

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #49

ACTS
The First Pastors' Conference
Acts 20:13-27

Today, we take up a study of God's appointed leadership for a local church. Quite often Christians think because church government does not affect one's salvation or sanctification, it is a subject of secondary importance. This is a woeful misunderstanding of the Word of God. After one has nailed down his theology in salvation and Christian living, the next most important subject to master is the study of the church. The tragedy is that most Christians have never really bothered to study the subject at all. They have no real convictions as to whether the congregational, episcopalian or presbyterian forms of government are right or wrong. The result of all this is that Christians are attempting to run their local churches diametrically opposed to what the Bible teaches, which often leads to tyrannical dictators as pastors or congregations where anarchy reigns.

If we say that church government is unimportant, then we are in essence saying that it really doesn't matter what kind of pastor is over us, or what kind of leadership is to rule in the local church, or how Christ rules His local congregations, or how discipline is to be carried out in the church. No, we cannot neglect any biblical study on the church, for without a sound understanding of the local church, there will be weak and inept bodies of believers in Christ.

What we have in Acts 20:13-38 is a record of the first pastors' conference ever held. At this conference, the Apostle Paul gathered the elders (pastors) of the Church of Ephesus together and gave them final instructions as to how to lead the Christians in Ephesus in his absence from them. This is a very important passage for elders and it should be mastered by all Christians so as to have an effective functioning local church. Also, what Paul says about his own ministry is to be applied directly to men who are elders of a local church.

GOD'S MEN - Acts 20:13-17

“But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for thus he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land.” – Luke and the others set sail for Assos while Paul chose to travel the distance by foot. The voyage by sea was about forty miles and the route by land was about twenty miles. Paul probably wanted to be alone that he might have time for prayer and meditation. He could walk, and think, and talk alone with the Lord without the interruptions of men constantly.

“And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. And sailing from there we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus. For Paul had

decided to sail past Ephesus in order that he might not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.” – Paul and the others were very mobile and they went where they felt God would have them preach the truth of Jesus Christ. Paul was trying to keep a schedule. He was already late, for he wanted to arrive in Jerusalem by the Feast of the Passover, but now he was trying to get there for the Feast of Pentecost, which occurred about six weeks later.

Paul made plans, but he realized those plans were always subject to change. He did not panic when those plans did not work out just as he had designed them, for he knew that God had a purpose in his delay. He rested his life in the sovereign purposes of God.

Their Ministry (20:17)

“And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.” -- From Miletus, Paul wanted to meet one final time with the elders of the local church in Ephesus. Paul had ministered in that city for three years, and now he wanted to give some final instructions to the elders since Paul felt he would never see them again. He had a real heart tie with these elders, for he had won them to Christ, disciplined them, and, as an Apostles appointed them to be elders in the church. He deeply loved these men and felt an urging to see them once more and encourage them to be faithful in their ministries at Ephesus. These elders were left in charge of the local church in Ephesus, for they were to be the shepherds, rulers, overseers, administrators, pastors and managers of the Ephesian local church. With the Apostle Paul leaving the government of that local church had been placed into the hands of the elders. What we have in Ephesians 20 is the very first pastors' conference. It was a meeting specifically for the elders of the Ephesian church.

Notice very closely that Paul called the elders (plural) of the church (singular). There was one local church in Ephesus and the elders ruled over that local church. Now it may have been that it was not always possible to get the whole church of Ephesus together and they broke up into smaller groups in homess and an elder or elders taught the smaller groups. However the ruling of the local church was in the plurality of elders.

“And when they (Paul and Barnabas) had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

Paul did not say he called the elders of the churches, but of the church.

What is an Elder? In the New Testament, the office of elder and bishop are the very same office. In Acts 20:17, Paul called the elders of the church and in Acts 20:28 he refers to these elders as “overseers,” which comes from the same root word as “bishop.” In Titus 1:5, Paul instructed Titus to ordain elders in every city, and then in Titus 1:7, begins to give the qualifications of a bishop (cf. Phil. 1:1; I Pet. 5:1, 2). The title “elder” looks at the dignity of the office, referring to a man of spiritual maturity. An elder may not have to be old in years, but he must be mature in judgment. The title “bishop” looks

at the duty of the office, which is to oversee the flock. An elder, then, is a spiritually mature man who has the total oversight of the membership of a local church. How In an Elder Chosen? According to the Bible, an elder was always appointed to his office. He was never elected but appointed to be an elder. It was God who chose and appointed an elder to that office. “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” (Acts 20:28). Then, either an Apostle or an Apostle's representative recognized these men God had chosen and appointed them officially to the office (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Those men, chosen by God and appointed by men, were then officially ordained to the office before the congregation by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 4:14).

This raises a very practical question as to who appoints elders today since the apostolic office has passed out of existence. First, we know that Timothy and Titus, who were pastor-teachers in local churches, both ordained elders and they were not part of the original twelve Apostles. This shows that others than the twelve could appoint elders. Second, today, we still have apostolic authority with us in the New Testament writings, and the New Testament is still binding today. Third, never once in the whole Bible do we read of congregations electing their own elders. Sheep never choose their shepherd; that is always the task of the Chief Shepherd. Fourth, the authority for choosing elders today lies in the hands of elders, operating under the authority of the Apostles in the New Testament. It stands to reason that spiritually mature men should make spiritual decisions, and there is no bigger decision for a local church than who are to be the elders. At Grace Church, this is the reason that new elders are chosen by the elders and recommended to the congregation for approval or disapproval.

Who Can Qualify To Be an Elder? The Bible gives clear instructions as to the qualifications for an elder.

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer (bishop) must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:5-9).

“It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer (bishop), it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

It is possible for a person to have the gifts of pastor, overseer, manager, administrator and

shepherd and still not be an elder because he does not meet the biblical qualifications. The office of elder and spiritual gifts are not the same. God has given us the rules for an elder.

No man-made church constitution, whether it be the Westminster Confession of Faith, Philadelphia Confession of Faith, the Thirty-nine Articles or the Grace Church Constitution, should be superimposed over the inspired and infallible Word of God. Constitutions are subject to change but the Bible never changes.

What are some applications to the biblical teaching on elders? First, elders must be spiritual men who meet the biblical qualifications. Just because a man has money, or is a sharp businessman, or has a dynamic personality, does not qualify him to be an elder. Elders must be spiritual men--men of prayer, men of the Word, men of faith, men who are determined to lead the local church according to the Word of God. Second, elders are accountable, not to the congregation or to the pastor, but to God, for the government of the local church. Third, the Bible does not teach the local church is a democracy but it is a rule by elders who are chosen by God. Rule by a congregation often leads to anarchy where everyone does that which is right in his own eyes. Fourth, the government of the local church is not vested in one man, the pastor. One man rule has led to serious errors in the local church, for no one man has the wisdom or the ability to run a local church. Any church which has a spiritual dictator is unscriptural and in sin, for Christ rules His local churches through the authority vested in a ruling body of elders. How many local churches have made shipwreck because the one man ruling has fallen out of fellowship with Christ? Rule by elders provides a check and balance system where neither the pastor nor the congregation can control. It is possible for a group of elders to get out of fellowship but it is less likely if qualified men are put into office. The elder form of government does not guarantee freedom from problems, but Christ has ordained that His local churches should be governed by elders, and with this system, there are less problems.

GOD'S MAN - Acts 20:18-27

His Manner (20:18, 19)

At this pastors' conference Paul addressed these elders (pastors) and it is one of the most tender, affectionate and eloquent messages in the whole Bible. Paul was pouring out his heart to fellow pastors (elders). He also defended his own ministry among them for just in the few weeks he had been gone from Ephesus, his enemies had challenged the Ephesian Christians on Paul's character and doctrine. Paul defended his own ministry and uses his own ministry as an example to these elders as to how they should govern and shepherd the Ephesian flock in his absence. Perhaps no Scripture gives us a better glimpse of the heart of the Apostle Paul than does Acts 20.

“You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, . . .” -- Paul stayed in Ephesus three years and these elders knew him personally. They observed that Paul had a faithful and a devoted life. He had holiness and purity of life that none of the elders could deny, in spite of what Paul's enemies said about him.

All elders of a local church should be able to say the same thing about their lives that Paul said.

“ . . . serving the Lord with all humility, . . . ” -- Paul's enemies were suggesting that Paul was proud and that he was insincere, superficial and a troublemaker. Paul declared, “No, I did not serve the Lord with pride and arrogance but in humility and without a desire to misuse my God-given authority as an Apostle so as not to lord it over the church.”

Humility should be the first mark of an elder, for nothing can destroy a minister of the Word quicker than pride.

“ . . . and with tears . . . ” -- Paul was not insincere and superficial. He loved his ministry so much that he shed tears over his converts and his enemies. He had such a tenderness of heart for the souls of men, for he wished that all men would come to know Christ as personal Savior. Paul was a brilliant intellect but he had a heart; he dared to cry as a real man. A man who knows Christ will shed tears for Christ, for Christians and for the enemies of Christ.

“ . . . and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; . . . ” -- The unbelieving Jews hated Paul and were constantly plotting against him, either to wipe out his ministry or to take his life. There were plots to blast his reputation and to destroy his usefulness for Christ.

When opposition comes to God's servants, it is designed by the adversary to distract the servant so as to get his mind off the winning of men to Christ and the building of the saints. Christians must pray for their elders so that the work of Christ may continue in and through the local church.

His Message (20:20, 21)

“ . . . how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, . . . ” -- Paul taught the Ephesians the Word of God without sugarcoating it, compromising it and cutting it. He taught them all doctrines, for this was profitable. “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (II Tim. 3:16). Whatever Paul judged would promote their salvation in Christ, he faithfully and fearlessly delivered. Even if what he preached was unpalatable, even if it involved deep doctrines such as election and predestination, even if it involved exhortation, reproof or discipline, even if it cut across the prejudices and passions of men, he preached the whole truth, knowing that the saints would be profited in the end.

“ . . . and teaching you publicly from house to house, . . . ” -- Paul had a public ministry when he taught large crowds, but he also taught small groups and individuals from house to house. This does not necessarily mean that he, at random, went down every block in Ephesus and knocked on doors, but he went to homes as he was asked and dealt with people about spiritual matters.

This certainly is a precedent for elders to visit in homes and to go there with a specific spiritual purpose in mind. Elders are not called upon to chitchat or socialize but to deal with the spiritual problems of men. This also tells us that, while a minister must prepare for public instruction (which takes much of his time), he must not neglect private instruction when it is needed.

“ . . . solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” -- This tells us what Paul preached to men. He taught that men are sinners, separated from God, under God's wrath, and that Christ came to die in the place of sinners so as to bear their sins and grant them eternal life. Yet, for the death of Christ to become a reality, men must repent and trust Christ. Notice that repentance is towards God, for it is sinful man who has offended the holy God. Repentance is a change of attitude which results in a change of action and life style. Paul called upon men to change their minds about God, that is, that they should see Him as the sovereign Creator, a God of wrath as well as love, and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were to accept the one true God of Scripture and to stop following a god of their own imaginations. Once men changed their attitudes towards God, then they were to put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Christ died for sinners. He was resurrected from the dead that guilty men might be justified before a holy God. Paul challenged men to stop trusting their good works, their education, their social standing, their culture, their goodness and even their religion. He also challenged them to turn and trust Christ alone for salvation. Paul not only taught salvation, but he taught that men who trusted Christ were to have transformed lives, bringing forth spiritual good works consistent with true repentance. What saves a person? Faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Perhaps the poet said it as well as any theologian when he said,

“Upon a life I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die:
Another's life, Another's death
I stake my whole eternity!”

His Mission (20:22-24)

“And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying bonds and afflictions await me.” -- Paul was convinced in his own spirit that the Holy Spirit was strongly urging and leading him to go to Jerusalem. He knew that in Jerusalem he would face danger, trial, hardship and affliction but he felt compelled to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

When elders, or any Christian, feel a strong urging from the Holy Spirit to do something, it must be done even if the consequences may result in danger and death. It is our duty to follow the directions of God; results we may safely and confidently leave with Him.

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, . . .” -- Paul looked at himself as a man running a race and it was imperative that he finish the course. His one goal was to break the tape at the end of the race. He was determined to let nothing keep him from serving Christ, not even the threat of death. Paul did not consider his life dear to himself. He wanted nothing for himself but only wanted to have God glorified and Christ magnified in his life.

“According to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20). For Paul, duty to Christ was more

important than life itself, and if he was given a choice of either duty to Christ or life to be sacrificed, life was to be cheerfully surrendered.

Paul loved life but faithfulness to Christ is more important than life itself. It matters little when or where or how we die if we die in the discharge of our duty to God.

“. . . and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, . . .” -- Paul here describes what the course or race consisted of for him. It was being faithful to the ministry he had received from the Lord Jesus. Paul knew Christ had called him to preach and he regarded the ministry as an office entrusted to him by the Lord Himself. Paul's ministry and message were a sacred trust to the Apostle Paul. “According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted. I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service (the ministry)” (1 Tim. 1:11, 12).

For Paul, his aim, his goal, his passion, was to glorify God and honor Christ by carrying out the ministry and gospel which he had been called to by Christ. He would rather die than compromise the gospel or make shipwreck of his ministry.

The Apostle Paul mastered the question of values. Not even life itself was more valuable than being faithful to Christ, according to Paul. For Paul, the ultimate value was carrying out the will of God in his life. Every Christian must settle this issue of values whether he is a doctor, lawyer, engineer, teacher, plumber, carpenter or housewife. The ultimate value is to do the will of God. Any other value must be subservient to being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. What are your values? To get a husband or wife? To be a success in business? To be a millionaire? To make some significant scientific discovery to benefit mankind? To write some scholarly work which will shake the world? The Bible says the only value worth having is to glorify God and to manifest Christ in one's life by doing the will of God.

Situations often change our value system as humans. This is well illustrated in the life of one woman who was aboard the passenger ship, Titanic, in 1912 when it hit an iceberg in the North Atlantic and stayed afloat for about four hours before sinking. In that sinking, about 1,000 people lost their lives.

As the ship was sinking, the women and children were being put on lifeboats. One woman was given a seat on one of the lifeboats, and she asked for three minutes to go back to her cabin and get something. She was granted permission. By this time the ship was listing badly. As she made her way to the cabin, there were diamond rings and bracelets, fur coats, expensive clothing and precious jewels sliding across the deck of the ship. She hurriedly went by these expensive possessions and picked up a sack. She reached her hand and pulled out three oranges. She stuffed the oranges in her coat and went back to the lifeboat. The situation had changed the woman's values. Now oranges were more valuable than diamonds.

If you knew you only had a few months, weeks or hours to live, how would this change your value system? What transformation would it make in you? If you are a true Christian, an announcement of pending crisis or even death should not measurably affect your life style or value system, for a true Christian knows he has been bought with a price. He belongs to God and his goal is to finish the race God has set before him.

Material things are transitory and only spiritual values are permanent.

“. . . to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” – Paul was committed to teach the gospel of the grace of God. Grace is unmerited favor. Christianity teaches that salvation is not worked for but given to men freely by God's grace. Man cannot buy salvation, beg for salvation or work for salvation, but it is a gift which God gives to all who receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Salvation is free; it is a gift, and all men can do is receive it by faith and say, “Thank you.” A person can never have salvation until he stops trusting in himself and starts trusting wholly in Jesus Christ to save him.

His Mandate (20:25-27)

“And now, behold, I know that you all, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more.” -- Paul was persuaded he would never see these fellow elders and pastors again.

“Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” – When Paul was in Ephesus, he taught them the whole counselor purpose of God. He taught them everything about Christianity. He told them about God as creator and sovereign. He told them about their own sinfulness and their desperate need of Christ. He instructed them about Jesus Christ, the God-man, who died for sinners and was raised from the dead. He declared to them that Jesus Christ was the only mediator between God and man and there is no salvation apart from Christ. Surely, he taught them of the certainty of eternal judgment for those who do not know Christ. He told them that salvation was a gift from God and appropriated by faith in Christ, and that man had to repent in order to be saved. Paul also preached the truths of election and predestination. He could say, “I am free!” He was faithful to his ministry and message which was given to him by Christ Himself. Because he preached the whole counsel to men, he felt their blood was not on his hands.

He could not be accused by any man at the final judgment that he had not declared to them the gospel of grace. Paul was undoubtedly thinking of Ezekiel 33 when he was making this statement.

“Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your life” (Ezekiel 33:7-9).

What this teaches us is that elders and all Christians must preach the whole counsel of God because God commands it, because it is necessary for the salvation of men, and because the message is not theirs but God's, and they have no right to change it or to withhold it. It is a solemn matter to be entrusted with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

For you without Christ, you have heard today of the salvation which Christ offers all men in order to set them free from the bondage of sin and from the agony of guilt. In a moment of time, Christ enters a person's life to become his Lord and Savior.

What must you do to know Christ in a personal way? Repent (that is, change your mind about God), bowing to the true God of Scripture. Then turn to Christ as a sin- sick, guilty person and receive Him by faith as your personal Savior and welcome Him into your life as the Lord who has the right to rule in your heart.

Today, as a minister of the gospel, I have declared to you the whole counsel of God concerning salvation. If you reject Christ and die without Him in your heart, you will not be able to accuse me at the final judgment of not telling you the truth. I am free from your blood. Yet, how is it with your soul? Commit to Him whom to know is life eternal.