

Holy and Blameless: God's Calling for the Church in Ephesus and CBCGB

This year we celebrate the 42nd anniversary of CBCGB, a testimony to the boldness and faithfulness of an intrepid band of thirteen people, and many others who followed. For this occasion, we turn to Scripture, to learn from God's Word to the church in Ephesus what he says also to us.

Day 1: Acts 19:1-41 Progress amidst setbacks

The early history of the church in Ephesus was an extraordinary dichotomy of receptivity and rejection. When the apostle Paul first arrived, he found a few Jewish disciples of John the Baptist awaiting the Messiah and eager to embrace the gospel (19:1-7). At the same time, he found a majority in the synagogue opposed to his message (19:8-9). Paul not only preached but also performed spectacular miracles, healing at a distance, and driving out evil spirits (19:11-12). When Jewish exorcists imitated his methods – as though exorcism is a matter of technique, not the intervention of Jesus – they were beaten and stripped (19:13-16). Believers were emboldened to renounce the use of magical charms, and to trust Jesus for protection from evil spirits (19:17-20). At the same time, a great many craftsmen, depending on magical charms and idol statues for their livelihoods, resented the loss of income and rioted against the Christians (19:23-41).

Acceptance – and rejection – by Jews. Acceptance – and riots – by gentiles. God's hand was clearly evident in the ministry, but so was Satan's. When God moves, people come to faith, and others oppose. This is a lesson to us, especially in the midst of the steady growth and development of the church over the last four decades. Even with God's grace, conversions, and growth, the work of God faces many obstacles, and sometimes endures severe setbacks. So we are grateful for the work that God does in our midst, yet recognize that even under the blessing of God, we will face obstacles.

Day 2: Acts 20:13-38 Sacrificial, trustworthy leadership

Paul has occasion to visit Ephesus a second time, but decides instead to save time and bypasses the city, though he stops long enough in a neighboring town to meet with the elders from Ephesus. In his speech, Paul makes three points: (1) his ministry among them had been beyond reproach, holding nothing back, and boldly preaching the gospel to all (20:17-21); (2) he anticipates continued persecution – maybe even execution – as he continues to preach the gospel (20:22-27); and, (3)

some, even leaders from within the church at Ephesus, will undermine the church through heresy and self-aggrandizement (20:28-31). Hardship afflicts the church not only from outside (as we saw yesterday), but also from within.

Which all serves as model – and admonition – for us. Paul’s ministry, past and future, contrasts with the heretics who will disrupt the church, illustrating diametrically opposing qualities in leaders: the one serves faithfully and sacrificially; the other seeks glory and teaches falsehood. This contrast is salutary for those who want to be leaders today, and to those who choose which leaders to follow.

Day 3: Ephesians 2:14-22; 3:7-13 Should a church be multi-ethnic?

We saw from Acts 19 that the church in Ephesus comprised both Jews and gentiles. Apparently, as elsewhere in the early church, this led to tension. So Paul focuses on the issue twice in his letter to the Ephesians. In 2:14-22, he explains that Christ brought peace not only between us and God, but also between Jew and gentile. He created one body out of the two ethnicities, reconciling each to God, and both, to each other. In 3:7-13, he describes this incorporation of gentiles into the people of God as a mystery, hidden for centuries, but now revealed in Christ. The rise of a multi-ethnic church in Ephesus is part of Christ’s triumph over the demons.

What implications does this truth hold for a Chinese – or any other mono-ethnic – church? We do well to be careful in application. Paul’s teaching does not prohibit linguistic churches (such as Mandarin-speaking churches). Also, realistically, self-described multi-ethnic churches are often monocultural (e.g., predominately second-generation, well-educated, yuppies), while many mono-ethnic churches are multi-cultural (1st generation OBC and 2nd generation ABC); the latter typically encompass greater diversity than the former. Additionally, many predominately ethnic churches are such by happenstance rather than by intention: in New England culture, still overwhelmingly white-predominate, the majority culture often feels ill at ease in minority churches (less a problem in CA, with its greater balance of ethnicities and races).

Clearly, there is no place for supposing that any race, ethnicity or culture is superior – much less, spiritual superior – to any other. And certainly there is every place for encouraging diversity as a demonstration of the gospel. Sometimes that diversity will be ethnic, sometimes cultural, sometimes socio-economic, and ideally, all three.

Day 4: Ephesians 4:1-13 Unity – not uniformity – in diversity

Often today we mistake uniformity for unity. On the assumption that we must all do the core things in the same way, we end up in conflict, arguing over whose way is the better. We find instead that Scripture, in general, and the apostle Paul in this text in particular, calls not for uniformity, but for unity in the midst of diversity. The point can be put more strongly: unity in diversity appropriately captures the work of God.

Paul begins with unity (4:1-6). The 'unity of the Spirit' derives from the nature of our shared faith: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Father of all, over all, and through all. To disrupt our unity is to deny the monotheism of God, or the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

At the same time, unity does not suppose uniformity (4:7-13). The grace given us differs, and comes to expression in varying spiritual gifts and ministries. Some are apostles; others, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Yet others are recipients of all these ministries, and in turn, serve the body of Christ in diverse ways through differing ministries and abilities. The purpose of this diversity: that the body be built up in unity and maturity (4:13).

So our preferences in language, in culture, in music, in preaching, in ministry, all reflect legitimate diversity, provided we do not promote one preference as superior or as more biblical. Instead, we honor God when we accept our differences and legitimize diverse forms of ministry, while preserving our unity.

Day 5: Ephesians 5:22-32 Family relationships and Christ

In this passage, Paul structures family relationships on the pattern of Christ's relationship with the Church. So while his application focuses on husbands and wives, his advice presupposes and illumines the Christ-Church relationship. Paul affirms three basic tenets. First, Christ is the head of the church, which properly submits to him. Secondly, Christ is savior and redeemer of the Church, loving, dying, cleansing, and sanctifying her, so that she becomes holy and blameless, unblemished by sin or defect. Thirdly, Christ provides and cares for the church.

Whatever this implies for the husband-wife relationship, it speaks all the more directly to our calling as a church: we submit to Christ, obeying and serving him; we are grateful to Christ, for his love, his sacrificial death, his transformation, and his provision; we rigorously pursue holiness, in order to attain to his purpose for our lives and our community.

Day 6: Revelation 2:1-7 The church in Ephesus, decades later

Apparently Paul's words in Acts 20 had a positive effect, because decades later, when the apostle John writes to the church, he is able to commend not only their hard work and perseverance, but also their opposition to false teachers who claimed to be apostles. The trouble-makers from within whom Paul anticipated eventually materialized, but the Ephesians handled them properly (and roughly). Despite these commendable virtues, the church is failing in one essential: persecution breeds reticence. Once they came to faith and proclaimed Christ regardless of the consequences inflicted by a hostile culture. But now, having experienced persecution, they persevere in faith, but seek to fly beneath the radar. Gone is the fervent commitment to Jesus, regardless of the cost, seen in Acts 19. John – and Jesus – urges them to recover this passion that values him far above worldly comfort and security.

Today, of course, we face nothing like the persecution and oppression which threatened the churches of Revelation. Still, in the face of whatever level of criticism, disdain or ostracism we do face from time to time, it is legitimate to ask: do we hold back in our confession of Christ in the effort to avoid drawing attention to ourselves, or do we consider that the generosity of Christ toward us is worth any small price that we pay for public affiliation with him?