

Blood Bought, Spirit Appointed

From the Book of Acts

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Some of you will be familiar with the name Roger Staubach, a former quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys. He was a committed Christian. And it was a marvel to me that he remained in the Roman Catholic Church.

You might ask the question: Can a person be a self-conscious Christian in the Roman Catholic Church?

Well, I think the answer is yes.

But I would draw back a little bit if this individual was a self-conscious Catholic, that is, if this individual actually believed that salvation came by Jesus Christ and in addition to this his or own works were necessary as meritorious before God. Such a person would not be able to make a confession of faith in a Reformed church.

So this matter of being self-conscious about what we are and who we are is rather important. I think, that as I have had the privilege of being among you, that you are self-conscious Christians and I am glad for that. And tonight, I wonder if you are self-conscious about your corporate church life. There are indications that this is the case, but I want to challenge you along this line this evening as our text challenges us along this line.

I am going to bear down on Acts chapter 20 and verse 28 which is a very familiar verse. “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.”¹

And the challenge is something like this. Know yourselves as a blood bought body over whom the Holy Spirit has placed guardians and shepherds. Know yourself as a blood bought body with appointed—Holy Spirit appointed—guardians and shepherds. This is where Acts chapter 20 and verse 28 is leading us this evening on this particular night as you take a vote to elect a pastor.

You are a blood body. Is this not the case?

¹ Acts 20:28.

Look at our text again. “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.”²

You are a blood bought flock and church, a blood bought flock of God. And the imagery of sheep is purposeful. Sheep are not known to be the most bright of creatures. Sorry, that this is the case. But it is the case. And the Church is understood to be a flock, a flock of sheep.

And, again, as I say, this is purposeful imagery because the flock does need guidance. The flock does need care. The flock does need a shepherd. And, of course, the Good Shepherd is Jesus Christ whom the Bible tells us knows the name of every one of his sheep. He knows you by name. And when he knows you by name this is not only intellectually, but he knows you by name *as his flock*.

And you are the Church the text tells us, the Church of God, purchased with his own blood. That word “Church” indicates that you have been called out from the world. You are a flock which has been separated from the rest of the world, called out of the world to be the people of God in this world. You are God’s Church. Aren’t you glad you heard the note of this in one of the prayers that was uttered, that this is God’s Church?

It was purchased, as Paul puts it, in a rather unique way, with his own blood. And how could this be? It can be only by way of the incarnation, only by the way of God, the great ineffable God of all, condescending to become a man and taken on human form. As a result, the blood that he shed was, in a sense, the very blood of the divine being, the blood of God by which you were purchased. *You* were purchased by this great price, the blood of God. And so you are the Church of God.

Years ago I remember serving in a little congregation where the elders, having come out of a more liberal denomination and having a rather independent streak, thought to themselves, “This is our church. We planted this church. This church belongs to us.”

And, as a result, if you crossed them, you see, you were in trouble. They didn’t have the divine perspective of our text. The congregation is God’s Church purchased with his own blood.

And as God’s church you have been given elders to watch over your souls. Look again at our text. “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.”³

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

“Be on guard...”⁴ This is the injunction. This injunction is given to the elders. Look at verses 17 and 18. “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.”⁵ And so the injunction is really to the elders, the leaders of the Church at Ephesus. And we are called, as a congregation this evening, to listen in on the words of the apostle Paul as they have been given to the elders of the church.

These elders, we know, are of two types. They are ruling elders and what we have come to call teaching elders. We also call the teaching elders, pastors. These men, these elders, ruling and teaching, have been given charge to watch over your souls.

And their work, as we understand it, is what we call ministerial and declarative. That is, they are servants, these elders. They are servants of God and they are your servants. And it would be a good thing to have a practice. I have done this over the years. When you sign your name at the bottom of a letter, why not put, “your servant” or “your fellow servant”? This is the perspective that the elder ought to have. Their duties are ministerial, that is, service oriented, service under God and service in the church.

And their duties are declarative. In other words, the elders are placed in your midst to declare the truth of God among you. That is one of their duties. And this duty falls primarily, not entirely, but primarily, on the shoulders of the one who teaches and preaches on a regular basis. And so we have these two types of elders. And they are given the care of souls in the declaration of the Word.

I know in this congregation, having become familiar with the elders, that they are anxious with regard to your status before Jesus Christ and before God in Jesus Christ. Do you trust Jesus Christ who died on Calvary’s cross. Do you trust him as the one that paid the penalty due to you for your sins. Do you find your salvation and your satisfaction in him? These elders of yours are concerned about this and rightly so. This is their duty before you and under God.

And this work, if they are going to carry it out, means that they must guard themselves. Look at the text again. “Be on guard for yourselves.”⁶ You see, if you are going to help others, you need to take heed to yourself first. And this is what Paul’s perspective is for the elders of the church. This goes for the pastor. And this goes for the ruling elders. Take heed, guard, yourselves first.

A little examination of this particular word will indicate to you that it has to do with not only outward matters, but matters of the heart. In other words, if you are going to take heed to something, you not only hear about, you also act upon it. In fact, the Hebrew word for hearing carries with it this sort of an idea. It is not only the audible sounds that you gather in your ears, but actual hearing involves stepping out and acting upon what you hear. You become a doer of the Word. The elder therefore becomes an example to the flock. And I think this is, in part, what the apostle Paul is getting at here.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Acts 20:17.

⁶ Acts 20:18.

And so you as a congregation need to pray for your elders. I have been in churches where people grumble about their elders. I hope this doesn't happen here. Rather than grumbling about your elders, you need to pray for them. You need to seek the Lord on their behalf that they will, indeed, be individuals who not only watch over your souls, but watch over their own souls.

And let me say in this context a word about commitment. The teaching elder and the ruling elder ought to have equal commitment to the Word of God. They should have equal commitment to the hearing of the Word of God and to the doing of the Word of God. There ought to be no disparity between the ruling elders and the teaching elder or the pastor with regard to the matter of hearing the Word of God, studying the Word of God and commitment to the Word of God.

I think sometimes we get the idea that there is a disparity between the two. This ought not to be the case. Where the disparity comes in is that the teaching elder has the privilege, not only the opportunity but the privilege, to teach and to preach as the full time duty which he exercises. The ruling elders are not in this capacity. They have other duties and responsibilities in their employments. But this does not lessen their commitment to Scripture.

And so, again, as we look at the text, these elders are serving you in this blood bought church to watch over your souls and watch over their souls. In addition, these elders, the text is telling us, are guardians and shepherds. Our text, again. "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."⁷ In the New American Standard Version the word I am translating "guardians" is translated "overseers." In some translations it is rendered "bishop."

We have a particular view of a bishop, don't we? Disabuse yourself of this idea because the word here may actually be, as I have indicated, translated "guardian." And it is linked with the whole idea of shepherd. The chief shepherd and guardian of your souls is none other than Jesus Christ.⁸ The elders, the pastor and the ruling elders, are his under-shepherds and guardians.

And what does a guardian do? Well, a guardian works to see that everything I carried out in proper order and is done as directed in the Word of God. This is the idea of guardian here. I had the privilege this last summer of being elected the moderator of our synod, the synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. My job was to ensure that the meeting was conducted and carried out in accordance with the law and the order of the church. This is the job of the moderator, to see that that work is carried out properly and efficiently. And from this perspective I was a guardian. This is what the elders are to do.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See 1 Peter 2:25.

And the elders are shepherds. What does a shepherd do? A shepherd stands in front of the flock—this is imagery again—and leads the flock and guides the flock. He calls the sheep by name and says, “Follow me.” From this perspective the shepherd is an example to the flock. The shepherd is therefore one to whom the flock looks. I know this is the case here. You look to your elders and rightfully so. They are placed in your midst to be shepherds and guardians.

Do you know the difference between a shepherd and a cowboy? I heard this distinction made by a ruling elder at an ordination service years ago. He exhorted the young pastor, “Just remember, you are a shepherd not a cowboy.”

This elder raised cattle. He was familiar with how you get into the cattle truck with a cattle prod and you jam that cattle prod into the sides of the cattle. And they start jumping around in the truck jumping over one another in an effort to get out of the truck. This is not how the shepherd operates. He does not drive the flock like cattle. He stand in front of the flock and leads the flock. Similarly, the ruling elders and the pastor are not cowboys. The pastor is a shepherd. He guides the flock. He leads the flock forward. He does not stand behind the flock and push the flock. Jesus Christ is the great example in this respect.

And then the text tells us, in a wonderful way, that the Holy Spirit is involved in all of this work. “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,”⁹ or guardians. The word translated “made” in the New American Standard Version may be translated “appointed.” And I would like to show you how the Holy Spirit is pleased to appoint elders in the Church.

Look with me, first of all, if you would, please, at Acts chapter six, just a couple of verses there. This is a text about the appointment of deacons. But deacons are also officers in the Church.

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.”¹⁰

You see, under the direction of the elders, new officers were selected by the congregation. “Select from among yourselves....” So under the direction of the elders new officers were selected by the congregation. How was this done?

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Acts 6:1-3.

Well, let's look quickly at another text in Acts, Acts 14 verse 23. "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."¹¹

Here is another text about the appointment of leaders, elders. And the word "appointed" here means this: the raising of the hand. It is a word that was originally used to indicate voting by the raising of the hand. And so the elders would say to the congregation, "It is time for us to appoint new leaders in the church." How are they to do this? By a vote with the raising of the hand. This is how it was done.

And now, when you turn back to Acts chapter 20 and verse 28 what is the outcome? Look at the text again. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers."¹² When the process is properly followed under the direction of the elders of the church, the outcome is that the Holy Spirit has determined and appointed the leadership.

I think you need to let this soak in a little bit. You are a blood bought church with *Holy Spirit appointed* guardians and shepherds. This is what Paul is telling you. Yes, God uses means. God uses means, the means of the preaching of the Word, to bring men and women to salvation, to bring young people and children to salvation. God also uses means in the appointment of the leaders of the church. And certainly when the proper means are utilized you would say with regard to your own salvation, would you not, that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit working in your life that brought you to Jesus Christ. And if you are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, it was by the use of the means of his word that God brought this about. And in a similar fashion, dear friends in Christ, God uses means in the appointment of his leaders so that, in the end, you may say, "The Holy Spirit has appointed, has made these men, guardians and shepherds."

And so I submit to you tonight, dear friends in Christ, that you are a blood bought body with Holy Spirit appointed guardians and shepherds. You need to be self-conscious about this. And I urge you to be self-conscious about it. Yes, you need to be self-conscious about your own salvation and your status before God in Christ. This is a necessity. But you also need to be self-conscious about the fact that you are a blood bought body with Holy Spirit appointed guardians and shepherds. You need to know that this is the case and to rest in it.

There is assurance here, friends. There is assurance here, friends, because in the end you may converse about your elders. You may also converse about your pastor and you can say, "Thank you, Lord, that you, by the power of your Spirit, have given these leaders to us as a church." And you may have confidence here that God is with you. You may be confident that as God is with you, he has not left you as orphans, that Jesus Christ has not left you as orphans, that as the great shepherd and guardian of your souls, by the power of his Spirit he has been pleased to appoint, in due process, these leaders that he has given to you.

¹¹ Acts 14:23.

¹² Acts 20:28.

And so once again my exhortation to you tonight is simply this. Know yourselves, be self-conscious about this. Know yourselves as a blood bought body with Holy Spirit appointed guardians and shepherds.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you. Thank you. This is no small thing about which we talk. We are grateful, Father, that you give us direction in your Word. You give us direction not only with regard to our personal lives, but you give us direction, explicit direction, with regard to our church life, our corporate life as the body of Christ. And I thank you, Father, for this congregation. I thank you, Lord, for their commitment to you. And I pray that as they move forward in their life as a church that they might know, that they might be self-conscious with regard to the truth, that they might know that they are a blood bought body with Holy Spirit appointed guardians and shepherds. Bless them to this end and work this truth out in their life as a congregation, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.