

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (12-12-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 20:13-38

Additional Bible Reading: Revelation 2:1-7

Paul's speech to the elders (part 2)

Introduction

Paul looks to the future as he addresses the elders from Ephesus. He deals with the responsibilities for those bearing leadership in the church after he has gone. He warns of the danger ahead, and finally commends them to God and His Word, which is the only sure source of strength.

Responsibilities of leaders

The word for elders is the same for overseers or shepherds. But the points Paul makes can extend to all who bear responsibility in the church – Sunday School teachers, leaders of groups or classes within the church, those with special responsibilities for young Christians, or care for families at home, indeed all who have spiritual responsibility for someone else. Therefore none can sit back and feel the sermon is not for them. We all need to apply it to our own circumstances and ourselves.

First of all we have a responsibility towards ourselves. **Keep watch over yourselves....Be on your guard** (Acts 20:28,31). They needed to watch out for themselves otherwise they would be no use to anyone else. To Timothy Paul gave the same warning: **Watch you life and doctrine closely** (1 Timothy 4:16). R.M.McCheyne admitted, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness" Your own soul is your first and greatest care. What we are will greatly influence others and what we say to others. Can we truly echo with Paul his words to the Thessalonians, **You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed** (1 Thessalonians 2:10)?

Then it is our responsibility to guard the flock, which the Holy Spirit has given us charge over. Note that it is God's flock, and it is God who appointed the leaders, not men. The church is not a worldly society. We are not to use the work of the church to display self. There is to be no jockeying for position. The leaders are those gifted and directed by the Holy Spirit. This attitude should banish all jealousy, discontent and bitter feelings.

The church is so precious that God bought it through His own blood – or the blood of His own (Acts 20:29). This is clearly a reference to God's redemption through His Son, the God-Man. The church is so precious that Christ died for it. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Galatians 2:20).

To be a shepherd or pastor includes feeding, caring, protecting, shielding – in every way it is possible to be a shepherd. And to be shepherd of "all" the flock – not just "some" of the flock. Some people are easier to get on with than others. Some homes are easier to call at than others. Some welcome the pastor, some tolerate, and others simply do not want him. But the pastor is called to care for all the flock, the Sunday

School teacher to attend to the needs of every child the same, etc. It is a solemn matter, for one day we have to give an account at the judgment seat of Christ. **They keep watch over you as men who must give an account** (Hebrews 13:17).

But to return to the earlier point, the shepherd can only guard others if he is near to God himself. We need to be taught before we can teach. We can take others no further than we have gone ourselves. We need to be in touch with God, and not merely going through the motions. Sooner or later our spiritual life, or lack of it, will be reflected in the quality of work and in the lives we influence. The Polish pianist Padrewski said, "If I miss practice one day, I notice it; if I miss practice two days, the experts notice; if I miss practice three days, my audience notices." Guard yourselves, and then the Church of God.

Warning of coming dangers

Diligence in caring for the flock is particularly important in light of the dangers which threaten. The threats come from two directions – from outside and from inside. There would be the savage wolves from outside come to devour the flock (Acts 20:29), and those from inside the church who would distort the truth and draw the flock away (Acts 20:30).

Paul had grounded the church in truth and in Christian practice. But soon attempts would be made to undermine his work, and to lead the church into unchristian practices. Paul's warning was not a minute before time. In the letter to the church at Ephesus recorded in Revelation 2:1-7, it is obvious that false apostles and Nicolaitans (marked by immorality and sensuality) had already visited the church. The Ephesians had resisted the attack, but were not unscathed. They had left their first love, though there were still many good things about the church.

Jesus had given the same warning against false teachers. **Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves** (Matthew 7:15). Paul had also written to the Colossians in order to deal with heresies being preached in Asia Minor. 1 John was also written to refute false teaching of those who spoke about Christ but denied basic truths about Him. Paul himself expressed disappointment at his own friends and colleagues who fell into error: **Hymenaeus and Alexander, who have shipwrecked their faith** (1 Timothy 1:19,20), and **Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me** (2 Timothy 4:10). It is a sign of the end times: **For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect** (Matthew 24:24). **The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons** (1 Timothy 4:1).

The Bible is full of warning to churches and individuals. One of the studies which can sadden the heart is to consider why churches and denominations decline. We can all think of powerful churches which are a shadow of their former selves. Some people think that churches with a reputation for being evangelical bible-believing churches are foolproof – just because they have "evangelical" in the name. Sadly, not always so. Sometimes circumstances are beyond the control of the church – e.g. movement of the population both physically, and morally away from the things of God. But sometimes the reasons are internal – a different emphasis in the pulpit, new office

bearers or members under different influences, making fatal compromises. The faithful may not like to say anything, preferring to stay positive and hope things will get better. But by the time the alarm is sounded, it is often too late. The situation has deteriorated where it cannot be remedied. The tradition of strong preaching is gone forever; the centrality of the Word has been pushed aside, never to be reinstated.

So it is in individual Christian's lives. One thing which the years teach us is that we have never arrived. We will never fight the last battle and be able to say all will go well henceforth. We might have left the temptations of earlier years, but new ones have only replaced them. When Andrew Bonar took up a new charge in a church in Glasgow, the retiring minister warned him, "Remember it is the remark of old and experienced men, that few men and very few ministers keep up to the end the edge that is on their spirit at the first." The world's adage is so applicable to the Christian life: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

So what is the secret of going forward and keeping on keeping on?

The power of the Word

I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32). There is a positive step to be taken – to be built up by the Word. **Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ** (2 Peter 3:17,18). Being an individual Christian and being a local church is the same as riding a bike – we either go forward, or else disaster. Delighting in the Word of God is key to this progress. **Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night** (Psalm 1:1,2) – the secret of faithful and prosperous spiritual life.

It is said that the only people who are not falling apart are those whose Bibles are falling apart – from great use! The Word is hidden in their hearts, they remember it as they go about their day, and they search it daily for more truth and understanding. **I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you** (Psalm 119:11). **Then I remembered what the Lord had said** (Acts 11:16). **I will obey your Word** (Psalm 119:17). **Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful** (Joshua 1:8).

God's Word needs to be read in the congregation of God's people whenever they meet. It needs to be preached. Preaching the Word is essential for the health and life, and even the existence, of the Christian church. It must be kept central, and not pushed to a few minutes epilogue after a display of "performing arts". Sadly, dance and drama are starting to take precedence in many churches – things that are not essential to evangelism and worship, and certainly are no proof of spiritual life and zeal. Their popularity is a mark of the feeble and frightened church, which is going downhill rather than uphill.

The church needs praying congregations, and the preaching of the Word with directness, plain speech and an immediate and personal approach. All else will flow

from this – pastoral care, living worship, fellowship, evangelistic zeal and earnest witness. The Christian church was conceived in a prayer meeting and came to birth in a sermon (Acts 6:4) – and here is the secret of its continuing growth, life and vitality. The early church turned the world upside-down. The danger today is the world is turning the church upside-down.

Conclusion

The responsibility of elders is to take heed to themselves and then to the church. The church is precious to God, and He has appointed the leaders by His Holy Spirit. No church can assume it is safe and sound forever. Changes take place, and can take place quickly. One safeguard is the pre-eminence of the Word. Where it is meditated on, obeyed, read and proclaimed, the church is truly following the apostolic succession. The church is girded, supported and made powerful by prayer. If it does not go forward in these things, it will certainly fall back.