

Practical Priorities of an Apostolic Church

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, do turn with me, if you would, back to Acts chapter 20 and to the passage that we read together. A few weeks ago we looked at this chapter of Acts and we found that it is a very helpful chapter for helping us to see what a truly New Testament church should look like, a truly apostolic church.
- We discovered it's not about physical bonds that link us to the apostles historically by the laying on of Episcopal hands.
- No, it's not that. No, it's by experiential bonds that link us to the apostles by imitation of once for all unique apostolic and prophetic ministries and the signs that mark the apostles.
- No, that's not what makes an apostolic church today. No, rather it's what the New Testament itself is interested in. And that's the preservation of two things.
- First, the apostolic doctrine, that is the gospel faith, the faith once for all delivered to the saints, as Jude says, and preserved in scripture, the apostolic doctrine, but also secondly the apostolic pattern of ministry and mission.
- [1 : 2 0] And a church marked by these two things will be today, or in any age, a truly apostolic church. And the book of Acts as a whole is a book that gives us great insight, particularly into the second of these things.
- It teaches us much about the apostolic teaching, of course, but it does show us very clearly the pattern of ministry and mission of the apostles. And it shows us that pattern being held out as a pattern for all the churches to follow ever after.
- And there's nowhere really in the Acts that that's more clear than in Acts chapter 20. Because in this chapter we can see so much, so many of the patterns of true apostolic ministry exemplified.
- And exemplified by Paul in a context where he is explicitly calling the Christians in Ephesus to apply those very same patterns after his ministry is over.
- To apply these same patterns to their own church life ever afterwards. Look at verse 31. Remember my ministry, says Paul.
- [2 : 3 4] Remember what I did. Remember what I taught you. And verse 35. In all these things, I've been showing you what to do.
- Remember what I did. That's what you were meant to do. Do it. Now there's so many things that we could learn from this chapter, but we've only had time in two studies to focus on two main things.
- The first one, last time, was, if you like, the big picture, the global view, the perspective of a truly apostolic ministry. But the second today is rather by way of contrast.
- I want to focus in more on the local view. What that perspective looks like in the nuts and bolts of ministry in the local church, in the local congregation.
- If you like, the practical priorities of apostolic ministry in the local church. Remember that the truly apostolic perspective we saw included at least three things in terms of the driving force, the big vision of a missionary church.

[3 : 41] Remember the first thing? It must always be God-centered and gospel-oriented, not man-centered and our felt needs oriented. In other words, it understands that the gospel is all about God, not about us.

It's about God's story. The gospel is not just a psychological prop, a help for me. That's why so many of us get it wrong so much of the time.

It's natural in our hearts to be so me-focused. That's why we get impatient so often. We say, well, there's nothing in this for me. But the gospel is not about me. It's about God and about his story.

It's about the mission of God to the world for his glory. That's why the Holy Spirit was given. Do you remember the beginning of Acts? The Holy Spirit is given for witness, for testimony to God.

As John Piper would say when he was here the other week, God is the gospel. That's the title of his new book. A very good one it is too. So that's the first thing. We'll be God-oriented and gospel-oriented.

[4 : 48] Secondly, a truly apostolic church will always be global and dynamic. It will not be parochial and static. A gospel church will pulsate with a sense of forward movement of the gospel all the time.

Paul had that sense pulsing through his veins. I must go on to Jerusalem. And thereafter, I must go on to Rome. Because the gospel is always moving forward. And if we're a gospel church, we will not allow anything to impede the forward movement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But more, a truly apostolic church will always have a sense of going outward. Not just forward, but outward to the whole globe, to the world.

That was what drove Paul's incessant travels on behalf of the churches. All through Greece. All through Asia. All through Palestine. Encouraging, equipping, building up, teaching.

A gospel church is never focused just here. It has a global outward vision. As well as a forward one. And a gospel church always also has a sense of upward movement to glory.

[6 : 00] Always it has an eye on what Paul speaks of there in verse 32. The inheritance of glory with all the saints. With all those who are being sanctified. So a God-centered, gospel-focused church.

A global and dynamic church. Not a parochial and static one. And how can a church be like that? Well, thirdly, it will be a church that is devoted to the word.

And not distracted by wonders. It won't confuse the essentials of gospel ministry with the inessentials that may or may not accompany it. Remember the church in Troas.

They showed their true devotion to God's word in that story of the miracle of Paul's all-night sermon. Do you remember? They were undistracted by Eutychus doing his skydive out of the window in the middle of the sermon.

No, Paul just picked him up, went on, and preached all night. And these are the things that mark the perspective of a truly apostolic church.

[7 : 01] These are the things fueling the big vision. They have a big picture vision. That's a truly apostolic perspective. But we need also to ask, well, what does that look like then in the day-to-day setting, on the ground, in the local church community?

What does that actually mean in the mundane reality of normal church life? And that's what I want to focus on today. It's really just the other side of the same coin.

The other aspect of what it means to be an apostolic ministry church. It's the practical priority of a truly apostolic church.

You see, to be churches that are truly in the apostolic pattern, we need both these things. We need the right perspective and vision, the big picture. But if we're going to achieve those things, we also need the right practical priorities, don't we?

We need to be a church that keeps the big picture in view all of the time. God is at work. We're involved in God's story. In the world and for eternity.

[8 : 12] And that God is at work. And he is achieving his purpose to his eternal glory. We must keep that in our minds. That's what we're here for. We must think big.

We must have vision. But at the same time, we must also remember how God works this out. How he's doing it in the world.

So we've got to keep our feet on the ground. We mustn't get lost in vision and forget reality. And the reality is that the focus of God's mission and the agents of God's mission are local churches.

It's real local congregations. It's real churches that are the key to God's great purpose of mission in the whole world. I'm going to say that again.

It's churches, congregations, that are the agent of God's mission to this world. I can't overestimate that enough. That's why the church exists.

[9 : 17] The church exists as the agent of God's mission in this world. That's God's plan. It's not God's plan that the churches should sit back and be content and be comfortable and parachurch groups should get on with the mission and the evangelism.

That's not God's plan. The Bible doesn't know anything at all about parachurch groups. It doesn't know any such thing. The only reason we have these sort of groups is because of the failure of the churches for so long to be what the church is meant to be.

That's why we have missionary societies like OMF. Because the real missionary society, the church, has forgotten what it's for. That's why the missionary societies were formed. That's no criticism.

Do not misunderstand me. That's no criticism whatsoever of missionary societies. Quite the opposite. Thank God they were started. Because the churches were doing so little.

Churches were so feeble. It's the same with so many other societies. Among students, among SU, and all sorts of other things. They do a great work. But really, this is the church's work.

[10 : 30] It's the responsibility of the churches of Jesus Christ in the world. We've got to get that clear. There's nothing so important to the big picture of God's mission to the whole world than the strength and the help of local gospel churches.

And that's why in Acts chapter 20, alongside such a clear view of the big picture perspective of a truly apostolic church, we have such an emphasis on what is the practical priority of such churches.

What their priority must be in their day-to-day life if they're going to be missionary churches. Whether in Ephesus in the first century or in Glasgow in the 21st century or anywhere, in any century.

And the practical priority, listen, can be summed up in just two words. Pastoral care.

Pastoral care. That's the practical priority in the church of Jesus Christ. But we mustn't understand what those words mean. We mustn't misunderstand that.

[11 : 40] And there's some very helpful things in this chapter to help us see what pastoral care really means. for Paul. And while it is pastoral care, real, biblical pastoral care, that is the fuel of the true missionary church.

Now, there are many things that could be said. I'm going to pick out four from this chapter. Four headings beginning with P. I'm having another attack of the P's. Obviously, I need to go on holiday. In fact, I'm going on holiday later this week to a country beginning with P.

Portugal. I believe it's a very cheery place at the moment. Something to do with disappointing metatarsas. I don't quite understand. Anyway, four P's.

Pastoral care, first, is all about people. Real flesh and blood. And the priority focus among these people is proclamation and prayer and real passion.

In other words, pastoral care involves our lips, our knees, and our hearts. First of all, then, let's think about the people.

[12 : 54] Everything that Paul speaks about to this Ephesian presbytery, this gathering of the overseers of the churches in Ephesus. Everything here is a lesson about real practical theology.

It's real pastoral ministry. It's about pastoral care. Just look at verse 28. He says to them, Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers or bishops to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood.

That's what bishops are for, by the way, not to sit in the house of lords or to wear funny hats but to care for the precious blood-bought people of the church of Jesus Christ, the flock of God.

Bishops or presbyters which is the word there translated elders in verse 17, they're both the same thing. He's talking to the same people. They are to be pastors. They are to be the leaders of the provision and care for God's people but they are not to be the soul carers.

We'll see that very clearly shortly. Why? They are to care because the people of God are precious. They're bought with God's own blood.

[14 : 10] By the way, just notice there that Jesus' blood is God's own blood. Just in case anybody was any doubt about that. Some people try to say that Jesus is not God.

Well, for Paul, Jesus' blood is Paul's blood. people are precious to the Lord Jesus. Now, isn't that important? I think that's very important.

Because, you see, we might think that when we talk about being a church grasping the big picture of mission, advancing the gospel, when we talk about a global and a dynamic vision, we might think that somehow, well, ordinary members, ordinary people in the church don't matter too much.

we might think, well, they can be sacrificed in the name of the great goal of onward gospel mission. I sometimes wonder if some of us think that when we're talking about mission and strategy for gospel vision.

That to try and have an apostolic perspective, a global vision, means, well, ordinary folk like me don't count for very much then, do I? No, it certainly doesn't mean that.

[15 : 22] I certainly don't mean that. Paul didn't mean that. No, he says the very opposite is the case. Seeing the great missionary perspective as Paul did does not ignore the needs of individuals, of families, of ordinary people.

In fact, the practical priority focuses exactly there on the people. Verse 20, Paul's pattern was to teach all the people, he says, including all in the household.

That would be fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, masters and servants, Jews and Gentiles, he says. Verse 26, he clearly says that he taught the word to all of you.

Verse 31, he said he admonished or warned everyone day and night for three years. It's a globally encompassing thing that involves all the people of God. Real people, all of the people are the focus of Paul's pastoral care.

I just want to emphasize that all means all. It doesn't just mean the promising and the able and the especially gifted and the strong.

[16 : 36] No, it means all. Do you see verse 35? He singles out and focuses on who? The blokes worth watching? No. He focuses on the weak.

Don't forget them because real Jesus-like ministry says Paul helps the weak and remembers that a ministry of giving to them is far more blessed than receiving from the strong.

That's not to say Paul didn't focus on teaching and training those who had leadership potential. Of course he did. his letters are full of that. But people, all people matter to Jesus.

And so any truly apostolic ministry that's God-centered and gospel-focused will inevitably have as its practical priority the things that matter most to God.

The people, the flock that he obtained with his own blood. And this chapter makes it so clear to us, doesn't it? It reveals to us the very heart of the gospel.

[17 : 42] It reveals to us the very heart of God himself. The love for his people. Yes, it is a chapter about the great onward march of the conquering gospel of the kingdom.

Yes, it is that. But it is a kingdom made up of individual souls, of precious people, who are saved by his blood, who are adopted in his family, who are tenderly cared for by the chief shepherd, by the Lord himself.

And so also, says Paul, by his apostles and by all those who come after the apostles who want to bear the marks of truly apostolic churches.

Great march to Rome, not misstanding for Paul, every believer and every church matters to Paul. That's what explains why Paul tirelessly laboured through all the provinces going to all these little churches to encourage the believers.

That's what explains his patient, his ceaseless ministry to all within the orbit of the local church in Ephesus. That's why he says in verse 35, in all these things I've shown you what you should be doing.

[19 : 01] working hard in this way, helping the weak, giving of ourselves rather than seeking for ourselves. Why? Because people matter to our Lord Jesus.

They're precious to him. He bought them with his own blood. And our practical priority must be to care for them, says Paul. Even the least, even the weakest.

we need that constant reminder, don't we? I need that constant reminder. There's times I have to confess when I don't find it easy to feel like that, because caring for the Lord's people does involve tears.

Paul says that very clearly in verse 31. It's not easy caring for the Lord's people. people. And the Lord often has to remind me personally how precious to him are all the sheep of his flock, all the lambs.

I need that reminder. But I expect you probably need it too, don't you? And is that exasperating person in the fellowship or in your home group or in your Bible study that drives you just insane?

[20 : 16] Or is that person who sits next to you in church and hasn't had a bath for far too long a time? Or when there's that rather pathetic soul in the fellowship that you know just needs to pull themselves together and pull the socks up and get on with it but is so pathetic?

Jesus says, that may be true, but they are obtained with my own blood. They're precious. If you love me, you'll care for them.

There's no sense in this chapter of the needs of God's individual lambs being sacrificed on the altar of progress of the gospel.

There's no need. Both go together. In fact, the one is simply the practical outworking of the other. But no, that doesn't mean that we're to be self-centered people, that we're to be needs-oriented people.

Of course we're not. We're to be deeply challenged ourselves to sacrifice our needs for Christ and the gospel and for his people. We're to be self-giving.

[21 : 27] We're all to challenge ourselves. He's just saying we're not to be flogging others. Verse 35 says we're to work hard, to help the weak. We're not to use the weak to bolster up ourselves.

ourselves. That's the pattern of pastoral care, says Paul. And you are to do likewise. In all these things, I've shown you what you should be doing, he says. And you, when he speaks to these people, is first of all, yes, the leaders of the church, the overseers, the presbyters.

It is those who are appointed to the pastoral office in a special way by the gifting of the Spirit. It is first to those, to the leaders. leaders. But it is certainly not exclusively to the leaders.

It is absolutely not exclusively to them. The New Testament is abundantly clear on that again and again and again. The pastoral care of God's people is to be led by the leaders, but it is to be exercised by all, says the New Testament.

Let me say that again. The pastoral care of God's people is to be led by leaders. leaders, but it is to be exercised by all. Listen to Hebrews 3.13.

[22 : 45] He's writing to the church, exhort one another every day that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Or Hebrews 10.24. Let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

You see, that's pastoral care in operation. Encouraging one another. Not a dog collar in sight. Read Titus chapter 2 about the many and the varied domestic ministries.

Older men, older women, younger men, younger women. The whole family, the whole flock of God. Pastoring, caring for one another. It's for all of us.

The ministry to the people of God is by the people of God in the New Testament. That's why Ephesians 4.12 says that those called to special office are there as pastors and teachers to prepare the saints for works of ministry, of pastoral care.

That's the theology of the New Testament. We are a kingdom of priests. We are all believers, pastors, teachers, priests, interceders for one another. That's the theology of the New Testament but it's also just the practical reality of the real world, isn't it?

[24 : 10] If any church expects one person to pastor a whole congregation in that way with virtually daily interaction, well it's perfectly impossible, isn't it? It's quite impossible even for a large group of elders to deliver pastoral care in a church our size if that's what we think pastoral care is.

No, Paul says pastoral care must be the priority of the whole church because people matter to God and we are responsible. We are responsible for one another.

We are our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper. It's for all of us. It's a big responsibility, isn't it? Why is it that Paul makes this care, this pastoring of the flock such a priority for the church?

Well the answer is there in verse 29. It's because we're constantly in danger, isn't it? From fierce wolves who will come and who will devour and damage the flock.

And the nature of these wolves and the ways of these wolves show us why the focus of Paul's understanding of pastoral care lies where it does. That brings us to the second P, proclamation.

- [25 : 31] Pastoral care must involve a ministry of the lips, all of our lips. The whole emphasis of Paul's example in Acts 20 is a full-oiled, applied, whole counsel of God, ministry of the word that pervades every aspect of the life of the church, large and small, at every level of interaction.

It's so clear. Remember last time we saw the exemplary perspective of the church at Troas, how they were devoted to Paul's public preaching. But that was not the only form of proclamation that pervades real pastoral care.

Paul exemplified teaching home to home, in small groups as well as large, pervasively, privately as well as publicly. And real pastoral care must involve real and fulsome discipling of one another.

We must do that so that the wolves will not be able to get their claws into God's precious sheep. And friends, that's hard work for you and me. It's costly work.

Yes, as verse 24 shows us, it involves encouraging people, testifying to God's grace. But also, verse 20, it involves pressing home into people's lives everything that's profitable.

- [26 : 55] And not everything that's profitable is pleasant to hear, is it? And Paul didn't shrink from that. Straight talk about repentance, verse 21. That's never easy to tell somebody, is it?

Verse 31, admonishing, warning and rebuke. That's part of pastoral cares too. And that's why Paul says it brings tears and it brings pain. But friends, that's what pastoral care is.

It is primarily anti-wolf ministry. And that's perhaps the most important part of the ministry of those with special offices of teaching in the church.

But it is the responsibility of all of us. We're all called to pastoral care. We're all called to anti-wolf gospel ministries to one another. And you know that's needed, don't you?

You've seen people that you know drawn away by people, as verse 30 says, who speak twisted things. So plausible at first, but ultimately, well, it leads away from the Lord Jesus.

- [28 : 01] How do you stop that? Well, you make sure that proclamation of the truth of God is pervasive in the church, in every nook and cranny of the fabric of the life of our fellowship.

Of course that means in the pulpit, in the public teaching. Of course. Of course that means in the home group, in the youth group, wherever else, when we gather together. But it's much, much wider than just that.

Even more importantly, it means the truth of God seeping out in the kitchen when you're doing the washing up and chatting to one another. In the garden, when you're speaking to friends. In the family, when you're speaking with your children, with your spouse.

On the golf course where you're out with a Christian friend just catching up. Everywhere you are, on our lips must be conversation seasoned with salt about the truth of God.

That's just how the family of God are to live and breathe, sharing God's truth with one another all the time. Do you remember Deuteronomy chapter 6 after Moses gives the law to the people?

- [29 : 10] He says to them, these words shall be on your heart. Teach them diligently to the children when you sit down in your house, when you get up, when you lie down, when you're going out, when you're coming in.

That's pastoral care. In Colossians 3, Paul calls it the word of Christ dwelling in you richly. He says, you care for one another.

He's not just talking about formal teaching sessions, about sitting down for a formal Bible study. There is a place for that, of course. But he's talking primarily about the natural lived out ministries of our lives with one another.

It involves our lips. The ministry of the word of grace, verse 32. That is alone what is able to build us up and bring us to an inheritance with all the saints.

And by the way, that's what distinguishes true pastoral care from wolf ministry. Wolf ministry takes from people.

[30 : 14] Verse 30 says, they draw people after themselves. Verse 29 says, they're unsparing on the flock. Wolf ministry is broadensome. It's demanding ministry of people.

It focuses on personalities. It says, come and join my group. It's divisive. Come away from them. We've got what you need. But Jesus' ministry, real pastoral care is the total opposite, says Paul.

It's a ministry of grace, verse 32. It builds people up. It focuses them on glory. It's a ministry that gives, verse 35. Working hard.

We must help the weak. It's better to give than to receive. It's not a ministry that demands. That's a very good test, by the way. We need to be on wolf alert.

Paul says, there will be those who arise from among us, from within the church, from among people that you know and very probably people that you trust. And people do sometimes in congregations push themselves forward and offer their care to people.

[31 : 19] And often, it's not because they really want to give, because they're people who want to take. They're people who need to be needed. They need to foster a dependence culture of others upon them.

And they will possess a person and make them dependent upon them. So we need to watch out. We need to say, is this really all about giving or is it about getting?

We need to ask that of others. We need to ask it of ourselves. Royal gospel grace doesn't lay burdens upon us. It lifts burdens. And Paul says, be alert.

Remember my pattern, the unceasing ministry of a word of grace that gives to you, that builds you up. And now I commend to you, all of you, that pattern.

And that's real pastoral care. It's the pattern for leaders, yes, but it is the pattern for all of us. Very particularly to those of us who are parents, it's the pattern for us.

[32 : 22] We are leaders of our own house churches. very, very particularly for fathers. We need to ask ourselves, are we pastoring our children? Are we pastoring our spouses?

The flock that the Holy Spirit has made us overseers of. We need to ask that question. Another focus of Paul's pastoral care is prayer.

Pastoral care involves our knees just as it involves our lips. Look at verse 36. Paul is taking his leave of them and what do they do? They all kneel down with him and they pray. If you read on into chapter 21, the same thing happens again.

21 verse 5, when they're at Tyre on the beach, all of them, men and women and children, all of them together kneeling in prayer. Well, why is that?

Well, what do you do when you have a very little time with those you love most? Well, you spend time sharing what's most precious, most personal, most central to your relationship.

[33 : 26] As a man and wife, you will embrace one another in a bodily union. If it's the church of Jesus Christ, you unite together with him and with his people in prayer. This wasn't a special occasion in that sense for Paul.

It wasn't unusual. It was just the expression of their deep, deep fellowship. It implies that prayer like that was at the very heart of his regular ministry to them. Of course it was.

That's real pastoral care, praying together. Pray in the New Testament, by the way, is always together. Do you know that? It's hardly ever alone.

Every single command to pray in the New Testament assumes that we're praying together with other believers. And part and parcel of care for the flock is to pray with the flock and to pray for the flock.

And that's for all of us too, not just for leaders. Although, of course, leaders must also lead in prayer, just as we lead in life and doctrine. Leaders, elders, are being specially instructed here and clearly of the essence of pastoral care is public prayer.

[34 : 34] Those of us who are leaders should not dodge that. We must not ignore it. But again, it's to be pervasive in the home, in the school, in the hospital, in the street, at college, praying together is a gift from God.

It's exercising his God-given pastoral ministry to one another. I think sometimes some of us are very scared just to pray with somebody else. Don't be scared to pray with somebody.

Don't be afraid. Nobody, I can say this truthfully, nobody, either believer or unbeliever, has ever refused when I've said to them, do you mind if I just pray for you before we part?

Ever. Stiffest pagan. You don't need fancy words, you don't need long prayers, you just need words to our Father. Any of us, any of us can share something of the word of God's grace with somebody else to encourage them, to help them.

Any of us can pray with somebody else. These things are to be our practical priority, says Paul. That's part of pastoral care for one another. You don't need degrees to do that.

[35 : 39] You don't need to go to college to do that. You don't need training to do that. You just need to love the Lord and love his people. Of course, we can always learn and be trained and help to be more effective.

We're always learners. But that's real pastoral care and we can do it. And lastly, I want you to see that all of this also involves real passion.

Real pastoral care involves our hearts. Yes, it is about proclaiming, about teaching, about admonishing, about instruction. Yes, it is about a constant ministry of God's word pervasively in every part of the fellowship.

But that kind of ministry, friends, is anything but cold and aloof and intellectual. It's just not academic and cerebral.

It is never that. It's transformed affections that are the hallmark of a true pastoral ministry of God's word, a true ministry of grace. Do you see how this chapter is all washed with tears?

[36 : 51] Look at verse 19. Paul the apostle says, I served you with tears. Look at verse 31. I admonish you all with tears.

In verse 37, everyone's in tears. They're all weeping, they're embracing, they're kissing one another. Why all this passion? Why should this be? Well, for exactly the same reason that the seemingly mundane, pervasive, local ministry of the word of God, the ordinary church ministry, is the means by which God's glorious worldwide kingdom advances.

Because in the word of the gospel, through God's people, the very power of God is at work. When real pastoral care is going on, when real ministry of God's word is happening, it's real spiritual warfare that's being waged.

The primary thing that's happening in the ministry of the word of God, whether it's in the pulpit, or whether it's one-to-one with somebody else by a bedside, or wherever it might be, the primary thing that's going on isn't intellectual, it's spiritual.

It's warfare being waged in the heavenly realms. That's what Paul says in Ephesians 6. Of course, first of all, it's through the mind, but it goes deep into the heart of our very being.

[38 : 15] And that's why real gospel preaching for Paul in Ephesus caused such chaos. There were riots. There was demonic opposition. There was magicians burning their books. All hell was breaking loose, quite literally.

And so also it is on the individual level, isn't it? The proclamation of the word of God is far, far more than merely imparting knowledge about God to our minds, to our intellects.

It is that, but it's far more than that. It wages war, spiritual war. It goes to the very deepest levels of our personalities and changes us.

It works a transformation of our minds, of our hearts, of our emotions, of our consciences, to bring everything into the obedience to the lordship of Christ.

And that's why God's word causes convulsions. It causes convulsions in people's lives. It causes convulsions in Christian churches.

[39 : 18] That's why it therefore necessarily works a change in our affections, in our deepest hearts. It causes us to begin hating sin, repenting of wrong.

It causes us to love Christ more, to obey him. works in our innermost affections. Or, as we know, can have the opposite effect, can't it?

Causing us to resist Christ, to embrace sin. And so inevitably, real ministries of the gospel, real pastoral care, will be a passionate thing.

It will be a moving thing. Because it's a transforming power, a regenerating power that's at work, either being received or being rejected.

And so there will always be tears in a church where there's a truly apostolic pattern of ministry. Always. There will be tears of anguish in the struggles and the trials of ministry.

[40 : 25] Because Paul says in verse 19 that tears and trials go together with gospel ministry. It's inevitable. It's warfare we're engaged in. It's not education. And if you're involved in caring for the flock, if you're pastoring people yourself, however large or small, however seen or unseen your road, there will be tears if you're caring for your brothers and sisters.

Can't be any other way, friends. Pain is inevitable wherever real love is involved. You know that. God. And if that's you this morning, take courage.

That's real apostolic Jesus ministry that you're engaged in. There'll be tears of grief in real ministry because of sin in lives that are exposed to God's word.

Warnings given with tears will also cause tears. But for those tears, of course, we should be glad that works repentance and faith.

There'll also be tears of joy in real and genuine ministry as we keep discovering more and more of the experience of the grace and the mercy of God in our lives that super abounds over the tears for our sins.

[41 : 42] And those tears, too, should be welcomed. And then there's sheer tears of love, aren't there? The bonds that unite those of us who share that same experience of grace together.

And especially with those who have ministered to us, who have helped us, who have encouraged us and brought us on in our Christian life. Tears of love. Remember Luke chapter 7 last Sunday morning, the woman wiping Jesus' feet with her tears.

All of these affections, all of them, all of these different kinds of tears, they're all marks of real apostolic ministry.

Real apostolic ministry, real pastoral care involves passion. It involves our hearts. Involves our hearts in both joy and in pain.

Always, always, always. And the tears of Acts chapter 20 just bear eloquent testimony to this. They're evidence of the tangible reality of transformed lives, changed people, people in whom the Spirit of God has truly been at work.

[42 : 55] So friends, I want to say to you this morning, don't be afraid of tears as you play your part in caring for the flock of God. Whether it's your neighbour, your friend, the person you sit beside, whether it's the group that you look after, or the Bible study that you teach, there will be tears.

Don't let's be afraid as a church of this apostolic pattern of ministry, of a perspective that really is big, that is God-centred, that is gospel-oriented, that's dynamic, seeking to go forward and outward and upward to glory.

Don't be afraid of that. Or of a practice which goes along with that that is really tender and patient and people-loving and full of nurture and care of everybody, that's passionate.

That is heart ministry. That is the ministry that speaks of spiritual change, of transformation. That, as verse 32 says, is the ministry of grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified.

So may God give us all speaking lips and praying knees and loving hearts to so care for one another that we will, like Paul, fulfil the course of the ministry, that we too all have received from our Lord Jesus Christ.

[44 : 30] And we'll stand before him with joy on that day. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that your flock, your people, your church is so dear to you that we are bought with your own blood.

We thank you for the Apostle Paul and his fellow ministers of that grace who spread that word throughout all the ancient world and through whose faithfulness we too stand today and claim the rights and privileges of sons and daughters of the living God.

Help us, we pray, to see in all these things how he has shown us that by loving your people with passion, by praying for and with your people, by sharing your word among every part of our fellowship, we too may fulfill our ministry and so glorify the name of Jesus Christ as many hear and witness and see the love that is among us and desire above all else to join in the grace that is ours in Jesus.

Help us, we pray, to that end for Jesus' sake. Amen.