

The Charge of the Elders

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the charge before installing elders, as seen in Paul's warning to the Ephesian eldership
2. aim – to cause us all to remain faithful to the true gospel and be watchful for heresy in the church
3. passage – Acts 20:17-35

b. outline

1. The Charge to the New Elders
2. The Charge to the Existing Elders
3. The Charge to the Church

c. overview

1. the **reason** for this sermon
 - a. today is **a very special day** in the life of Grace Fellowship Baptist Church
 1. something only done a few others times in its decade-long history: the addition of new elders
 2. continuing for another week our “break” from Ruth
 - b. ordination/installation services are often accompanied by specific sermons
 1. referred to as **charges**: instruction, encouragement, and exhortation to both the candidate and to the church – to faithfulness (by the candidate) and support (by the church; **sybiosis**)
 - c. therefore, I am led this morning to that same intention: to lay a charge at the feet of the new men, and at the feet of the church, but also at the feet of the eldership *as a whole* in embracing these
 1. and, I can think of no better passage to use for this **tri-partite charge** than **Acts 20:17-35**
2. the **context** of this passage
 - a. **Acts 20-21** is the account of Paul going to Jerusalem at the end of his 3rd missionary journey
 1. booted from Ephesus in **Acts 19** → three months in Macedonia and Greece → 7 days at Troas
 - b. **20:16** explains why Paul *skips* going back to Ephesus
 1. he did not want to “*spend time*” in Asia (**i.e.** in Ephesus) – because he would have to:
 - a. confront those who opposed him there; see the people and give a report (which would take time); and deal with issues in the church directly (**note 20:29ff**)
 2. he wanted to be back in Jerusalem “*on the day of Pentecost*”:
 - a. to make sure he made it there (and left again) before the shipping lanes closed
 - b. maybe to get an opportunity to present the gospel to the crowds who would be in Jerusalem
 - c. **20:17-35** is his **final** address to the Ephesian elders
 1. believing that he will not be able to return, Paul sends for the elders of the church to encourage them to both faithfulness and watchfulness – his “charge” to them for the last time
 3. the **application** of this passage
 - a. **Paul's address to the Ephesian elders stands as a timeless message of what it means to serve as an elder in a local church**
 - b. the address is an **oral epistle** – having a similar structure to Paul's epistles, especially Galatians
 1. it begins with an overview of his own work *as an example to them* (**e.g. Galatians 1-2**)
 2. it continues as a *warning* regarding the true content of the gospel (**e.g. Galatians 3-4**)
 3. it ends with an *commendation* to the grace that God has provided (**e.g. Galatians 5-6**)
 - c. it is this structure which serves as our framework here: Paul's example → new elders; Paul's warning → existing elders; Paul's commendation → congregation
 - d. **note**: we will not be “expositing” this passage verse-by-verse – just using it as a “loose” framework

I. The Charge to the New Elders

Content

a. Paul's review of his ministry

1. Paul speaks of himself first (and foremost) as an *example* to them of “gospel zeal”
 - a. **e.g.** as Jesus prayed for *himself first* in **John 17**
2. Paul speaks of his **attitude** (**v. 19**)
 - a. serving the Lord with “*humility*” – recognizing his own *subordination to Christ*
 - b. serving the Lord with “*tears*” – putting *all* of his energy into seeing people turn to Christ

- c. serving the Lord with “*trials*” – enduring the *opposition* that came (esp. from the Jews)
- d. **Paul’s attitude was to see himself only as a servant of Christ**
- 3. Paul speaks of his message (vv. 20-21)
 - a. a message preached to *everyone* – in public, from house to house, to Jews and Greeks
 - b. a message of “*repentance*” and “*faith*” – a robust and *complete* gospel; not a watered-down one
 - c. **Paul’s message was a simple and direct appeal of a life centered on Christ**
- 4. Paul speaks of his commitment (vv. 22-27)
 - a. a commitment to *follow the Spirit*, regardless of the consequences (**Paul knew his future**)
 - b. a commitment to the *ministry of Jesus*, even sacrificing his own personal *goals and aspirations*
 - c. a commitment to the “*whole counsel of God*,” leaving nothing out of the message
 - d. **Paul’s commitment was to do zealously whatever the Spirit of Christ led him to do**
- 5. Paul speaks of his energy (vv. 33-35)
 - a. an energy of *work* – making sure that he was never a burden to others, but supporting himself
 - b. an energy of *sacrifice* – putting the needs of others *above his own*, as a way of *ministry*
 - 1. **note:** Paul quotes Jesus as the very basis of this idea – the nature of Christ was to give himself completely for others; thus the elder must put the needs of others over his own
 - c. **Paul’s energy was to see his entire personal and spiritual life as a ministry in Christ**
- b. **the charge to the new elders**
 - 1. **Paul saw his work in Ephesus as an example for the whole church to follow**
 - 2. **new elders: you are being called to a ministry of faithfulness to Christ – a ministry that emulates Jesus through a proper attitude (as a servant of Christ), message (the gospel), commitment (under the leading of the Spirit), and energy (to a ministry of Christ)**

II. The Charge to the Existing Elders

Content

a. Paul’s warning to the Ephesian elders

- 1. Paul warns them to “pay careful attention” to (v. 28):
 - a. themselves – to make sure that *they* remain faithful to the gospel and to Christ
 - b. the “*flock*” – to those they have been *entrusted* with by the Holy Spirit
 - c. **Paul’s warning was for the elders to keep their priorities straight**
- 2. Paul warns them about “fierce wolves” who would appear in their midst (vv. 29-30)
 - a. these destroyers would come “*from among your own selves*”
 - 1. **either:** from within the elder body itself, or from within the congregation – either way:
 - 2. **reality:** most opposition in the church comes from *within* (not from outside the church)
 - 3. **reality:** most opposition in the church is a matter of doctrine (and who interprets it)
 - b. **Paul’s warning was that there would be those who would come and twist the gospel**
- 3. Paul warns them to “be alert” (v. 31)
 - a. to *understand the times*, and the ways that heresy comes against the church
 - 1. “*tears*” are (sometimes) the necessary result of confrontation with error
 - b. to *persist* over the long haul – the constant work of diligently “*staying the course*”
 - 1. this work is *necessary* to prevent error coming into the church through the “*weak*”
 - c. **Paul’s warning was to remain alert to error and to root it out wherever it appears**

b. the charge to the existing elders

- 1. **Paul warns the elders to pay attention to who has been assigned to you by the Lord, to recognize the inevitable error that comes against his gospel, to remain alert by understanding the times and persisting over the long haul**
- 2. **existing elders: “stand in the gap” – stay focused on moving the “weak” to spiritual maturity, even when they resist or attempt to confound your effort – avoid the “claptrap” of temporal needs overshadowing eternal ones in the flock**

III. The Charge to the Church

Content

a. Paul commendation of the Ephesian elders

- 1. Paul “*commends*” them to “*the word of his grace*” (v. 32)
 - a. this is an *imperative* following the *indicatives* above (“**therefore**”)
 - b. Paul is “giving them over” to something *specific*, which is the “*solution*” to the above warning:

2. Paul commends them to the Word – to the Scriptures, which are able to make them wise, separating what *truly matters* from that which is “artificial” or “secondary” or “trivial”
 - a. it is the Bible (properly interpreted by the Spirit) that defines what truly matters – it is the Bible that gives the elders the *wisdom* to lead the church as Christ would have it to go
3. Paul commends them to God – to the power and leading of God *by his grace*
 - a. it is the power of God (properly applied by the Spirit) that energizes what truly matters – it is the action of the Spirit of Christ that gives the elders the energy to accomplish the work

b. the charge to the church

1. **principle: the church is to trust its elders, to embrace the imperative of Hebrews 13:17**
2. **question:** but, why does the church *trust* the elders; why do the people of the church put their trust in these men and then willingly follow their direction and teaching and counsel?
 - a. is it because they are *smart*, or *trained*, or *experienced*, or *well-positioned*?
 - b. now true, the elders must be men who are *qualified* (i.e. see **1 Tim. 3; Titus 1**) – the elders must be men of good reputation, of spiritual and intellectual ability, of experience, of training
 - c. **but, the church is to trust their appointed elders *not because of them (per se), but because of the power of the Spirit of God behind them***
3. **church: the elders have been appointed by Christ, and the success of the church is not in their hands, but in the hands of Christ, whose Spirit works in and over and around and through them to accomplish his goals – you are to trust the Lord for the success of the church, and insist that the elders appointed over you stay focused on him**