

Acts 20:17–38

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Date: 22 July 2018

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[0 : 00] Good morning. I feel like the train track is laid down and possibly running through, but I'm sure we'll find our way this morning on this. It's really good that you're here.

We are in the midst of a long series in the book of Acts, and if you're visiting, just a special welcome to you. We have been enamored with this book two of Luke's writings.

In fact, many times along the way, I have imagined what it would have been like, therefore, to have been alive at the time of the apostles, those sent ones named by Jesus as such with his gospel.

For indeed, the Christian message moved from the Lord Jesus to a select group of apostles, apostles, and then into the hands of many in what you could only term to be a post-apostolic age.

And as we have been reading this book together, I am sure that for those of us who have been here throughout, there are times where you wonder, wow, what it must have been like to have walked at the time of the apostles. Or perhaps your own heart begins to rise with the notion of what it would be like to be part of a church that resembled the church in the book of Acts.

[1 : 55] Certainly, it would have been to live at a time of great reviving, great impact, a sense of being part of something which is indestructible and moving beyond you, something bigger than yourself.

Our text today gives us Paul's final discourse, his farewell as a free man.

In the coming chapter, he will be in bonds and be imprisoned or on his way to imprisonment throughout the rest of Acts. So these are, in some sense, the final words of a free man.

And in laying it down, he presents us with the very thing we want, with the very things we need. He provides the marks of an authentic apostolic ministry.

You can actually read them for yourself. These are the marks of a genuine apostolic work. And then, the second half, he actually indicates, by way of description, a model for that work going forward.

[3 : 21] Those two simple words pivot the text for me. The marks of authentic Christian ministry and a model for that ministry going forward.

If you look at the text before you today from Acts 20, it opens with Paul's defense of his ministry all the way through verse 27.

And then it will shift to a description concerning their ministry after he is gone. In other words, he is actually showing you what apostolic living looks like in a world when the apostles no longer are alive.

The marks of an authentic Christian ministry, 17 to 27, threefold by way of my comments this morning.

A leader who is himself led by God. Secondly, one who has a genuine, genuine love for God's people.

[4 : 41] And thirdly, one who is preoccupied with the word of God. Those are the hallmarks of Christian ministry by way of Paul's own self-description.

This is the kind of church you should be looking for. One where the leader is led by God.

One where there is, by way of demonstration, a love for God's people. And one in which that ministry is preoccupied with God's word.

Take a look. After he calls the elders of the church to him, he said to them, and the speech begins there in the middle of verse 18.

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time. From the first day that I set foot in Asia. Here it is.

[5 : 43] Serving the Lord with all humility. Notice, the first mark of an authentic Christian ministry is a minister who is serving the Lord with all humility.

Some time ago, one of our own elders was leading the devotional to the other elders gathered. Doug Rothschild, and he selected Psalm 23.

And it's a famous psalm. Even if you've never read the scriptures, you're probably aware of its opening refrain. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

And he, that is, Doug, indicated for us that David, the writer, the anointed, the leader of God's people, was nevertheless one who was himself led by God.

The Lord is my shepherd. Although he was the under-shepherd. An authentic mark of Christian ministry.

[7 : 05] And Paul here exemplifies it. He is one who is himself serving the Lord with all humility. In other words, it's a leadership that is by nature under authority.

Not autonomously over. And you will know that through the characteristic of humility. And their service unto the Lord.

He has not only exemplified himself in this sense, but he says, With tears and with trials that happened to me through the plot of the Jews.

That couplet could almost be laid down as a blues line with tears and with trials.

Those two words, for me, exemplify that an authentic ministry is one where there is a genuine love for God's people.

[8 : 22] I mean, tears and trials. Tears, by nature, demonstrate a tenderness of heart.

Trials indicate a stick-to-itiveness in time of trouble. A pastoral ministry that would resemble the church at the time of the Acts of the Apostles is one where the leadership itself has a genuine love for God's people.

There is an internal empathy that at times leaks out of concern for those who are walking in ways that move them away from the Lord rather than to the Lord.

It's one thing to see somebody throwing their life away and saying to yourself, Well, good thing I don't have to live their life for them.

It's another thing to see someone throwing their life away and have welling up within you an empathy and an angst that desires in some way to turn them back toward that which is right and good and proper.

[9 : 49] A genuine love for God's people. Both tears and trials. And sometimes those who are in ministry, I say this because I've been, well, I'm not a rapper.

But a famous rapper has once said that if I were a rapper, he would change my name to Teardrop. Occasionally you'll see me do this. Paul's internal heart sensed for his people at times more than they could sense for themselves.

Whitefield, of the 18th century time of great awakening, was known to weep while preaching. And accused by some as relying on the trade of emotion to move the mind of the listener in an inauthentic way.

[11 : 23] To which Whitefield responded, I weep for you who know not how to weep for yourselves.

Paul then, as a mark of genuine authentic ministry, knew danger, knew danger, felt danger, had empathy, and at times was known to be a man both publicly and privately.

To be a man of tears. Such was his concern. Such was his love.

Paul could be a harsh sounding man, but I almost get the sense that as he is defending his ministry here, he's saying, you want to know, you want to know if I really loved you?

I wept for you when you would not weep for yourself. My internal angst overflowed, leaked out, because I see the consequences of the actions of my own people.

[12 : 51] But not only that, trials. Authentic ministry walks through hardship. A sign of an inauthentic ministry is to when the going gets tough, to simply get going.

But to have an enduring quality, not merely an empathetic quality. Paul says, that's what I exhibited. That's what he says, you yourselves know, verse 18. You know how I lived. I lived as a one under authority, led by God.

I lived as one who genuinely loved you. My love for you was manifest through my tears, and my endurance through trials.

Wow! This, this is, this is the church at its great moment.

[14 : 03] But not only that, the third mark, led by God, a love for God's people, but preoccupied with God's word.

It's amazing to me, in these brief verses, how often he is using language to talk about a teaching ministry, a word explanation, an implication ministry.

Take a look. Verse 20. How I did not shrink from, here's one verb, 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 towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And then later, down in verse 24, as well, all he wants to do, is to testify, to the gospel of the grace of God. And verse 25, Behold, I know that none among you, as I have gone about, proclaiming the kingdom.

I mean, the verbs are just, they're rolling like waves, on the Southern California beach. This testifying, declaring, teaching, proclaiming.

[15:31] This is a word ministry. You want an authentic Christian ministry? And those who lead it, will be preoccupied with, the word of God.

They'll be preoccupied with testifying, declaring. And they'll be doing it, everywhere they go. It'll be both publicly, and in house to house. It'll be in personal conversation, and as a mark of corporate gathering.

This is the mark of ministry. And they know that, for three years. Well, that's what they knew.

Verse 18, you yourselves know. It's fascinating to me, at a literary level, how he also wants to say, now there's a couple of things I know. You can see that in 22, and in 25.

And now behold, I am going to Jerusalem, or in 25, and now behold, I know that you will not see me again.

[16:43] Having put forward the marks of authentic ministry, led by God, a love for God's people, a preoccupation with word, he says, now I know a couple of things.

You know that from me, but I know that I'm heading to Jerusalem, and while I don't know exactly what will happen to me, I have been compelled by the Holy Spirit, not only to go, but I am aware that imprisonment, and difficulty, and hardship will come to me.

And not only that, I'm aware that I'm in pastoral transition. You will not see my face again. I'm done. I have another ministry assignment.

And in light of that knowledge, he actually concludes then, in verse 26, that first half of our entire text, 26 and 27, Therefore, 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.

Full stop. There's a defense of his ministry, by way of description, a mark of authentic ministry, the end of which is, he is completely innocent.

[18:05] Of the blood of all those, who would go another direction, live another way, believe another gospel, because he's proclaimed the true thing to them. And he's done it, all the way along.

What a phrase. It's a, this phrase, I am innocent of the blood of all. Isn't, isn't a washing of his hands, in the sense of, do your own thing.

It's, it's, I've been, I've been with you. I, I've taught you. I've, I've led a life before you.

I've opened the scriptures to you. I've declared faith in Christ before you. And if you abandon those things, then, then your blood is on your, own head.

You will have to answer for your ways. I will not have to answer for you. And then the text moves.

[19:11] From the marks of authentic ministry to a model for their ministry. Now, remember the gathering here are the elders. You can actually see that in verse 17, when he had called the elders to them.

And then here again in verse 28, where you see the phrase overseers, two different words from which we kind of get the understanding of a bishop or an, in the, in the episkopos and the other, the presbytery.

Both of these two words use synonymously in Acts 20 to refer to the same body of men. And the thing moves now in regard to his direct address on what life needs to be looking like under their care, because he is now moved on.

So what is the model for Christian ministry in a post-apostolic age? What should the church look like today? What should you be looking for in a church as you explore and decide to land in one today?

The model is right here. The first mark already stated the plurality of leadership. There's a plurality of leadership. It's no longer just Paul.

[20:33] It's you all. It's a team. Not merely an apostle. There's parity.

And plurality. Just as the mark of authentic ministry was an apostle who was led by God, the model for ministry will be a team who is serving God.

Team ministry. No sense of a one-man show. This is very instructive. If you're getting ready to go off to college in the fall for the first time, or you're coming here for the first time, and you start to think, well, maybe I'm going to go to a church, maybe not.

What kind of church do I look for? This is a model. This is a model that you ought to consider. Is there a plurality of people that are overseeing this thing?

Or does everybody step in line under one name, one figurehead? There's a plurality of leaders.

[21 : 44] And notice, they are known for their careful attention and alertness. Look at 28. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.

And there again, verse 31. Therefore, be alert. The model for ministry is a team that is careful in their attention to themselves and the church, and they are alert.

They are intent. There's an attentiveness and an alertness to the leadership. They're not just coming and going. Not just walking in and walking out.

Their minds, in a sense, are preoccupied about their own life and the lives of the people in the church.

They're given to both. They're given to self-watch. They're careful. They're careful. They're careful in their discourse.

[23 : 00] They're careful in their habits. They're careful in their patterns. And they're attentive to the people.

They're not the man they once were. They've had to grow up, walk well, take care.

Because their charge is nothing less than the church of God, verse 28, which he obtained with his own blood.

I mean, there's a movement in the text there. Paul says, I am innocent of all blood. And then he looks to this next band of leadership and says, you better be careful, attentive, and alert, because the church of which you are overseers was purchased by his own blood.

And if you want to know what's embedded in that nature, he's well aware that there are wolves that are out looking for blood.

[24 : 16] I am innocent of blood. The church is obtained by Christ's blood. And there are those looking for blood who will actually destroy the flock.

What's stunning to me here is the careful attention and the alertness is embedded by fierce wolves not sparing the flock.

Indeed, by those who will speak twisted things. So the care, the attention, the alertness, actually relates to their word ministry.

They know how to protect people with the gospel. They know how to say, you should not pursue that course of action, and I can tell you why.

Because it will be contrary to the gospel and unhelpful for your life over time. And there will be others who will come along to say, ah, you know what?

[25 : 28] Do what you want on that. It's completely a matter of Christian conscience. It doesn't matter. You're free to sleep with whomever you want. You're free to marry whomever you want.

The gospel is the gospel of grace. And there's an unawareness within the leadership of actually being able to walk into somebody's life and say, take care now.

There are fundamental reasons why you ought to consider a different course of action. And notice, notice where the trouble in the church comes from in a post-apostolic age.

There's all kinds of talk today about how is the church going to survive the 21st century given the onslaught of the secular culture. There's not a word here about the secular culture.

Paul's not worried about the outside world. He's not worried about the political discourse. And he's living at a time in Nero where things aren't going to be easy for his people. His greatest, the chief concern of the apostle in his farewell speech is that the trouble will arise from inside, not outside.

[26 : 44] Now, that doesn't mean that we ought to look around and cast aspersions. But I'm telling you this.

If you're in that select group that day in Miletus when Paul's talking, I can guarantee you, you would tell yourself this. I better really take care of my life. And I better really recognize that the gospel of grace trains you in godliness, not ungodliness.

And that there is a thing called godliness that is a natural consequence of the gospel that I preach.

In other words, the ministry he put forward is almost one now that is to be the model for those. Look at verse 31. Be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

There's an admonishment that takes place. There's a speaking ministry that will call people to a life that is greater than the one they are living because the gospel they have embraced is actually conforming them into the likeness of Christ.

[28 : 03] Paul basically says twice now in the text, I wept more than once over people who would not hear my counsel. It's the model for any who would lead the church in the days long after he is gone.

How will the church today manifest such attention and alertness? They manifest it simply by holding fast to the word and by working hard.

We will not have the church at the time of Acts if we do not have leaders who are not holding fast to the word of the apostles.

It's impossible. So they are actually then men who are appointed in the congregation here in Ephesus to know the word, what it is and what it isn't.

To be able to admonish people in a way in which those persons know they are loved, not despised. In other words, you have to hold fast to the word.

[29 : 26] And they should be men who work hard. I love this about Paul. I'm sure you do as well. Verse 33 and following, I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.

In other words, I wasn't a self-serving guy. I didn't get some position in the church and utilize it for my own welfare. In other words, he says, you weren't here for me, I was here for you.

The church ought to just like, just grow men and women like this. People in the congregation who understand the words of Jesus, it's better to give than to receive.

That a mature church is a giving church, not a taking church. It grows in number of those who are providers. And over time, there are fewer and fewer unhealthy, I'm not talking about people with real needs, but there's no one in the church that's parasitic.

There's no one that's just trying to feed off other people. There are selfless people, not selfish people. Notice he says there, I was hard working, verse 35, in all things, in all things, I've showed to you that by working hard, we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 45] In other words, all of us, when we become Christians, need to learn how to provide for ourself, and even more than that, provide for ourself to the point that we can help someone else.

I mean, that's what Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians, elsewhere, about a thief who became a Christian, and he learned not only to steal from others, but in becoming a Christian, he actually learned that he would have something to give to others.

Paul says, I was a hard working individual. I wasn't looking for all the things that you would necessarily do for me. In fact, I kept making tents along the way so that I would have more to give to you.

That's the model of Christian ministry. A team of leaders who are known for a pattern of careful attention and alertness, which is manifested by their holding fast to the word and by working hard. If you get that, if you get that, then you found something that resembles an incredible moment in the history of the church.

[32 : 01] church. What's an authentic church look like? Leaders who are led.

Leaders who love. Leaders who live to proclaim God's word. How will that be modeled? in plurality. With self-watch. Genuine care.

Holding fast. And releasing all. Well, I doubt you'll apply it the way they did.

But when he said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all. And they embraced Pastor Helm and kissed him.

[33 : 18] Believe me. Lord willing, you will see my face again. I'm not going anywhere, Lord willing.

And we shouldn't be going anywhere. Let's not just dream or imagine about being part of a church that lives in a time of great explosive power.

Let's just keep our feet on the ground. Give ourselves to the word. Continue to work hard. Receive the word from one another.

Make progress in our following of the Lord. Amen. The great thing is he's the one who will hold you fast.

Our Heavenly Father, as we now get ready to stand and sing and go our way, we pray that this church, this congregation within this church would be authentic, genuine, the real article, that we would resemble the apostolic age and that we would conform our lives to its pattern, that the marks of that ministry would be modeled in our own midst.

[35 : 12] In Jesus' name, Amen. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's