

# Genuine Gospel Ministry

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Preacher: Philip Copeland

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, do take up your Bibles and we're going to read together and our reading is from the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles and in chapter 20. I think that's page 929 if you have one of the blue visitor's Bibles.

Phil Copeland has been looking at these chapters, 19 and 20 of Acts, and we're looking particularly at the second part of chapter 20 this evening.

If you look at the beginning there, you'll see that Paul's been traveling, he's been in Ephesus, he's on his way, on his journey now to Jerusalem, and here from Acts 20, verse 17, we read about him stopping and gathering together church leaders from that great city of Ephesus, probably leaders of the house churches there, to come and speak to them.

And this is what the Apostle Paul says, when he's probably going to see them for the very last time. So these are very important words, aren't they, of a great Apostle to those who he entrusts to carry on that gospel work among these churches that he loves in the future.

So Acts 20, verse 17, now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said, you yourselves know how I lived among you the whole of the time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

[ 1 : 42 ] How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not count my life of any value, nor is precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

And I behold, I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, none of you will see my face again. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

[ 3 : 05 ] I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands minister to my necessities and to those who are with me. In all things, I have shown you that by working hard in this way, we must help the weak.

And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, it's more blessed to give than to receive. And when he said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

And there was much weeping on the part of all. They embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he'd spoken that they would not see his face again.

[ 4 : 28 ] And they accompanied him to the ship. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, please do have your Bibles open in front of you to page 929 of our church Bibles.

That passage that we read in Acts 20. Amen. I'd like to imagine for a moment that it is currently the year 2028.

You currently live outside of Glasgow. And a friend asked you to come into the city center to meet them for a coffee. So you get the train in. You meet your friend at Queen Street Station.

And your friend says to you, let's try that new coffee shop up at the top of Bath Street. And your heart sinks. But you agree because you're a good friend.

As you walk up Bath Street, you come past number 25. And you look and you see a derelict building that has been empty and unused for some time now.

[ 5 : 44 ] And you could just about make out on the front of the building a faded Tron Church logo. And as you see that, you burst into tears. And your friend says, whatever's the matter?

And you say, I'm really sorry. It's just I used to go to church there. It was once full of life. But it was ravaged and ruined.

And didn't persevere. Question. Is it possible for a strong-looking church to fall away from Jesus Christ? Answer. Yes.

And is it possible for a strong-looking church leadership to fall away from Jesus Christ? Answer.

Yes. Friends, how can we ensure that this sort of thing doesn't happen to the Tron Church?

How can we ensure that we will persevere and carry on as a genuine gospel church? Well, Acts chapter 20 will help us. Because Luke has written Acts 20 so that we will have certainty concerning what genuine gospel ministry looks like in the Apostle Paul.

[ 6 : 49 ] As Willie said, we're going to focus on the second half of this chapter this evening. In the first half, Paul leaves Ephesus before he sets off on his big journey to Rome via Jerusalem.

And what he does is he travels around revisiting churches that he had sprouted up in the past as a result of his mission work. The fruits of his gospel planting. So from verse 1 to 16, that is what he's doing.

He'll be traveling around Macedonia for roughly two years, actually. Dropping in on the churches in places like Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. And Luke tells us that Paul only moved on once he'd given each church much encouragement.

He literally put encouragement or courage in them. And in the second half of Acts 20, we eavesdrop on the Apostle Paul's farewell words to the elders of the church from Ephesus.

And no doubt, Paul would have spoken the same sort of farewell words to those other churches that he'd visited in the first half of the chapter. And they are crucial words for us today as the people of God.

[ 7 : 59 ] For if we listen to the exhortations of this speech, and if we obey them, then we can have greater certainty that we will endure. And what Paul does in this speech is he holds up his own ministry as a model example for future generations to follow.

As you'll know from our previous studies over the past couple of weeks, it was Paul who first planted the gospel in Ephesus. He stayed there for roughly three years and had a deeply impacting ministry.

So these Ephesian elders, they'd seen Paul in action. They knew what his pattern of ministry was like. And so here, as Paul is about to finally head off to Jerusalem, he calls the elders to meet with him.

And he says to them repeatedly, I'm never going to see you again. And you're never going to see me again. And so he reminds them of the crucial things that they must keep doing if they are to endure.

Now before we look at some of the things that Paul teaches them, you might be sitting there thinking, But isn't this passage just for church leadership, for pastors and elders? If you're sitting there thinking, what's this got to do with me?

[ 9 : 08 ] I'm just a church member. Well, the answer is everything. This has got everything to do with your life if you're a church member. Everything. Because the Bible says that we all have a responsibility as Christians to minister and pastor one another.

Yes, there are those whom Christ has appointed to be in the specific position of leadership in the church. Those set apart to preach the word of God and oversee the flock in a full-time capacity.

But at the same time, the Bible also says that every one of us is called to pastor each other. If I was really bold, I would say rip out a little bit of paper out of your hymn book and shove it up there as a little mini dog collar.

Because you all, just have a look. Just look at the person next to you. Just look at the person next to you. Have a look. You're all called to pastor one another. So, just think of what Paul himself says in Ephesians 4.

Every church member has the responsibility to speak the truth and love to one another. So that we mature one another up and build up the body of the church to maturity.

[10:14] Or think of what the writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 11. All church members have the responsibility to not neglect meeting together, but instead to go about encouraging one another.

Just as Paul does here. And so this speech is not just for church leadership, but it's for you, church members. So we need to listen carefully.

There's loads of things we can learn here. But for the sake of time, we're going to look at three points. Three key things. Firstly, a genuine gospel church is all about the proclamation of the word of God.

Did you notice when the passage was being read out for us, just how many references there are to Paul speaking the word of God to others? Let me just run through. You can follow along.

I'll highlight them for you quickly. Verse 20. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you. Verse 21.

[11:13] Testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 24. The ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus Christ was to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Verse 25. I've gone about proclaiming the kingdom. Verse 27. I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Verse 31. I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. Verse 32. I now commend you to God and to the word of his grace.

Verse 35. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus. Friends, a genuine gospel church will have leaders and members who, like Paul, prioritize the proclamation of the word of God.

For Paul, actually, this is what real pastoral ministry is all about. I wonder what comes into your head when I say pastoral ministry. For most people, they get images of helping those who are sick, bringing around meals to different people's houses and so forth.

[12:22] And there's nothing wrong with those things. Those are good things. And I hope you do them. But pastoral care in the Bible is primarily about speaking the word of God to the people of God. And that is also the primary role of a church pastor.

A church pastor has been appointed to be an under-shepherd of the shepherd, the Lord Jesus. And the pastor is to give the voice of the shepherd by opening up his word and preaching it clearly and faithfully.

If a pastor neglects this duty and starts to focus on other things, then the people of God will starve. They will, like sheep, go all astray and they will never grow.

Now, a gospel church that's genuine will do what Paul did, prioritize the proclamation of the word of God. Can I just say, I think it's very instructive if you just zoom out of Acts for a little moment and if we compare Acts 19 and Acts 20.

So as you've already seen, let me remind you, in Acts 19, Paul brings the gospel for the first time to Ephesus. He proclaims the word of God, but he also carries out extraordinary signs and wonders, miraculous things.

[13:36] These signs and wonders confirm that Paul is not a charlatan. In fact, he's a genuine ambassador of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. That's what those signs were pointing to.

This is Christ's man, the real deal. He must be listened to and obeyed. So in Acts 19, Paul establishes the church by Bible teaching and signs.

But in Acts chapter 20, when Paul is instructing the church and what they're to carry on doing now that he's leaving them, there's loads and loads of references to Bible teaching and there's not one mention of signs and wonders.

So does Paul expect the church to carry on doing ministry in exactly the same way that he did? And the answer is yes and no. Signs and wonders? No.

Proclamation of God's word? Yes. It's everywhere in this speech. And please look at verse 20. I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house.

[14:43] Now why does Paul have to remind the elders of this detail? Why remind them that he did not shrink away or hesitate from teaching the truth? And the answer must be that Paul himself knew what a great temptation it is to shrink away from declaring certain parts of the word of God.

It is a real temptation for a Bible teacher to water down bits of God's word, especially when those bits are going to be extremely challenging to those who are listening.

I'll never forget one moment a few years ago now, and it was in the Cornhill Scotland training course. Andy Gemmill was giving us young would-be preachers a lecture.

And Andy said to us this, a paraphrase, but he said this, if you're preparing a sermon and you see something in the Bible passage that you know will challenge the church, and if you decide to miss it out and avoid saying it because you know the offense it will cause, the second you do that, you have become utterly worthless in ministry, and you either need to repent or resign because you've lost it.

A genuine gospel church will have leaders who will not shrink away or hesitate to share helpful truths from the Bible, even if it means offending and unsettling people.

[16:06] Now don't mishear me. Don't mishear Paul. He's not saying that a Bible teacher is to go out of his way to be deliberately offensive. Okay? Paul certainly didn't do that.

But as he says in verse 31, he proclaimed the truth, the hard things, with tears in his eyes and with humility. But church leaders must be willing to help people in the congregation apply the word into the specific situations that they find themselves in, even if it's uncomfortable.

That's what Paul did. Notice he did it both publicly in gatherings like this, and he also did it privately from house to house. He got out of his pulpit and into the homes and lives of the people of the church to see if they were applying what they were hearing.

And notice that he wasn't simply teaching the Bible for the sake of it. No, for Paul, Bible teaching is actually a means to an end. Just look at verse 21.

Paul testified to both Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And this is the real reason why Bible teaching must be at the heart of the life of the church.

[17:16] We teach the Bible so that it will lead people to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus and so that it will keep people walking in repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.

A genuine gospel church will be full of people who have been so moved by what they've heard from the Bible they will be keen to die to themselves more and more every day and instead to live for Christ in response to his grace.

And that's how every Christian is called to live in the present age. Each day in response to his saving work and by the power of the Holy Spirit we're to put to death any behavior that displeases Christ and to bring to life behavior that pleases him.

Now friends, I can't believe I'm going to do this but I'm going to do it anyway. I'm going to teach you how to trash the tron.

Are you ready? Here we go. You trash the tron by sidelining the proclamation of God's word. You can do this in an obvious way. You can get rid of the sermon completely and instead pursue other things.

[18:24] Pursue maybe signs and wonders or social action or whatever alternative is going about today. Paul says, do that. That's a recipe for ruin and your church will die.

But you know you can also sideline the Bible in a much more subtle way. Maybe start off by harboring bitter thoughts that the Bible isn't really the final voice of authority for the Christian life today.

Maybe even entertain thoughts that our church shouldn't be proclaiming the Bible for as long as it does and as much as we do. Maybe even start to share that attitude amongst other members.

Spend a bit of grumbling about the place.

Maybe even start to grumble about the length that preachers preach for. It's always a popular one.

And whenever you come across a passage that's really challenging, what to do is switch off and just let it float over your head.

Instead, just pay attention to the bits of the Bible that are nice in your mind. Cut out all the warnings of God's demands for holiness and obedience. And whenever a church leader or a church member seeks to share something that will be helpful to you and challenging so that you will grow in your walk with Christ, what to do is get really angry with them.

[ 19 : 37 ] Look at them in the face and say, who do you think you are? Do you know who I am? Do you know how many years I've been a Christian? Do you know how many years I've been at this church for? I've done Cornhill.

And if you see a brother and sister in Christ slipping into some sin in their lives, what to do is hesitate to speak. Shrink away from sharing the truth of God's word that they need to hear. And just say nothing. And just let them slip further and further and further away until you never see them again on a Sunday. If you do all those things, then you will trash the Tron. Or of course, we could just listen to Paul, couldn't we? And humbly sit under the proclamation of God's word and be all about speaking the truth in love to one another, letting it change us, letting it master us.

That is the first mark of a genuine gospel church. Secondly, a genuine gospel church endures opposition from without.

[ 20 : 44 ] Please look at verse 18 and 19. Paul says, You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews.

Now just look at verse 22. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me that in every city imprisonment and afflictions await me.

You see what Paul does here? Again, he holds up his own ministry as a model example. The way that he faced opposition in the past and the way that he is going to face opposition in the future are both to be an inspiration and a resource for the ongoing work of these Ephesian elders.

They too are to endure opposition. They are to expect it, receive it, and endure it from outside the church, just as Paul has done and as he will do in the future.

And you remember I touched on this last week. If you read about all of Paul's ministry recorded in these final chapters of the book of Acts, you will see how Luke draws out many parallels between Paul's experience and the experience of the Lord Jesus in the final chapters of Luke's gospel.

[ 22 : 12 ] Just think about it. At pivotal moments in their ministries, both Christ and Paul set their faces like flint to go with the word of God to Jerusalem. And when they get to Jerusalem, both Paul and Christ are rejected by their own people.

Both are unjustly tried. Both are handed over to the Gentiles for crimes that they didn't commit and both of them endure all of that for the sake of God's elect. The point you're to see as you zoom out and see that parallel is that all those who are to share in Christ's ministry must also share in Christ's sufferings.

Every Christian knows this though, don't they? It's so basic, you've only got to be a Christian for less than two minutes to know that Jesus calls you to pick up your cross and follow him. Deny yourself.

It was true of Paul, it's true of these Ephesian elders, and it's true of everybody in this building who bears the name of Christ today. As Paul would later say in Acts 14, we must, notice that must word, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

Or as a friend of mine once said, there ain't no way but the hard way. Genuine Christian ministry, because it calls people to die to themselves and to instead live under the rule of Jesus, it will provoke opposition.

[ 23 : 35 ] Now there were many times in Paul's ministry where he didn't face hostility and people responded with great joy and with belief. And that will also be true of us today in our mission to Glasgow.

But friends, we mustn't be surprised when as a genuine gospel church, we feel the heat from the unbelieving world around us. I seem to be telling you an awful lot about when I lived down in England.

But I'm going to tell you another story about when I lived down in England. And when I lived down in England, I used to tell him a lot about when I lived up in Scotland. So, nice fare we go. But when I lived down in England, there was a young lad in my youth group called Alyssa.

And Alyssa was a cracker lad. He was a total space cadet most of the time. He looked like he was away with the fairies. But actually, he was really switched on. And Alyssa attended a local secondary school that branded itself as a Christian school.

And in one of his RE classes, Alyssa bravely challenged the teacher for giving a false representation of what the Bible teaches about sex and marriage. Alyssa said that, you know, the Bible clearly teaches that sex is to be enjoyed only between one man and one woman in marriage. [ 24 : 48 ] Anything outside of that is a sin. It's wrong. It displeases God. And you know, the RE teacher who herself professed to be a Christian told Alyssa to wait behind after class.

And as all the other pupils left, she gave Alyssa a punishment exercise, detention. And the punishment was he had to repeat this one line, keep your harmful opinions to yourself. Keep your harmful opinions to yourself. Keep your harmful opinions to yourself again and again and again. It's just one example of the heat that we will face from the world around us.

A genuine gospel church will expect this sort of opposition from outside and it will endure it. Just like Paul. Please look at verse 24. But I do not count my life of any value nor precious to myself.

If only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. Wouldn't that be a great mission statement for our church here?

[ 25 : 54 ] It wouldn't be a very attractive one to the world around us. But can you imagine if we had that on our website? Imagine if you clicked on our website and it came up in the Tron church we consider our lives as worthless.

If only we finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given us. The task of testifying the gospel of God's grace. come and join us. You might think that that is radical but to Paul that is basic standard Christianity.

A genuine gospel church will endure opposition from without and also guard from opposition from within. That's our third point. Guard from opposition from within.

Please look at verse 28. Paul says pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of God which he obtained with his own blood.

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock. This is alarming. It is really if this verse gets your heart thumping a bit faster then that's good.

[ 27 : 04 ] That is the right response to this verse. It should be alarming for those of us who are in positions of leadership in the church especially because Paul says certain men are going to come into the church join the membership and these men are going to look and sound Christian but in reality they are savage wolves predators out to deceive God's people.

And the New Testament is full of warnings like this isn't it? New Testament says that there's plenty of people that you shouldn't listen to in church because they twist the scriptures. there's also plenty of people you should listen to because they teach them faithfully but there's also lots of people that you should be very suspicious of.

And as if that wasn't alarming enough Paul goes on verse 30 and even from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away disciples after them.

So Paul looks at these Ephesian elders men whom he has put through his own ministry training scheme and he knows that even some of them will turn out to be on the side of the enemy.

And in case you think Paul's being over the top here or just being a bit over the top in one of his later letters 1 Timothy we are told that this is precisely what happened later on in the church in Ephesus.

[ 28 : 25 ] It was ravaged by this sort of false teacher. So Paul's warning must be taken seriously. He says watch out for some of you will start to do Christian ministry in such a way that will take people in the church away from the Lord Jesus to love you and follow you instead.

And we're all in danger of doing that aren't we? Yes we are. For we all still have a sinful nature. The old remnant of the old man the old remnant of Adam is still in us and it wants to shove off yeah it shoved God out of the picture and to take his position of power as we love to be like God in the wrong sense we want to receive the praise that should belong to God alone.

And so let me ask you if you are serving in church then why are you doing it? Are you doing it because you love to feel loved and needed?

Are you doing it because you love to have people come up and say thank you? Thank you for what you've done. If you are then you're playing a very dangerous game. For we are to serve in church solely to bring glory to Jesus Christ and not to ourselves.

Just look at verse 30 again. Men will arise who speak twisted things. Where in the Bible do we first encounter someone speaking twisted things for the very first time?

[ 29 : 54 ] And the answer of course is Genesis 3. Satan twists the true word of God in order to draw Adam and his wife away from God to follow him instead. Did God really say?

That's still the tactic of our enemy today. He's not changed his tactics probably because they're so effective and they work. So this evening let's let Paul's tear-jerking warning shake us out of any complacency.

The devil has plenty of potential agents sitting in this building. So be on your guard. What does it mean to be on your guard? What does that look like in practice?

Well I take it it means that we will always be discerning. We will always check what we hear in church and what we hear in our own consciences against the plain meaning of the Bible.

Test everything that you hear against the scriptures. It doesn't matter who is saying it. Test every voice that you hear. whether the voice is coming from Christian books or Christian blogs that you read online or the Christian videos that you watch on YouTube or the Christian songs that you listen to or the things that that person says in church small groups or the things that that person says in youth group or the talks that you hear on your holiday youth club that you go to in the summer or the Christian TV channels that you watch.

[ 31 : 21 ] in fact if I were you I would never ever watch any Christian TV channels ever ever. Amen. From what I've seen they are all teaching absolute drivel.

The way that the Bible handled is just downright deceptive and dangerous. And the teachers on these channels will be doing a similar sort of thing as to what we do here. The teachers on those channels will say well look at verse such and such and the people look at verse such and such. The thing is they've ripped the verse that you're looking at completely out of context from the rest of the Bible. They don't read the Bible in light of the rest of Scripture and so they can make the Bible mean anything. So do not if you were me I would say do not watch.

I know some of you do. You shouldn't be. So whatever voice you hear they all must be tested against what the Bible actually says in context read in light of the rest of the Scriptures.

And if what is being said isn't clearly from the Bible then you're to be immediately suspicious. Now Paul is not speaking about the odd one-off error because as you'll know sometimes us Bible teachers we get it wrong.

[ 32 : 37 ] However if someone is persistently teaching things that are contrary to the Scripture and if that person refuses to change when they're pulled up about it then they are a wolf.

And Paul says in 2 Timothy you should have nothing to do with them because they're leading people to hell. And that's really one of the reasons why the New Testament says a job of a pastor one of the jobs of a pastor is to identify wolves and to tell them to shut up.

And again friends if you want to trash the Tron if you want to see it ravaged by wolves then what to do is say doctrinally anything goes here in this church.

Teaching it doesn't really matter. Understanding the Bible it's just really down to your own personal interpretation. We shouldn't really be going too deep as a church. We should have childlike faith. Let's just let go and let God.

That is a recipe for ruin. If you're in a position of leadership in this church whether it be a pastor, elder, a small group leader, a youth leader, a parent, a husband or whatever position of leadership then why don't you make it your life's goal to strive for verse 26.

[ 33 : 52 ] Have a look at verse 26. Wouldn't it be wonderful if at the end of our lives before we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ we can look back and confidently say verse 26.

I am innocent of the blood of all those in my church for I did not shrink away from declaring the whole counsel of God. I have not hesitated to stick my neck on the line for the truth and for the security of God's people my brothers and sisters in Christ.

A genuine gospel church will be full of people who seek to safeguard one another with the gospel. Well our time is gone but as I close let me ask you this in 2028 if the Lord Jesus hasn't returned by then will this church still be here.

Will it be spiritually healthy and alive? Will we still be a shining witness to the Lord Jesus in Glasgow? Well if we heed Paul's farewell words in this chapter I think we can have greater certainty that we will be.

A genuine gospel church will be all about the proclamation of God's word. A genuine gospel church will endure opposition from without. And thirdly a genuine gospel church will guard against opposition from within.

[ 35 : 14 ] May the Lord Jesus give us the strength that we need to persevere in these things to the very end. Let's be quiet for a moment to respond to God's word in our own hearts and then I'll pray for us.

Let's pray for a help us to be a people who have been so moved to daily repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.

Help us to be a bold people ready to endure opposition from the world around us. That we may be ready to stand for the truth. And help us also to be a discerning people about what we hear.

Keeping a close guard on the church. Looking out for one another. Encouraging one another to not fall away from Christ. Father please enable us to persevere in these things.

On our own we are so weak. We need the power of your spirit in us to be at work. So we pray all these things. In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

[ 36 : 41 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.