

COMMIT

Acts 20:18-32

Life is all about change. Some changes are routine and are handled easily, while others are significant and require a lot of planning and getting used to what is now the new normal. For example, graduating from school and getting a job is a “big deal” for most people. Getting married and the birth of children are marked as milestones. Some will mourn and others will rejoice as their children grow up and move away from home. Changing jobs and retirement also can be difficult adjustments.

It helps to have thought about how we will respond to such changes before these happen. Planning ahead, being prepared and projecting ourselves into the anticipated new situation can also be helpful.

The Apostle Paul had come to a significant transition place in his life following his Third Missionary Journey and having spent nearly three years with the believers in Ephesus. He had reached a point of completing a significant phase of the things God had called him to do and he was getting the message from God (through various prophets) that it was time to begin a new lap in the race that he was running. That realization prompted Paul to have a meeting with the leaders of the church of Ephesus for the purposes of saying farewell and passing the baton of leadership to them as he moved to the next phase of “giving testimony of the good news of God’s grace.”

Truth Proclaimed – 20:18-21

¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 20:18–21 (ESV)

Paul’s farewell meeting with the leaders of the church of Ephesus began with his testimony of what had transpired over the past three years he had ministered in that area. When a person gives his or her testimony to a group, it could be for a variety of reasons. The motivation for sharing a testimony is directly related to the basic character of the person. I would think that the least noble motive would be to tell the listeners “look how great and smart I am” while the most noble would be to communicate the greatness of God’s power. Both these would be primarily to inform the listeners. Going beyond just informing, a practical reason related to sharing a testimony would be to inspire others to take action by simply relating what had happened as an example of what can be accomplished by faithfully serving God.

This practical approach that focuses on “what was done” can help others by giving them “how to” leadership examples of what turned out well in the past. The first example of effective leadership is that leadership works best when it is carried out among those being led. Leaders don’t need to be hiding out in their ivory towers or in their basements. Typically, a leader needs to have a good grasp of the fundamental and foundational aspects of what is to be accomplished. Application of that knowledge is effectively applied when the leader sees what “the people” are dealing with in their lives.

Another important aspect of providing good leadership is to approach everything with a spirit of humility and empathy. Humility admits to “those being led” that the leader can learn something from those he is leading and empathy requires a close relationship so that the leader can “feel the pain and the joy” of others.

A third aspect is that leaders provide some insulation or protection from the distractions that come from those who oppose what the people are trying to do. In Paul's case, he was the target of critical attacks from the Jews rather than the members of the church needing to deal with such issues.

A fourth (and really important) part of good leadership is to have the courage to address difficult situations that arise either corporately or with individuals. If a leader sees or hears of things that are less than ideal, then those need to be confronted and not be allowed to grow and cause bigger problems in the future. For example, we need to realize that exposing ourselves to temptations can and usually does lead to committing sinful acts. Playing the lottery can lead to a gambling addiction. Experimenting with so-called safe drugs can lead to addiction and death. Participating in occult practices can lead to misplaced trust and involvement in practices that leave God out of our lives.

Another thing that Paul did was to be prepared to teach the fundamentals of the faith whether it was in a public forum or in small groups in the homes of both Jews and Gentiles.

Testimony of Grace – 20:22-27

²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Acts 20:22-27 (ESV)

If we have walked with the Lord for many years, then we are more likely to be able to know His will for our lives in the future even though we may not know all the specifics of what the future holds. As we have observed His faithfulness in the past, then we are better able to put our full trust in Him for whatever may come our way tomorrow. We can do this knowing that God will use these “whatevers” to advance the cause of Christ (in the larger context) and will also result in what is best for us (individually).

If we go back to the commission given to Paul in Acts chapter nine, we see in Acts 9:15 the things God wanted to accomplish through Paul. Specifically, he was to be “a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.” Paul had not yet had the opportunity to bear the name of Jesus before kings. This (new) phase of his calling was about to begin as he prepared for the trip to Jerusalem that would eventually take him to Rome.

Paul used the terms “bound” and “bonds” to help those in Ephesus (and us) see the situation he was facing and how he was dealing with the realization that he was entering a major change for his life and the ministry to which God had called him. Paul used “bound in the spirit” to describe his situation. That could mean that his spirit was compelling him to go, meaning this was a strong personal commitment. It might also mean that the Holy Spirit was compelling him to go. It is likely that the reference is to the Holy Spirit since Paul used the definite article “the” in what Luke reported.

Paul knew he was facing “bonds and afflictions” in his future, but he also knew that he was already “bound” in the protective envelop of the Holy Spirit and was sustained by the grace of God which was (in every way) superior to the bonds and afflictions that he would experience later. Sometimes we tend to overlook the fact that being constrained by the Holy Spirit also protects us from that which the world would use to hinder what God wants to accomplish.

Paul also knew that bonds (probably prison) and hardships were facing him and yet he did not know the details. God still lets His people know what He is doing and what is going to

happen – yet we do not know all the specifics. However, Paul did realize that what was unfolding in his life at that time was directly related to the “course” or the “race” that God had called him to finish or complete. The “course” was the ministry to which God called him and that was to give witness to and confirmation of the good news of God’s grace.

The word picture evoked by “course” or “race” was intended to communicate the intensity and urgency of the work of the ministry to which God had called Paul. Many times we used the term “walk” as a description of the manner or attitude of a person’s life. It goes without saying that for Christians that this “manner of living” must be in harmony with the character of God. The idea of a “course” implies a “way” or a path. If one is participating in an athletic race, then the pathway is predetermined and the participants are expected to follow the track. Many times we tend to think that what we are called to do in the church is more like a “walk in the park” rather than a race to be run. The walk in the park is more or less leisurely and allows for distractions to wander off the path. On the other hand, a race has intensity and urgency and wandering off the track results in being disqualified from winning.

If we declare the full council of God when we deal with others, then we do not have to be concerned about missing an opportunity to tell them “the rest of the story.” If we know someone who is not saved and we do not share Christ with them, then we have missed an opportunity to keep another human being from spending an eternity in hell. This is not a decision we should make for anyone. We should share the truth of Jesus and then allow the person to decide his or her own fate by either accepting or rejecting God’s offer of salvation.

Paul’s statement in verse 26 that he was innocent of the blood of all men was likely a reference to wording found in Ezekiel 33:7-9 in which God emphasized to Ezekiel his accountability for warning people about the consequences of sin (the wages of sin is death). Paul had boldly proclaimed God’s full message of salvation to all and, consequently, had been a faithful “watchman on the wall.”

Paul shifted his emphasis from his testimony to focus on the responsibilities of the leaders in the church. Though Paul spoke these words to the elders of the churches, they are good advice to all Christians. Each one of us has responsibility to “watch over” or to care for ourselves. Most of us have relationships of family, friends, and perhaps fellow workers. These relationships did not happen by accident since God is in control of our lives. God will work through us to bless and help others with whom we interact. We need the equivalent of a spiritual Neighborhood Watch to be on our guard lest any be drawn away from the truth.

Be on Guard – 20:28-32

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every 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. Acts 20:28–32 (ESV)

Paul challenged the elders to be “on guard” starting with themselves. The first responsibility of anyone in a position of leadership is to hold themselves accountable to do what is right and to have and display the highest integrity. We typically point out that such faithfulness is especially important for leadership in the church. That importance is certainly true because we are dealing with God’s kingdom and the eternal consequence of decisions people make. Additionally, as we are exposed to what happens in civil governments, businesses, education, the media and even in sports, we quickly realized that honesty and integrity cannot be

compromised without destruction of trust and the ability to accomplish anything of lasting significance. The failure of a few hurts the reputations of nearly everyone trying to work in these areas to the extent that most people are to the point of not trusting or being willing to believe anyone. This breakdown in trust happens when people fail to follow the precepts and principles of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes we get the impression that people have cast off all restraint and we live in an “anything goes” kind of world.

A person in a leadership position impacts many others who are depending on him or her for direction and, in some cases, security. Paul was very aware of many who were promoting false philosophies. These were just waiting for an opening to impact the church by trying to convince Christians to believe as they did. He reminded these elders that they held a position of oversight for the local church and in this role of “inspector” they were to be diligent to not allow false teachings that were contrary to the Gospel message.

Apparently, the motivation of the false teachers was ego based in that they wanted to draw disciples unto themselves. Whatever happened to being motivated by being constrained to seek the truth? That question should then raise the same question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” Of course, the only acceptable answer is what Jesus stated in His prayer in the Garden before he was arrested: “Thy word is truth.”

The problem posed by false teachers (then and now) is that they want to define truth based on their own desires and ideas that are typically in conflict with the word of God. Since Paul had continually warned and admonished the church at Ephesus for several years about this danger, it was a constant threat. Some may have thought that the intensity of the attempts to interject false ideas into the church from outside sources and even from those in the church would lessen after Paul left since he was somewhat of a “lightning rod” that attracted opposition. Of course, that idea was just wishful thinking, because the absence of strong leadership actually emboldens the false teachers. Paul’s advice to them was to be even more alert and watchful regarding philosophies and practices contrary to Godly principles.

The problem of bad philosophies and heretical teaching infiltrating churches is alive and well today. Secular humanism and their ideas that man is his own god and that the teachings of the Bible are for a different time and age have impacted some groups of churches with serious errors.

When we are no longer available for God to work through us to bless others in a particular time and place, then we must trust God to continue to do His work in them. God works in and through others and through His word. Those who spend much time in the word will find more influence of God in their lives. That influence will be evident as we grow and are strengthened spiritually and as we take on the character of Christ in our lives.