

The Whole Counsel of God

Ezekiel 3:16–21, Acts 20:25–31

Westminster Theological Seminary, which has trained many OP ministers over the years, has an official seal¹ with the Latin words meaning *Sign of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, AD 1930* around a decorative border; inside is an illustration of a pulpit holding an open Bible with an unsheathed sword on top, a symbol of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”²; above it, the Greek words πᾶσα ἡ βουλὴ τοῦ θεοῦ—“the whole counsel of God”—from our text this morning.³ What the seal expresses is that the seminary’s core mission is to prepare preachers who can articulate the whole counsel of God to their people—preachers who have a competent and experiential knowledge of the Bible. This is a commendable ideal—may all conservative Reformed seminaries live up to it!

“The whole counsel of God” is the theme of today’s message. There is a lot in this text, and we are going to spend two weeks on it. But for today, consider three points: the *reality*, the *urgency*, and the *priority*. First,

1. The reality: “You all ... will see my face no more.”

Consider Paul’s words, “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more” (v. 25). Paul was realistic. He knew that, from a human perspective, time is short. *Today* is the day of salvation⁴; after death there will be no second chance.

When I was eight years old I remember thinking, *I can hardly wait till I am sixteen, so I can start driving*. Eight whole years till I could start driving a car, and how slowly the time passed! Now, in my 70s, I am more likely to think, *My, how time flies—where has the time gone?* At this age I have fewer years to accomplish everything on my bucket list. But clearly, from a human perspective, time is short. As wise Solomon tells us, “The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.”⁵ I have now passed the seventy-year mark. I am in good health, but will I make it to eighty, or beyond? Only the Lord knows. Have you noticed how many stories there are in the news of people—even athletes in top condition—who are dying suddenly, with no warning? Some of them die right on the playing field, or at the end of a race. People have their theories as to

¹ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/passion-ministries--497436721321237381/> accessed 11-19-22

² Eph. 6:17

³ The seal uses all capitals: ΠΑΣΑ Η ΒΟΥΛΗ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ. Historically, this was translated “all the counsel of God”; cf. Wyclif (1380), Tyndale (1534), Cranmer (1539), Geneva (1557), Rheims (1582), Authorized (1611). More recent translations render it “the whole counsel of God” (NKJV, ESV), “the whole will of God” (NIV), “the whole purpose of God” (NASB), “the whole plan of God” (Holman Christian Standard Bible), “the full counsel of God” (Jubilee Bible 2000). The translations essentially mean the same thing. “All the counsel of God” is slightly more literal, as the word πᾶς means *all*, and Greek has another word that specifically means *whole*: ὅλος.

⁴ 2 Cor. 6:2

⁵ Ps. 90:10

why this might be, but the takeaway is this: for people of any age, life is not a certainty. “It is appointed unto men once to die.”⁶ Babies die, toddlers die, preschoolers die, elementary children die, teens die, the newly-married die, middle-aged die, seniors die. One day, all of us will meet our maker. What will we say to him? “I always intended to commit my life to Christ, but I never got around to it, I knew he was the Savior of the world, but I had so many other things to do.” What will he say to us if we rejected God’s Son?

There is only one way of salvation, and that is Christ. We are all sinners. We have offended a holy God. We are lost—without hope, without God in this world—without a Savior. God is holy; he cannot allow sin in his presence. Since the whole human race incurred the guilt of Adam’s first sin, no one can approach the God of infinite holiness without a mediator—someone who can go to the Father and intercede on our behalf. God himself provided the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the holy one who came to this earth to die, as our substitute, in the place of his people. Our sins were laid upon him, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us by faith. If we receive him as Lord and Savior, he will bring us to God. He will bear witness at the final day: “This is my child; I died for him, so that he would never die.”

What will you say to God if you reject him—or even if you never get around to receiving him? Will you say, “But God, I never found your gospel all that interesting. There were so many things that were more exciting. I was more interested in the here-and-now than the bye-and-bye.” If you never get around to receive Christ, the default will be that you rejected him. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.”⁷ There are two alternatives: “Kiss the Son” (receive him, hold him close, love him as he deserves to be loved) or “perish”; “put [your] trust in him, or suffer his eternal wrath. This does not seem fair to you? May I remind you that *you* are not the Creator. This is God’s world, and *he* sets the terms. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, love him, and enjoy him forever. If we do this, we will experience eternal joy. If we fail to do this, we will experience eternal woe.

Paul was very close to the Ephesian Christians. For two years he had reasoned daily in the school of Tyrannus; for three years he had laboured in the area. He had spent time with them, diligently setting forth the teaching of Scripture and patiently answering all their questions. The Ephesian Christians had been greatly blessed. They had had the unspeakable privilege of having one of the greatest theologians the world has ever seen be in their very presence for an extended period of time. What was Paul’s message? “The kingdom of God”—the rightful rule of Jesus

⁶ Heb. 9:27

⁷ Ps. 2:12

Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. In our Acts text we hear the apostle Paul baring his heart to the Ephesian elders. This was a church that was very close to his heart. The saints at Ephesus would become the addressees of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a very special letter—a doctrinal feast. Now he says to them, “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.” Paul's Ephesus Bible School was closing permanently. Paul would be leaving the responsibility for teaching the Christian faith to the elders he had trained. He was telling them, The things that you have heard from me, the same commit to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. So it is in every generation. God calls his faithful servants home, but commits the work to their successors, who would be able to carry on the teaching.

Here, then, is the *reality*: we are all going to die. Someday, people will see *our* face no more. Death will overtake us. We will be gone. Our earthly lives will be over. There will be no going back. “Only one life, 'twill soon be past.” At every moment the key question is, “Am I living for Christ right now?” Second, consider **2. The urgency: “I am innocent of the blood of all men.”**

The word in the original is καθαρός, *clean*. It comes into our language as *cathartic*. It is used of clean linens. In the moral and religious sense it means *pure, free* from sin.⁸ This is the sense in which it is used by our Lord in Matthew 5:8, “Blessed are the *pure* in heart.” Or as in Proverbs 20:9, “Who can say, I have made my heart *clean*, I am pure from my sin?” In Acts it means *guiltless*: in Acts 18 we read that “Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your own heads; I am *clean*. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’” Or as it is used here: “I am *clean* (innocent) of the blood of all men.” Paul was innocent of the blood of all men because he faithfully taught the whole message of Scripture. Oh, that every preacher would earnestly desire to be innocent of the blood of all men!

There is a parallel in our Ezekiel text. Gill gives a careful exposition; updating his language, it says essentially this: “When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die’”—that is, not only physically, but *eternally*, for this is the wages of sin, apart from grace; “and you give him no warning,” warning him of the evil of his sin and the danger to which it exposes him; and you do not “speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way,” to abstain from it, and live another course of life; “that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity”; that is, with the guilt of his sin upon him, and so be punished for it⁹; “but his blood I will require at your hand”: his death shall be laid to your charge, and you will be chastised for your negligence.¹⁰ Such is the

⁸ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, καθαρός (Logos Bible Software)

⁹ John 8:24

¹⁰ John Gill, commentary on the whole Bible, Ezek. 3:18 (Olive Tree Bible Software)

prophet's warning to the unfaithful watchman, whose duty was to warn the citizenry. This is in perfect harmony with our Acts text: Paul says that he is "innocent of the blood of all men" precisely because he has *not* "shunned [*shrunk back from, avoided* because of fear¹¹] to declare the whole counsel of God." What is implied is that Paul would *not* be innocent of the blood of all men if he had held back and *failed to declare* the whole counsel of God. If a minister holds back and does not proclaim the whole will of God taught in Holy Scripture, he is *not* innocent of the blood of all men. God will require it at his hand.

This does not mean that every sermon must include every doctrine—the Bible is a big book, and there are many doctrines. But it certainly means that if, over the course of a man's preaching ministry, he purposely withholds any biblical doctrine that he doesn't personally like, then he is not declaring the whole counsel of God. He is distorting the message of Scripture, and the blood of his Christ-rejecting hearers will be upon his hands. Such will be the fate of preachers who fail to warn men that they are bound for hell apart from Christ, that there is no other way of salvation than through Christ, and that if they reject him, they will suffer eternally in the lake of fire. Telling sinners simply that they must believe in Christ, without warning them that apart from him there is no other way of salvation, leaves the impression that believing in Christ is just one way, among many, of attaining heaven. That is a purposeful distortion of the biblical message, one for which the preacher will be called to account: the blood of sinners will be chargeable to him. As James wrote, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that *we* shall receive the greater condemnation."¹² Preachers who purposely withhold biblical doctrines from their hearers will be judged more harshly. God does not want his prophet to deliver a truncated message but the "whole counsel of God."

Here is the urgency: to be *innocent* of the blood-guilt of all men. Finally, consider

3. The priority: "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God."

Paul says, "I am innocent of the blood of all men *because* I have not shunned to declare the *whole* counsel of God." Here, we come to the heart of our text. What is the whole counsel of God? The older English translations rendered it "all the counsel of God." More recent translations render it "the whole *counsel* of God," "the whole *will* of God," "the whole *purpose* of God," "the whole *plan* of God" or "the *full* counsel of God." What does this mean? It cannot mean God's secret will, for no man knows that. "The *secret* things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are *revealed* belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). Clearly, "the whole counsel of

¹¹ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, ὑποστέλλω (Logos Bible Software)

¹² Jas. 3:1

God” refers to his *revealed* will, found in the Holy Scriptures. Essentially, what the phrase means is God’s will revealed in the Gospel, concerning the salvation of men by Jesus Christ, even the whole of the Gospel, every truth and doctrine of it.¹³ The phrase itself may have originated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), which states (summarizing Holy Scripture) that “*the whole counsel of God* concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly set down in Scripture*, or by good and necessary consequence may be *deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” The whole counsel of God is revealed in Holy Scripture, either by express teaching or by valid deduction. Clearly, it is essential for the church, through its preachers, to *declare* the whole counsel of God. The whole counsel of God is the teaching of all of Scripture. To omit any part of the whole counsel of God is to disfigure, mar, spoil and ruin God’s truth.

Lately, there have been accounts of climate activists defacing famous works of art, throwing tomato soup or mashed potatoes on them in order to draw attention to their cause. What if an activist absolutely destroyed half the *Mona Lisa*? Would anybody believe that it really didn’t matter because the half that remained was still good art? No! An art connoisseur is interested not only in the individual brushstrokes but in the effect of the whole—perspective, balance, focus, and so on. Part of the greatness of the *Mona Lisa* is the whole.

So it is with the word of God. Jesus declared, “Thy word is truth.” Surely this refers not just to the particular doctrines but to the whole. Every individual doctrine of Scripture is true, and the whole of Scripture is true. “Therefore I esteem *all* thy precepts concerning *all things* to be right; and I hate every false way” (Ps. 119:128). The Christian is to have a “high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the *heavenliness* of the matter, the *efficacy* of the doctrine, the *majesty* of the style, the *consent* of all the parts, the *scope* of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the *full discovery* it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other *incomparable excellencies*, and the *entire perfection thereof*, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.¹⁴

Years ago I spoke with a woman who was working with young mothers that suddenly found themselves with an unplanned pregnancy. She had taken a group the previous evening to hear a female evangelist preach at her church. I found out that her church regularly has women preachers, and that she enjoys listening to them. I asked her how these women would preach on the text “I do not permit a

¹³ John Gill commentary on the whole Bible, Acts 20:27 (Olive Tree Bible Software)

¹⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01

woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.”¹⁵ She immediately replied, “Oh, we just don’t see it that way.” In her mind, what she likes (women preachers in worship) takes precedence over what God forbids (women preachers in worship). God speaks very clearly in his word, but some of the things God says are not palatable to her sensibilities; therefore, she feels she has the right to reject them. It is as though she has defaced Scripture—thrown tomato soup over the parts she doesn’t like—and what remains is not what God intended; it is fundamentally changed, fundamentally different, and of no avail.

The fact is that there are a *lot* of doctrines that the unregenerate man does not like—creation out of nothing by God’s powerful word, in the space of six days, and all very good; the fact that all men sinned in Adam, and apart from regeneration by the Holy Spirit are spiritually dead, utterly lost, unable to see their need of Christ; the fact that there are not multiple ways of salvation but only one: through faith in Christ alone; the fact that God receives only the worship that he himself appointed in his word and abominates false worship; the fact that those who reject Christ will spend eternity in the lake of fire. Millions of unregenerate people hate these doctrines, yet they are taught in the Bible. But truth is not determined by majority vote but by God himself.

I was reading about the life of the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. He was the third child and younger son of the Reverend Arthur Vaughan Williams and his wife, Margaret. Margaret Vaughan Williams was Charles Darwin’s niece. After his father died suddenly in 1875, his mother took the children to live in her family home, Leith Hill Place, Surrey. One day young Vaughan Williams asked his mother about Darwin’s book *On the Origin of Species*. She answered, “The Bible says that God made the world in six days. Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer: but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way.”¹⁶ But is it? Is the length of the creation days unimportant? Are there unimportant doctrines in Scripture? Who gives man the right to decide? The Holy Scriptures are the word of God!

When Paul speaks about “the whole counsel of God” he is speaking of *biblical* doctrines—things taught in the Bible. Some Charismatics call themselves “full-gospel,” “full” meaning not only the good news of salvation but emphasis on the sign gifts: tongues, interpretation, healings and miracles—as if the Reformed churches obstinately hide these from their people. The sign gifts were given before the completion of the canon, to accredit the apostolic message. Now that the canon is complete, God’s messengers are accredited by their fidelity to Scripture, not by miracles.

¹⁵ 1 Tim. 2:12 NKJV

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Vaughan_Williams#Early_years accessed 11-19-22

As a boy I remember reading *Reader's Digest*, which offered condensations of popular articles from other magazines. A good condensation preserves the content of the original while cutting out some of the verbiage. But the sincere Christian is not content with the "*Reader's Digest Bible*"! He wants the whole word of God—every word.

Not only should preachers *preach* the whole counsel of God, but by analogy, it is likewise essential for the individual believer to *understand* the whole counsel of God. I am not saying that a person must have perfect knowledge in order to be saved; by the mercy of God a person can be saved who has a basic knowledge of the elements of the gospel: "I am a sinner and have no hope of eternal life apart from Christ; he is my Savior, and I am trusting in him." But why should we settle for partial knowledge?

The gospel is a many-faceted gem. It is the pearl of great price. It is the treasure of incalculable worth. Oh, dear brothers and sisters, let us not be content with spotty, incomplete, superficial knowledge. Let us dedicate our lives to learning God's truth, to acquire a competent knowledge of the *whole* counsel of God. Amen.