

Leadership In Biblical Perspective  
“Three Leadership Vocations and Virtues”  
Acts 20:17–38  
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In this study, we will be looking at Acts 20. This is concluding testimony and product of Paul's third missionary journey at a place called Ephesus, where he has spent a significant amount of time in ministry and now is about to leave. The Apostle Paul is fully aware of the importance of leadership and therefore when he leaves, his last words are a charge to the elders of the church in Ephesus, in which is an unbelievable treasure trove of workmanship and leadership insights. This text is just an enormous blessing. I want to draw out a couple of thoughts from this text. We pick up in this text where Paul gives this exhortation to the elders of the church at Ephesus.

Acts 20:17-38 says [17] *Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. [18] And when they came to him, he said to them:*

*“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, [19] serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; [20] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, [21] testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. [22] And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, [23] except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. [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. [25] And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. [26] Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27] for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. [28] 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. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. [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. [33] I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. [34] You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. [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.’”*

*[36] And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. [37] And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, [38] being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.*

This is a marvelous text of Scripture for one of my mentor's said years ago that in this text one can see the tropical eyes of the Apostle Paul who wept regularly, passionately, and

were always seemingly moistened in his concerns for the glory of our God, for the progress of the Gospel, for the Church of the Lord Jesus, for the well-being of His people, and for those who were leading His people. They were constantly upon his heart. In this study, I want to look at this passage a little bit on the objective side and a little bit on the subjective side with just a few thoughts. I have out this under three vocations and three virtues.

First, I want to cover the vocations. Christ has ordained that His people are to be led and are to be led in a very specific way. Many times in the Bible, the Church is pictured as the body of Christ and often times people will say to me, 'the church is an organism, not an organization' but that's not accurate when one studies the Bible. The church is not merely an organism, nor is it merely an organization. The Bible, I think, is pretty clear that it's an organized organism, just like your body. Your body is an organism, and it grows up. What is the body of Christ supposed to do? It is to grow up. How do we grow up into Christ the head? It is because we have an internal, God ordained infrastructure that He has put into place. We see that a skeleton is not on the outside of the body, but the inside for when you see a body you don't see the skeleton. But if you don't have a skeleton, that organism is nothing more than a blob. It's not growing up or any direction for that matter.

As a parent, when you take your children to the doctor, you love to hear the doctor say, "Oh, their bones are hardening and growing." I remember my doctor, Dr. Frazier, used to tell my mother 'let him sleep a lot for that's when the bones grow and he'll be taller.' I'm not sure if you sleep 18 hours a day, you're going to end up seven foot six in the NBA, but it's a basic truth. That's when your body heals, grows and does all of those things. But why is it you're growing up? It is because there is something that's not designed to be focused upon but is designed to give direction. It is the infrastructure of your body. The infrastructure of Christ Church is the ordained leadership that Christ has designed.

The New Testament Church has already been pictured for us in the Old Testament, as in God's providence, there was the development of the Office of King, the Office of Prophet and the Office of Priest. Those were the three anointed leadership offices. Those are the ones that are pointing to the Messiah who is the Prophet, the Priest and the King. All of those offices that are seen in the Old Testament of prophet, priest and king, I think can be rightly understood as being reflected, not implemented, in the leadership offices of the New Testament.

In the New Testament what do we have? We don't have the office of prophet whereby God speaks forth new revelation, but we have the reflection of the office of prophet, and that is the minister of the Word or the teaching elder of the church. Those who are ministering the Word are speaking forth, not new revelation, but speaking forth God's given revelation so that God, the Holy Spirit would give His people illumination. So the office of prophet is reflected in the teaching elder or the minister of the Word. That office is so important, not the person so much, but the function of that office, that God has even ordained something as precious as the tithe to be given to the support of that office.

I Timothy 5:17-18 says [17] *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.* [18] *For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."* In this text Paul lays out a precedent. The precedent is, because preaching and teaching is so important for the church to fulfill its mission and its message, then that person who occupies the position of elder as a teaching elder not only has one honor, that's the honor of the office of elder, but a double honor, a second honor and that is the privilege of support in that office, not because they're more important, but because of what they do is of such primary

importance. People aren't saved without faith. People grow by faith, and faith comes from hearing the Word (Romans 10:17). Therefore, the ministry of the Word needs to be ensured – the proper preparation and delivery of it. So let's remove their normal activities in life and support them so that they can give themselves fully for that purpose, thus the minister of the Word or the preaching office, the teaching elder.

Then there is the office of king which is reflected in the ruling elders. Ruling elders are to give oversight to the congregation. I love the fact that the office of elder is given with five words, five titles. Some churches have taken those five titles and made separate offices. Actually, these are five titles or five names for those who occupy one office. They are known as stewards, shepherds, elders, overseers, and teachers. The reason they are known by multiple titles is because they have multiple responsibilities in the office of elder. They are overseers of the policies of the church, the processes of the church and the benevolent care of the people of the church. They are stewards because they answer to the Lord for the health and vitality of the church that they oversee. They are called shepherds because that is their primary focus, even as Paul emphasized that in Acts 20 – shepherd the flock of God among you.

Then there is the office of deacon which arises and is implemented in Acts 6. Here is where they are instructed to oversee the resources of the church, to oversee the stewardship of the church and to oversee the mercy of the church. People have asked me, “Pastor, can you have a church without deacons?” Yes, and clearly we have churches in the New Testament without deacons, but you don't have them without elders. The diaconal office is very important so why are they being ordained? It is because of the diaconal office that reflects the office of priest – intercessor, servant, mediator – their office responsibilities have been carved out of the office of elder.

In Acts 6, when the dispute arose over the inequitable ministry of the funds of the church for resources, the elders of the church realized they weren't doing a good job of functioning in mercy. Realize there were twelve elders in a church that had somewhere between 14,000 and 18,000 their congregation and they weren't doing a good job because they were doing it out of their hip pocket. They created a solution wasn't that they needed to repent for they hadn't been sinful in it. They just needed a better process. They drew upon the diaconal dynamic in the Bible, the servants' office. But everything that deacons do were already being done, not well, but were already being done by the elders. So deacons are ordained because they are having authority under the oversight of the elders to do those three functions of administration, stewardship and mercy that previously were elder responsibilities. Now they've been carved out. Why? So that the elders can stay focused on the ministry of prayer, the Word and shepherding in the church.

Thus, you have these three vocations of calling to leadership in the church – 1) the pastor/teacher, the teaching elder, 2) the whole dynamic of the ruling elders and then 3) the diaconal ministry reflecting, not implementing, the offices of the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ of Prophet, Priest and King, as God now gives the gifts of these three vocations of leadership to His church. And what does that mean? It's very clear that there were deacons, plural. When they were implemented, there were seven deacons set aside and Acts 6. There were elders, plural. Acts 20:17 says, *[17] Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.* just a couple of weeks ago.

When people ask for prayer and to have the anointing of oil it is done by the elders, plural, of the church, singular. There are appointed elders, plural in every church. The elders, plural of the church at Ephesus. We see that plurality God. Some people ask, ‘Why isn't there

just a singular?' There is a professing church – brother ancient in age – from which the Reformation movement brought out that we're a part of, and that's the Roman Catholic Church. They have a head of the church who has since 1979, been declared as invested with infallibility. Something very odd happened this last week for there was a funeral for the pope emeritus. It's the first time in history there was a pope emeritus. Why? Popes minister until they die for that has been the practice. Another thing that has never been done in history with this recent funeral was that a pope did the funeral of a pope. So, you have lived at a very unique time in history.

There is this papal authority, the singular supreme head of the church, the vicar of Christ Church. We, of course, have a vicar of Christ's Church. It is Christ. He is the unrivaled Head of His church and one of the blessings He has given is to implement the plurality of leadership – of elders, of deacons, of leaders, pastors – because of multiple reasons. If you look back to the Reformation, you see this blessing of plurality in some extraordinary and wonderful ways. Where did the Reformation really explode from? I know most think Wittenberg, but really the explosive places of the Reformation were in two Switzerland cities – Zurich and Geneva. Luther was in Wittenberg where there's Luther, Calvin in Geneva, Zwingli at Zurich, Bucer in Strasbourg, John Knox in Scotland and Thomas Cranmer in England. Thomas Cranmer was so effective because it wasn't just him but with him was Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. It wasn't just John Knox for Chris Goodman was right alongside of him. It wasn't just Calvin, but there was Theodore Beza, and it wasn't just Luther, but there was Millington. God raises up this plurality, as Calvin called them, the company of pastors and shepherds for God's people.

So, we see how these three vocations are put into place with plurality, with qualifications and then the process of these disciples being selected – let these first be tested and then let them serve. We have followed that process now to the point of ordination for the new ones, the installation for those in this class and the consecration of those who are already in their class and ministry. The ordination of officers is for life unless there is the need of discipline. It is for life in which they serve, in which they minister, and they are to be given, as you will vow, the due respect of their office in order to honor Christ who has designed the office and has called forth and given the gifts to those who steward them as elders, pastors and deacons in the church. Now my last three thoughts move from vocation to virtues.

This is so rich. I'm just going to pick a couple of things out for you. The first thing is a leader that Christ has given has perspectives. I like the word perspectives. He holds loosely to his office, but tenaciously to his vows. Why does he hold loosely to the office? We are all aware that none of us are indispensable, that the office belongs to the Savior, not to us, yet we tenaciously hold to our vows. That's what Paul is telling them and that is one of their perspectives.

Here is another perspective. It's not your church. It is Christ's Church. They are to shepherd the flock of God among you in God's providence, those whom He has brought, who have recognized your leadership. Who are they that they are to shepherd? Paul says they are the flock of God, the church of God and they have been purchased by the blood of Christ. Christ is the One who purchased His church with His own blood.

Another perspective that leaders have is accountability and stewardship. We answer for what we do in that office to the Lord. That's why the Bible warns us in James 3:1, *[1] Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.* So these perspectives and many others begin to fill the heart of a leader.

I love the seasons of the church. I love the seasons of life, the seasons of a year and the seasons of a week. I love the rhythm of Lord's Day morning and evening worship and then six

days of serving Christ. I love the liturgical seasons of Advent celebrations, Holy Week Focus, Pentecostal Sunday and I'm thanking God for that glorious outpouring of the Spirit of God at Pentecost. I love those seasons where there's certain hymns that we sing as well as those newer classical contemporary hymns that God is bringing to us. I love this season where we're able to focus on the wonderful gift that God has given to His church of pastor/teachers who equip the saint for the work of the ministry.

One of those perspectives has to be a sacrificial commitment with a servant's heart for that's the only way you can shepherd. It's easy to renovate the leadership of the church into a corporate board of directors, but it's a challenge to do and engage in those things that many people do not see, which is the shepherding of God's people, the opening up of a home and hospitality, the visitation in a home, the contacts that are made, the reactive shepherding when crisis has struck, the proactive shepherding, so that when the reactive shepherding takes place, it's not – who are you, oh, you're the one that's called me and been praying for me. It is that sacrificial servanthood that gives the shepherd's heart.

Here is another virtue of this leader – proclamation. Did you see how many times Paul said in the Acts 20 text, 'I'm innocent of your blood'? Why? It is because he proclaimed to them the whole counsel of God. We are conduits of God's Word to God's people by God's Spirit, through preaching, teaching and discipling. That is what we do. We are to be models and mentors of the Word. We are to give ourselves that God's people will get God's Word. The Christian life is built not upon human intuition or investigation, but upon Divine revelation – God's Word – a that has to be communicated faithfully to God's Word. That's why Paul said 'I brought to you the whole counsel of God.' Not only did he bring it to them publicly, but he also brought it to them house to house (Acts 20:20). Paul not only had the gathered worship, but they had the small group discipleship, house to house. Paul knew what Jesus had done – the multitudes, the 70, the 12 and the three. In Acts 20 Paul is telling the elders to continue this public proclamation of the Word and to continue to get into houses with the ministry of the Word. It's not so much a program, it's what we would say is a commitment to proclamation.

The third virtue is that the Apostle Paul was shepherding, leading, caring and serving the ministry of God's Word in the lives of God's people through these three glorious offices of teaching elder, ruling elder and deacon for that was his passion. Paul says he was with them with tears. It wasn't checking the box. He didn't have to be given boxes to check where elders do this and deacons do that. I understand giving direction in terms of responsibilities for that's called a plan but Paul did not lead by a plan. Paul's plan came from his leadership. This was his passion. He wanted to handle the Word of God and the people of God rightly. He wanted to rightly handle the Church of God because he knew Satan never lets up, never.

Satan attacks from the outside and from the inside. He attacks from the outside with intimidation and from the inside with infiltration. He loves to assault. In fact, Paul warns these elders when he says, 'from among yourselves will arise false teachers and false leaders' (Acts 20:30). You might be thinking 'how does Paul know that Satan is going to bring wolves in sheep's clothing?' From among them will arise wolves in sheep's clothing – wolves in sheep's clothing that will what lead the disciples to themselves. This is where it becomes all about them, not about Jesus. Their leadership is not pointing to Jesus because it becomes all about them. And they will twist the Scriptures in order to accomplish their self-promotion and their self-absorption.

Paul knew this was going to happen because he had already been three years and it happened while he was there. Is Satan going to take advantage of Paul's absence? Sure and he

did. The church at Ephesus, after Paul's departure, went down the tubes for years and it wasn't until Paul got out of Roman imprisonment that he was able to send Timothy back for a ministry of church revitalization and that's what the book of I Timothy is all about – revitalizing the church at Ephesus. I Timothy 1 deals with teaching. I Timothy 2 deals with prayer. I Timothy 3 deals with leadership, because everything Paul warned them about, they ultimately did not listen so Paul sent the very best man he could back to revitalize that church.

Satan is incessant. He attacks from the outside with intimidation. He attacks from the inside within, infiltration. Within a congregation he loves to infiltrate with gossip and slander and within the leadership he loves to infiltrate with jealousy and envy. But as the people of God, we need to have the armor of Christ, we need to walk carefully, and be circumspect.

We need to ask God to bless those who are about to take the responsibility to lead us, that they will lead us in their vocation of pastor, elder or deacon with passion for Christ, His church and His people, that they will lead with proclamation – the proclamation of Divine revelation preached, taught, shared, disciplined, counseled and mentored, and their perspectives will always be. ‘Let me die and may Christ be exalted.’ We hold loosely to our office. It belongs to Christ. We hold tenaciously to these sacred vows from God's Word for the authority of Christ, and by the power that His Holy Spirit supplies. Notice in your vows, you will endeavor by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You for these moments we could be together in Your Word. God, bless my brothers here who are ordained as elders, deacons and as pastors in this congregation to enjoy a deep bath in this text on their own. Lord, take what we have just drawn out and help us apply it into our lives that Christ's Church might be known as Christ's Church and Christ would might be known in His church and known above all, in all and through all – Christ in us, the hope of glory. Then Father, enable us to embody in the leadership what we long to see in the fellowship at Briarwood. May those things that are important in the means of grace, worship, Lord's Day, prayer, sacraments, and shepherding be embraced with passion by us for the proclamation of Christ that Christ would be preeminent for I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.