

J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lord's Day Morning Sermon Notes

12th March 2006

Read: Acts 20: 28-38

Text: 32

The Scripture as a Means of Grace

A true Christian, a genuine child of God, *is one who has received new life* in terms of a new principle of spiritual life created within the soul by the Spirit of God at the moment of the new birth. The language of Scripture proves abundantly that this new life is implanted in the one whom the Lord saves. The child of God is described as having been born again, born from above, and begotten by the will of God & the power of God unto a living hope. He has been quickened or made alive; he has become a new creation. These are all Scriptural terms, and they are indicative of the fact that those whom God saves have been wrought upon by the Spirit's mighty power as He executes His saving work in their hearts.

Moreover, a genuine Christian *is one who lives a new life*, again revealed by the terms of Scripture. Paul states in Rom 6: 4 that the person brought into union with Christ begins to "*walk in newness of life.*" The Apostle John, throughout his first epistle, presents seven spiritual characteristics that will mark the person who has come to know God in Christ; and the epistle also gives solemn reminders that the absolute absence of these characteristics would show that the individual is yet unregenerate and is a child of the devil. Above all others, our Saviour Himself clearly taught that His people live a new life, with the fruit of the Spirit being produced in and through them throughout their lives from the time of the new birth.

In essence, therefore, the teaching of Scripture is that there is not only the beginning of the new life through the new birth; there is also the constant development of it thereafter. There is change, growth, progress and advancement – these are features irrefutably associated with life, with spiritual life as much as with physical. Thus, within the body of Christ as a whole and within each member in particular there is to be a striving after constant progress with regard to this new spiritual life implanted in the soul. The perpetual challenge is there: "*grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord & Saviour Jesus Christ.*" The Church is to seek to be edified or to be built up in the area of things spiritual – we must never ever become content with a stunted spiritual growth or experience for this would be a denial of the very essence of true N.T. Christianity, which is this new life.

However, the Lord Himself has made provision for the edifying of the body of Christ that it might thrive and grow. While in the new birth the Lord works directly & immediately, creating new life in the soul, He has chosen to work subsequent to the new birth in the believer by use of various means, which are normally described as "the means of grace." The Westminster Larger Catechism provides a definition of these means of grace in answer to Q. 154 – "*The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to His Church the benefits of His mediation are all His ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.*"

It is important to remember that these means of grace for the Church's edification do not of themselves confer grace on any person – they have no mystical or magical powers of their own. They are not even absolutely necessary to the purposes of God in the edifying of His people in the sense that He is bound to them. But, God has appointed them and employs them to bring about spiritual advancement and growth in the person whom He saves; thus, to despise them, to neglect them, to disobey them, will bring spiritual loss & much poverty of soul. Consequently, since we came last week to consider from Eph 4: 12-16 the subject of edification itself, it is essential that we move on to give some attention to this issue of the means of grace as a result of which we are edified.

As already indicated, the first of the means of grace is the word of God; and it is first because it is the chief means of grace to the soul, a fact conveyed in our text. In the passage in which our text lies, Paul addresses the elders of the Ephesian church in the process of leaving them for the final time. Thus, he commends them to "*the word of His grace...which,*" he says, "*is able to build you up.*" The verb "build up" means *to edify*, thus the Apostle is concerned for the edification of these elders, and thus, through them, for the edification of the Ephesian Church. But note the point – Paul does not commend them, for example, to the sacraments but to the word of God, showing that he saw the word as the chief and primary means of edifying the Church. Keep in mind that the truth about the sacraments is derived from the word first of all. These ordinances can only be a means of grace to God's people through the understanding of them that Scripture gives. Hence, from every perspective, God's word is the chief means of grace to the Church, the position adopted by the Reformers, the Puritans and all true churches.

Here then is a text that plainly refers to the edifying of God's people by means of God's word. Edification by the word as the chief means of grace is a subject which in itself would require an entire range of study. But it is my objective today to leave with you the salient points that this text raises with regard to the word of God being a means of grace or edification to the Church of Jesus Christ.

I. FIRST, THE PROPERTY IN THE WORD AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Again, note that Paul is commending these Ephesian elders to God. 'Commend' means *to commit or deposit for safe-keeping*, thus Paul placed them in the safe-keeping of God himself, see Acts 14: 23. Here Paul is commending these elders to God with respect to their edification, for it is the Lord who edifies His people, but He does so through "*the word of His grace.*" Here is proof again that the word is the chief means of grace. However, note how Paul describes the word – "*the word of His grace.*" The word is in view here as possessing a particular property – the property of grace. God's word is a grace-filled word; a gracious word, Luke 4: 22. The word of God

is described thus, for throughout it is the revelation of God's grace. The theme of grace predominates, thus in this way the word of God possesses the property to edify the Church & build up the believer. It is God's grace that edifies the soul and that grace is revealed & conveyed through the word; thus it can be clearly seen why we may speak of God's word as a means of grace; indeed, the chief means of grace. Moreover, from the language of this text we may also affirm that the property of the word for edification is essentially in its revelation of Christ to our souls. Christ is the central theme of all Scripture, Luke 24: 44. In His person & work He is the subject of the word, so it is the word of God's grace. Think of some of Christ's titles that emphasise this point.

(a) **Christ is the Word**, John 1: 1 & other references also. The title "the Word" means that Christ is the one through whom God's revelation is given; and that Christ is its theme – so He is the Word of God. See Rev 1: 8 – "*I am Alpha and Omega*." These are the first & last letter of the Greek alphabet; and the title signifies that Christ is the very alphabet of God. God has always spoken through Christ & of Christ, Heb 1: 1-3.

(b) **Christ is the Word of life**, 1 John 1: 1. This title means that all spiritual, saving & eternal life is treasured up in Christ. He is the fountain-head of it. Thus, when God speaks in His word to sinners about enjoying & possessing this life, Christ is always in view. All Scripture is replete with references that reveal that Christ is the Word of life to sinners, John 1: 4; 10: 10; 11: 25; Col 3: 4 – "*Christ is our life*."

So in the same sense we may look on these words in our text as one of Christ's titles – "*the Word of His grace*." Christ is the embodiment, the spring & source of the grace that saves the soul & edifies the believer. See John 1: 14 – note in this text that Christ the Word is intimately & inseparably associated with grace. Thus, Christ is the Word of God, the revelation of God to men, and it is a revelation of grace. Therefore, the word of God is a word of grace; it contains the property to edify the souls of God's people for it constantly presents Christ to us.

Hence, we understand the matter this way – in the word and through the word Christ is brought nigh unto us for our enlightenment, our salvation and our edification; effectively, for all that our souls need. See Acts 14: 3 – the same term is used. The reference here is to the preaching of the Gospel in Iconium during the 1st missionary journey. The word of His grace was preached; i.e. Christ was preached to the saving of many both Jews & Gentiles, v.1. Note – Paul and his colleagues "*so spake that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Gentiles believed*." That is, according to v.3 they preached "*the word of His grace...*" and many were converted. The grace in the word brought them to Christ. Then see Acts 13: 43 – here are converts exhorted "*to continue in the grace of God*." In this text "in" means *by* signifying continuing by the grace of God. To continue indicates growth, spiritual development, edification, but such comes through "the word of His grace" – i.e. through Christ. See 1 Pet 2: 2-5 and note the progression of thought: v.2 the word essential to edification; but immediately Christ is brought into focus & the need to come to Him constantly, v.v. 3 & 4, the result being edification, v.5.

II. SECOND, THE POWER IN THE WORD AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Paul refers to the word as being "*able to build you up*." The word for 'able' is the N.T. word that signifies *power* or *energy* – and here it is spiritual power. Thus, the word of God has the power to edify the believer, Heb 4: 12 – where it is said that "*the word of God is quick and powerful...*" and proceeds to set forth its mighty impact on the soul. Other Scriptures bear out this truth of the power in the word for edification of spiritual growth. John 17: 17 – where Christ prays for the sanctification of His people through the truth – "*thy word is truth*." See also James 1: 21 – addressed to those already regenerated by truth, v.19. But v.21 shows that the same people need to keep on receiving the word "*which is able to save your souls*." Here is the very same word – 'able'. And the word is able to save the souls of believers' again in the sense of sanctification as the following verses show, which refer to the word under the symbol of the looking glass. See also 2 Cor 3: 18 where the same issue of sanctification by the word is in view. Sanctification is essentially synonymous with edification; and these Scriptures all reveal the power of the word to the end that the Church is edified.

However, it must be kept in mind that resting upon the word there must be the anointing of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the divine author of the word, 2 Pet 1: 21. But we need Him to attend our reading of the word; and especially the preaching of it in order to its being a means of grace to our souls, Shorter Catechism 89. See Acts 4: 29, 31 & Acts 11: 22-24. Thus, we must cry to God for the Spirit to rest on us otherwise the word will not benefit us at all, Luke 4: 14 & following verses that record the mighty anointing of Christ for His preaching ministry.

III. THIRD, THE PROSPECT IN THE WORD AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Notice how Paul states that the word not only edifies but gives God's people "*an inheritance among all them which are sanctified*." The 'inheritance' mentioned is the heavenly inheritance that belongs to God's people. This inheritance is promised to them "in the word of His grace." It is set before them there as a glorious prospect as many verses testify. However, this inheritance is promised to and belongs to only those "*which are sanctified*." That is, those who in this life are changed by grace, made new creatures as was noted earlier, a solemn fact. No man who is not experiencing the power of the word as a means of grace, who is not experiencing its sanctifying & edifying power has no right to conclude that the prospect of the inheritance is his, Rev 21: 27.

But from another perspective, the prospect set forth in the word of the heavenly inheritance becomes a means of grace in that it causes the true believer to yearn for heaven and prepare for it, Titus 2: 11-13; 1 John 3: 1-3. The prospect of heaven that the word gives is means of grace to our hearts. May we experience it continually!