



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ◇ DEO ◇ GLORIA

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

Paul's Third Missionary Journey, Part 6

The Functions of Elders in the Body of Christ

Acts 20:18-38

March 9, 2008

- I. Guard Themselves
- II. Shepherd the Flock
 - a. Possess the Biblical Motive
 - b. Feed the Flock
 - c. Lead the Flock
 - d. Protect the Flock
- III. Follow the Apostolic Model
 - a. Pursue Christ-likeness
 - b. Remain Free from the Love of the World
 - c. Love the People of God

- Recently, I saw an interview that occurred less than three months ago, on December 23. I was an interview with Joel Osteen, Senior Pastor of Lakewood Church, here in Houston – the largest congregation in the country. The interview appeared on **FOX News Sunday with Chris Wallace**.
- Yet, the response by Osteen to one of Wallace's questions was so unbelievable, from an orthodox Christian perspective, that I believe it is worth noting.

WALLACE: And what about Mitt Romney? And I've got to ask you the question, because it is a question whether it should be or not in this campaign, **is a Mormon a true Christian?**

OSTEEN: **Well, in my mind they are.** Mitt Romney has said that he believes in Christ as his savior, and that's what I believe, so, you know, I'm not the one to judge **the little details of it.** So I believe they are. And so, you know, Mitt Romney seems like a man of character and integrity to me, and I don't think he would — anything would stop me from voting for him if that's what I felt like.

WALLACE: So, for instance, when people start talking about Joseph Smith, the founder of the church, and the golden tablets in upstate New York, and God assumes the shape of a man, do you not get hung up in those theological issues?

OSTEEN: I probably don't get hung up in them because I haven't really studied them or thought about them. And you know, I just try to let God be the judge of that. I mean, I don't know. I certainly can't say that I agree with everything that I've heard about it, but from what I've heard from Mitt, **when he says that Christ is his savior, to me that's a common bond.**

* * * * *

- ❑ Boasting 47,000 members, Lakewood church's website claim that it helps "millions of people in over 150 nations."
- ❑ Tragically, the leader of this church teaches these millions of people that one of the most heretical cults of our day is the same as historical Christianity!
- ❑ In our modern-day, all-inclusive culture, it is often frowned upon when one confronts the beliefs of another, especially publicly.

❑ However, Biblically, nothing is more fatal than the teaching of false doctrine.
--

- ❑ This explains why the Apostle Paul was so vigilant with respect to guarding against it, as well as exposing it.
 - In fact, so vigilant was Paul in exposing false teaching that he **named names!**
 - In 1 Timothy 1:18-20, Paul writes, "This charge I entrust you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are **Hymenaeus** and **Alexander**, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."
 - Also, 2 Timothy 1:15, "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are **Phygelus** and **Hermogenes.**"
 - Finally, 2 Timothy 2:16-17, "But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are **Hymenaeus** and **Philetus.**"
- ❑ Not only does Paul give names of false teachers, but he writes to Timothy, an elder in the Ephesian congregation, concerning "those who persist in sin", stating that they must be "rebuked in the presence of all." 1 Timothy 5:20
- ❑ Here, in Acts 20:28-30, the Apostle Paul summons the elders of the church at Ephesus and explains their roles, their functions, in shepherding their home church.

- ❑ In **Verse 17**, Paul calls the Ephesian “elders of the church” to Miletus for his final exhortation to them before he returns to Jerusalem.
- ❑ It is significant that, consistent with the rest of the New Testament, there is one church spoken of here, with multiple elders.
- ❑ There in no way appears to be a rigid hierarchy, with one elder enjoying any degree of supremacy or superiority.
- ❑ As Paul speaks, what becomes clear is that the type of leadership – eldership – that he is commending them to is one of servant leadership.
- ❑ Thus, the modern-day concept of “Senior Pastor” – whereby the Pastor is, essentially, the CEO of the church, is **completely foreign** to the New Testament.
- ❑ In fact, the idea of a single bishop / pastor who rules over a particular church or group of churches, does not emerge until the 2nd Century under Ignatius and Irenaeus [Ign. *Eph.* 6; *Magn.* 2, 7; *Trall.* 2-3; *Smyrn.* 8; Irenaeus, *Ag. Her.* 3.2.2; 3.3.1-2; 4.26.2].

I. Guard Themselves

- ❑ Paul begins this section of his speech, in **Verse 28**, saying, “Be on guard for yourselves...”
 - Throughout the New Testament, the Lord Jesus, as well as the Apostle Paul, exhorted the disciples and leaders of the church to continually examine themselves [Mark 13:9; Luke 21:34; 1 Timothy 4:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:20].
 - Furthermore, the Apostle Paul commands the believers in the church at Ephesus to examine themselves prior to partaking of the Lord’s Supper: 1 Corinthians 11:28: “But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”

- ❑ In his classic work, *The Reformed Pastor*, Puritan Richard Baxter writes:

Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and, when you have done, dishonor Him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ’s governing power, and yet contemn it, and rebel yourselves? Will you preach his laws, and willfully break them? If sin be evil, why do you live in it? If it be not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? If it be not, why do you tell men so? If God’s threatenings be true, why do you not fear them? If they be false, why do you needlessly trouble men with them, and put them into such frights without a cause? Do you ‘know the judgment of God, that they who commit such things are worth of death’; and yet will you do them? ‘He who teaches another, teaches not himself.’ He who says a man should not commit adultery, or be drunk, or covetous, are you such things yourself? “He who makes your boast of the law, through the breaking the law dishonors your God?’ What! Shall the same tongue speak evil that speaks

against evil? Shall those lips censure, and slander, and backbite your neighbor, that cry down these and the like things in others? Take heed to yourselves, lest you cry down sin, and yet do not overcome it; lest, while you seek to bring it down in others, you bow to it, and become its slaves yourselves: 'For of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought into bondage.' 'To whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey, whether of sin until death, or of obedience unto righteousness.' O brethren! It is easier to chide at sin, than to overcome it."

II. Shepherd the Flock

- Then, Paul says, in **Verse 28**, "Be on guard...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."
 - Paul, now, will equate the role of elders to the role of a shepherd, or, more accurately, the role of the Good Shepherd. This is one of several passages, including 1 Peter 5, where the Apostles equate elders with Shepherds.
 - Throughout the Old Testament, the LORD is depicted as the Shepherd of the nation of Israel [Psalm 23; Psalm 77:20, 52; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; 63:11; Jeremiah 13:17; 23:2-3; 31:10; Ezekiel 34:2; Micah 2:12; 5:4; 7:14; Zechariah 10:3].
 - Furthermore, in the New Testament, the LORD Jesus Christ is presented as the Shepherd of His Church [John 10:1; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; **1 Peter 5:2-4**].
 - In these New Testament passages, the Lord Jesus Christ is presented as the **Chief Shepherd**, and the elders of the church as His under-shepherds.
 - Not only this, in **1 Peter 5**, the Apostle indicates that the Lord has subdivided the universal flock of the church and placed a plurality of elders over each of these subdivisions ["shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight...nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge..." [1 Peter 5:2-3].

a. Possess Biblical Motive

- The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the motivating factor for each elder to exercise his biblical duties is that the people entrusted to the care **are not his own**. In fact, they have been **bought by the blood of Christ**. Not only this, no elder appoints himself; rather, he is appointed by God.
 - Paul writes, "Be on guard...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."
 - This is one of only two direct references to Jesus' sacrificial work in the writings of Luke [Luke / Acts]. Read also Luke 22:19-22.

- This Verse echoes **John 10:11**: “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”
- John Stott writes, “Implicit in Verse 28 is the truth that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs ultimately to God Himself. Indeed, each of the three persons of the Trinity has a share in this oversight. To begin with, the church is “God’s church.” Next, whether we read that he redeemed it “with His own blood” or “with the blood of His own”, it is plain that the purchase price was the blood of Christ [the eternal Son of God]. And over this church, which belongs to God and has been bought by Christ, the Holy Spirit appoints overseers. So the oversight is His too, or he could not delegate it to others. This splendid Trinitarian affirmation, that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs to God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), should have a profound effect on our pastors. It should humble us to remember that the church is not ours, but God’s.”
- Darrell Bock writes, “The picture is like what Abraham had been willing to do with Isaac (Genesis 22), only here God does carry out the offering so that others can benefit from the sacrifice (‘purchased’ in Isaiah 43:21; Psalm 74:2). Thus the acquiring of the church had as its basis a substitution of God’s own for those God would bring to eternal life. Such a sacred form of down payment for the church makes the responsibility of the elders sacred. It is clear that the death of Jesus, God’s own Son, is described here.”
- The arrogance of the pastor who sees Himself as the CEO or Chief Administrator of a church that was bought by the blood of Christ is almost beyond comprehension.
- Just as the children are not the property of parents, but rather God, so the sheep are the “possession” of the Chief Shepherd – the One who gave His life for them [John 10; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Ephesians 5:25-27].
- Again, in *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter writes, “Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: ‘Did I die for them, and will you not look after them? Were they worth My blood and are they not worth your labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and save that which was lost; and will you not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is your labor and condescension as to mine? I debased Myself to this, but it is your honor to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and was I willing to make you a co-worker with Me, and will you refuse that little that lies upon your hands?’”

b. Feed the Flock

- One of the primary functions of a shepherd is to feed the flock.
- In fact, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, was primarily a teacher. In **John 6:45-46**, Jesus states, “It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.”

- ❑ Furthermore, John states in John 1:18, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained [*exegeted*] Him.”
- ❑ This is why Jesus would later tell Peter three times, “Do you love Me?...Tend My lambs.” John 21:15-17
- ❑ The idea is that it is the shepherds *primary* role to feed the flock through the faithful exposition of the Word of God.
- ❑ This is why Paul tells the Ephesian elders, in 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.”
- ❑ John MacArthur writes, “...the primary task of an under-shepherd of the Lord’s flock is to feed the sheep. Sadly, many under-shepherds today fail to do that, seemingly content to lead their sheep from one barren wasteland to another. The tragic result is a spiritually weak flock, read to eat the poisonous weeds of false doctrine [unable to discern truth from falsehood], or willing to follow false shepherds who deceitfully promise them greener pastures, while leading them to barren desert.”

c. Lead the Flock

- ❑ Not only does a shepherd feed his flock, but he leads them.
- ❑ In John 1:23, John the Baptist, quoting from Isaiah 40:3, cries out, “I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,’
 - Thus, the “straight way of the LORD” is Jesus Christ Himself!
 - This is why He Himself says in John 14:6, “I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father except by Me.”
- ❑ Therefore, under-shepherds are to lead the flock to the straight path of Jesus Christ.
- ❑ In fact, this is what the word **orthodox** means – straight, or correct praise or glory. [From the Greek *orthos* meaning “straight, upright, or correct” and *doxa* meaning “glory, praise, renown”].
- ❑ Yet, many pastors are not necessarily leading their flocks down the wrong path; they are leading them down no path. As such, their flocks are susceptible to all of the latest movements and religious fads.
- ❑ Yet, biblically and historically, the orthodox, or straight path, is clear. It is made of a doctrinal body of truths, such as:

- ◆ The Bible is the Word of God
- ◆ The Doctrine of the Trinity
- ◆ The Two Natures of Christ
- ◆ The Doctrine of Original Sin
- ◆ The Virginal Conception / Birth
- ◆ The Substitutionary Atonement / Vicarious Death of Jesus Christ
- ◆ The Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ
- ◆ Salvation [Only] by Grace Alone through Faith Alone in the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ Alone [to the Glory of God the Father Alone]
- ◆ Regeneration by and Indwelling of all Believers by the Holy Spirit
- ◆ Justification by Faith Alone in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ Alone

d. Protect the Flock

- Paul states, in **Verses 29-30**, “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”
- In his book, *The Minister as Shepherd*, Charles Jefferson wrote:

“The Eastern shepherd was, first of all, a watchman. He had a watchtower. It was his business to keep a wide-open eye, constantly searching the horizon for the possible approach of foes. He was bound to be circumspect and attentive. Vigilance was a cardinal virtue. An alert wakefulness was for him a necessity. He could not indulge in fits of drowsiness, for the foe was always near. Only by his alertness could the enemy be circumvented. There were many kinds of enemies, all of them terrible, each in a different way. At certain seasons of the year there were floods. Streams became quickly swollen and overflowed their banks. Swift action was necessary in order to escape destruction. There were enemies of a more subtle kind – animals, rapacious and treacherous: lions, bears, hyenas, jackals, wolves. There were enemies in the air; huge birds of prey were always soaring aloft ready to swoop down upon a lamb or a kid. And the, most dangerous of all, were the human birds and beasts of prey – robbers, bandits, men who made a business of robbing sheepfolds and murdering shepherds. That Eastern world was full of perils. It teemed with forces hostile to the shepherd and his flock. When Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Habakkuk talk about shepherds they call them watchmen set to warn and save.

Many a minister fails as a pastor because he is not vigilant. He allows his church to be torn to pieces because he is half asleep. He took, it for granted that there were no wolves, no birds of prey, no robbers, and while he was drowsing the enemy arrived. False ideas, destructive interpretations, demoralizing teachings came into his group, and he never knew it. He was interested, perhaps, in literary research; he was absorbed in the discussion contained in the last theological quarterly, and did not know what his young people were reading, or what strange ideas had been lodged in the heads of a group of his leading members. There are errors which are as fierce as wolves and pitiless as hyenas; they tear faith and hope and love to pieces and leave churches, once prosperous, mangled and half dead.”

- Throughout the Scriptures, false teachers are characterized as fierce and savage wolves. Read Ezekiel 22:27; Zephaniah 3:3; Matthew 7:15; Luke 10:3; 2 Corinthians 10-13.

- Jesus Himself speaks of such savage wolves in Matthew 7:15; 10:16.

2 Peter 2:1-3: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

- False teachers had infiltrated the church at Corinth [2 Corinthians 11:4] and Galatia [Galatians 1:16]. Therefore, Paul knew [certainly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit] after he left Miletus, that these “wolves” would make their way into the Ephesian church as well.
- Jude warns of the same thing [Jude 3-4; 10-13; 16]
- In contrast to godly under-shepherds who lead the flock of God down the straight path, savage wolves seek to “pervert” or “twist” things in order “to draw away disciples after them.”
- As Paul says, they are not interested in protecting the flock, they are interested in themselves, seeking the praise of men.
- Further, these “savage wolves” may even appear “well-intentioned”; yet, they are more concerned with how people think about *them* rather than Christ.
- **In fact, “savage wolves” nearly always speak of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible. Yet, it is always a *different* God, Jesus, and Spirit [Galatians 1:6]. This is why they are so deceptive.**
- To make things even more “effective”, false teachers typically arise “from among” professing Christians.
- **Consequently, under-shepherds must be vigilant.**
- This is why Paul states, in **Verse 31**, “Therefore be on alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”
- Like Christ, undershepherds must put the needs of the flock before their own. They must be willing to even suffer for safety of the flock. This often comes in the form of personal attacks and criticism. NOTE: It seems like godly men who have devoted their lives to pasturing are always under attack.
- In his letters to Timothy, who was an elder at Ephesus at the time, Paul condemned the false teachers that had risen with the local church [1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Timothy 3:1-19].
- Paul was correct in his admonitions to the Ephesian elders, as his predictions did, in fact, come to pass [1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:15; Revelation 2:2].

- As stated previously, he even named names!

III. Follow the Apostolic Model

- Finally, Paul describes his example among elders while he was in Ephesus.
- His purpose for this is clear: follow the Apostolic model!

a. Pursue Christ-likeness

- The model that Paul is presenting is the model of Christ Himself.
- Christ was the Chief Shepherd, and as such, His undershepherds should seek to emulate His work.

b. Remain Free from the Love of the World

- In **Verses 33-35**, Paul states, “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In 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.’”
 - The purpose of Paul’s words here is to, once again, establish the sincerity of his motives.
 - His example made several things clear. Among them was that he was not in the ministry in order to gain anything financially or otherwise.
 - This example of Paul reflects the truth contained in the letter he wrote to Timothy, when he stated, “An overseer...must be free from the love of money.” 1 Timothy 3:3.
 - Tragically, the allure of financial gain has lead many in the ministry down the path of deception.
 - In fact, greed and the love of money has often been a characteristic of false teachers [Isaiah 56:11; Jeremiah 6:13; 8:10; Micah 3:11; 2 Peter 2:3; Titus 1:11].
 - Thus, as Paul quotes from Jesus [a quote recorded no where else in the Scripture], his point is clear: under-shepherds are servants, for “it is more blessed to give than to receive.”

c. Love the People of God

- ❑ Finally, Luke concludes this section, in **Verses 36-38**, “When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.”
- ❑ Anyone reading this passage is struck with the mutual love between Paul and the Ephesian elders. It is obvious that he loved them and they loved him.
- ❑ In fact, Luke even says that the elders “repeatedly kissed him [Paul].”
 - Interestingly, a later rabbinical traditions stated that “all kissing is indecent, save in three cases: the kiss of high office, the kiss of reunion, and the kiss of parting” (Genesis Rabbah 70:12).
- ❑ Several years ago, when I was in seminary, the guest lecturer in one of my classes was the former pastor of Houston’s First Baptist Church, John Bisagno. I cannot remember exactly what was taught in the class, but one thing I did observe – he loved the people of God...and they loved him, too. This was simple, yet profound to me – for it was a sincere love that I had not, personally, ever observed so clearly in a Pastor before.
- ❑ What we observe, here, in Acts 20, as well, is a *personal* love. In other words, one cannot love someone he does not know.
- ❑ I believe this is one of the major deficiencies of the modern-day mega church movement. Local churches have become so large that the elders or pastors – especially the “Senior” Pastor – could never know everyone. The love he has for his congregation could, therefore, never be a *personal* love.
- ❑ As a result, we have even taken the liberty to delegate the God-given, Holy-Spirit appointed, responsibility of shepherding to “shepherd groups” and “shepherd group leaders.” Yet, we do not have the freedom biblically to do this. This is nothing short of a dereliction of our duty as under-shepherds.

* * * * *

- ❑ Then, after weeping with him, the Ephesian elders accompanied Paul to his ship.
- ❑ As he leaves Paul departs them and heads toward Jerusalem. The Ephesian elders; however, head home, carrying with them the charge to shepherd the flock...to **lead** it, to **feed** it, to **protect** it, and ultimately to **love** it, for **Christ died for it**.
- ❑ Read **Jude 3-22**.