

33. The Pastoral Congregation

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.
(James 5:19-20)

A Remarkable Conclusion

We come now to the last verses of the letter of James. At this point, we need to remind ourselves of the general theme of the letter and also ask some questions about its ending. As we have learned, the theme is the maturity of faith. James wants his readers to come to the point where their faith is fully effective and powerful, bearing fruit and thus mature.

He writes the letter to churches in which there is much turmoil and strife, churches in a state of spiritual infancy that have to grow in faith and obedience in many ways. There are some very serious problems in these churches, especially when it comes to living the faith, to Christian morality.

Now James comes to the conclusion of his missive. In some ways, it is a remarkable conclusion. With this, I mean that James does not end with the usual greetings, doxology, and benediction. There is actually no specific conclusion, and it seems that the letter just peters out. Some explainers therefore suggest that the last verses are not original, but were added later to emphasize one aspect of James' writing. These explainers question whether this concluding part of the letter is genuine.

There are, however, other letters in the New Testament which also end rather abruptly. In itself, the abrupt ending is not an argument for disqualifying these verses. We can only surmise why James ends this way, and I suggest that he wants to make a lasting impression with a very powerful message, one that summarizes the letter and gives it a final application.

We see this already in the first words of the text: "My brothers..." When we read that throughout the letter and now at the end, we know that a key statement is coming, and this will also be the concluding statement.

James writes that the greatest service we can do for another is to bring him back from the error of his ways, thereby saving his soul from eternal damnation.

This ties in to that which James has constantly emphasized: the mature congregation must be the pastoral congregation in which everyone is directed to the salvation of the others. We will consider the need for this pastoral care, the style of this pastoral care, and the fruit of this pastoral care.

Wandering From the Truth

James writes in 5:19, “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back...” We need to look closer at the expression “wander from the truth”. Let us not think that this is only a matter of following a false doctrine. Of course, it could mean that, for everything starts and ends with a sincere acknowledgement of the truth. We must be committed to the true doctrine of Scripture, and therefore our liturgical forms can speak of erring in doctrine and conduct, with doctrine mentioned first.

But the “truth” here is much more a living in accordance with God’s commandments. In the Bible, truth is never an abstract thing but always a matter of morality. Truth, like love, is an action word. We must actively do the truth, putting our principles of faith into action.

In this light, we can better understand the phrase “wandering from the truth”. James does not write, “If one of you should *break* with the truth,” but he writes, “If one of you should *wander* from the truth...” The former is a much more serious matter than the latter. In such a case, there is an open and public denial of the truth and a conscious living in sin.

This may also help us to understand the difference between what John writes and what James writes. Let us look at I John 5:16-17. John writes about the fact that someone sees a brother committing a sin that is not unto death. He then writes that there *is* a sin that leads to death, and in that case, we do not have to pray for the sinner’s repentance.

Do we find it shocking to be told not to pray for someone whose sin leads unto death? Is this the basis for the so-called “mortal” sins for which there is no forgiveness? John states, “There is a sin that leads to death.” What kind of sin is that? It can be nothing other than the sin against the Holy Spirit, when someone with full knowledge of the truth deliberately continues in a sinful lifestyle and obstinately refuses to heed the admonitions of the church and the elders.

The Need for Pastoral Care

The Old Testament already made a distinction between sinning unwittingly or thoughtlessly (Lev 5), by mistake (Lev 22), and defiantly, that is, with uplifted hand (Lev 15:30). The one sin can be forgiven in the way of proper sacrifice, but the other sin is punishable by death. Hence John can write about sin that leads to death: obstinate, defiant sin.

John does not write that we *may* not pray for a defiant sinner. He writes, “I am not saying that he *should* pray about that.” Do we ever stop praying for defiant sinners? That situation can arise over the years. What is the sense of praying for someone who defiantly and obstinately disregards the truth, and even hates it? Sometimes everything we say or do leads to further hardening in sin. There are persons whom we can better leave to the Lord.

Let us go back to James 5. Here we read about a wandering from the truth. The person involved may or may not even be aware of the fact that he is living in a specific sin. He is wandering, drifting from sin to sin. James reckons with the fact that this can happen to anyone in the congregation. “If one of you,” he writes. No one should think that this will never happen to himself. We are all inclined to hate God and our neighbor, and who does not stumble or fall?

There is the sad reality of sin that can get its grip on us in various ways, from time to time. We may not even see that where we are going or what we are doing is wrong, but this demonstrates the need for pastoral care. We are members of a pastoral congregation. James does not here address the office bearers, but the whole church: “my brothers” (and this includes the sisters).

What Is a Pastoral Congregation?

What is a pastoral congregation? We call our ministers “pastors”. This is fine, as I mentioned before, as long as we know that elders are equally pastors, and as long as we understand that we are all pastors of each other as members of the pastoral congregation of Christ. This is the basis of mutual discipline that begins and ends in the church, among the members, and does not even involve the consistory. In our church order, we therefore have a stipulation that the consistory may not deal with any matter of censure that has not first gone the way of brotherly admonition. The consistory serves the pastoral congregation, but does not replace it.

There are so many things about which the office-bearers never know, nor should know. If we see someone wandering from the truth and becoming

increasingly caught up in a sinful lifestyle, we must act in order to bring that person back. We are brothers and sisters of each other, and hence also our brothers' and sisters' keepers. "Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, I am."

The evidence of a mature congregation lies in the fact that it has become a pastoral congregation, a caring and acting fellowship. This is especially important when we see someone wandering from the truth. We have to act, and "nip it in the bud", so to speak. If he does not listen to us, the Lord Jesus shows us the way to involve the congregation even further (as recorded in Matthew 18), but we must first act as a pastor, a shepherd, to our brother or sister who is wandering.

James has had to write about all kinds of sins and sinful situations, but worst of all would be that we simply do not care about each other in the church. It is fine to mind our own business, to not be "busybodies", but we must also realize that we must be pastors in our congregations. We must not stick our noses into other people's business, but stick out our hands to help and guide whenever we are confronted with the wandering of others. Then, when we ourselves wander from the truth, they will perform the same service for us.

As time progresses, the church must increasingly be a pastoral congregation. The trend of today is to break down the church into various groups. Some people think we should have a pastor for this and a pastor for that, here a counselor, and there a counselor, but what do we ourselves do when we see someone wandering from the truth? Like the wolf he is, Satan loves to cut the weak and young from the flock, isolate them, and then destroy them. But Christ says, "Will you keep an eye on each other? You are responsible first. You are to be a pastoral congregation."

How Are We to Be a Pastoral Congregation?

How do we do this? James uses the expression, "bring him back", which means turning a sinner from the error of his way. This is an important expression. A certain effort and patience is required when turning someone. We cannot always cause someone to repent in one fell swoop. I do not deny that one simple conversation can sometimes cause someone to turn back from his error, but often more is involved.

Turning someone is a process that requires much wisdom and patience. I am not sure if we understand that properly. Sometimes we may see someone wandering away, and we let it go for a while until we finally blurt out whatever

it is that must be said. The result is that the wanderer becomes angry or deeply hurt, or both, and the pastoral effect is lost.

Being pastoral means that we follow the great Lord and Shepherd in his way of dealing with sinners. I once thought of preaching a series of sermons on how the Lord Jesus dealt with sinners who came to him, voluntarily or under force, and the amazing words he spoke. We can so easily cut down or cut up a sinner with our sharp tongues. James has written about the tongue a number of times, and now he asks for a pastoral heart and words of wisdom.

The style of pastoral care must always be that of the Lord Jesus himself: to the point, direct, deeply probing, yet loving and compassionate. I think here of Psalm 103. If we are like this, then we can bring the sinner to rejoice in the Lord instead of pushing him deeper into his sin and error. We have to gently yet firmly say and show from the Scriptures that the path the sinner is taking will lead away from the truth. We have to be specific—general pastoral care is hardly worth the name—but also take into account the circumstances and character of a person. The hardest work of all is to be a pastor to our brother and sister, to lead them back to the way of God.

Open Bible Along With Open Mouth

I will not elaborate further about the style of pastoral care in the congregation, but I hope it is clear as to how it basically must be done: with firmness and gentleness, with directness and compassion. We must open the Scriptures and not just our mouths. The worst thing in pastoral work is an open mouth with a closed Bible. We must pray for wisdom, for the right approach, and for the proper words, so that the other person is edified and not alienated. We may never have the attitude, “Well, I really told him! He had it coming, now let’s see what he does.”

We must all have the attitude of Christ, for we must be a pastoral congregation where we have the same care for one another. There must not be favoritism. The same Word must always be applied equally to all, to ourselves and to others. Indeed, we must live according to the Word ourselves, or we lose credibility as a pastor to others.

I am afraid that all too often we have the attitude of “telling it like it is”. People are sometimes proud of the fact that they are “straight shooters”. If we are straight shooters, however, how come we most often miss the target? More than once I have tried to tell someone the truth, but was later ashamed of my

own words, my haughtiness and insensitivity, and had to confess my sin. I was like a wolf in the pastoral congregation.

This does not mean that we cannot be frank and direct. We do not have to walk on eggshells in the pastoral congregation. Rather, we have to state exactly where the error lies. We must not be afraid, nor mince words, but we must also not be unnecessarily harsh or perhaps cruel. There should be humility in pastoral care over one another, realizing that we, too, could fall into the very same sin. We may not stand above others, but must walk beside them.

It is not easy to approach someone in order to turn him back from a sinful way. Often relationships are already so tense that if we raise certain matters, everything really blows up. We may be holding on to too much baggage ourselves, or hiding skeletons in our own closet. We may be afraid of being accused of some things we ourselves did, so we do not even begin to exercise pastoral care. We may also think, "Forget it, it will not help anyway. It is totally fruitless."

The Fruit of Pastoral Care

Perhaps fear of failure is often what hinders the pastoral congregation from functioning. James therefore writes, "...remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins." "Remember this." James means here that we must keep in mind what the fruit of pastoral work will be under God's blessing: we will save a sinner from death, that is, eternal damnation. If a sinner continues on the way of sin and is not properly approached with the Word, he will fall further and further into sin, and in the end, he will be led to eternal death. We must therefore try to turn someone back while there is still time to turn, and reach out when someone can still be reached, before it is too late. We must always keep the goal in mind: the salvation of the brother and sister.

We must remember this especially when the one we are addressing becomes angry and upset, even hostile. We should never give up, thinking it is fruitless, because if he turns back, we save him from death. His life, his very soul, is at stake.

If he says, "I can't turn back for I've gone too far, there's no hope for me," then we must remind him that God's love in Christ covers a multitude of sins. There is life for all who repent, no matter how gross or terrible the sin. Even a multitude of sins, so many countless wrongs, will be covered by the sacrifice

of Christ. The pastoral congregation has a never-ending spring from which to draw grace.

The pastoral congregation will see the fruit of its work. Yes, some will harden themselves to the end, but others will turn and be saved. James exhorts us to remember that we must not give up, and always engage in pastoral care with a positive attitude. We believe that Christ calls us to do this, and he who calls us then also enables us.

A Powerful Challenge

Some explainers suggest that the “[covering] over of a multitude of sins” refers not to the sinner, but to the pastoral care-giver. In other words, if we can cause a sinner to repent, this will cover many of our own sins also. Some Reformed explainers immediately react negatively to this explanation, because it might imply that we could earn forgiveness by causing others to repent, but there is not a notion of merit here, rather, it is all grace.

The point may well be that if we act pastorally to others, we who are also sinners are confirmed for ourselves in the way of salvation. Nothing is more encouraging than to see a sinner turn from his error, to proclaim to such a person the forgiveness of sins, and to realize that we, too, have been forgiven much. We all draw water from the same well. The secret of the pastoral congregation lies in this: there is forgiveness for each and every one of us, for love covers a multitude of sins. We can all come to kneel at the cross and draw near to the heavenly throne of God.

The pastoral congregation will see much fruit of its labor. People will be saved from death. Many sins will be covered. Lives will be renewed and enjoyed in the grace of God in Christ, and the congregation will grow in the surety of grace and become mature in faith.

James has nothing more to write. He ends his letter with a powerful challenge. Let the church be a pastoral congregation, where salvation is received and a multitude of sins is covered, where brokenness is healed and life in the Lord is enjoyed. This is how we grow, together, and then we are ready to be presented as bride by Christ to his Father. “Lo, what a glorious sight [will then

appear]!” (Hymn 55:1, *Book of Praise*). The pastoral congregation will become the perfected congregation.