Chapter 52: Overseers of the Flock

Acts 20:13–38

The letters of Paul provide tremendous pastoral insights, especially the so-called "Pastoral Epistles" of 1, 2 Timothy and Titus. Yet, perhaps no passage in the New Testament is more pastorally poignant than Acts 20:13–38, when Paul gathers the elders from Ephesus to speak to them one final time before departing to Jerusalem. Paul knew that he would never see these men again, and he knew that great suffering and possibly even death awaited him in Jerusalem. In a manner characteristic of his entire ministry among the Ephesians, Paul poured out his heart and soul to these brothers to equip them to lead the church in his absence. As Paul summarizes his heart for ministry in the church, he emphasizes that *elders must care for the church that God obtained with his own blood*.

The Example (Acts 20:13–24)

As we noted in the previous passage, Paul had stated his desire to "stay in Ephesus until Pentecost" (1 Cor. 16:8); however, as he begins his journey toward Jerusalem (Acts 19:21), he speeds up his journey to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost (v. 16). Luke therefore gives us a few details to fill out the beginning of this journey, again speaking to reflect the fact that the author of Acts was present for these events ("we"/"us"; vv. 13–15). Although Paul had at first intended to "go by land," he ultimately joined the group Luke was with to sail to Miletus (vv. 14–15). It is unclear exactly why Paul did not want to spend time in Asia at this point in time, but it seems mainly to be an issue of time to ensure that he would "be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost" (v. 16).

Humility and Suffering in Ministry (Acts 20:18–19)

Yet, before Paul leaves the church of Ephesus entirely, he calls "the elders of the church to come to him" in Miletus (v. 17). This journey was only about thirty miles away, and walking such a distance was fairly normal for people in those days.[1] Paul has many things to say, and commentators note how similar the content is to what Paul writes in his letters generally, and especially in the Pastoral Epistles (1, 2 Timothy and Titus).[2] Paul's speech to these elders begins by pointing to the example that he had set during his time among them, beginning with his humility and suffering: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews" (vv. 18–19). The first point Paul emphasizes is striking, since it does not seem like something many would be tempted to brag about. Yet, like his Master before him, Paul insists that his own ministry was built upon humility, suffering, trials, and tears (e.g., Rom. 8:17; Phil. 2:3). In particular, Paul reminds them of the plots he faced from the Jews who reviled Christ whom he

[1] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 836.

[2] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 412.

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preached (see Acts 19:9; 20:3).

Diligence in Ministry (Acts 20:20)

Second, Paul highlights his diligence in ministry: "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house…" (v. 20). Calvin rightly summarizes the heart behind Paul's emphasis as "such a desire to edify, that the pastor must omit nothing, so much as in him lieth, which is profitable to be known."[3] This is not a prideful, puffed-up desire to show off his knowledge, but an earnest, practical desire to equip believers with all things that pertain to life and godliness (1 Cor. 8:1; 1 Pet. 1:3). This, in part, means teaching in *depth*, but Paul also talks about the *breadth* of his teaching in two ways, first when he speaks about his teaching "in public and from house to house." The reference "from house to house" may refer to the house churches,[4] but the point seems to be even broader than that. Paul spent all his time teaching anyone, anywhere they needed it. He was a man who not merely commanded the pulpit on Sundays, but a man who labored through the week to make Christ known to those who did not yet fully know him. Again, Calvin comments wisely:

> [Paul] did not only teach all men in the congregation, but also every one privately, as every man's necessity did require. Christ hath not appointed pastors upon this condition, that they may only teach the Church in general in the open pulpit; but that they may take charge of every particular sheep, that they may bring back to the sheepfold those which wander and go astray, that they may strengthen those which are discouraged and weak, that they may cure the sick, that they may lift up and set on foot the feeble, (Ezekiel 34:4) for common doctrine will oftentimes wax cold, unless it be holpen with private admonitions.[5]

Every seasoned pastor understands the wisdom of Paul's example. Though we labor week in and week out to preach the Word from the pulpit in our ordinary worship services, it is remarkable how much people miss or forget from what we preach. Even as the one who is doing the preaching, I often have people ask me about some sermon, "Do you remember when you said…," and I must honestly reply that *I* don't remember many of the things that I have preached. If preaching were the extent of my labors much seed that I scatter would be snatched up and lost forever.

Yet, the inverse is true. The more work I do with individuals during the week who are struggling, wounded (physically or spiritually), sick, or grieving, the more those individuals begin to hear from what I preach in public in my sermons. I have often remarked that pastoral ministry is strange in many ways, especially in the mixture of public speaking and private counsel that we are called upon to administer. I speak regularly to crowds of hundreds of people, but it is usually difficult to tell whether any particular sermon has accomplished anything, so far as I can see. On the other hand, it seems that some of my most fruitful ministry is at the private bedside of some saint in the hospital whose frailty and mortality have impressed upon them their need to straighten out their relationship with the Lord. Yet in all this, I am reminded of how Jesus illustrates in his parables that sowers of the Word are simply called to be faithful in scattering and watering the

[3] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:243.

[4] So Polhill, *Acts*, 424.

[5] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:244.

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seed of God's Word as far and wide as possible (Luke 8:4–8; 2 Tim. 4:1–2). The Lord is the one who gives the growth, and he does so in ways that we do not understand (Mark 4:26–29; 1 Cor. 3:6–7).

Faithfulness in Ministry (Acts 20:21)

Third, Paul reminds them of his faithfulness, both in the people he reached and the message he preached. As to people, Paul was faithful in "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks" (v. 21a). As an apostle, he had a mandate to reach the whole world, beginning with the Jews, and Luke tells us specifically that under his ministry, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).[6] In terms of the message he preached, Paul testified to both Jews and Greeks the necessity "of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 21b). As Lenski so elegantly summarizes, "Repentance includes all of the law, and faith all of the gospel, and these two comprise the Scriptures."[7] The whole counsel of God of the law and the gospel, preached to all people, both Jews and Greeks.

Obedience in Ministry (Acts 20:22–24)

After all this, we might understand Paul's desire to retire to a beach somewhere for the remainder of his life. Yet, he closes this section with a statement about the faithfulness that the Lord will require from him in the coming months: "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me" (vv. 22–23). Paul was both "constrained by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem, even as the Holy Spirit also testifies to him "in every city" that he will face "imprisonment and afflictions" when he gets there. It is unclear how the Holy Spirit communicated this message to Paul in *every* city, but we do see a clear example of this in Acts 21:11, when the prophet Agabus declares the message that Paul would be bound and delivered to Gentiles in Jerusalem.[8] Although others interpreted this as a warning for Paul not to go to Jerusalem, Paul himself understood that he was compelled to go straight into the belly of the beast (Acts 21:4, 13–14).[9]

One of the chief reasons that Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of his own example was to exhort them to follow in his footsteps. In commenting on this passage, Lenski charges ministers to keep carefully in mind the public reputation of their ministry: "So begin and carry forward your work, whatever the Lord allots to you, that, when it is finished, you, too, can submit it fearlessly to men tried and true and be assured of what their final judgment will be."[10] Having asked the elders to consider his ministry since they would no longer see him again (v. 25), Paul summarizes the entirety of his conduct, saying, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (vv. 26–27). As many commentators note, Paul is echoing the Lord's prophecy to Ezekiel where he declared that the prophet would be free of bloodguilt *only* if he was faithful to proclaim to the people the whole counsel of God (Ezek. 3:16–21; 33:1–9).[11] Because of his faithfulness, Paul is able to declare himself "innocent of the blood of all" among those who are in a position to judge the truthfulness of the statement.

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[6] Polhill, *Acts*, 424.

[7] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 840.

[8] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 414.

[9] Polhill observes how these two messages may seem "contradictory," but that, in fact, they were not: "Paul was indeed being led to Jerusalem. God had a purpose for his going there….whatever happened, God was in it" (Polhill, *Acts*, 425).

[10] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 837.

[11] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:252–53.

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The Exhortation (Acts 20:28–38)

From this summary, Paul then charges the elders to follow his example, with one of the most poignant charges ever given to those who hold the office of elder in the church of God: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (v. 28). First, he charges them to "pay careful attention" (v. 28a). The ministry is not a loose responsibility that permits lax focus. Second, he speaks of the church of God as a "flock" of sheep (v. 28b), consistent with language from the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Ps. 78:70–72; 95:7; 100:3; Ezek. 34; John 10:1–18). As a shepherd, "the elder is to protect, rule, and foster care."[12] Third, he calls elders "overseers" (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*), sometimes translated as "bishops" (v. 28c). As Bruce notes, "There was in apostolic times no distinction between elders (presbyters) and bishops such as we find from the second century onwards: the leaders of the Ephesian church are indiscriminately described as elders, bishops (*i.e.* superintendents) and shepherds (or pastors)."[13]

Fourth, Paul calls upon these elders "to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (v. 28d). Commentators struggle with translating this as referring to "God's blood."[14] God does not have blood, so many commentators have sought ingenious ways to translate this phrase to avoid the difficulty. Yet, the answer is simple when we remember that Jesus is at the same time human and divine. The eternal Son of God took a human body and shed human blood so that at the cross the person of the Son of God truly shed his blood to purchase his church.[15] Theologically, it is common for Scripture to refer to some aspect of Christ's work according to one nature (here, the "blood" of his humanity) in language referring to him according to his other nature (here, as "God"). This is called the "communication of attributes," and it is possible because Christ's two natures are inseparably united in one person.[16]

Fifth, Paul calls the elders of the church to watch for "fierce wolves" who will not spare the flock (v. 29). In John 10, Jesus warned about wolves as thieves who come "only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10, 12). In Matthew 7:15, Jesus talked about wolves as "false prophets" who come in "sheep's clothing." Here, Paul follows the latter idea and speaks of these wolves as false teachers, including some who will arise within the church: "and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (v. 30). On this point, Paul commends not only being "alert," but also reminds them of his own example of diligent teaching: "for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (v. 31).

As Paul moves toward the conclusion of his speech, he closes by encouraging them by commending their well-being not to the pastoral skill of the elders, but "to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (v. 32). The word *inheritance*

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[12] Bock, *Acts*, 630.

[13] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 415.

[14] Polhill, *Acts*, 427–28; Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 569–70; Schnabel, *Acts*, 846–47.

[15] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 849.

[16] "Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature." (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 8.7)

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is important, especially in contrast to the material possessions that Paul did not covet: "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (vv. 33–35). He had worked to meet his own needs, and he uses that example to commend to them the blessedness of giving over receiving. This is an important point for those in ministry: "no man can be a good minister of the word, but he must also contemn money."[17] Paul's heart was set on an eternal inheritance, not temporal gains.

Then, when all is said, Paul "knelt down and prayed with them all" (v. 36). Through much weeping, hugs, and even (culturally appropriate) kisses, they accompanied Paul to his ship, sorrowful that they would never see their father in the faith again (vv. 37–38). They did not bristle at Paul's closing exhortations; they cherished every word and every moment they had with him before his departure.

Discussion Questions

1. Where had Paul intended to remain until Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8)? Where did Paul ultimately seek to be on Pentecost (v. 16)? Whom does Paul summon to meet him at Miletus (v. 17)? How far was it from Ephesus to Miletus? What does Paul talk about in the first section of his speech to the Ephesian elders (vv. 18–27)? In that first section, why does Paul emphasize the "humility" and "tears" that he shed during his time with them (v. 19)?

2. How does Paul characterize the faithfulness of his ministry among the Ephesians (vv. 20–21)? What is the scope of what he taught the people? What is the range of places where he taught the people? Do the words "repentance" and "faith" sufficiently summarize the message of his ministry comprehensively (v. 21)? What has the Holy Spirit intimated to Paul about what he will encounter in Jerusalem (vv. 22–24)?

3. Why does Paul say that he is innocent of the blood of the Ephesians (vv. 26–27; cf. Ezek. 3:16–21; 33:1–9)? In light of Paul's example, what does Paul want the Ephesian elders to do in their own ministry (v. 28)? In what sense can we say that the church "of God" was obtained by "his [i.e., God's] own blood" (v. 28)? Who are the "wolves" who will not spare the flock after Paul's departure (vv. 29–30)? What is the remedy for protecting the flock (v. 31)?

4. What does Paul mean by the "inheritance" that the saints stand to gain (v. 32)? How does that inheritance contrast with the material possessions that Paul did not covet among the Ephesians (v. 33)? How can Paul say that it is more blessed to give than to receive (v. 35)? In this speech, what stands out to you most? What do you learn about the heart of a true pastor? What do you learn about the heart of Christ for his people?

[17] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:263.

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