



## Farewell to Friends 2

Exposition of Acts 20:17-38

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Paul at Miletus hurries to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. Because his ship is being refitted at Miletus he calls the elders of the church at Ephesus to visit him. He treats them to an address which sums up his ministry at Ephesus. He speaks of the past, of his constant manner of life and of his uncompromised style of ministry. He reflects on his present, on his determination to complete his ministry at Jerusalem and on his innocence of the blood of any at Ephesus, since he did all that he could while he was with them. Now he turns to complete two crucial objectives, crucial because they underline his break with the church and its ministry. First, he directs their responsibilities for action as leaders of the church (28-31). Second, he commits them to God and to the 'word of his grace' (32). He ends with a reflection on his integrity.

### Directions on management

Paul's past history at Ephesus and his present determination to move on with the Holy Spirit earned him the right to tell the elders at Ephesus precisely how they should go about discharging their responsibilities. He has done the job himself. He has done all that he could. He has declared the whole will of God, and he is in no position to do any more. He has the right to tell them to perform their responsibilities.

Paul has given them a model, a tradition within which to discharge their responsibilities. He has reflected on his life-style and ministry while amongst them. He has given them a store of inspiration, for they can always look back on his reflections and take courage from what the Lord has done through Paul and is still doing, for example in the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Biblical farewells are meant to be moments of inspiration as well as of sorrow. They normally contain a word of exhortation and encouragement, as well as a model to imitate. Take Moses' farewell (Deuteronomy 31:1-7), Joshua's (Joshua 23-24:32) or Samuel's (1 Samuel 12, especially verse 24). What has been achieved in the past is an encouragement and incentive to stand firm along the lines laid down by those who have gone before.

### A command

Paul has the right to direct their actions, and he does so, as he was to do later with Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete: 'Take heed 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 the blood of his own Son' (verse 28 RSV) or 'which he bought with his own blood' (NIV).

'Take heed to yourselves and to the flock' means 'concentrate, pay attention to yourselves in relation to attending to the flock'. There is no conflict of responsibility, for the attention they pay to themselves relates directly to how they attend to the flock. A

similar thought comes from Paul when he tells Timothy, 1 Timothy 4:16, 'Attend to yourself and to the teachings, stick to them. For by doing so you will save yourself and those who hear you'. The elders are to concentrate on their activity where it relates to their concentration on the flock. As Dr Max Warren wrote many years ago about missionary activity, 'concentration and limitation are the keys to success' (CMS newsletter). Attention to the flock is a fearful responsibility. Usually when the church of God is called a flock in Scripture a stark challenge is being given: a *warning*, perhaps, against neglect of the people of God by the priests, prophets and ministers (Jeremiah 23:1-2, Ezekiel 34:10, Zechariah 10:3; 11:16 and hirelings in John 10:12-13); an *assurance* that YHWH himself cares whatever others might do (Ezekiel 34:12-16), that the Lord Jesus cares (John 10; Luke 12:32; 1 Peter 5:1-4); a *commission* to care for the church of God, as the Lord Jesus told the puzzled Peter, 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:15-17) or as Peter later told the elders of the church in Turkey, 'Tend the flock of God that is your charge' (1 Peter 5:2) or here, where the elders are told to *shepherd* the church of God (NEB, TEV, NIV). The metaphor is fairly clear: David shepherded Israel by leading and ruling them (1 Chronicles 11:12); the Lord shepherded Israel by protecting them with his staff (Micah 7:14), and by searching for them and seeking them out when lost, gathering them together, feeding them with good pasture and making them lie down. 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over' (Greek, Syriac, Hebrew 'destroy'); I will feed them with justice' (Ezekiel 34:11-16, especially v15). Jesus carried his shepherding to the point of laying down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). Richard Baxter defined shepherding as 'to feed and rule' (*Reformed Pastor*). Now this responsibility - to shepherd the flock - is very similar to being 'overseers'. The Holy Spirit, directing the mission and ordering the lives of the early Christians (20:22-23), had appointed them as overseers. On the surface it was Paul who had made these appointments, since he and his companions after prayer had appointed elders in the churches they visited, but under the surface (or above it!), as Paul himself taught, it is the Holy Spirit who distributes gifts and allocates responsibilities in the church (1 Corinthians 12:18, 28), and the Ephesian elders were no exception. The Spirit had made them 'overseers' in the Christian church at Ephesus, like others at Philippi (Philippi 1:1) or Crete (Titus 1:5, 7), just as the men of Qumran beside the Dead Sea appointed their Mabaqqer, 'overseer'.

What did this responsibility involve? 'To oversee' is a word used supremely of the Lord's dealings with Israel. The synonymous 'attend to', 'visit' or 'appoint' can apply in two ways, either to 'to observe with care' or 'to visit with disciplinary judgement'. Both applications appear in the following quotation

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from Jeremiah 23:2: the RSV uses the translation 'attend to' for 'oversee': 'Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, "You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold I will attend to you after your evil doings", says the Lord' (RSV). Oversight is both care and discipline, the abandoned self-sacrifice for others displayed supremely in the Cross and the firm protecting, searching care that went with it; and the strong lead and rule which sometimes leads to sharply learnt lessons or even punishment such as Paul recommended in 1 Corinthians 5.

The flock is the church of God, in this case the local church at Ephesus. But the fact that it was a local handful did not detract from the awesome and glorious fact that God has acquired it with the blood of his own son. God has obtained, acquired, taken into his own possession each local group of Christians throughout the world, as if he had acquired the whole at once. This is the *mystery* of the local and universal church. But what an exalted place we have! Isaiah has the vision of God acquiring us to declare his praise (43:21), and Peter shared the vision when he announced to the Christians at Turkey that they are 'a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Peter 2:9). And the means whereby he obtained the church was the 'blood of his own one'. The Greek at this point is most naturally translated 'the church of God which he obtained by his own blood' (NIV), but some Christians are unhappy to think of Paul saying that God shed his own blood, and, to avoid this, either they read the inferior mss variant 'the church of *the Lord* (i.e. Christ) which he obtained with his own blood' or they translate 'the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own one', and I prefer this, following the similar claim in Romans 8:32 that God did not spare his own son.

The first command is then to concentrate their energies in caring for and leading the local community which belongs to God himself and which it took the death of his son to secure. What a precious thing we are, what a precious thing we are to look after, what a precious thing to go wrong through mismanagement!

### A warning

Paul directs their management with this solemn command first, and second with a warning of the ruthless outside disruptive forces and the heretical influences from inside to which this gem of God is subject. Savage wolves from outside recall the false prophets whom Jesus compared to wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15) and they look forward to the early Christians' description of heretics as ravening wolves (see Didache and Justin Martyr). Their insidious influence has two effects: one is destruction and enfeeblement ('not sparing the flock') and the other is separatism, especially of those who are eager to learn ('in order to draw away disciples after them' verse 30). If the elders allow such influences to take hold, they are responsible; they have got to oversee the flock with such care and discipline that their influences are put down, whether by remedial debate such as we use today in sermons, literature or broadcasting or by the stern sanctions which were more fashionable in earlier centuries. We cannot afford to let a heresy rip through our congregation.

### Another command

This leads to a second command to be constantly watchful. The Greek imperative means watch continually or carry on watching, just as the earlier command meant to concentrate continuously or carry on paying attention. It is a full-time occupation keeping our eyes open when our charge is something so precious to God, and when the influences opposing its upbuilding are both from outside and from inside. The Lord's coming at any moment is enough to make us keep awake, on the alert, watchful, as Jesus often taught; Paul ranked this command alongside others which make for survival and perseverance. For example he told the Corinthians, 'Be watchful, stand in the faith, be men, be strong' (1 Corinthians 16:13).

If they were in any doubt about what this might entail he asks them to remember his three-year ministry of tearful warning (Acts 19:10 gives part of this period). Warning was a regular part of Paul's ministry. One example is his warning the Corinthians when they were inclined to make more of their favourite ministers than they did of the Lord (1 Cor. 4:14). Christians need to be warned of dangers, and it is resistance to such warnings by Christians which made Paul weep. He could be heavy in his heart when he recalled the obstinacy of unbelieving Jews (Romans 9:2), but it was the Christians who did not hold fast to the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18) or who refused his pastoral guidance when he had worked with them for months as he had at Corinth (2 Cor. 2:4) who drove him to tears.

### Directing them to God

Paul now performs his second deed: he directs them to God. He does this simply by the verbal act of commitment to God and to the word of his grace and by giving both their full value for safe-keeping and future development. This is the fourth part of the speech as a whole, beginning with the attention signal 'and now'. Some words give information, other words do more. Promises do more than declare an intention; they are a form of commitment. And when Paul says 'And now I commit you to God', he is actually doing something, not merely saying something. He is placing them before God, just as the Philippian jailer placed a meal before Paul and Silas, and he is entrusting them to God, just as he had done each time he appointed a new set of elders in a church (Acts 14:23), and just as the Lord himself had entrusted his life when he said, 'Father, into your hand I entrust my spirit' (Luke 23:46).

Now Paul is absolutely confident of the utter security of anything he commits to the Lord: 'For I know whom I have trusted, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard until that day what I have committed to him (2 Timothy 1:12). He commits, because he knows the full value of God and the word of his grace for safe-guarding anything. And often in his letters he stresses God's power to keep guard (1 Thess. 5:23; 1 Cor. 1:8; Rom. 16:25).

Paul commits them not only to God but also to the word of his grace. At Miletus Paul places the Ephesian elders before the word of God. And the 'word of his grace' is the word which proclaims Christ, 'the word', according to the late Professor F.F. Bruce (*Acts*, Tyndale Press), 'being not the Old Testament revelation but that of God in Christ'. 'Of his grace' refers to the gospel of the grace of God which Paul preached (Acts 20:24).

Why does he value it as so powerful as to describe it as that 'which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified' (Acts 20:32)? Consider what Paul had proved that grace to be at Iconium. There the Lord had not only testified to the word of his grace but gave signs and wonders to substantiate it (Acts 14:3). His own survival as an active apostle depended on grace thriving in human weakness: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 13:9). More than that the gospel of grace can be summed up by his words at Romans 5:6, 'You see, just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly'. To put it crudely, when man is at his worst God is at his best, when man is at his lowest God is at his highest – that is grace. That is why Paul could say (Romans 8:36) that amid all the pressure of the apostolic ministry which made him feel as if he was being killed all the day long we are in fact *more*; the normal conqueror is the strong man, the conqueror in God is the weak man with the strong God. He is more than conqueror. If this is how Paul values God and the word of his grace, no wonder he committed the Ephesian elders and the church they oversaw here, when he discharged himself of his own responsibility for them.

And what was his prospect for the local church in such circumstances? How does Paul project its development? The answer comes in terms of the vision given to him by Christ at the outset of his ministry. When he was first converted Christ said to Paul that his appointment was 'so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me' (Acts 26: 15b-18). Now here in the speech at Miletus Paul claims that God and the word of his grace 'can build you up and give you an inheritance among those who are sanctified'. The word used for 'place' in Acts 26 and for 'inheritance' in Acts 20 are related, *kleros* and *kleronomia*. Paul is promising the Ephesian elders that God will build up the church, in the present, and secure their place among the sanctified (holy and blameless) people of God on the Last Day. I think it pathetic when people displaying the grassy ruins which now remain of ancient Ephesus on film comment that the once-flourishing church is now reduced to a few stones as if there were any warning in that. Ephesus as a place might be in ruins, but the Ephesian Christians will appear on the Last Day alongside all the other saints from all over the world and throughout time. God is interested in people, not buildings! And Paul is confident that the church, as long as it sticks to God and to the word of his grace, to which he has clearly directed the elders, will be built up in this life and will appear in full salvation at the Last Day.

### Post-script

Paul has done with directing the leaders. His post-script reflects on his own integrity (verses 33-37) – I had no financial motive in my ministry. Rather I tried to earn by manual labour enough to keep myself and my friends and to have enough to give to those who are weak, for the Lord has told us, 'It is a happier thing to give than to receive'. With that he prays not on his feet as he would have done normally, but on his knees because that was far more earnest and intense. They kissed, and the elders saw him off.

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