

Acts 20:17-38 – Leadership

Introduction

There are many transitions that take place in Acts: The transition of Christ's ministry on earth in physical form to Christ's ministry through the Holy Spirit, the spread of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles, the Apostles assuming the reins of the ministry from Christ, and the transition of the church having to finally face the world on its own without either the physical presence of Christ or the Apostles themselves. In Acts 20 we have Paul providing this example in his transition of the care of the church in Ephesus to its elders, a church and area he literally spent years discipling and building.

[Read 20:17-38 once through to get the overall picture]

There are 2 messages interweaved together: Paul's personal integrity and responsibilities which are identified in the phrases that begin with "I" that are meant to serve as an example of leadership, and the specific direction and charge to the elders who are about to assume sole leadership in their own right.

Paul's example of leadership

¹⁸And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Read 20:18-21]

Q: According to v.18, what was the level of Paul's commitment to the people?

A: "I was with you the whole time"

Q: Is this because he was, in our own modern terms, a full-time paid member of the church's staff?

A: No. Verse 34 indicates that he supported himself financially.

Q: What is the practical point of application? What is probably different about Paul's attitude from our own?

A: His Christian brethren were the focus of his **life**, not a part-time activity. He did not view service as participating in his brethren's life a couple of times a week, but in devotion to **all** their needs **all** the time.

Q: According to v.19, how would you characterize the type of persecution to which Paul was subjected?

A: It was specifically directed at him personally.

Q: What are the three ways in v.20-21 which show Paul did not let personal trials interfere with his ministry?

(1) He "did not shrink from declaring....anything that was profitable....";

(2) He continued "teaching....publicly and from house to house...."

(3) He solemnly "testified to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Another way of putting it is that he built the church up **both** through small or large, public or private meetings and continued to evangelize new converts. He built the church up **both** inwardly **and** outwardly.

²²And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

[Read 20:22-24]

Q: Paul was attacked by people on earth in the course of his ministry, the Holy Spirit warned him personally of the future certainty of more personal trials in the course of his ministry, yet how did he cope with these things? According to v.24, how did Paul view his ministry?

A: He understood that it was not his ministry but a gift entrusted to him from Jesus. Read Acts 9:15-16 as to what was promised at Paul's calling: "But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Point of Discussion: Do we view that with which Christ has entrusted us as something we take out only a few times a week or do we see it as our full-time life? Are the activities of our life supporting our ministry or is our ministry just another one of life's activities?

²⁵"And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. ²⁶Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

[Read 20:25-27]

Q: Why does Paul speak as if he's innocent of murder? What is the real meaning of v.26 and 27 taken together?

A: Because he has preached at every opportunity, never forsaking a chance to offer the Gospel whether the listener received it or not, Paul is not guilty of someone **NOT** hearing the message. If everyone that has come across Paul's path has heard the message, the guilt of their blood is on **THEIR** head by **THEIR** decision as to whether to accept or reject Christ.

Read Ezekiel 3:17-21: "Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me. When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet if you have warned the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself. Again, when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I place an obstacle before him, he will die; since you have not warned him, he shall die in his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand. However, if you have warned the righteous man that the righteous should not sin and he does not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; and you have delivered yourself."

Point of Discussion: Can we say the same thing? Have we, as described in Ezekiel 3:17-21, availed ourselves with every opportunity to **BOTH** the saved and unsaved?

³¹Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

[Read 20:31]

Q: What does it mean to “admonish” someone?

A: Admonition is warning of things that are *specifically* wrong, a sort of call to avoid the very things of sin or that lead directly to sin. It's trying to convey one's wisdom and experiences to someone who hasn't encountered such situations in the hope that they'll make the right choice and avoid it altogether rather than having to learn the hard way for themselves. (Kind of like parents attempting to teach their children.)

Point of Discussion: *Do we see our interaction with our fellow Christians as Paul did?*

³³I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

[Read 20:33-35]

Q: What is Paul's ultimate example to the Ephesians?

A: He lived by example according to the message. He was not a "Do as I say, not as I do" kind of person.

Point of Discussion: *"Admonishment" – without putting the words of admonishment into effect in one's life – results in simple judgment of another. Where are we on that scale? Are we living the Gospel to the degree that we can safely admonish others to their benefit? Or are we trying to turn attention away from our own weaknesses?*

Summary of Paul's Example

- Ministry consists **both** within the church to build up believers and outside the church to win non-believers. It's not an either/or choice.
- Ministry is not simply another activity in life – it's the only purpose of life.
- Take every opportunity seriously – both towards the righteous and the wicked – for we are responsible if the message is not preached through us.
- Live by example so that you can impart credible and effective admonishment that will benefit your brethren.

The charge to the elders assuming sole leadership in their own right

[Read 20:28-31]

²⁸“Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. ²⁹I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Q: How are the leaders and church described in v.28?

A: Shepherds and the flock.

Q: Are the shepherds to be completely and solely consumed with protection of the flock?

A: Yes, but it's equal protection for themselves as well as the flock. On a spiritual level, a leader that becomes deceived cannot guide a follower. If the wolves take out the shepherds the flock is even more vulnerable.

Q: Who owns the flock? Why is this significant?

A: Christ paid the price with His blood. The shepherds must never forget that they're hired hands. (Read Luke 12:42-48)

Q: What are the two directions of attack described in v.29 and 30? What are the differences?

A: Outside and inside the church. Savage wolves represent direct and open attacks from the outside. The false shepherds are more subtle, coming from within and using deception to make their own disciples.

Point of Application: Notice in Paul's example that he never stopped preaching to **BOTH** those inside the church and out. “The best defense is a good offense” and Paul puts that principle in action as described above. Do we recognize the dual prongs of our gifts to withstand the forces **both** within and without?

[Read 20:32]

³²“And now I commend you 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.

Q: How is sanctification – withstanding the forces within and without – put into effect?

A: Being built up through the Word, devoted (“commended”) to God. It's not just a commitment for the shepherds, but for the flock as well.

Is the Spirit through this study speaking of imbalances in your personal life? In your ministry? In your local church? What is the commitment we need to make to achieve the example Paul has set before us?