

Paul's Counsel to the Ministry

There is a passage of Scripture found in Acts Chapter 20 that I strongly recommend to the ministry, younger and older alike, to thoroughly study. Such a study, if diligently pursued, will uncover several principles vital to us in our efforts to fulfill God's call to the ministry. In studying this intriguing passage, I have found comfort, practical instruction, conviction, and encouragement. The particular passage I have in mind runs from verse 17 to the end of the chapter, where we read the Apostle Paul's final farewell address to the elders of the church at Ephesus. From this portion of Scripture, we have, at the very least, an outline of the duties and responsibilities laid upon the ministry in every generation, particularly those men who are called to serve as pastors of the local assembly.

In the beginning of his address to the elders, Paul reminds them of his manner of life, which they had been able to observe from the first day he set foot in Asia. His attitude and his actions had been consistent regardless of the season. In the midst of sorrows, trials and persecutions, Paul had served the Lord among the people in that region with all humility of mind. But Paul had also boldly proclaimed the gospel, testifying to the Jews and Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. As you continue reading the passage, notice... Paul taught the people publicly. He taught them in their homes. He warned them night and day. He kept back nothing that was profitable. He declared all the counsel of God. Paul lived his life as an example to them. He had faced persecutions and was willing to endure more through bonds and afflictions. He wasn't moved. Fulfilling the ministry, which Paul received of the Lord, was more important than his own life. He exhorted the elders to take heed unto themselves. He exhorted them to take heed to all the flock. He reminded the elders that they were made overseers by the Holy Ghost. He reminded them of their purpose: to feed the church of God. He reminded them why the church was so precious. Paul had not coveted material things; in fact, he labored with his own hands to provide for himself and those with him. Paul warned them about men coming in from the outside and men arising from within, who would not spare the flock but would draw away disciples after them. Paul was about to depart. He was convinced he would never see these men again on this side of glory. Here are just a few lessons we, in the ministry, can learn from this passage.

First of all, humility and boldness are not exclusive to one another. That is, we shouldn't think we can be humble but not bold, or we can be bold but not humble. The two characteristics are not 'disjunctions'. They must, in fact, both exist if a man is to effectively serve the flock. Being bold is simply demonstrating your confidence and commitment to the principles you embrace. A man can be bold in his humility by setting the example through his manner of life - ensuring that his actions and attitudes are in agreement and are complementing one another. That same man can be humble in his boldness through his preaching and teaching by consistently pointing others to the One Who called him, sacrificing himself and his own personal agenda. This is instructive and encouraging to me. I know I have been bold but probably harsh. I know I have been humble but probably weak. Reading this passage, I know I can be both. God grant me the grace to do so.

Next, we see that Paul did not limit himself, nor did he allow others to limit him, as to when and where he took advantage of the opportunity to preach and teach. We read in another place (Acts 16) where Paul was forbidden by the Holy Ghost from going to a certain place at a particular time. Evidently we are in agreement with Paul by having this principle stated on our ordination certificates. We would be in agreement, practically speaking, if we as ministers actually lived by this principle. Reflect on what the word of God means to you personally. Think about how it would be with us if we were without His word. Now think about so many of the Lord's people around you and in other places who have not had the privilege to hear the truth of His word. Our appreciation for what we have should be manifest in the effort we make to share it with others. Publicly and from house to house? Night and day? For me, this is very convicting. God grant me the courage to not neglect the evangelistic aspect of my ministry.

Allow me a short story... I remember my first experience at a very popular local restaurant. A buddy of mine and I went together and the only reason for the visit was dessert! The variety wasn't wide but it included my favorite dessert, which was good enough for me. The first bite was to die for! In

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fact, every single bite was just as satisfying as the first. Just the right combination of warm chocolate syrup, cold vanilla ice cream and moist chocolate brownie. We went back a few more times and each time, dessert was the sole purpose. It was absolutely delicious every time. But one day, as we were anticipating that delicious dessert later in the evening, our routine was interrupted. As it turned out, the most convenient response to the interruption was to eat a meal at the restaurant, since we were planning to be there anyway. That was fine. It would be a good time to try their 'regular' food. Looking at the full menu, all I could think about was that dessert. I finally ordered but I limited it to a small salad. Didn't want to get too full and not have room for that delicious dessert I had enjoyed so many times. Much to my surprise, the salad was well prepared and quite tasty. But that dessert... ah, it was as good as ever! Our next visit, I ventured out a little more. Salad was good... why not try some meat, a few vegetables, maybe a little bread? Wow! Actually pretty good! Before long, our regular visits to the restaurant would include a full course meal every time, including dessert. We were rarely disappointed. Think about the spiritual diet of the congregations we serve. Is it dessert all the time? What about the meat and potatoes, the salad, the vegetables... the things that might not be quite as tasty as the dessert, but necessary sustenance to help ensure a healthy body. Do our congregations experience enough of the 'regular food' to even know what it tastes like? Paul did not fail to declare all the counsel of God - the doctrine, the reproof, the correction, and the instruction in righteousness. God grant us the wisdom to realize the health benefits of a full course meal.

Paul's ministry was one based on needs: his own needs and the needs of others. At times and in certain places, such as the time he spent around Ephesus, Paul labored with his own hands to support himself and those with him. The situation was similar at Corinth because of the relationship he had with that church - as a father with his children. But at the same time, he clearly taught the Corinthians to support the ministry to the fullest extent possible. Here at Ephesus, he set the example of working and laboring in order to support the weak. Obviously, when Paul was imprisoned, he was in greater need of the support of others. Whether he was on the giving or receiving end; whether it was material, financial or spiritual... Paul approached "ministry" with respect to needs. What did the people need? What were his own needs? Paul instructed the elders to "take heed" to themselves and to the flock. They were to observe the circumstances of the flock, as well as their own circumstances. They were to be aware of weaknesses and strengths. They were to be constantly engaged in acquainting themselves with the needs of the flock, both collectively and individually. It was the Holy Ghost who had made them overseers. Could it be that the task given to the elders to 'take heed' would be the primary means by which the Holy Ghost would lead the congregation? Is this a vital element in a congregation's effort to walk more closely with God and in His will? Certainly it is. Paul often encouraged the saints to pray for him as doors would open that he might know what to speak. He became all things to all men that by all means he might save some. Paul wanted to reach them in their present circumstances, according to their present needs, and minister to them effectively. What a powerful principle! So it should be with us today... a ministry not directed by customs, traditions, or men's expectations, but a ministry led by the Holy Spirit, directed by God's word, and driven by the needs of the people.

Finally, Paul was unwavering. That's an understatement, isn't it? Holy Spirit God had revealed to Paul that he would suffer afflictions wherever he traveled. He didn't know in what form the afflictions might come. He simply was assured they would come. But he pressed on! His own life wasn't that important to him. Fulfilling the ministry to which he had been called of God was his ultimate goal. That was Paul's joy! Paul was pursuing righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in the kingdom of God. The life he lived was to be an example to the saints. What an awesome responsibility he had. What an awesome responsibility laid upon us today, as ministers of the gospel and as overseers of the flock of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. God grant us the grace, the courage, the wisdom and the strength to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we have been called.

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