

Kington Baptist Church

MESSAGE BOARD – 85

I tell you that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not draw back from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. You must keep a faithful watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he purchased with the blood of his own Son. I know after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice your people to go after them. So be alert, remember for three years I did not falter night or day to warn everyone with tears. (Acts 20.26-31)

These words are Paul's farewell to the Christians in Ephesus, as he left them to continue his Apostolic ministry elsewhere. They are weighty words, full of warning and encouragement. At the heart of what he says is the message he'd been commissioned to spread by the Risen Lord. Paul's divine commission weighed heavily on him. He devoted his life to spreading this word, defending and explaining it.

These words (from Acts 20) record how Paul insisted he was now innocent of 'the blood' of those he had lived among. He means that their eternal future was now their responsibility. On the other hand, had he failed to proclaim to them what he refers to as '*the whole counsel of God*' he would himself be answerable for their souls. He had been sent by the Lord to share with them the gospel – '*the whole counsel of God*'. This is what Paul had been commissioned to preach: '*the gospel in all its fullness*'. In other words, he was to take all God has revealed about our sin, our need of salvation, the salvation provided in Christ, how that salvation becomes ours, and the new lives we are to live.

Paul also charges the elders and leaders of the Christians in Ephesus with two stern warnings. The first is based on the price God paid for the salvation of these Christian men and woman. That price, Paul says, was '*the blood of his Son*'. This defines the weight of responsibility resting on the shoulders of those called to shepherd the people of God. Peter, in his first Epistle, also appeals to leaders of God's people to keep in mind the cost Christ has paid to purchase us to God: '*as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ ... I charge the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge*'. (1 Peter 5.1-2) These were the very terms Jesus used when he re-commissioned Peter: '*tend my lambs, feed my sheep*'.

The second warning Paul gives the leaders at Ephesus alerts them to the inevitability that trouble awaits the followers of Christ. In this case Paul warns of wrong ideas others will spread; ideas that will confuse, mislead and twist their thinking and damage their Christian walk.

So what's the point in all this for us? I think two things stand out as vitally important.

Firstly, the ever-present threat to the truth and to the way we are to live. That threat is as real and dangerous today as it has ever been. The truth at the foundation of our faith and salvation is being shaken to the core by ideas and theories and influences that are utterly opposed to the truth of God's Word. The alarming part in this is that much of this confusion comes from inside the Church – exactly as Paul warned would be the case. Coming from 'inside' these ideas have a plausibility and seeming 'authenticity' that makes them all-the-more dangerous. We're told today that *what* we believe doesn't matter that much, so long as what we believe doesn't mean we fall-out with each other. Now, Paul wasn't in favour of Christians falling out with each other (nor am I!) but he includes a vital condition: *'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all'*. (Romans 12.18) But living 'peaceably with all' was impossible for Paul when he knew the water of life was being polluted. It is astonishing how frenzied the world has become over pollution of the planet and how completely indifferent the world is over pollution to the water of eternal life! We must remember how often our Lord opposed the Pharisees over this very thing. Paul warns that to put a superficial idea of love above truth isn't the way of Christ – and in reality is not love at all: 'Love must be absolutely sincere, it must be marked by a loathing for evil and a thirst for what is good'. (C H Dodd on Romans 12.9)

A second thing stands out here, like unto the first. It's this commission, this calling, challenge, obligation – call it what you will – to proclaim what Paul likes to call *'the whole counsel of God'*. And here the great Apostle is our example. The sad fact is that we live at a time and in a nation profoundly hostile to the central truths of the Christian message – indeed to any truths of the message of Christ; to *'the whole counsel of God'*. Paul lived in similar circumstances – and paid a high price for his faithfulness to the Lord. There are aspects of truth found in the Bible and in the age-old tradition of Christian preaching and teaching, that would plunge us into deep water were we to proclaim them fully and faithfully today. That wasn't always so in this country – but over the last 20 to 30 years has become the reality we live with now. For fear of offending, or of a backlash, or falling foul of public opinion, aspects of *'the whole counsel of God'* are ignored, avoided or suppressed. To the extent we hide these truths for fear of the consequences we may be to blame for a 'guilty silence'.

Pray for those called to proclaim *the whole counsel of God* at this time, that we will be bold, fearless, faithful and true to our calling and commission – so we too may be free from the blood of those to whom we are sent.