

Features of the early church

Part 1

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Note: This text is a computer generated transcript of the sermon. In some cases it may contain errors.

[00:00:00] I suppose we begin with chapter 5 of the Gospels, commencing with verse 17.

The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 20 and verse 17.

And from Midas, Paul, sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church.

And when they were coming to him, he said unto them, Ye know from the first days I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind and with many fears and temptations which befell me [00:01:01] by the lying in wait of the Jews, and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shown you and have taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now, behold, I go bound in the midst unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things which shall before be there, saying that the Holy Ghost which is in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me, but knowing things move me, neither can I my life here unto myself, so that I might build my court with joy and ministry, [00:02:02] which I have received of the Lord Jesus to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my faith no more.

Wherefore, I take you to record the day that I am pure from the blood of all men, for I have not shunned to declare unto you all things have fell on God.

Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseer, to feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing, [00:03:01] shall grievous wounds enter in among you, not tearing the flock.

Also, of your own self shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, watch, and remember, that by the space of three years, I have ceased not to warn every one night and day with fear. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the work of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance above all that which the family buys. I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or heralds.

Yes, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessity, [00:04:04] and are ever with me.

I have shown you all things, how that so neighborly ye ought to support the weak. And to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is God's blessing to give, that to receive.

And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down and prayed to the Lord. And they all went and saw, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all with the words which he spoke, that they should see his face no more, and they accompanied him unto the ship.

Now, in my mind, what I have read has a very distinct connection with that which we have had before us on the two preceding eves.

[00:05:07] Two nights ago, I was endeavoring from chapter four to point out the very delightful features that marked the early church.

I think I called it the primitive church in Jerusalem. We noted how, at that time, in the energy of the Spirit, when as yet little had come in any way to breathe the Spirit, and in which we saw what did come in, in connection with Ammonites and Babara, was very definitely dealt with violently. Well, we saw a very delightful picture of the simplicity of that which was established, and the box, [00:06:02] I think one might really put it, of the church in its primitive simplicity. But, last evening, I pointed out, as most of you will remember, that one great feature that marked this church, this sensation, was nothing in the form of act.

Because, as I pointed out, the feature, one might almost say, at the moment, it is this, that God has created something entirely new.

It isn't an improved form of the Jew's religion, though.

It is something entirely new. As he puts it in the Second Religion, to which I think I refer, last evening, God has created one new man, breaking down the middle wall of partition [00:07:08] between those gathered out of Jewish circles on the one hand, and those gathered out of Gentile circles on the other, breaking down the middle wall of partition, and making that which is essentially new.

What we haven't got in act form, of course, is the Gentile call as yet into the church.

So, as you will remember, last evening we travelled on to chapter 11, where we see the beginning of this remarkable work at Antioch.

It began in a very simple way by very humble individuals whose names are not on the record. While many who were scattered abroad, [00:08:01] owing to the persecution that sprang up after the martyrdom of Stephen, many went about still preaching the word to the Jews only, as if this was something that only concerned that favored people. But amongst them were men of thankfulness, as I would say, who went to these preachers of goodness, preaching the Lord Jesus, preaching him as Lord. And as Peter told Cornelius, it's recorded in chapter 10, he is Lord of all, of Gentile, of, and yet as well as of Jew.

Instantly we come to the gospel. We step outside Jewish circumstances, and I think I might also say

Jewish exclusivity, and we contemplate God gathering out of the nations, [00:09:06] he had that word in chapter 15, a people for his dead.

I think I did a little job last evening. It's a remarkable fact. In fact, it was a lot to record in chapter 15. During that, when every person who speaks of Daniel, while we get the record of the conversion of Cornelius, in chapter 10 we get it told as Peter told it, somewhat later, in chapter 11, and we get it referred to, in fact, it was the decisive argument in the minds of the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem when this question arose. Now, if Gentiles are gathered out of the nations and brought into this which God is building, [00:10:01] must they not be inaugurated in Judaism?

They were surely circumcised, and they sought to keep the law of Moses. Let us make them into a new species of first-rate convert to Judaism.

Well, it was considered, and they saw very clearly, it was decided by Jesus, when Cornelius was converted.

What happened? Well, Peter preached the word, and, look at this, when he reached the climax of his address, possibly here then, if you were to ask me here where I live, in my own life, I'd hardly believe you. I reached the climax, that to him, we've all come to witness, that whosoever, look, you're leaping right out of my Jewish circle there, whosoever believes in this [00:11:01] shall receive remission of sin. There were a lot of poor Gentiles, every day, their hearts brought on by the Holy Ghost, ready for the Word. And, as I said last night, I wonder if ever since any preacher has had the privilege of talking to a group of people when the conversions were on, hundred-percently, every hour.

I never heard that statement. On that basis, but it was so.

The Holy Ghost fell on all men. You say, well, that's right. No, they weren't.

The Holy Ghost, you see, the message that they know yet, there'll be a lot of arguing about that time. So we'll settle it. They shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost just as he did.

Elected the apostle for 120, and others possibly, were baptized by the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost.

But in that case, as you very well remember, [00:12:03] when the chalice was given Peter said to them, now look, save yourselves from this untoward generally death.

They had to receive this Word by that time. And then the essence of which was, then they disputed. They cut from it.

In that outward, visible way, they professed, our link to the future, madame. We've died out of that circle. And then the essence of which was, the Holy Ghost settled this question by baptizing them with the Holy Ghost. He baptized them before ever they were baptized in water. They had to be baptized in water because, obviously, it was settled. But the Holy Ghost had baptized them. And that settled the question. Clearly, as we saw in Acts 15, they could say, it seemed good to the Holy Ghost. In the case of Cornelius, [00:13:02] and to us, a certain fear in Jerusalem, to put upon you Gentiles, no other, the even certain necessary thing, not so much connected with the law, and with God's rights in creation.

Now, that's rather a long preliminary, isn't it?

Now tonight, I want to say, yes, now we are listening to the man who, in those days of God, in gathering us in those days of the nations, of people that they made, and we are instructed as to, well, how to do it.

Isaiah 315 marked the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

He was a court who was tremendously antagonized [00:14:01] by the Jews.

If he wrote, as Isaiah already has done, it's generally held, the epistle to the Hebrews, did you know, instead of incorporating Gentile converts into Jewish services, he had to end his epistle by saying, in effect, now you who are Christians from among the Hebrews, you instead of your services, go forth to the rejected Savior without the pen.

Well, what did he do?

What was it that God used in the early days in the accomplishment of this wonderful purpose?

There are so many things here that I can only attempt to speak perhaps of a few.

But I know this, the Apostle speaks of his ministry, of the manner of it, the method, [00:15:01] and then of the things that he did.

Now, you might say to me, dear, you're a Christian man, you've got to pay attention to the manner in which the Apostle Paul exercised his ministry. I have a book. If you say that to me, you are quite right. Every one of us who in our small way today seeks grace to preach or minister to the Word of God, let the guidance by speaking of the Apostle, the Jew that we have behind me, be consistent with it. He says, I will win you at all sins.

It wasn't the case of his being very hot today and very cold tomorrow, like two Asians.

No, faith, constant ministry, in humility, in trial, [00:16:01] difficulty, these temptations or testings that he had by the divine way to do.

And then he tells us not only did he declare things by word of mouth, but he showed them. Christ, he said that. You note, I dare say, in the verses I read, I've shown you.

I've shown you. In other words, he exemplified, in practice, the things that he preached.

So many people say, now what did he mean by that? There is a way to see. Look what he did. Look how he carried himself. Look at the spirit that marked him.

He has displayed, he has showed us, in practical terms, what he declared in words.

But what did he declare?

[00:17:03] Now that is my first point. But look, he says in the end of verse 24, the ministry I received of

the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel of the grace of God.

Of course, that is where all began and where everything begins today.

It's no use of jumping further until that is established.

The foundation is laid in the gospel.

Here, not the gospel of the kingdom, which we read about, for instance, in the Gospels, because there was that time for the Jew that last year was a Jew. Here was the expected thing. So alas, they didn't recognize him. Still, the good news, [00:18:01] God had revealed his prediction through the prophets and healed of the world, who was Israel, rightful, alas, that was not perceived, saved by other Jews.

But now there goes out, consequent upon the death and resurrection and glory of Christ, and the coming of the Holy Ghost, the gospel of the grace of God.

This is the epoch which is paradigm, thy grace.

Let's never forget that.

I never forgot, nearly a year ago, I'm talking to the children, whom I, what many years ago, I was walking down the road, shedding them, those children's meetings on the beach, and he was telling them about grace. And he had all the youngsters with him. You see, I remember, even if the youngsters hadn't, I hadn't attended, [00:19:02] he was there, and they all said after him, Grace is, God giving something to somebody who doesn't deserve it. Which I said to myself, well, that's a very primitive kind of theological statement, but it's true, just about it, the man upon the head, the little child, God giving something to somebody who doesn't deserve it. It's grace.

In other words, grace is, in contrast with anything like merit.

Merit means I deserve something. I have merit. No. No, we have once before had to say, I have shown mercy, not merit, but mercy. And it is the gospel of the grace of God. And look, you might, especially in this day, notice what that meant practically when he came to what I might call our side of this matter.

[00:20:03] He said, I've been testifying, those of you who've come earlier, I've been testifying to the Jews and also to the Greeks, what? Why? Repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ. When our souls come under the mighty power and influence of the glad-tidings of grace, the grace of God, it instantly reveals us to ourselves and their repentance before God and their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't know whether I'm right, though I think I see other people who have said in present, possibly we, modern preachers of the gospel, haven't made quite clear enough. [00:21:01] Repentance towards God.

It's then that there is depth, the deeper the conviction in my soul, and your soul, and the soul of any convert, the deeper the conviction of sin and demon.

God, so that we are brought down in repentance, well, the more stable and satisfactory the

conversion to prognosis. So often repentance is shallow, and then the sense of grace is not deep.

And Christian life afterwards is rather shallow. The apostles are in very pain that when the gospel of grace is faithfully declared, that's what is really about are in the hearts and minds of those who receive the gospel, repentance towards God, [00:22:02] repentance towards our Lord Jesus Christ. The problem is not there. Now the second thing that he, so ably did it, sir, he mentioned, as I'm in the next verse, I think, he speaks of the gospel of the grace of God. And then he said, Now, behold, I know that ye, or let me emphasize that little word, he, you, all of you, among whom I have gone, Christians, the kingdom of God, shall see my face, shall know me, for all men preach the kingdom of God among the saints.

You, all, you will be brought up wherever I go, sir, and yet, I say to the saints, Look, grace has reached you in the gospel, but it's brought you under the eye of authority.

[00:23:02] You've been consoled, I'm going to quote the Colossians, you've been consoled from the authority of darkness. You've been brought into the kingdom, the kingdom of God, dear son.

God's kingdom is established in the hearts of his people, and they are brought into happy subjection to Jesus, who has become their Lord, their Lord. Whenever Paul went, he brought the truth of God to bear upon the consciences, the hearts, the lives, of those who received the gospel.

If anybody said, is there truth in that? There is indeed, if you look at the Apostle. The Apostle never contented himself with merely expounding truth.

Having expounded it, of course, that's the beginning. [00:24:02] You will have to begin in your new life with doctrine, the unholy of God's truth.

But he never stopped there. Take the epistle of the Romans, wonderful unfolding of the gospel, particularly in chapters, chapters one, two, and a half. Yes, it's bringing all men down into repentance towards God, to take our place of duty there as women in the presence of God. Then the grace of God in its fullness doth give away him, reckons his nations.

In Christ Jesus, the Spirit is eternal, ever living, the whole effect of sin comes abounding, and more in the gospel.

Then the three chapters, of course, that several questions that will rise in some people's minds as to whether this is in any way set aside what God had previously promised to Israel and Assyria in the past.

[00:25:02] But when you come to chapter 12, you get it.

I will speak to you there.

I will speak to my brethren, he says, in the light of the proof that I have opened up before you.

Look, my, we present our model, my model is that which, in my unconverted days, was the vehicle in which I pressed my door, my desire, my dream, my joy of my happiness. It was all of a sudden.

When a Christian is going to present his or her body, a big sacrifice, a sacrifice exactly is devoted to God and his purpose.

We do it in a living way. There we are, our very bodies are to be under divine control. We are to prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect good of God. [00:26:03] And only that is yet divine, what I was trying to tell you. The apostle didn't stop and expound the whole bundle of chapters 5, 6, and then again 8, particularly he says, just now, in the light of the good, what it means. He applied it to the concept of self. Presently he says, are you to fear the kingdom of God, you are brought to do it. It isn't a matter of meat and drink. It's righteousness, it's peace, it's God in the Holy Church.

Well, you see, that was the gospel of Israel. But anyway, the religion of Israel, which is especially unholy, proves, I'm sorry, the church.

What God is doing today, calling to his own gracious counsel and court, [00:27:01] if there is an exposition of death and grace in that gospel, he doesn't stop there. He turns about the middle of chapter 4 and you find he suddenly says, in effect, look, you're not going to be a thief, you're not going to do any damage to your own life. If these beliefs are true, and they are, look what it means in the practical Christian way.

Again, the apostle says, in effect, you're going to put on the new man, the old man, this process.

You're brought under him, the Lord under him.

Though the word kingdom may not be mentioned there, what is in her, is in him.

We are brought under [00:28:01] the design of our lives, that our lives, the desires of our hearts, the words of our lips, the actions of our minds, may be controlled by the Lord.

Now, everywhere Paul went, he made that note.

He wasn't a mere kind of theological professor, profound in all kinds of wonderful, wonderful ideas, and there he left it. Nobody would at all exercise as to any light which these ideas shed upon their practical behavior.

So, if truth is revealed, and it is revealed in order to exert its control upon our lives, as brought under divine dominance. That's what it is.

[00:29:01] Whenever Paul went, he preached among, among you, the kingdom of God. But there was another thing. He goes on to say, I'm, I'm love yours in the blood of all men, for I have not shunned you, nor have I viewed you for the price of God.

Well, that course is very poor, I'm telling you, in the epistle to the Ephesians.

Beyond that, which meets our needs, is that which God has denied according to his own thought. If you really give to the Ephesians, because there are always a pencil mark underneath every time that kind of expression occurs, according to, he has left us according to the original Hebrew. According to the purpose, [00:30:02] the key purpose of his thought. You'll find it in 109.

We are brought into the presence of this, that God has left us not merely according to our needs, of course he has left us, he's left our canaries, he's left more land for us to grow, he's left us according to his own thoughts and purposes and countries which he formed even before the foundation of the world. Now, Paul made that manifest. Do you know this? Do you know this? He said, I have not shouted at my father or at my mother.

At first sight you might say, I'm bored, I've got no idea at all. Why should you?

Why? Why do you? I should go and be delighted, I could wonder who could, that I could expound to you [00:31:03] or compel my father to be delighted.

Why should you shout? Well, obviously, because it was exactly that that brought upon him the raw of the Orthodox Jews.

Why was he aware that this could step dark in every place? Why was he treated as he was, he recalled, because he did not churn to declare the whole counsel of God, which lifts the Christian into heavenly into heavenly blessings beyond anything made known in connection with the Jew and the blessings which the Jew will have according to God's thought in the coming age.

[00:32:03] No, it was just that that brought upon his head the persecution.

Continually gone his footsteps from the Jews that he made.

He made it clear what God is doing according to his counsel.

I always say, you of course, let us, my dear brethren, remember these three things. Don't get lopsided. Don't say, I'll have all gospel and no counsel or I'll have all kingdom and no gospel.

No, have all three. We need also the gospel of grace, the kingdom of authority, the counsel of the purpose of God.

And that was what wrought in the Apostle's ministry. Now, I'm only going to say this, I think, that he then tells them, maybe, there are two great dangers ahead. [00:33:01] The one is a more obvious movement of the adversary.

He calls them grievous wounds, getting it among you, not sparing the flock. Yes, that is marked the whole course of the Christian procession. Men rising up with hot steams, I think we may say, spoken of as they are with wings, they're no true Christians at all. But they gain an entrance in the Christian circles and what they promulgate is destructive of the truth. That has happened again and again.

But he indicated a second danger, which I think, perhaps, for us, to provide, is coercion.

And that he said, yes, but besides this, besides this, also, first, in addition to that, [00:34:01] of your own sin, he was talking to the elders, remember. It isn't merely of you Christians, in this case. No, it's of the elders.

Of you who are responsible because, he noted, the Holy Ghost has made you overseers, or elders, exercising a measure of spiritual oversight.

The Lord Father said, he said, why is your own sin? Men will arise speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them.

The new translation, in good time, has not got exactly that word perverse.

If my memory is correct, it assumes it's the word perverted. Perverted.

That is a thing which is not exactly like you, [00:35:01] but gives you a twist.

It's perverted.

There is evidence of truth in it, but, via an extra twist, it's made visible.

That again and again has taken place in the history of the Church. Men who may be amongst true there, even of the elders, if self-counseling, in the desire of preeminence, something like biographies of whom John speaks of his third apostle, if that creeps in, even to the heart of an elder, there is a tendency for him to do something very novel with a little twist. He goes, oh, I say, isn't that wonderful? You've never heard that before, did you?

No, we never did. No, and presently, he becomes the leader of a kind of party [00:36:02] in the Church of God, an exalted somebody who is supposed to be, well, a little bit about the average servant of God and worthy to be.

A leader gathering the saints round himself.

Yes, that happens increasingly when you look, because you know again and again enough.

In the Church of God that has happened. Let us remember, think of the warnings issued so that we may be kept very clear of that kind of thing ourselves.

And finally, there are many other things that might be said about it, but the United Nations recognizes this, and in the light of this, which has been fulfilled, I might pause a moment and say, [00:37:01] if you turn to Deuteronomy, you'll find Moses, who had a very special place at the Lordgiver, he spoke in a similar way. He said, I know that after my death you will utterly corrupt, and so on and so forth. But if you look at the view of the future, the Apostle Paul, the Apostles of the Gentiles, the ones who whose, the mystery, the thing that's been hidden in the Old Testament but now comes to life, the full counsel of God, and they made man again. He has issued his warnings, I hope again, that are going to be two sources of peace. And in the light of that, I want to show you two sources of preservation.

And guess what?

Preservation says, I commend you.

Now, of course, he couldn't say, I commend you to the elders. Why, he was talking to the elders. [00:38:02] So elders, you see, are no safeguards themselves.

It was some among the elders who might become the propagators of the twisted ideas which made them the centres of the procterics or saints in the church of God.

But he does say, I commend you to God.

Well, then, do you mean that we each are putting it up to God and are to keep it up to God?

I think we are possibly waiting for the answer. That's it.

God and the Word of His Grace.

Now, I'm telling you, certainly, I don't think I've ever said any of you would wish to disagree with me if I said, I commend you to God. It will be my having to do with God. [00:39:03] God will be the Lord. I shall live in a life where there will be an element of prayer and dependence in my life.

Because, you see, it's God.

It's God who will lead me. Now, if we're looking about, the very best servant, Emmanuel, I shall be put, you will be put, into touch with God.

He said, now I commend you to God. It's God who has blessed you. It's God who has been revealed to you in Christ.

It is God with whom you will have to do what you have to do with God and prayerfully keep in touch with Him. And everything else, yes, one thing decides.

God and the Word of His Grace.

Not the Word of His law. Very important in its place. [00:40:03] Nothing more effective in producing conviction of sin. The law enters a person's life. Not only a matter of fact, but in its potency and the conscience of those who have gone under the law. Yet again and again, a person may be doing things utterly wrong. They don't realize the wrongness until somebody brings them face to face with legislation on them. When will I be great with the law? I'm convicted against the bounds in my life.

The law has proved me guilty before God.

Yes, but now we have the Word of His Grace.

If you ask me, it lays great stress on the New Testament.

The Old Testament is the Word of His law. If you allow me to speak in a broad and gentle way, the New Testament gives us [00:41:02] the Word of His grace.

The Old Testament does give us, and let God pour in, shadows of the good news to come. That, as the epistle to the Hebrews tells us, not the very image of the good news.

Well, I think I'd like the very image of the good news available.

Not merely a shadow.

Why, instead of being this natural lit wall, I'm standing outside where the sun was shining. Out in the

country, perhaps, there's a barn, there's a tree. I'm standing here.

I look there, oh, there's a shadow. I said, well, it's a house or a barn. It's a building.

And that's true.

But it's no good asking me to tell you where the door is in the barn, because I don't know. The shadow doesn't reveal these smaller details. It gives me the outline.

I can't tell you how many branches [00:42:02] that tree has, but there's a shadow. It's a tree, right enough. I can deduce certain things from it.

It doesn't give me the very image of the good news. No, it gives me the shadowy outline. Again and again, these mighty, cunning events connected with the advent of Christ, you know, the same cunning events cast their shadow.

The advent of the Messiah, even in humiliation, cast a shadow that stretched over 4,000 years to the Garden of Eden when animals were slain to provide coats of skin to clothe the guilty.

Things shadowy.

But I think we can see the tip of the shadow.

But now we have the plain revelation of the things.

And let us, my dear brethren, remember what a preservation [00:43:02] we have in the Word of God.

I'm afraid we don't, we. There are so many other things distracting us and occupying our time. Let's depend upon it.

And I see it here.

Bring it down very simply that in the other days my husband said, I'm going to have to do with God in this time.

And I'm going to have to do with the Word of grace. It certainly means the careful prayerful reading of the New Testament and the oath in the light of the New Testament. Though we can't get the details there, we have when the substance is revealed.

It is the Word of grace.

And so it has been.

Through the centuries, when God was wanting to enliven power, it has been through the Word of grace. Did anybody say, look strange, isn't it, [00:44:01] how centuries passed and then came what we speak of as the Reformation.

Blimey, blimey.

What half a century or so before, printing was invented and the Bible began to be let loose.

In that way, they had a Bible chain in the churches and the cathedrals. I see pictures representing it. Artists have drawn lots. Did somebody read the Bible? Wow. No wonder something began to happen. Wow. Oh, the Word of God, grace, began to be multiplied. Instead of being locked up in monasteries and smothered by the priests, it was let loose.

Blessing began. And so it has been all along the line. It's when our souls are brought under [00:45:01] the mighty gracious influence of His Word.

It's when our souls are preserved. Now brethren, I commend you. God and the Word of His Grace.

We're carrying outside man, even the rest of men, the most gifted servants of God. We're carrying the man in which we may speak to God on the one hand and on the other hand He speaks to us in His Word.

Therefore, preservation and blessing is to be had.

Now I think we might close our meeting by just reading a hymn which is number 337. 337. O God of grace, our Father, all praise.

[00:46:01] We give to thee, we give to thy sovereign favor, all the blessings which we seek. Notice the third and concluding verse is thy Word, thy self-reflecting, the abstinence of thy truth, still leading on thy true ways, prepared for ever. 337. O God of grace, our Father, all praise.

We give to thee, we give to thy sovereign favor, all the blessings which we seek.

Therefore, we give to thy sovereign favor, [00:47:01] all the blessings which we seek.

Therefore, we give to thy sovereign favor, all the blessings which we seek.

Therefore, we give to thy sovereign favor, all the blessings which we seek.