

## Feed the Flock of God

Acts 20:17-38, Trinity Sunday XXI

November 5, 2006

Beloved of the Lord.....Before our Lord Jesus made Peter a "fisher of men", Peter had been a fisher of fish. Before his call into the Holy Ministry, Peter had made his living by fishing in the Sea of Galilee. It is interesting that years later, even after the death and resurrection of Christ, we see Peter fishing once again. After a night in the boat of catching nothing, Jesus appears on the shore, and suddenly they catch their fill. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?" Three times Peter answers, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Three times Jesus commands Peter, "Feed my lambs, Feed my sheep, Feed my sheep." This charge is not only given to Peter, but to all called ministers of Christ. Let us then learn today the work and calling of the Holy Ministry.

I. Ministers must pay attention to their own doctrine and practice for the sake of their congregation. The apostle Paul is now concluding his third missionary journey, and is about to set sail on a ship toward Jerusalem. He has gathered the elders of Ephesus together, for one last heartfelt good-bye. Paul explained to them, "I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me." Paul would be captured and bound by the Jews in Jerusalem. Though Paul knew this would ultimately lead to his own death, he did not resist the Holy Spirit but boldly went forth preaching God's Word. In the spirit of little David and little Luther Paul said, "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God."

The elders of Ephesus needed to hear Paul's undying resolve to preach the Gospel regardless of the hardships involved. These elders were themselves pastors to the Ephesian congregations. They were overseers of the flock of God. To these pastors Paul said, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock." Paul said likewise to young pastor Timothy, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." I Tim. 4:16 This means if a minister is to be an overseer of God's sheep, he had better pay close attention to himself and the doctrine which he teaches. God holds pastors accountable for all doctrines they teach. For they teach in the name of Christ and the congregation. They are to remain faithful to God's Word, so that they themselves will be kept in the true faith, and also those which hear them. If they fall into error, they will not only lead themselves astray, but also those who hear them. Even as Paul spoke these words to these pastors, he knew what would soon happen. "For I

know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." False teachers would not only attack the flock from the outside, but they would arise from within! These teachers would teach false doctrines, creating their own disciples!

Oh what a dreadful world we live in when the sheep of God's pasture, must beware of false prophets from without, AND even from within! All Christians are priests. Pastors AND layman alike have the power to judge doctrine, women here being included. None dare blindly assume that all their pastor teaches them is true. God's Word is the sole standard and norm. Pastors and laymen alike must also know that false doctrine can arise from their own heart, by way of the Old Adam. We often have the image that false teachings always come from other people, or from outside the flock, or only from pastors, but we must realize that false teachings also come from our own heart. Our own heart can lead us astray and cause us to depart from God's Word and faith. The Bible says (Jer. 17:9), "The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" And if we don't stick to and hold fast the doctrines found in our Bibles and catechisms, we ourselves may become the very wolf we fear! Dear sheep, let none of us underestimate the sinful power of our own flesh! For it is desperately wicked, and its pull is strong upon our soul, making war against our faith! May we never be so arrogant as to say, "I am too wise and too well versed in the Scriptures to ever be led into false doctrine!" Such arrogance and pride of the heart is the first step into error. Pride, self-confidence, and self-reliance is the very foothold Satan needs to lead us away from Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who gave His life for the sheep!

II. It is the Holy Ghost which brings together a congregation and her pastor. But none of this really gives us comfort does it? If our own hearts are deceptive, and if a wolf can arise from the midst of the sheep, and if our own pastor himself can fall into error.....what are we to do? Here we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things! Have no fear dear sheep of God's pasture, there is still the Almighty God who will guard and protect you by the Sword of His Spirit, the Word of God! His Word can edify us all! God says, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers". It is the Holy Ghost therefore, which makes ministers overseers in the congregation! God Himself, the Almighty Holy Ghost, provides, matches, and brings together pastors with their congregations. While we must diligently study the doctrines which our pastors teach us, we can have all faith and confidence that it is God Himself, the Holy Ghost, who has given us the minister we need! For we see and learn from God's Word in this beautifully simple verse,

that it is the Holy Ghost who makes ministers overseers in the congregation. The Holy Ghost does this by way of the "divine call."

And what is this "divine call"? When a congregation needs a minister, the men assemble together and pray to God the Holy Ghost. They diligently pray that the Holy Ghost guide them to choose the qualified man whom God would have them call. They then put all their faith and confidence in God the Holy Ghost to do what they humbly ask. They trust the Holy Ghost will keep them from sin, that their vote will be agreeable with God's will alone, and not the will of their own sinful flesh. They do not want to sinfully call the wrong man. After prayer, by means of a vote, they then elect that man whom the Holy Ghost has chosen. If the vote is unanimous, and if the minister accepts the call, it is clear to all this man is the minister God has chosen for us. The unanimity of a congregational vote is necessary and required because if there is only a majority vote, the "divine" call of the minister is called into question. God does not tolerate politics in His Church but He rules by His Word alone. Any type of political maneuvering or seeking the vote in a church is wicked sin - and will not go unpunished. If there is only a majority vote for a minister, and the minister accepts the call with only a majority vote, the sheep of the congregation can never have confidence that God the Holy Ghost has called this man. There will always be a group or party within the congregation who will work against their own pastor by bringing into question his call.

The good news is, that when a congregation prays for guidance from the Holy Ghost, and ultimately the vote is unanimous, once the pastor accepts the call, all in the congregation can have complete confidence that their newly-called minister, is the choice the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost has called this man to be their overseer. All sheep can say, "This is the pastor God has chosen for me. God knows what He is doing. This minister stands in the stead and place of Christ, as Christ's ambassador, that by his preaching of the Gospel, I will be comforted, fed, lead, and edified. Though he is a sinner just like me, both he and I have been redeemed by the same blood, the blood of God's own Son, Jesus Christ. And my Lord Jesus Christ will use this divinely called minister, to feed and clothe me with the righteousness of Christ." May all of us then, you as the congregation, and I as the called servant of the Word, have full confidence that we are both where we belong. God through His Word has brought you into this flock, and God through His Word has called me to serve you, with the Gospel and Sacraments.

III. Ministers must feed the Church of God. I serve you today by giving those who've announced for Communion, the very body and blood of Christ for the remission of sins. I will also serve you today, by baptizing two precious little souls after our normal service. Most importantly I serve you today by the preaching of the Gospel. I preach Christ

crucified, and the full truth of His Word. This is also what Paul confessed, "[I have] kept back nothing that was profitable *unto you*, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house.....repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

Here then is the job and work of any called servant of the Word, to preach repentance toward God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ - for we cannot save ourselves! Our sins condemn us! The devil condemns us! Death awaits us all, lurking at every corner! Our own conscience testifies of our sin, and the punishment from God we rightfully deserve! Who of us is worthy of His grace? And it is even true, that our own sinful flesh hates God and utterly despises Him when He commands us to do this, and not to do that! Oh but we should shudder when we think such rebellious thoughts against the Almighty! For who can stand up to Him or defy Him? In this world there are many who try! They fight and fight and fight against God their whole life, but it does them no good! In the end such people are dead men walking. Unless they repent, they are lost forever for all eternity! May God have mercy upon us all! But if you dear sinner, have felt that sting of death, if you know and are convicted by God's Word of your sins, then repent! Freely confess your sin to God for the Savior of the world will not turn you away! Remember the prostitute who once came to Jesus. She felt so horrible about her wicked life that she washed the feet of Jesus with her tears, and dried His feet with her hair. Jesus knew the sorrow in her heart over her sin. Jesus did not condemn her. Instead He said, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven." Jesus said to the penitent prostitute, "Thy sins are forgiven..... Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace." With these life-giving Words, Jesus preached the Gospel to her soul and she believed! She then went in peace, and forsook her former way of life.

This same Gospel message which Jesus spoke to this woman, is also spoken to you. Every time you come to church on Sunday and hear the preaching of this Gospel, you are forgiven. So God commands His ministers today, to "feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." God has purchased your soul. He has paid for you, so you can be with Him in heaven! Christ redeemed you, "not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death". He is the Savior of all men, especially of those which believe. His suffering and death deliver you from death, making you free! You are not free to serve sin, nor continue therein. But you are free to serve Jesus Christ your Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep. May all of us this blessed day, rejoice in the knowledge that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. May we too, just like the forgiven prostitute, go in peace. Amen.