

Taking Stock

Proverbs 27:17–27, Acts 14:24–28

The year 2021 is history. Today is January 2, the first Lord's day of the new year. The end of a year and the beginning of a new year are a good time for taking stock—for self-reflection regarding our goals, priorities and performance. How well have we done? Have we made progress? The Bible urges us to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Has there been measurable growth the past year? Are there any things we can improve, any mid-course corrections we can make? A wise person will take care “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly” (Rom. 12:3). We must have a sober self-assessment—not an exaggerated sense of self-importance, but not unduly putting ourselves down, either. We'll have more to say about this shortly.

In our New Testament text this morning we read that Paul and Barnabas “sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.” Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Bible states that Paul and Barnabas had “completed” their work. What a wonderful word, that word “completed”! To actually finish a job and enjoy a warm feeling of accomplishment is a rare but satisfying thing.

As we look into our text today let us observe three activities of the early church—things that are vital for the present time as well: preaching, gathering, reporting. First,

1. Preaching

Paul and Barnabas were had been evangelizing in Asia Minor in what is now modern Turkey. They had been run out of two cities—Pisidian Antioch and Iconium. In a third place—Lystra—Paul had been attacked by a violent mob, stoned and left for dead, yet, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, he had gotten up and gone right back into the city where he had been attacked, to spend the night. The next day he and Barnabas started on their journey to Derbe. After preaching there, the men determined to go back to each city where they had evangelized, appointing elders and organizing local churches. This would have been time-consuming work, patiently preparing men of character and competency for the office of elder, and the work of spiritual care of the churches. As we mentioned last week, the text indicates that the elders were elected by a show of hands. The biblical pattern is for churches to be led by elders elected by the people, who voluntarily place themselves under the elders' spiritual care.

Note well: Paul and Barnabas didn't just make converts, they gathered them into churches. Perhaps this is what is meant by the phrase “the work which they had *completed*” (v. 26). Paul and Barnabas didn't just win people to Christ, get them to pray the sinner's prayer, and leave them to flounder. They *completed* the

work; they organized churches, in every community, that could carry on the work the evangelists had begun.

Many people, on hearing the gospel, will agree with it. They will recognize that they are sinners and seemingly receive Christ. But they do not want to commit to the church. Christ is perfect, and his church is *not*—at least, not yet; Christ is in the midst of perfecting his church. As Paul explains in Ephesians 5, Christ is presently sanctifying and cleansing his church “with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” Someday, the work of sanctification will be complete, someday the church will be a glorious bride, presented to the heavenly Bridegroom, experiencing perfect fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all eternity.

Yesterday I received an email from a woman in another state. She has been deeply hurt by some Christian people, and at this point in her life wants nothing to do with the church. Yet it is the church that she needs! Every member of Christ’s body is important. She needs the body to reach out to her and encourage her and minister to her. And the body needs her insights—the things that she has learned through her hurts. She is truly hurting, but pulling away from the God-given institution that could truly help her.

But in the case of Paul and Barnabas, the work of ministry had taken its toll. These missionaries were battered and tired. They needed to get back to their home base and be refreshed. They needed to report on their work and thus encourage the saints. Preparing to begin their return journey back to Antioch in Syria, from which they had been sent out, they traveled to Pamphylia, the coastal region on the north of the Mediterranean. Here, they went into Perga, continuing the pattern of strategically reaching population centers and fanning out into the surrounding regions. Notice particularly an important little phrase in verse 25: “when they had preached the word in Perga.” Once again, Luke is careful to note the apostles’ main mission—preaching the gospel. He has used different words to express this, as we have noted before. He typically uses verbs meaning *to proclaim as a herald* and *to share the good news*. The one word is used for the official proclamation of the King’s message; this would normally be done by the apostles, or by ordained ministers of the gospel. The other word is less formal, referring to ordinary Christians testifying of their faith in Christ. Here, the inspired writer uses a third word: the common word for *speak*. This range of words indicates that the message of Christ is to go out both formally and informally; Christians everywhere are to tell anyone who will listen about the Savior. The book of Proverbs (25:11) teaches that “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Gill helpfully observes that “a word fitly *spoken*” is “a discourse well put together, properly pronounced, roundly, easily, and fluently delivered to proper persons, and adapted

to their circumstances; and ‘seasonably’ spoken.” All of us should look for opportunities to speak to others about Christ, using words appropriate to the occasion, taking particular note of how receptive the person we are speaking with might be, and the particular circumstances he might be experiencing, and his or her state of mind at any given moment. Is the person we are speaking with going through hard times? Jesus is “the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Has she experienced a significant life event—a birth, graduation, wedding, funeral, marital breakup? God’s Word declares, “Thou shalt *guide* me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.” Is he living a life of pleasure, living it up, with no thought of tomorrow? “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” Is she burdened down with her sins? The Bible declares, “Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.” No matter what circumstances we or the people we talk with might be going through, our greatest need is Christ, and the most helpful thing we can do is to point others to him. Let us each pray for wisdom to offer “a word fitly spoken.”

When Paul and Barnabas were in Perga, they “preached”—literally *spoke*—the word.” What was it that they spoke? “The *word*”—the Logos. Christ is the Word, the Logos of God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Human language involves putting thoughts into words. We learn to do this as very young children. Each of us speaks thousands of words every day. We learn largely by listening to words. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Word *par excellence*. He, the second Person of the holy Trinity, expresses the mind and person of God to mortal men. Here is the message that every person the world over needs to hear, and it is expressed through words. Words have the power to illuminate, to encourage, to destroy. “Whoso despiseth *the word* shall be destroyed: but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded” (Prov. 13:13). “The *word* of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Jesus is the Word made flesh. May God open our ears and hearts to receive the Word!

When Paul and Barnabas got to Perga, even though they were tired and bruised from spiritual warfare, they were “speaking the Word.” In the original, “speaking” is plural; both Paul and Barnabas were doing it. Exhausted though they were, they couldn’t stop speaking about Christ. Here were men who were single-minded—almost fanatical. Their own lives had been changed by Christ. They were absolutely convinced that Christ was real, that his resurrection was real, that hell is real, that his salvation is real. Christianity to them was not just a nice little philosophy that seemed to make sense of the world but had little practical significance. For them, the Christian faith was life-changing. Paul and Barnabas

were not in Perga to tell people just to be a good person and go to church. They told people that Christ is the only way to the Father, that there is salvation in no one else, and that to reject him is to burn in hell for all eternity.

The message of Christ is not a passing fad—something that is in style one day and outdated the next. The church must always single-mindedly preach Christ. Life is short. Eternity is long. It is no exaggeration to say that receiving Christ is absolutely a matter of life and death. To receive him is life. To reject him is death. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).

A faithful church must always be preaching; secondly, it must be

2. Gathering

From Perga, the missionary team went down to Attalia. This was a seaport on the shore of the Mediterranean. Here, they found a ship bound for Antioch in Syria, boarded it, and set sail. They had a lot to report on from their first missionary journey. The work to which the Spirit of Christ called them had been fulfilled. Not only had they made converts, they had established churches that could perpetuate the work.

When Paul and Barnabas got back to Antioch, they probably enjoyed a good night’s sleep—maybe several! But notice what we read next: “Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” There’s a lot here, but for now notice one thing: when they had come they “gathered the church together.” The word in the original for “gathered the church together” is the verb form of the noun *synagogue*. A synagogue is a place where people gather together. Here is the church—in this case, a *local* church—gathering together.

Gathering together is what the church does. There is no biblical pattern for a “virtual” church. Now we are thankful, particularly in this third year of a “pandemic,” for live-streaming technology. It is a great tool—something that was all but unknown just a few years ago. Live-streaming has been a great blessing for many members of our congregation when they had to stay home because of sickness or quarantine or rehab. It has also enabled our services to be viewed by interested parties outside the church. But live-streaming is no substitute for the church actually gathering. A person can *observe* worship over live-stream. But one cannot actually *worship* (in the biblical sense) remotely. You cannot sing with a congregation remotely. You cannot receive the Lord’s supper remotely. Even the sermon (in its biblical sense) is designed to be received by a congregation gathered together. The whole congregation receives the sermon; the elders are there, exercising their gift of discernment, judging the sermon. Is it faithful to Christ? Does it accurately represent the message of Scripture? Is it appropriate to the needs of the congregation at this hour? By the way, the word *congregate* comes from the

Latin roots meaning *to flock together*. The church is Christ's flock gathered together! Christ's flock gathers to hear the Shepherd's voice. The church receives its marching orders and goes forth to take dominion in the name of Christ. When Christ called his disciples, he didn't just drop a little handbook from heaven into the front yards of twelve men ("Here's everything you're supposed to do, now read it and get to work"). No! He called them all by name. He modeled a life of discipleship in their midst. "When he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice" (John 10:4). What we see in the Scriptures—both testaments—is God's people gathering together to hear his voice.

In the present case, the returned missionaries Paul and Barnabas "gathered the church together [and] reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." This was an important message, and it needed to be delivered to the whole congregation. At the beginning of chapter 13 the Holy Spirit had said, "separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." The church obeyed. "Having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away." Barnabas and Saul were sent out jointly by the Holy Spirit and by the church. Now, the church would joyfully gather together to hear from the lips of the missionaries all the details of what God had done through them. There was a spirit of great anticipation. What had these servants of Christ done during the long months and years that they had been away? They had been preaching and gathering flocks of God's people in Cypress and Asia Minor. Now, the sending church was gathering together to hear personally from God's servants, rejoice in what had been accomplished, and pray for their newly-established sister churches in other lands. But there is a third activity that is evident here, and that is

3. Reporting

We read that the missionaries Paul and Barnabas began to tell "all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." Here was an encouraging report. Note that it was about "all that God had done." Paul and Barnabas were humble. They didn't spin the message to make themselves look better. All the emphasis was on what *God* had done. They didn't boast about the miracles they had performed, the great sermons they had preached, the converts they had made, their great exploits. All was put in proper context. It was *God* who was working in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure. It was God who had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

It is the same now. When people come to Christ, it is not because of the persuasiveness of the preacher, but because the God who made light shine out of darkness shines the light of his regenerating Spirit into a spiritually dark and cold heart. The story goes that Charles Spurgeon, the great pastor in nineteenth-century London, was walking down a street one day when a man who was drunk and

leaning on a lamppost yelled out to him, ‘Hey, Mr. Spurgeon, do you remember me?’ ‘No, why should I?’ ‘Because I’m one of your converts!’ Spurgeon’s response? ‘Well, you must be one of mine; you’re certainly not one of the Lord’s.’”¹ With the Lord’s help a preacher can make the gospel plain, but only the Spirit of God can breathe life into a spiritually dead heart, and open it up to the gospel.

So Paul and Barnabas reported to their sending church the things that God had done through them. It was the church at Antioch that had sent them out, supported them and prayed for them all these months and years, and it was the church at Antioch that now heard their first-hand report. In essence, what Paul and Barnabas were doing was being accountable to the church that had invested so much in them. Here, then, is the principle of accountability. Paul and Barnabas did not say, “We were personally chosen for this work by the Holy Spirit; therefore, we are accountable only to him. It’s none of your business what we did when we were on the missions trip.” No! They were sent out by the church, and so it was appropriate that they would report to the church. There was transparency, and there was accountability. Here were Paul and Barnabas giving account of their stewardship. Paul would later write, “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2). Clearly, he practiced what he preached.

This is something that missionaries do today as well: they deliver reports of their work to praying and sending churches. This past fall Grace OPC had missionary visits from Ben and Heather Hopp (Haiti) and Mark and Jeni Richline (Uruguay). These were very encouraging visits, and help to make our prayers for our missionaries much more personal.

At the end of a business day (or month, or quarter, or year) a businessman will balance his accounts. He will total up receipts and expenditures and see how he is doing, business-wise.

When my dear wife worked at a bank, early in our marriage, she would have to balance her transactions at the end of every business day. Being conscientious, she tried very hard to balance right to the penny. And she was very good at it. Even though she was part-time, she received the “teller of the season” award several times. And this was in the days before computers; everything had to be added up with an old-fashioned adding machine.

Just yesterday I received the report of our presbytery Committee on Diaconal Ministries for posting to our presbytery website. The Committee gives account of its stewardship to the whole presbytery. So does the presbytery treasurer. Once a year the presbytery will appoint an auditing committee to go over all the books and report to the body. “It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.”

¹ <http://michaelkelley.co/2011/02/spurgeon-and-the-drunk-convert/>

In Luke 16 we read of “a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’”

Accountability is inescapable. Some people foolishly assume that they can get away with things when nobody is looking. But there is one who *is* looking, and that is God who has perfect knowledge of all things, including the human heart. Those that are mistreated pray, along with the Psalmist, “Lord, break the wicked person’s power and *call him to account* for all the evil which he thought would never be found out. The Lord will ever reign as king; his throne will always stand. The heathen nations of the world will perish from his land” (Psalm 10:15–16, TPH).

How are you doing, accountability-wise? At the end of a year do you take stock? Do you set aside time for self-reflection regarding your goals, priorities and performance? Does your life have a purpose? Are you living your life purposefully—intentionally? How well have you done this past year? Have you made progress? Have you slipped back? Socrates famously said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” He was not a follower of Christ, but he got this one right. Do you examine your life? Do you take stock? Or do you have the attitude: *Life just happens, and there is nothing I can do about it?* It is good to take stock, and to report it to yourself and to your superiors. Eventually, you will report it to God, at the final judgment. Taking stock is essential for leading a purposeful life. The end of the year is a good time for taking stock. How do you measure up?

Our Old Testament text wisely counsels, “Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds; for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations.” Solomon’s son, when he would become king, must be diligent to know the state of his flock. Sadly, he failed and lost the kingdom. Church elders, likewise, must know the state of their flocks. Are their sheep living in obedience to Christ? Are they growing in their knowledge of the Scriptures and their love for Christ? Are they happy and healthy? Husbands and wives likewise must regularly take stock. Are they growing in their love for one another? Are they solving problems biblically?

We have considered three important activities of the early church that are vital in the present time as well: preaching, gathering, reporting. May God strengthen us all, enabling the church today to preach with power, to gather the saints for worship and instruction, and to report on God’s wondrous works among the children of men. To him alone be the glory. Amen.