

Acts 20:17-38
"The Elder's Job Description"
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When you think about serious and sophisticated music, do you ever think of a one-man band? You know what I mean by a one-man band. A single person attaches several instruments to his body and plays them all at once. He might beat a drum harnessed to his body, play a harmonica attached to his head, clash cymbals attached to his knees, and so on. Is that what we associate with serious, sophisticated music? No, we associate the one-man band with circus clowns and comedians. If you want serious, sophisticated music, you might go hear an orchestra or a string quartet, but not a one-man band.

In like manner, if you want to have serious, sophisticated ministry in a church, you need more than a one-man ministry. You need a ministerial orchestra. Even in a small church, there are too many ministerial needs for any one person to meet them all.

In the Christian church, every member of the church should be a minister in one sense of the word. Paul compares the church to a body with different members, the different members representing the different church members with various gifts of ministry. We could also compare the church to an orchestra with different instruments, each instrument representing a different

gift of ministry. Too many church members think of themselves as part of the audience when in reality they are part of the orchestra. Look at Ephesians 4:11-12:

- 11 And he gave ... the pastors and teachers,
- 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Only pastor-teachers should engage in the work of the ordained ministry, but everyone in the church should engage in the general work of ministry. The pastor-teachers should be equipping all the saints for various works of service for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.

But beyond that, every church should also have a plurality of ordained ministers or elders. Look at Acts 14:23:

- 23 And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Notice this says that Paul and Barnabas appointed a plurality of elders in every church. There is nothing in the New Testament to indicate that a church should ever be under the spiritual oversight of only one, solitary elder. Every church should have a plurality of ordained elders.

This does not, however, mean that every church has to have a plurality of full time ordained ministers. You see, the New

Testament also gives evidence of two orders of elder. We find this in 1 Timothy 5:17:

17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

This verse implies that though every elder is involved in the ruling or overseeing or shepherding of the church, not every elder labors in preaching and teaching. We call elders who labor in preaching and teaching, teaching elders; and we call those elders who don't, ruling elders.

So every church should have a plurality of ordained elders. All of the elders oversee the church and shepherd the flock. One or more also labor in preaching and teaching.

With that background, let's now look at our text. Paul's third missionary journey is ending, and he is traveling to Jerusalem and bringing a special offering from the Gentile churches for the impoverished Jewish church at Jerusalem. On that journey, his ship stops for a few days at the port of Miletus. This is only 30 miles from Ephesus, so Paul sends for the Ephesian elders so he can speak to them while he is in the area. The elders from Ephesus come to see Paul, and Paul's message to them is recorded in our passage for today. We are today going to look at Paul's message to the Ephesian elders to learn what we can about the elder's job description. We are going to look at

Paul's example,
Paul's exhortation, and
Paul's expectation

I. Paul's Example of Ministry in Their Midst

Paul was one of those too rare individuals who practiced what he preached. Too many people have to say, Do as I say, not as I do. That is a hollow message. People call it hypocrisy and a double standard. But the apostle Paul was able to say with sincerity,

Follow me as I follow Christ.
Imitate me as I imitate Christ.

Now what do we learn from Paul's example? We learn that a church's ministry should be centered on the Word of God. The people of God should be a people of the Book, and the church's ministry should be a ministry of the Book. We can summarize Paul's ministry in this way:

every bit
to everybody
in every way.

Every bit:

- v. 20 "I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, ...
- v. 21 "testifying ... repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

vv. 26-27 "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

Beloved, do you want elders who are dedicated to teaching and applying **every bit** of God's Word? Or would you prefer leaders who are willing to use the cafeteria method regarding the Word of God: take what you like and leave the rest?

Let's say a daughter of the church wants to marry outside the faith. Let's say a wealthy donor wants to desert his wife and marriage. Let's say some families want to organize a church soccer team that will play on Sunday afternoon. The Bible addresses all these issues. Do you want elders who will teach and pastor in terms of what the Bible says about these issues? Do you want elders who declare to you the whole counsel of God? Or do you want elders who will tickle your ears and teach only those portions of the counsel of God which everyone finds agreeable?

Every bit to everybody:

v. 21 "testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks ...

Paul took advantage of every opportunity to preach, not allowing himself to be restrained by any barrier, whether social or economic or racial. Paul was willing to become all things to all men, that he might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:22).

When it came to gospel opportunities, there was, as far as Paul was concerned, neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free (Col. 3:11).

Every bit to everybody in every way:

v.20 "... I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house

Paul taught people in public meetings, and Paul also taught people privately in their homes.

From Paul's example we learn that we need elders who are dedicated to a Word centered ministry in the church.

II. Paul's Exhortation to the Elders

Paul states the elder's number one responsibility in verse 28. He is to watch over himself.

A 19th century pastor, Robert Murray McCheyne of Dundee, Scotland, once said, "My people's greatest need is ..." What do you think he said? His intelligence? His charisma? His diligence? No, he said, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness."

Beloved, there are few things that do as much harm to the church as an elder who falls into sin, who strays into heresy,

who grows cold in his devotion to God's Word, who neglects the church. An elder's first and foremost duty is to watch over himself, to take heed to his own spiritual health, to his own close fellowship with Christ.

The elder's second responsibility is to shepherd the flock.

Acts 20:28

28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

The elder as shepherd should value the church because the church is God's flock. The church belongs neither to the congregation nor to the elders. It belongs to God, and God has entrusted it to the elders' care. God in the person of Jesus shed His own blood to redeem or purchase the church. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says,

18 knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers,
19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

That which is paid for something is one measure of its worth. By this measure, the church is priceless, because the church was redeemed with the precious blood of Christ. Thus, the elder as

shepherd should recognize the great value of the church.

If Christ died for the church, the elder should look after the church. If the church is worth Christ's blood, then the church is worth the elder's labor.

The elder as shepherd should also take his position of responsibility very seriously because he did not appoint himself. In the most ultimate sense, the church did not appoint him. If he is truly an elder, the Holy Spirit appointed him. Paul said, "The Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the flock of God."

How does the Holy Spirit make someone an elder? The office of elder requires certain graces and gifts, and the Holy Spirit is the one who gives these. The Holy Spirit distributes the gifts as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11). And the graces are called the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). The Holy Spirit also burdens the elder's conscience for the work of ministry and motivates him to say in response to the need for laborers, "Here am I! Send me!" The Holy Spirit as the God of providence provides the elder with the opportunity to become an elder. And the Holy Spirit leads the church to issue the call.

The elder as shepherd should value the church as God's flock purchased with the blood of Christ. The elder as shepherd should take his position seriously as a position given him by the Holy Spirit. Here is how John Stott expressed this:

"... sheep are not at all the clean and cuddly creatures they may appear. In fact, they are dirty, subject to unpleasant pests, and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, ticks and worms. They are also unintelligent, wayward and obstinate. I hesitate to apply the metaphors too closely and characterize the people of God as dirty, lousy or stupid! But some people are a great trial to their pastors (and *vice versa*). And their pastors will persevere in caring for them only if they remember how valuable they are in God's sight. They are the flock of God the Father, purchased by the precious blood of God the Son, and supervised by overseers appointed by God the Holy Spirit."

Finally, the elder as shepherd should, of course, do the work of a shepherd. As shepherd, he should make God's flock to lie down in green pastures and lead them beside still waters. In other words, the elder-shepherd should provide for the church's spiritual nourishment by teaching them the truth found in God's Word.

The elder as shepherd also warns against error and protects God's flock from savage wolves who will not spare the flock. Savage wolves is Paul's description of those who teach errors which compromise the very fundamentals of church doctrine. These false teachers can invade the church from the outside, or they can arise from within the church, even from among the church's elders. When this happens, it takes great courage and a holy boldness rooted in the fear of God to oppose such false

teaching. Paul says that the elders need to be men of such mettle that they can not only teach the truth but also warn against error and oppose it.

Before I go on to my next point, I want to divert a bit and make an observation. Look at verse 30:

30 "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

The word there translated "men" is the Greek word which refers exclusively to the male. Paul here predicts that men, adult males, will rise up from among the elders and speak perverse things. This is another of those verses which implies that God does not call women to be ordained elders. If there were both men and women elders in the apostolic age, then Paul would have used a gender neutral term in this warning. By using a male specific term in this warning, Paul implied that the elders were exclusively males.

III. Paul's Expectation

Our third and final point is Paul's expectation, which is found in verse 32:

32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

No matter how many hard working, diligent elders a church has, all their activities in and of themselves are not enough. But Paul says that the Word of God's grace is able to build us up spiritually and to give us a spiritual inheritance. That was Paul's expectation, and it should be ours as well. The Word of God's grace is the Word which tells us about God's grace and the Word which God uses as an instrument to give us His grace. We need to believe that in spite of all our inadequacies, God can use us and bless our efforts if we will only center our ministry upon His Word and look to Him to bless it as a means of grace. We simply need to put our trust not in ourselves but in God's Word as the instrument of God's grace.

Conclusion:

Let's now apply what we have learned from this passage to our current situation. Over the next few weeks, we will, God willing, be electing additional elders for our local congregation. Here is what you need to be prayerfully looking for as you consider whom to nominate:

- * men who are committed to the whole counsel of God as found in Scripture;
- * men who take heed to their own spiritual condition;
- * men who value the church as God's flock purchased with Christ's blood;
- * men who have the courage and knowledge needed to protect the flock from false teachers;

- * men who have faith that God can use them in spite of all their inadequacies as long as their ministry is faithful to God's Word.