

The Church's Care

Acts 20:17-38

It's probably no surprise to anyone that I am not much of a runner. There's a certain level of insecurity that brings me, working with two Boston Marathoners—Travis and Drew. But I have resigned myself to be content in the shadows of their glory, and take my proper place as one cheering from the sidelines, because, as I said, I am not much of a runner.

However, *I used to be*. Believe it or not, I was part of 4x400 relay team for Aurora Middle School Track. And we actually did pretty well (not saying it was because of me, but we did pretty well). And as anyone who's been part of a relay team will tell you, the most critical component of success is not necessarily how fast each person is (though that of course matters); the most critical part is executing a solid handoff. We spent just as much time practicing handing off the baton from one runner to the next as we did in running sprints or any other conditioning. You can have the fastest four runners in the state, but without a smooth and solid handoff, you will never win the race.

What we have in our passage this morning is just like that—it's a handoff of leadership from the apostle Paul to the elders of the church in Ephesus. This story brings us into Paul's third missionary journey in Acts (cf. 18:18-23). As he was returning to Antioch after his second journey (which was essentially his sending church, cf. 13:1-3), he had stopped briefly in the city of Ephesus in modern day Turkey, and had preached the gospel in the synagogues (18:19-21). In ch. 19, toward the beginning of his third journey, Paul returned to Ephesus and ended up spending two years there (19:10), building on the ministries of Apollos and Priscilla and Aquila (18:24-28; cf. 19:1). After those two years, we're told in ch. 19:21 that "Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'" It was time to move on. And so in ch. 20 he heads to Macedonia and Greece, visiting some of the churches he had established and strengthening believers there. And as he makes his way toward Jerusalem, hoping to make it there in time for Passover, he decides to sail past Ephesus. He doesn't have time to stop there and see everyone. But he does want to take one last opportunity to encourage the leaders. And so while he's in Miletus on the coast, he summons the elders of the church in Ephesus to meet him there (20:16-17). And there in Miletus, Paul gives what is essentially his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, which not only offers us a window into his ministry, but demonstrates the standard and pattern for the church's ongoing care as the apostles begin to hand off the responsibilities of gospel ministry to the elders of each local church.

This is the passing of the baton. The apostles—the witnesses to Christ's resurrection who were entrusted with his teaching—they're not going to live forever. So how will the church be nurtured and cared for and protected in their absence for generations to come? They entrust that

responsibility to the elders of each local church (cf. 14:23; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), and instruct those elders to hold fast to God's Word (cf. 2 Tim. 3:10-4:5). That's what we see in this hand off—that *the health of the church requires the faithful ministry of God's Word*.

Now I'm not about to compare my imminent departure from Westgate to Paul's handing the baton to the Ephesian elders. For one, I am not an apostle handing ministry to elders; I am one of the elders of Westgate, who share a ministry that Christ has already entrusted to us. The elders already own this shepherding responsibility, and that doesn't change after I leave. Moreover, I am not willing to concede that after we move, we will never see each other's faces again. Now of course I can't control that, but I very much anticipate visiting, and all of you are welcome to visit us in Cedar Rapids (though not all at the same time; we don't have that much room).

But it's not hard to see some similarities between our situation at Westgate right now and what's happening in this passage. We are entering a season of transition, a change in leadership. And so it's a good idea for us to pay careful attention to what Paul has to say here, as we think about both Westgate's future, and the kind of lead pastor you all are looking for. The health of the church requires the faithful ministry of God's Word. More specifically, Paul outlines three standards for faithful leadership here, namely: faithful proclamation of God's Word (vv. 18-27), careful shepherding of God's flock (vv. 28-31), and dependence on God and the word of his grace (vv. 32-35). We'll start with the faithful proclamation of God's Word.

Faithful Proclamation of God's Word (20:18-27)

Paul begins in v. 18 by holding up his own service in Ephesus up as a model and standard for how the Ephesian elders ought to lead. Which might sound arrogant to us. But isn't that how leadership should work at its best? Mentors modeling for others how to lead? That's what he does. And in doing so, amid everything he might point to in his own life, he emphasizes the faithful ministry of God's Word. Notice how many times he refers to speaking God's Word in these verses: *declaring, teaching, testifying, testifying, proclaiming, declaring*. More specifically, he attests that his Word ministry was both undeterred by trials, and unreserved in content. He didn't give up, and he didn't hold back. He was faithful.

So first, he was *undeterred by trials*. Paul reminds them how the hardships that he faced didn't cause him to pull back from proclaiming God's Word to the Ephesians. In vv. 18-20 he testifies to what the elders themselves already know: how he served "the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews [multiple attempts on his life; they know how despite those trials] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable . . ." (20:19-20). Suffering did not cause him to close his mouth.

Sometimes when you do something and it results in pain, you resolve not to do that again. Like touching a hot pan, or sending a critical email to a colleague. 'That was an unpleasant experience; I think I'll avoid that from now on.' But hardship didn't close Paul's mouth in Ephesus, and it won't close it as he moves on to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit has already testified to him that more trial awaits (vv. 22-23). But look at his resolve in v. 24: "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Paul is willing

to lose everything to faithfully preach God's Word, to testify to the gospel of God's grace. He is undeterred by trials and suffering.

And he is *unreserved in content*. He was not only faithful to keep preaching despite his hardships, he was unwilling to hold back anything that might be profitable for the Ephesians in their knowledge and relationship with God. One of the greatest temptations for a preacher in any day is to tailor your message to what you think people want to hear, or at least to leave out the things they don't want to hear. Especially if you know that you'll be opposed or mocked for it. But look again at what Paul says in v. 20: you yourselves know "how I did not shrink from declaring to you *anything* that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (20:20-21). Paul didn't limit or alter his message based on his audience, or revise it based on his critics. He preached the whole counsel of God. He was faithful in his ministry of the Word. And look at what he says in v. 26: "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" (20:26-27). Think about the implications of what he's saying here: if the shepherd willfully withholds or alters the word of God, he is guilty of the blood of the flock. He becomes like the doctor who knew that the people were terminally ill, and who had the cure in his position, but then withheld both the diagnosis and the cure, lest people criticize or oppose him. Guilty.

Paul *dared not* shrink back. Whatever the cost, he was resolved to finish his course and the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God's grace.

So what is the first measure of faithful leadership? Of a shepherd who has fully discharged his duties to the flock? Preaching the full counsel of God. And as you think about the shepherd ministry of your elders at Westgate, and as you think about what you're looking for in your next lead pastor, make sure to prioritize the faithful proclamation of God's Word.

Pastors are more than preachers. They're leaders, trainers, counselors, mentors, supervisors, planners, and so on. But a lead pastor, whose primary responsibility is to feed the flock among him, must be a faithful preacher of God's Word.

In the preaching workshops that I often attend and sometimes instruct at, we have a lesson we teach called "Staying on the Line." There is a line of Scripture, and the obligation of the preacher is to neither go above the line, adding to Scripture, or below the line, taking away from Scripture, but to *stay on the line*—to say only what Scripture says, which is what God says. You think of the oath that a witness makes when they take the stand: 'Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?' That is the preacher's oath. To tell the truth—to preach the Word. To tell the *whole* truth, and not leave anything out—to preach the whole counsel of God. And to tell *nothing but* the truth, not adding or 'correcting' or revising in any way.

That's one of the reasons why biblical exposition is one of our core commitments as a church—preaching the kind of sermons where the message of the sermon is driven by the message of the biblical text open before us. It's one of the reasons we prioritize working through whole books of the Bible, rather than bouncing around to topics that are interesting to me, or relevant to the latest headlines, or driven by the latest trends. There's a place for some of that. But working primarily

through whole books forces us to preach the whole counsel of God, and not just pick and choose what we want to hear or avoiding what we don't like.

If this is going to be a healthy transition, and Westgate is going to continue to be a healthy church, and grow in health and witness and faithfulness, we must be committed to the faithful proclamation of God's Word.

Careful Shepherding of God's Flock (20:28-31)

The second standard Paul holds before the Ephesian elders is seen in the specific charge he gives them in vv. 28-31: the careful shepherding of God's flock. In v. 28, Paul transitions from describing his own ministry to instructing the elders on what to do: "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).

Here is the actual passing of the baton. And as he does so, Paul specifies three things: the essential responsibilities of the elders, their immediate task, and the urgent threat before them.

First, the essential responsibility of elders is to care for (or more literally, *shepherd*) the flock. Now there are three words in this passage we need to understand—what they are and how they relate: *elder* in v. 17, *overseers* in v. 28, and then also *shepherd* in v. 28, which translated "care" in the ESV, and is actually the word from which we get the English "pastor." (Pastor simply means shepherd in Latin.) So, elder and overseer are two words for the same leadership office. We know that because in Titus 1, Paul uses the words interchangeably, charging Titus to appoint *elders* in v. 5, who carry certain qualifications, because an *overseer* (v. 7) must be above reproach. We see something similar in 1 Peter 5. And right here in our passage, Paul summons the *elders* in v. 17, and then calls them *overseers* in v. 28.

And according to v. 28, the essential responsibility of elders or overseers is to *care for* or *shepherd* the flock of God, his church. Elders are pastors, shepherds. Today we often use the word pastor to refer to a separate role. But biblically speaking, all elders are pastors, and our pastors here are simply vocational elders. We often have more training, and more availability because we do this full time, and therefore specific areas of responsibility, but it's the same essential call: shepherd the flock of God, which he purchased with his own blood.

And you think what a shepherd does: he needs to know the flock—it requires relationship and oversight. He needs to lead the flock, to offer direction and guidance. He needs to feed the flock—the proclamation of God's Word. And he needs to protect the flock—to guard their spiritual health and wellbeing.

And that's the immediate task that Paul focuses on here—that last point. Their general responsibility is to care for or shepherd the flock, but their immediate task (the second thing Paul specifies) is to protect it. Look again at v. 28: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock," and v. 31: "Therefore be alert . . ." There is a vigilance necessary for the call. *Careful* shepherding. Which requires that elders not just watch the flock, but watch themselves. And that's because there's an urgent threat before them—the third thing Paul specifies—v. 29: "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples

after them” (20:29-30). It is a sad but unsurprising reality that there are those for whom a leadership platform like eldership or pastoring is simply an opportunity to make much of themselves. Those who would use others rather than shepherd them, whose goal is to draw them after themselves, rather than point them to Christ (cf. Ezek. 34). So Paul says watch out. Be alert. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of God. He says something similar to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” The second mark of a faithful leader is careful shepherding of the flock.

And so what does that mean for Westgate right now? It clearly means that the elders have a responsibility to guard the spiritual wellbeing of the church through the transition and beyond, as well as to continue feeding and leading the flock. That’s why the elders have put together a solid interim staff plan for the ongoing care and ministry of Westgate. Next month, as Travis graduates from Gordon Conwell, he’ll come on staff full time, to assist Bruce in carrying out the pastoral leadership of the church during the interim. And Heidi Hart will return as our interim Kids Journey director, to free up Bruce to focus on broader responsibilities. That’s also why the elders committed to listening to all of you, and taking an active role in the search process. We want to continue to give careful attention to the church.

But this also has implications for the kind of pastor you’re looking for. Not someone who will use the position to make much of himself. Who sees leadership as a chance to build his own platform and draw people after himself, or who will take advantage of others. You want someone who is eager to serve the flock, not use it. Someone who will follow the pattern of Paul, and ultimately the pattern of Christ. He’s not going to be perfect, and you shouldn’t expect him to be. But he ought to be driven not by his own personal ambition, but by the glory of God and the good of his people. He must be a careful shepherd.

So the first mark is the faithful proclamation of God’s Word; the second is the careful shepherding of God’s flock. That brings us to the third and final mark in Paul’s speech: dependence on God and his word of grace.

Dependence on God and his Word of Grace (20:32-35)

This is where Paul lands his speech in vv. 32-35, by reviewing the foundation for faithful gospel, identifying both the power and the pattern.

The power comes from God and the word of his grace. That is what Paul commends them to, what they must depend on. Verse 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.” This is not a task they can do on their own. Only God is able to build up his church and bring it home, giving us the inheritance waiting for all his redeemed. And he supplies his strength through the word of his grace—the word of the gospel.

The health of the church requires the faithful ministry of God’s Word. And that’s true not just for the flock, but for the shepherds as well. They must depend on the very word they preach to others. Because the shepherds are not above the flock. They are sheep within the flock, and just as dependent on the gospel of God’s grace as everyone else. In 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds us

that it's the gospel of God's grace that ultimately qualifies someone for leadership. "Who is sufficient for these things?" he asks in 2 Corinthians 2:16. And the implied answer is no one. But, ch. 3:4:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. . . . (2 Cor. 3:4-6)

The foundation for faithful ministry is God and the word of his grace.

But depending on God and his word doesn't mean elders just kick back and do nothing, as though God will do all the work. Not even close. Dependence is not laziness; it's faith. Faith that fuels hard work for God and his kingdom. That's the pattern Paul points out in the close of his speech. Hard work to care for his own needs, which is something Paul chose to do, even though he could have received support from the churches. He didn't want anyone to have an opportunity to accuse him of trying to profit off his ministry, so he forfeited that right (v. 34; cf. 1 Cor. 9). And hard work in caring for the flock itself. Verse 35: "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.'"

And so, again, what does that mean for Westgate? It means, for our elders, that you have work to do. This is a busy season—caring for the flock, shepherding through transition. But God is the one who does the heavy lifting. This is not on you; this is *his* church. Purchased with *his* blood. And he is the one—the only one—who can move us forward and ultimately bring us home. So depend on him and his word of grace.

And for the congregation, it means first praying for your elders as they depend on God and his Word to shepherd the flock. But also submitting to the Word of God proclaimed. Don't just expect your leaders to preach faithfully; expect to submit to the faithful Word preached. There's no such thing as depending on God's word if we're not submitting to it—all of us. A faithful church is an obedient church—a church that depends on God and his gospel and obeys his Word by faith.

And finally, as regards the kind of pastor you're looking for, you want someone who is *diligent*—hard working, not lazing, willing to lay his life down—but also someone who is *dependent* on the very gospel he preaches. Search team, elders, congregation: If you can't tell in your interviews, or in listening to sermons, that this pastor knows that he needs the very Word he's preaching, keep looking. Don't settle for the dazzle of someone who appears to have it all together. Trust God to supply a man who knows his need for the gospel and is unashamedly dependent on it for all of life and ministry. Someone who knows that, but for the grace of God, he would be bankrupt and useless to you. Again, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2:17).

The health of the church requires the faithful ministry of God's Word. May we remain committed to faithful, word-driven ministry, especially in our transition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. What is happening in our passage, such that Paul wants to see the Ephesian elders one more time? (See ch. 19 for additional context)
2. As Paul describes the example of his own ministry in vv. 18-27, what does he emphasize?
3. What is the specific charge he gives to the Ephesian elders in vv. 28-31? What's so urgent about it?
4. How does the conclusion of his speech in vv. 32-35 help us understand what makes the elders' ministry possible?
5. How would you summarize Paul's message to Ephesian elders? What is necessary for the ongoing health of the church?

Questions for Reflection and Application

6. What about Paul's instructions strike you personally? How should you respond?
7. How does this passage speak to our current season of transition at Westgate? What are some important lessons to glean from it?