

Text: Ac 20.32

Proposition: God, in His wisdom, commits his work to men (filled with the Spirit, guided by the Word), to build up His heritage.

I have one more item in Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders, but I will save it for this afternoon and our communion service.

As our record of Paul's message to these men winds down, he offers a closing benediction to them. It is a kind of "passing the mantle" or "handing over the baton" to the next generation.

In it we find something of the mystery of the church.

Generational transitions are challenging for any institution.

- Consider a large business corporation, built on the energy and acumen of one or two founding individuals...

Who becomes the next CEO? What direction will the company take? Will it retain the same energy and vision?

Many large corporations have floundered at transitions like this, ending up in years of struggle, or even complete collapse.

- Or consider the transition between Elizabeth I and her successors: James I, son of Mary Queen of Scots, comes to the throne, turns out as a fairly able administrator.

Charles I, son of James ... well, he sparks a Civil War, loses his head (literally) and brings in the period of the Cromwell protectorate...

Not exactly a stellar transition through those generations.

No doubt we could think of other examples.

The full title of Acts is, "The Acts of the Apostles." We are in the "age" of the apostles in this book. Certainly, God purposed to use these men as the founding pillars of his church, and their work continues to bless us to this day, two thousand years (almost) on.

But think of the many generational transitions that brought us from the first century to today...

In some cases, the church (or churches) transitioned into capable hands, with good leadership and the local church persisted for many years.

I think of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

The church has changed its name a few times since its founding in 1650.

- First pastor, William Rider, 12 yrs
- 2nd Pastor, Benjamin Keach, 36 yrs (notable in Baptist history)
- Benjamin Stinton, 14 yrs
- John Gill, 51 yrs (another Baptist notable)
- John Rippon, 63 yrs (and another)
- Joseph Angus, 2, James Smith, 8.5, and William Walters 2 yrs
- Some guy named Charles Spurgeon, 38 yrs
- Since Spurgeon, most pastorates short (including 15 yrs of Thomas Spurgeon, his son until the present pastor, Peter Masters, since 1970, 41 yrs so far

The church remains true to its founding principles over those 400 plus years — a very rare example.

Every one of these men were just men. Some of them had notable ability. None of them remain (except Masters) and all passed the ministry on to others.

Consider what it means...

- To pass on the Christian ministry from Christ to the apostles
- To pass on the Christian ministry from the apostles to the preachers who came after them
- And so on, every year since then

Our message considers how Paul passes the Ephesian ministry off into the hands of these elders.

Ac 20.32 “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.

Proposition: God, in His wisdom, commits his work to men (filled with the Spirit, guided by the Word), to build up His heritage.

I. The reason we don't need superstars for ministry success (“God” and “the word”)

A. The place of notable men in God's work

1. I listed the major pastors at Metropolitan Tabernacle

a. Five pastors for 229 years of a 371 year history

- b. We could call each of these five “notable men” — each made significant contributions in their ministries
2. Other notable men led local churches and influenced the whole church throughout the post-apostolic history
 - a. Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and others from the early centuries
 - b. Tertullian, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and others in the transition from disapproved to approved status
 - c. Luther, Calvin, Knox, etc. during the reformation

We could go on: the point is that God used notable men throughout history as leading figures in their generations

B. The work of unremarked men through the years

1. According to Wikipedia, that fount of wisdom, in 2020 there were approximately 2.383 billion Christians in the world (31.11%)
2. According to our definitions, many of these people would be “professing” Christians, not “possessing” Christians
3. Nevertheless, these numbers represent the widespread influence of Christian ministry throughout the world
4. Though we point to “notable men” in history, the “notable men” cannot account for these numbers of adherents to Christianity
5. Men laboring in churches like ours, in relative anonymity, preach the gospel, disciple converts, and build churches

C. The key heritage of the apostles: the reason unremarked men build churches

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace

1. Paul left the Ephesian elders to God
 - a. God is enough

- b. God sent a message through Zechariah to encourage Zerubbabel in rebuilding the temple

Zech 4.6 Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts.

- c. The power of God is all we need to build his church, but there is one other thing

2. Paul left the Ephesian elders the Word of God

- a. Of course, that includes all the OT
- b. At this point, much of the NT was complete
- 1) James, Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians
 - 2) Matthew (I think)
 - 3) 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans
- c. Soon to come would be Luke and Acts itself
- d. The rest came in the years following, most of it complete by AD 70

1 Cor 1.18 ¶ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

II. The resource that produces God's goals among the sanctified

A. The word is God's power tool for building saints

1. Paul would testify to the result in Ephesus in a future letter (Eph 2.19-22)

Ep 2.19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

2. Paul describes the process of ministry in building the saints (Eph 4.12-16)

Ep 4.12-16 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

3. The tool God uses is the true Word (Eph 4.29)

Ep 4.29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

B. The word accepted enables the marvelous inheritance of the saints

1. Guaranteed by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1.13-14)

Ep 1.13-14 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation— having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory.

2. Anticipated in the new creation (Rm 8.22-23)

Rm 8.22-23 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.²³ And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

3. Expected to endure forever (1 Pt 1.3-4)

1 Pt 1.3-4 ¶ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

III. The decisions God's people must make to pass from one generation to the next

A. God's people must commit themselves to God's hands

1. Plenty of fear, uncertainty, disappointments will occur in every lifetime
2. Fears will not find answers in human saviours
 - a. No politicians will eliminate fear from your life
 - b. No medical practitioner will eliminate suffering completely from your life
 - c. No friend will eliminate disappointments from your life
3. It is not might or power (human strength) but God's Spirit we must trust

We don't depend on denominational structures to perpetuate the ministry: we act as a local church, gathered together, commended to God and his word. That's all.

B. God's people must commit themselves to God's word

1. We consume a lot of ideas from many sources in our world: books, news media, blogs, social media, podcasts
2. We confront a myriad of contradictory experts

For example, and not raising the question, for every expert you tout who claims vaccines don't work, I can give you an expert with the exact opposite assertion, and with research to back him up.

The question isn't: whose expert is right, but who can you trust?

3. The ideas we must rely on are the ideas in God's word
 - a. Overcome fear with faith
 - b. Overcome uncertainty with God's assurances
 - c. Overcome disappointments with God's comfort
 - d. Overcome our sins by salvation; our sinfulness by sanctification

These are the things that matter for our future.

Conclusion:

Proposition: God, in His wisdom, commits his work to men (filled with the Spirit, guided by the Word), to build up His heritage.

Paul left the ministry in the hands of the elders, but he didn't leave those hands empty.

Those hands passed on what they had to our hands.

We need to realize that God's work is left in our hands, and it is up to us to do God's work — not the world's work.