

Text: Acts 20.28-31

Proposition: The pastoral role is crucial for preserving faithful churches for succeeding generations.

Last week we began to look at Paul's direct instructions to the elders of Ephesus. As I think about this passage, I think we might be digging into it for a while.

When we think about instructions to the elders of local churches, what topics come to mind?

- Scriptural matters (doctrine, church polity [organization], preaching)
- People matters (evangelism, growing disciples, handling personalities and conflicts)
- Character matters (faithfulness, purity, integrity)
- Administrative matters (dealing with offerings, committees, church maintenance)

All these topics, and more, we will find covered in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, as well as many hints and instructions through the other epistles.

The occasion of this message to the Ephesian elders is a "farewell speech" — as far as any of them know, this is Paul's last time to be with them, after extensive ministry and discipleship among them.

If you had just this one last opportunity, what would you say to a group of pastors that they should take with them for their future ministry?

Paul chose to strongly caution them, to warn them of grievous troubles that would come from people opposed to a faithful Christian ministry.

By taking this direction, Paul gave the pastors a job description that makes the pastoral role crucial for preserving faithful churches for succeeding generations.

Read Acts 20.28-31

Proposition: The pastoral role is crucial for preserving faithful churches for succeeding generations.

I. Seen in the synonyms for elder (28)

A. You might think I am repeating last week's message in this point

1. Last week: elder, overseer [bishop], shepherd [pastor] = one man with three titles

2. Last week: men in these offices come as gifts from God (the Spirit)

B. However, today I want to consider the “verbal” aspects of the two new titles

1. Overseer

- a. The command of v. 28 is to “take heed for yourself and the flock”
- b. Taking heed = taking oversight
- c. Taking *responsibility* (a term regularly mentioned in the commentaries)

When you have an overseer on a job site, he has responsibilities:

- Managing all aspects of the project
- Coordinating the work of the project
- Reporting to the owners of the project

In some senses, this is the job description for a pastor: he oversees God’s work, giving account of himself to God.

- d. *BKCNT* says that the term “emphasizes the responsibility of the office, namely, ‘to look after’ others”¹

An ominous overtone shades verse 28, and this responsibility, but we will wait a bit before we bring this out.

2. Shepherd

- a. Here “shepherding” is the purpose of the oversight
- b. The *KJV* translates as “feed” which is certainly part of it, but incomplete
- c. What does a shepherd do?

1. to serve as tender of sheep, *herd, tend, (lead to) pasture ...*

¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 414.

2. to watch out for other people, to shepherd, of activity that protects, rules, governs, fosters ...

a. in the sense of lead, guide, or rule

b. *protect, care for, nurture*²

d. Consider Psalm 23

1) The shepherd feeds and waters (2)

2) The shepherd leads and guides (3)

3) The shepherd protects in danger and disciplines (4)

4) The shepherd feeds and cures [applies medicine] (5)

Ps 23.6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

C. The Lord's flock has supreme value — the Lord appoints men to care for it

Again, as I think about these terms (and the context) I am hearing the ominous overtone of vv. 29-30, but I still want to wait on it.

II. Expressed in the commands to the elders (28, 31)

A. Be on guard (28)

1. Some lexicons:

a. Friberg: "turning or holding one's mind to someone or something ... watch out, beware"³

b. Louw-Nida: "to be in a continuous state of readiness to learn of any future danger, need, or error, and to respond appropriately"

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), BibleWorks, v.8.

— ‘to pay attention to, to keep on the lookout for, to be alert for, to be on one’s guard against.’”⁴

2. Duties of a guard

a. Watch for dangers external and internal

1) Intruders

2) Breakdowns internally (fire, flood)

b. Report and support

The analogy breaks down in Canadian security systems, because guards are just “eyes and ears” – no authority to thwart, just a responsibility to report.

3. The focus of spiritual guardianship

a. The elder is to guard himself: “Be on guard for yourselves”

1) Against giving in to intimidation

2) Against deception of subtle attackers

3) Against weariness in well doing

b. The elder is to guard “all the flock”

1) Flocks so susceptible to wandering

2) Flocks so naïve in following

3) Flocks so vulnerable to attack

B. Be on the alert (31)

1. Lexicons

a. Bauer: “1. to stay awake, be watchful ... 2. to be in constant readiness *be on the alert*”

b. Thayer: “1. properly: *to live, be alive* on earth ... 2.

Metaphorically, *to watch i.e. give strict attention to, be cautious,*

⁴ Johannes E. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 332.

active: -- to take heed lest through remissness and indolence some destructive calamity suddenly overtake one”

2. The penalty for sleeping on guard in the Roman army: death

The ominous overtones increase with these imperatives, both present tenses, *i.e.* continuous action — constant vigilance.

III. Anticipated in the dangers coming against the elders and the churches (29-30)

A. These dangers are *certain* to come “I know”

1. “I know” is very emphatic in the Gk
2. The watchfulness is not “in case” evil comes, but *because* evil is coming

B. The certainty of savage wolves: external threats (30)

“To use the imagery of wolves together with the imagery of the church as a flock is natural (Gaventa 2003: 289). This imagery is like John 10, where the shepherd protects against the thieves.”⁵

I plan to come back to these dangers next week, so just a couple of points to note today.

1. The wolves are “savage” — fierce, rapacious

Root meaning has to do with overbearing *weight*.

“pert. to being of unbearable temperament, *fierce, cruel, savage*”⁶

2. The wolves will not spare the flock: no pity

The commentaries mention false teachers in connection with wolves, but there are more *external* dangers than false teachers.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 630.

⁶ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

C. The certainty of perverse teachers: internal threats (30)

1. These will emerge from “among your own selves” – from within
2. These will speak “*perverse things*” – strange doctrines and more
3. These will attempt to draw the disciples after them

“The pity of it is that such leaders of dissension can always gain a certain following.”⁷

Conclusion:

I gave this proposition to start with:

Proposition: The pastoral role is crucial for preserving faithful churches for succeeding generations.

Some churches advocated for “pastorless” assemblies – led only by elders, chosen from among the congregation (the Plymouth Brethren churches, with various permutations)

- Originally, reactionary against Anglicanism
- Emphasized strictly following the Bible (much to commend them in their history)

Others followed this path due to decline in membership, decline in men willing to serve, etc. (many small churches in Wales, for example)

- Again, there is much to commend these Christians for maintaining their meetings despite difficulties

God’s plan is for pastors to provide oversight and guardianship of his flock. Watch! Be alert!

The flock needs a commitment to godly leadership (some of the threats are among the shepherds themselves), so Paul’s proposition calls for personal commitment.

⁷ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Ac 20.30.