



January 22

AMMiC 2014 Mini-Conference

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Paul, a Church Planter

Text: Acts 20:17-38

Key verses:

Paul said to them, *“You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with **great humility** and with **tears**, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to **preach anything that would be helpful to you**....(v.v. 18-20a) Therefore, I **declare** to you today that I am **innocent** of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to **proclaim to you the whole will of God.**” (v.v. 26-27)*

Introduction

We are entrusted with a local mission, particularly in the area of the Asian and Multicultural Ministries, to both first generation immigrants and local-born second generation. This will include those who speak different mother tongues and who come from different cultures to Canada. The gospel of Christ is for everyone; thus no one is outside the radar of proclamation in ANiC.

As an evangelist, how can we do it right? From whom can we learn as our example and predecessor?

Let me introduce my spiritual giant to you - St. Paul, a servant of God. In today's Acts reading, Paul gave a pastoral farewell address to the leaders of Ephesus with whom he had walked and worked shoulder to shoulder for the entire three years. Paul's farewell address is somewhat similar to Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples with whom he had lived together for 3 years. In retrospect, Paul said plainly that there were both joys and tears; easy-going days and rough times; discouragement and thankfulness. All of these are mingled together in the life of a pastor. Here, Paul never painted a rosy picture for an evangelist or a pastor. What Paul said is that we will experience fruitful harvesting in ministry as well as feeling lost in ministry direction; times of being appreciated as well as times of getting hurt, feeling lonely and being abandoned.

To me, Paul's farewell address, written close to the end of his life, serves as the manifesto of his lifelong pastoral ministry. After having met with Ephesian elders at Miletus, Paul ended his third missionary journey. Immediately Paul took a ship back to Jerusalem. There he was escorted to Rome for trial and subsequently died for Christ as a martyr in Rome.

Therefore, in Paul's address, every word comes from his heart, with charity and admonition. What St. Paul said to the Ephesian leaders, now to you and me as well, falls into 3 foci, namely, (1) Building up the Church with the Word of God, (2) Guarding the gospel and the Church, and (3) Gaining respect by your sacrificial love to Christ.

I. Building up the Church with the Word of God

“I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ... Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”(v.26; v.32)

St. Paul said that he was guilt-free with respect to teaching God's word to the Ephesians, because all 3 years, Paul focused on helping the Ephesians to know Jesus, the salvation of God. The effort Paul made is different from what we do today because in Paul's time, the New Testament canon was not in place yet. What Paul kept working at, under the Spirit's guidance, was to understand, write and teach the doctrine of salvation in Christ and make pastoral applications to Christian living, piece by piece and day by day in Ephesus. The teachings are the result of the integration of his study in Jesus' salvation and his firsthand learning in pastoral work in the cross-cultural missionary field. Paul's teaching on pastoral application in the Gentile world often goes beyond what Jesus taught in



his life. How to deal with mixed marriages, one Christian and one not? How to deal with shopping of food from the temple, the market place? How to deal with social life mingled with immoral sexual influences? And all these Pauline teachings later became the teachings of the New Testament.

Today, you are entrusted to build up the flock of God with God's Word. You need to study hard, teach the Word of God, and apply God's word to our flock who are culturally shaped by postmodern values in a pluralistic and secularized Canadian society. You need to deal with the conflicting values between East and West among first generation immigrants when they live in Canada. The key is we need to know how to be a Christian in today's Canada. You need to explore what is the biblical teaching on family relationship between the two generations in order to rebuild the family from the existing brokenness. You need to rebuild the "living in Christ" attitude taught by St Paul in order to encounter the current narcissism and individualism. Like what St. Paul did among Ephesians in a pagan culture, now you are entrusted with the same mission to encounter a pagan culture in Canada. Your pulpit is sacred and your teaching is holy.

Paul made his best effort to nurture his flock with God's Word. We need to check ourselves how well we know the Scriptures, and turn the Word into a living Word. If your congregation increasingly knows Christ daily and spirituality grow up, you will have a congregation with faith, love and hope. You will share what Paul said that ***"I am innocent of the blood of all men for I have proclaimed to you the whole will of God."*** This is what I have done in Good Shepherd Vancouver for 23 years and am still doing. Build up your leaders' spirituality in word and prayer. Bring up your second generation leaders' spirituality, so that we can have a promising future.

Jesus made it very clear to his disciples that only those who hear and put into practice his teaching are wise and good builders, whose house can withstand stormy adversity. Paul therefore is a wise and good builder. For three full years, Paul built up the Ephesians on the "Rock," i.e. on the living Word.

II. Guard the gospel and the flock

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you as overseers. Be Shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." (v.v. 28- 31)

Paul gave a serious warning mainly because Ephesus at this time was made the capital of the newly formed Roman province of Asia. Ephesus relied upon two important assets for wealth and vitality, namely the center of trade and profit-making from the temple of Artemis, who was the multibreasted goddess of fertility. Paul's teaching against the cult in Ephesus caused riots and life-threatening attack in chapter 19. The attack was so serious that it almost ended the outreach of the gospel in Asia. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:32 described his enemy as the "wild beast in Ephesus" and he was facing "a deadly peril" in Asia (2Cor 1:8-11). He was facing an evil attack.

Here, in this context, Paul issued a strong warning. Guard the gospel; guard yourself and guard your sheep. The enemy is coming from outside but the trouble can also emerge from inside. He realized that the devil would be like wolves coming to devour the flock; and the deflected, contagious convert would also bring up troubles to mislead others away from the faith community.

Having spoken about the dangers from outside, Paul emphasized that the primary watch is over yourself, as a pastor and leader of the church. Leaders are the most vulnerable target of the devil's attack. This is why Paul requested constant prayer and intercession. ***"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."***(1Tim 4:16) It is only when the pastors themselves remain faithful to God that they can expect the church to do likewise.

What happened to the Ephesian Church after Paul had left? We understand that a widespread revolt against Paul's teaching arose in Asia (cf. 1Tim 1:19-20; 4: 1-5; 2Tim 1:15; 2:17-28; 3:1-9). Some years later, the Ephesian Church abandoned her first love of Christ due to the seduction of this world. (Rev. 2:1-7)



As pastors, we are called and entrusted to be the watchman and shepherd of the flock. In so doing, we are also assured that Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the Church who bought the Church with his blood, and he will oversee his church with us.

Before the second coming of Christ, the church is often seduced by false teaching; and is persecuted from without and within. As Jesus said to his disciples, the weeds will grow together with the wheat in the field. As a result, opposition and hardship are always the reality in pastoral ministry. We have to wait until the harvest day or the judgment day, and then the weeds will be collected for burning. Meanwhile, we are now entrusted to guard the gospel diligently and faithfully. As the Psalmist encourages us, ***“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.”***(Ps 126: 5)

III. Gain respect by your sacrificial love to Christ

“I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”(v.v. 33-35)

In order not to give any opportunity for his enemy to denounce him, Paul made up his mind to earn his own living by tent making. He worked with his team, Aquila and Priscilla, to earn their living. For the sake of the gospel, Paul sacrificed his right to be supplied by the Ephesians but lived on his own hands. This is how Paul made his personal sacrifice as an offering to God, on the one hand trusting that God will provide enough for him, and on the other hand Paul became free from any accusation of covetousness in seeking reward for his pastoral labors.

In all these, Paul’s primary concern is the preaching of the Gospel of grace, not about his personal wealth. ***“I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.”***(v.24) Paul therefore asked us to follow his example, in remembrance of Jesus’ words: ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*** Having served Christ all his life, Paul concluded, ***“I rejoice greatly in the Lord ... for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”***(Phil 4:1a, 11-13)

I remember in Acts that when a crippled beggar asked money from Apostles Peter and John, in response to the request, Peter replied, ***“Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!”***(3:6) And the crippled walked. This is the spiritual strength the Spirit of God has given to Peter, John, Paul, and today you and me. We are not given money and wealth, but we are entrusted with divine power for the mission work. But of course, the use of this power is solely for blessing those who are in need rather than receiving benefits for private gain.

Conclusion

I agree with St. Paul that pastoral ministry has both joys and tears. The calling to pastoral ministry or church planting is never a rosy picture, and in reality never a ministry often applauded by people around you. Oftentimes we find ourselves unable to climb back up and get through difficulties in our own effort. So we might want to quit. But with persistence in God’s grace, we will be carried through by God’s rescue, and we learn that Christ often walks with us, helping us to build up faith, hope and love.

So, hardship and opposition do not scare us away from being a pastor or a church planter; they only help us to turn our eyes back upon God for his grace. As a result, suffering only makes us stronger in God. As St. Paul shared with us his conviction of God’s promise in the pastoral vocation, ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*** And therefore, as a servant of God, ***“when I am weak, then I am strong.”***(2Cor. 12:9, 10) Amen.