

## Paul and the Ephesian Elders, Part 2 (Acts 20:28-38)<sup>a</sup>

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### Context

1. Paul on his third missionary journey
2. Retracing his route from the second missionary journey
3. Focus is not evangelism of new regions, but *discipleship* : strengthening the newly-established churches
4. Heading back toward Jerusalem by ship
5. Passed Ephesus, stopped in Miletus on the coast, calls for the Ephesian elders
6. The last time they will see Paul

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### Passage (Acts 20:28-38)

<sup>28</sup> “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. <sup>29</sup> For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. <sup>31</sup> Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” <sup>36</sup> And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup> Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, <sup>38</sup> sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.<sup>1</sup> (Acts 20:28-37)

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### Part 1 (last time)

1. Paul is speaking to the *elders* of the church at Ephesus — these are individuals most commonly referred to as “pastors” in our day
2. They are responsible before God for the well-being of the people (1Pe. 5:1-3)

*The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1Pe. 5:1-3)*

### 3. Paul gives a three-fold admonishment (warning)

- A. #1: His example - how did Paul live (serving, with humility, faithful, teaching)
- B. #2: His focus - aware that the future likely holds trouble and persecution, but retaining a focus on heavenly concerns
- C. #3: His predictions - what, specifically, are the elders to expect going forward (today's passage)?

## Part 2 (today)

### 1. Specific warnings, a “tactical briefing” for the pastors

### 2. The need to shepherd (an action verb)

- A. A God-given role, *the Holy Spirit has made you overseers* (Acts 20:28)

I. “overseers” is **ἐπισκοπούς** [*episkopous*], composed of a preposition, **ἐπι** [*epi*] = “over”, and the word **σκοπος** [*skopos*] = “watch”

- a. To “watch over,” “guard,” or “keep”
- b. From which we derived the term *episcopal* - referring to a type of church government
- c. Notice *elders* (**πρεσβυτέρους** [*presbyterous*]) are *overseers* (**ἐπισκοπούς** [*episkopous*]) and are *to shepherd* (**ποιμαίνειν** [*poimainein*]) the people of God
  - i. These terms do not refer to a hierarchical structure: “an elder is an overseer is a shepherd” - they are equivalent terms for the single role of a pastor
  - ii. See presentation #49, [The Appointment of Elders<sup>C</sup>](#), covering Acts 14:23-28, where we discussed the NT model of Church government in greater detail

II. They have a God-given responsibility to watch over both themselves and the flock

- B. Motivation - the value of the flock

- I. Who's is the church? *the church of God* - God owns the flock, the elders are merely stewards
  - II. Pastors don't have churches: God has churches over which He appoints elders to steward the work He has established
  - III. God's ownership of the flock would be enough to establish their value in His sight
  - IV. Paul goes further, underscoring the price that God paid for the flock, *which God . . . purchased with His own blood* (Acts 20:28)
  - V. Notice the trinitarian reference: it was the blood of *Jesus* that was spilt on behalf of the flock—whose blood is referred to as the blood of *God*
- C. Grazing of the sheep will not be a benign activity - they will be in for attack!

I. Paul mentions two sources of attack

- a. #1 - *savage wolves will come in among you* (enemies from outside the church)
- b. #2 - *Also from among yourselves men will rise up* (enemies from inside the church)
- c. How concerned was Paul? . . . *for three years I did not cease to warn . . . night and day . . . with tears* (Acts 20:31)
  - i. Paul understood that evangelism and missionary work, as necessary as they are, are only the first step in fulfilling the goal of the Great Commission - making disciples (Mat. 28:19)
  - ii. This is reflected in Paul's approach on this, the third, missionary journey — with a focus on building up what was earlier established through missionary endeavors
  - iii. Salvation is the doorway to sanctification—the ongoing process of Christians developing into disciples, and many a snare attend both
- d. *Therefore, watch!* (Acts 20:31)
  - i. “to watch” is **γρηγορεῖτε** [*grēgoreite*], to stay awake, be alert, vigilant
    - Implications
      - An ongoing need - as Jesus told Peter in the garden, *watch and pray* (Mat 26:41)
        - Extended periods of watchfulness are difficult - for long stretches of time the thing being watched for doesn't occur, the senses get dull
      - Attacks can arise quickly, unexpectedly

II. #1 - External attacks - *savage wolves will come in among you*

- a. These come from outside - primarily non-Christian sources
- b. They are *expected* and *continuous*
- c. They come from everything that is “not of Christ”: other religions, the occult, atheism, secularism
- d. Attacks are on two fronts: doctrinal (what to believe: teaching, understanding, concepts) and practical (how to live: lifestyles, acceptable/unacceptable behavior, moral behavior)
- e. Jesus warned His disciples of this reality on the night of His betrayal

*If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before [it hated] you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you* (John 15:18-19)

- f. These attacks are various manifestations of “the world” which is under the rule of Satan (Luke 4:6; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1Jn. 5:19)
- g. These are from people, *walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience* (Eph. 2:2)
- h. As dangerous as these attacks are, their origin is more easily discerned.

### III. #2 - Internal attacks - *from among yourselves men will rise up*

- a. Hence, the need to *take heed of yourselves* (Acts 20:28)
  - i. Elders/pastors/teachers are especially influential
  - ii. A lifeguard who is drowning can't save another drowning man
- b. The damage that can be done is immense: “the fox is in the (proverbial) hen-house”
- c. How will they manifest: primarily by *speaking perverse things* (Acts 20:30)
  - i. “Perverse things” is **δισταραμμένα** [*diestrammena*] (from **διαστρέφω** [*diastrephō*]), meaning “to mislead”, “cause to turn from correct behavior,” even “causing a state of unbelief” (Acts 13:8)
  - ii. They will lead disciples off the Master’s path to a different path: either by their doctrine, living, or both
    - The path to the Master: orthodoxy leading to orthopraxy - straight teaching leads to straight living
    - By distorting the teaching (orthodoxy), they distort how disciples are to live (orthopraxy), thereby preventing their conformity into the image of Christ

- An incorrect understanding of God
- Conforming into the image of a different christ who is not Christ
- Stunted: remaining spiritually immature
- The perversion of the truth can often be subtle, difficult to detect, mixed in with truth
- Other times, the perversion is obvious, but they *still* draw sheep away!
  - As sheep: we are dumb and easily led
  - Fallen/exposed false teachers readily reestablish their ministry and gain a new following
- Perverse things are “novel” and tickle ears
  - The problem is not entirely with the wolves! The sheep also contribute!

*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (2Ti. 4:2-4)*

- d. What is their motive? *to draw away disciples after themselves* (Acts 20:30)
- i. Turning disciples of Jesus into disciples of themselves
  - ii. Charismatic leaders, with gifting in excess of character (and oh, how the sheep love gifting and care little about character!)
  - iii. Selfish rather than others-focused
  - iv. Lacking humility, controlling, asserting their own special status or insight
  - v. Seek to increase dependence of others upon themselves
    - Only they have the “special anointing”
    - Claim to be modern-day apostles, prophets
    - They are the source of the next “word from God”
    - “I’ll catch fish for you” rather than teaching people how to fish for themselves
  - vi. Monetary opposite of Paul, who worked with his own hands and provided physical support to others
    - Private jets, mansions, etc.
    - Today’s examples would be laughable if it weren’t so sad and the results weren’t so serious

e. Training up enemies of Christ

i. Bart Ehrmin<sup>2</sup>

- New Testament scholar, professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

- Studied under well-known schools and individuals
    - Moody Bible Institute
    - Wheaton College
    - Princeton Theological Seminary, under Bruce Metzger, considered by many as the “dean” of NT textual criticism
  - Highly influential in matters pertaining to the reliability of the Bible
  - Prolific writer
    - Example: “How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee”
      - “Examines the historical Jesus, who according to Ehrman neither thought of himself as God nor claimed to be God, and proffers how he came to be thought of as the incarnation of God himself.”<sup>3</sup>
  - The oh-so-common journey: fundamentalist Christian → liberal Christian → agnostic atheist
- ii. Devotees turned enemies are especially useful to the enemy
- Their testimony: how they came to realize their “naive faith” and came to a more sophisticated and “reasonable” understanding of the Bible
  - No more destructive testimony than one who “once was” but “is no longer”
    - After all, they were “immersed”, and “convinced” - and “know from the inside”
  - This has been going on from the beginning, as John wrote:
 

*Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but [they went out] that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. (1Jn. 2:18-19)*
- iii. Paul’s emphasis to Timothy - find faithful men
- *Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, But who can find a faithful man?* (Pr. 20:6)
  - *And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also* (2Ti. 2:2)
  - How reliable is a chain? No more reliable than the weakest link!
    - *commit these to faithful men → who will be able to teach others*
  - Not education, nor charisma, nor notoriety, nor social standing, nor speaking ability, but faithfulness
- iv. My own experiences
- Gifted, attentive, fast-learners
  - Are you equipping a disciple, or a monster—enabling the future effectiveness of an eventual enemy of Christ?

### 3. More personal examples from Paul: “shoe-leather Christianity”

- A. Coveted no-one’s silver, gold, or apparel
- B. Worked while three years in Ephesus, providing for his own needs
- C. Even contributing to the needs of others less fortunate, *these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me* (Acts 20:34)
  - I. An example of supporting the weak

### 4. A sorrowful parting

*And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship* (Acts 20:36-38)

- A. A final separation, this side of heaven, between a spiritual father and his spiritual children
- B. We may endure difficult seasons of separation from other believers which may last until our race comes to an end
- C. Our ultimate hope and joy regarding fellow believers: after death, we will all be reunited, in sinless perfection

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#### Endnotes:

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart\\_D.\\_Ehrman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart_D._Ehrman)
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart\\_D.\\_Ehrman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart_D._Ehrman)

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#### Links Mentioned Above

- a - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/72\\_Acts\\_20\\_28-38/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/72_Acts_20_28-38/index.htm).
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/49\\_Acts\\_14\\_23-28/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/49_Acts_14_23-28/index.htm).
- d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- e - See <mailto:contact@spiritandtruth.org>.

