

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

The Christian Ministry (Why We Need Shepherds)

Acts 20.17ff

7.9.17

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. ¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴ "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. ²⁶ "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. ²⁸ "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. ²⁹ "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. 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. ³³ "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. ³⁴ "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵ "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.'"

³⁶ *When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, ³⁸ 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.*

Our current sermon series, *The Incendiary Fellowship*, is looking at The Acts of the Apostles. It's the story of Christianity's wildfire growth in the first century. The book focuses on two apostles: Peter at the start and then Paul in the second half.

At this point, the Apostle Paul and his international team are completing a third missionary journey... Paul returned to his home-base in Antioch, spent some time there and then left for the very influential city of Ephesus (3rd or 4th largest city in the empire).

Ephesus was so strategic that Paul and his team spent about three years there...a church is set up and Paul does a lot of speaking, discussing, counseling, teaching in that church... He apparently rented a facility where this daily instruction took place.

And now, Paul has moved on but he's passing within 30 miles of Ephesus so he sends for the leaders of that congregation and they travel the 30 miles to spend some precious time with him...and they know and he knows that he won't be coming back to Ephesus...and it's a very touching farewell.

What Paul says to these church leaders is a kind of summary of the Christian Ministry – why do we need ministers? And while ministers have been called by a wide variety of titles like priest, vicar, reverend, clergy, father...HERE the central metaphor gives us some clue: v. 28 – “shepherd the church of God.”

What does that mean – to shepherd the flock? What does that imply – that we are... a bunch of...sheep? And what does THAT say about the spiritual life...about life/relationships/leaders in the church?

Let's look at: 1) What this speech (shepherd image) says about the church (broad strokes) 2) What it says about US...our needs as sheep

First, on the topic of wide, broad-stroke principles of how a church ought to be organized or managed, let's look at three facts that come from this speech.

First, as in all the churches mentioned in the New Testament, the church at Ephesus was led by a team. It's NOT a single leader whom Paul summoned to come from Ephesus to Miletus – it's a group, a team of elders. AND not just here but this is the normal pattern – NOT a single executive or president or CEO but a plurality of elders. And Paul will write in a number of places, “elders were appointed in all the churches” – in his mind until leaders are set up, you really don't have a local church (Titus 1.5, Acts 14.23).

Second, among the team, there's no real trace of a hierarchy or a chain of command. Paul uses three words here for church leaders: elders (17), overseers (28) and pastors/shepherds (28) and they all refer to the same people – used interchangeably.

The middle word “overseer” (ἐπισκόπος) is sometimes translated as “bishop” and we tend to think that a bishop is bigger than an elder but again these words are used interchangeably – the word “overseer” describes what he does and the word elder describes what he is – he's OLD and hopefully mature... function (to oversee) and qualification (to be elder/mature) – same person.

One last fact (and this sort of emerges from the whole scene) and that is, evidently, church leadership is REALLY, REALLY important...to Paul it was!

In that huge, influential city with LOTS of people to reach, Paul withdrew for two years into a lecture hall where he could concentrate on training leaders more deeply... intense training!

AND here, in THIS scene, he calls these same leaders to sort of drop what they're doing and make a difficult journey of over thirty miles (Ephesus to Miletus). That would be like walking from here to Boca Raton or Kendall or like driving from here to Atlanta! Why would Paul put them through that and why would they drop everything and GO?

Well, for one thing, they loved one another (you can't miss that in this whole passage). But ALSO, Paul believed that the way to go WIDE was to first go deep...same strategy employed by Jesus Christ. He concentrated His efforts NOT only on large public meetings but also on that small group of twelve...and even smaller, the three (Peter, James and John).

So, the church is always a missionary church (always reaching OUT – broad and wide) AND always the worshiping church (reaching UP) and ALWAYS the teaching/training/leadership-development church going INWARD and DEEPER...helping people to mature and use their gifts and lead.

So...again...broad principles of what the church IS and how the church is to be led...a normative picture...not the whole story but a great snapshot.

AND now let's look a little closer at the guiding image or metaphor at the core of Paul's speech – the word picture, "shepherd the church of God" (28) and what that says about US...about YOU...

The words and metaphors/images, shepherd, flock, sheep, wolves ALL imply something about us, namely that we need shepherding in our lives. ALL of us are sheep-like...and we think of that very famous text from Isaiah, "ALL we like sheep have gone astray" (53.6). We are ALL (as the hymn puts it) "prone to wander", to stray, to roam...and ONE of the remedies God has for our harmful detours and self-destructive meanderings is SHEPHERDS. We need official church leaders to "keep watch over our souls" (Hebrews 13.17). And NOT only official leaders but people we invite IN to share their maturity and oversight of our lives.

Again, Paul is addressing the official shepherds or overseers or elders in the church of Ephesus (so you elders in THIS church pay extra-close attention!) but for ALL of us who want to benefit from the shepherds God puts in our lives AND to be used by God in shepherding OTHERS, this passage helps us define the task...helps us see what GOOD SHEPHERDING looks like.

What would we hope to find in a shepherd? What would we hope to BE as a shepherd?

Notice that Paul lays out these qualities by words but even more, by example. And the stress falls on TWO primary qualities we hope to receive FROM shepherds or to exhibit AS shepherds and those qualities are TRUTH and GRACE...TRUTH and GRACE.

Jesus Christ was THE Good Shepherd and as the perfect shepherd, He embodied truth and grace. It says of Him in the opening to John's Gospel: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (1.14)

See, Jesus Christ, the perfect Shepherd, crossed the great divide in search of the lost sheep and then He embodied truth and grace. He explained the heart of God to people like US...people who just didn't get it.

We needed more than just a word of truth – we needed the Word to be made real, tangible, touchable...the Word to be made flesh.

And THAT'S what we're looking for in a shepherd and what we're hoping to become AS a shepherd...a person who can embody truth and grace to people who need and want it...our kids...our friends.

Look at this twin-emphasis in Paul's heartfelt speech. Twice he says from his own example, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that would help you..." and again, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God".

Paul is saying, "I gave you the truth...in word and in example...I made the truth real to you – THAT'S what a good shepherd does."

Paul emphasized that he was a truth-teller. He gave them the truth that would lead them to know God...anything that would help them in that pursuit.

He gave it to them in public meetings, in home-groups, in whatever the venue. He spoke in a wide variety of ways – sometimes in a kind of "Q & A" format (the Greek word διαλεγομαι – dialogue); other times in preaching/lecture formats; discussions, classes, living life and just talking. Show and Tell!

And Paul tells the Ephesian elders to follow his own example. He tells them to guard the church with the truth they've received and that requires discernment because NOT everything that is spiritual or religious or apparently MORAL is actually TRUE.

And Paul says, "After I leave get prepared for a parade of counterfeits...even from among yourselves (see shepherds NEED shepherding too because all shepherds are also sheep!) Watch yourselves and watch one another!

In the first letter Paul wrote, he showed the disastrous results of just tweaking and changing the truth a little bit. The Letter to the Galatians shows what happens when we make our acceptance with God something we ACHIEVE rather than RECEIVE...it could look like Christianity – two people who were attempting to live holy lives but one does it because he has BEEN adopted and has BEEN declared a child of God and the other does it because he's trying to earn God's acceptance – looks VERY similar but it's TOTALLY different. "Watch out!" says Paul.

God is good AND we still live in a fallen world where God's truth is constantly under attack. Don't be gullible – "guard yourselves (FIRST!) and then guard all the flock...against the wolves!" None of us is so holy that we can't get messed up/twisted.

We need shepherds who know the truth; believe the truth personally and who tell the truth. We have a really hard time seeing ourselves (especially our flaws) and we NEED help from others who can see us.

But notice (second) right along with the truth they embody good shepherds also embody grace. Jesus Christ, the perfect Shepherd was full of grace and truth...and we could even say that a good shepherd knows that GRACE IS THE TRUTH! (John 1.16)

The good shepherd, whether a trusted Christian friend/mentor OR an official shepherd/elder in the church – he/she keeps the main Thing, the main Thing!

Paul summarized everything he told these Ephesians in the words of v. 24, "the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the God's grace."

He refers to this Gospel of Grace – he calls it (25), "the kingdom of God" – He rules the world with truth and grace!

In v 28 Paul puts it again (repetition is the heart of instruction!) Paul again highlights grace, "Hey you shepherds, you're guarding something so valuable, so precious to God Himself – it's the Church that God purchased with His own blood!"

Shepherds have to remember that always: the tremendous value of the ones in our care. Shepherds have to be fixated on grace – constantly reminding ourselves, "These sheep are purchased by the blood of God, the blood of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd – they are treasures... YOU...are a treasure."

We have to see people through the lens of grace and the Gospel – to see our children that way and the people around us and... to see ourselves as God's own beloved possession... He loves us so much He gave Jesus Christ the Great Shepherd who became a Lamb...and spilled His blood for me AND God has given me pastors, elders, older friends, confidants, mentors, parents to speak

grace and truth to me... God must REALLY love and value me... God must be very fond of me!"

And because Paul knew this – he KNEW that grace made him acceptable to God and grace came at infinite cost – purchased with God’s own blood... therefore Paul could say, “THAT changes everything! That frees me from self-protectiveness/preservation and self-focus and fear... “I do NOT consider my life as my own – I’m one of the PURCHASED...I belong past, present and future to God.”

And if WE see that...we can get free from the quest to GET...and grasp...and grab and we can LISTEN to people (without looking for the first opportunity to jump in and speak) and we can be blessed to GIVE – because Jesus Christ said, “It’s more BLESSED to give than to receive”

Good shepherds know that GRACE-PARADOX and they get freed from greed and manipulation and we can really start to love.

Paul knew that was what these elders needed and that is what the church they shepherd NEEDED and he was able to say, “I commend you to God and to the word of His grace that is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among those who are set apart...” What you really need is GOSPEL... it’s grace that will shape you and instruct you and grow you. I can give you principles – but grace is THE principle that wins the whole person – grace is the TRUTH that establishes the whole life (Heb 13.9!)

Only grace can win the heart/motives and change the real you! This passage ends in a very tender way; it shows the depth of love among these shepherds. Notice the gestures of weeping, kissing, embrace, kneeling. And THIS is all the lovely fruit of grace among those who know what it is to be purchased by God’s own blood and shepherded by those the Holy Spirit provides.