

THE ELDERS AND THE LOCAL CHURCH
Acts 20:17-38

Intro: The spiritual health of the local church is vital to the progress of the work of the Lord in the world. When the church is corrupt for any reason, the blessing of God is hindered. God has given us His Word as "a lamp unto" our "feet, and "a light unto" our "path" (Psa. 119:105)--and this is for all of us. Without the Word we would not know how the work of the Lord is to be carried on.

In the church it is the will of God that certain men bear the responsibility for the spiritual life of its people. These men are called elders. For the most part, the work of the elders is a delightful work, but there are times when it becomes very, very difficult. It is never easy to deal with problems and the people who are involved in those problems. But it must be done.

Recently Trinity Bible Church has had to go through a difficult time. We have had to ask one man not to come any longer until he could fit in with our teaching and submit himself to the leadership with the church. Over a period of more than a year he seemed insistent upon changing the course of our ministry, and he refused to submit himself to the leadership of the elders. As a result of his departure, at least two other families have left. As you know, I was out of the picture much of this time because of illness, but I am in full accord with what has been done in the case of the one man although I have prayed for months that it would never come to this. One man who left us as a result of this did not believe that this was the kind of an issue which called for such discipline. His reason was that it did not involve any major doctrines. But it did. The problem had to do with the place of the Mosaic Law in the lives of Christians today. To have followed this man would have affected the church's mission in the world. It would have altered the Biblical doctrine of sanctification. And ultimately would have affected the preaching of the Gospel itself. Besides it is a doctrine of the NT that we are to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace--and the discord that was being sown was destructive to the tremendous fellowship we have enjoyed here at Trinity since our beginning. Nothing would make us happier than to see these men change and return to our fellowship. But, until they do change, we stand by the action that we have taken, fully assured that we have done the will of God.

I know that this has been hard for many of you. These are families that we have loved, and I trust that we still do. We have prayed for them, and I trust that we will continue to pray for them. But because this has been a very painful experience for us as a church, I felt that I should spend some time with you from the Word examining our role in this local church. And to do

I would like for you to turn with me to Acts 20 where we have the record of Paul's final meeting with the elders of the church at Ephesus.

— This has to be one of the most emotional scenes depicted for us in Scripture--and there are many of them. Notice the last three verses. (Read.) Tears were flowing freely--and remember that these were men. Tears had characterized the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Note what he said in vv. 19 and 31. Obviously this is here to meet a greater need than just to satisfy our curiosity about what took place in the early Church. It is here to instruct us in carrying on the work of the Lord today.

Let me point out just a few of the lessons from this very important passage.

I. THE CHURCH IS TO EXPECT OPPOSITION AND TROUBLE (Acts 20: 29, 30).

— So far as we can tell, there was no trouble that was apparent at this time, but this did not keep the Apostle from talking about it. He knew it would come. He knew that it could come from one of two directions: from outside the church, or from inside the church. He had spoken to them about this many times before. We probably do not mention it as much as we should. A major part of Paul's ministry was warning! And it needs to be of ours, too.

As you read the OT, and as you read the NT, notice how much and how often we have warnings. We live and work in enemy territory. Dangers surround us constantly. And the more a work is devoted to the ministry of the Word of God, the more we can expect the opposition of Satan--because he is the one who is behind all of this.

Note the words of hymn #471 which we sang this morning during the SS hour.

We do not like to think that this is true, that troubles will come and continue to come, but this is the opposition we can expect.

Secondly, in the light of this, Paul gave

II. HIS MESSAGE TO THE ELDERS (Acts 20:28a)--the first line.

— I speak to you as an elder tonight, and I speak to myself and to all of our elders.

But let me say this first: I thank the Lord for the men who serve Trinity Bible Church as elders and as deacons. We are

all just sinners saved by grace, and we stand in constant need of your prayers. We are not infallible, but we are certainly in the hands of the Lord. It is an ominous responsibility to be an elder, or a deacon, and none of us feels sufficient for the work. The Ephesian elders were just as needy. Therefore, Paul said to them, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves." You see, one way the Devil seeks to destroy a work is by getting at the leaders. The Lord has given us a wonderful fellowship among our elders and deacons. We are a group of men who love each other. We enjoy being together. I pray daily for them, and I feel that they are praying for me and for each other. I hope that they are remembered by each of you.

But in what matters does an elder need to take heed of himself?

From what Paul said, let me suggest the following areas. Look at v. 19.

- A. "Serving the Lord." We need to remember whose work this is, and that our responsibility is toward Him.
- B. "With all humility of mind."
- C. "With many tears." Tears were a part of Paul's ministry. Tears were a part of our Lord's ministry. And they must be a part of our ministry. It is doubtful if we are really under the burden of the Lord's work as we should be if it has not brought us to tears.
- D. "Temptations" -- dangers, trials. The true servant of the Lord does not run from them. He expects them, and faces them in the strength of the Lord. They are a part of what it means to be involved in the work of the Lord.
- E. The teaching of the Word. Notice how many times this comes up in Paul's last message to the Ephesian elders: Vv. 20, 21, 24b, 25, 26, 27, 32.

What Paul did, they were to do with their people. If an elder is to teach the Word, he must be in the Word himself, reading it, searching it, hiding it in his heart, seeking to obey it, praying over it.

- F. Prayer. See again what Paul did at the last (v. 36).

See Paul's word to Timothy in 1 Tim. 4:16.

But now, what about the ministry of the elders to the people of the church?

III. THE ELDERS' MINISTRY TO THE CHURCH (Acts 20:28).

The people of God are sheep. Those young in the faith and the little ones among us are lambs. They need to be shepherded. This means that the elders are shepherds, and they are to do everything for the people of God under their care that a shepherd would do for his flock--to feed them, to guide them (through the teaching of the Word), and to protect them from "grievous wolves" on the outside, and any who speak perversely inside. "Perverse things" (v. 30) are things that erroneous, things that would get the people of God off the right track.

But most important of all, elders must learn to commit their people to God, as Paul did in v. 32, and to His Word.

The responsibility is awesome. And we need to pray constantly that the Lord will bring into our work those whom He wants to be a part of the work, and to keep all others away.

Concl: Every generation seems to have its own peculiar problems. The early church had its battles over the Law, and it seems that we are in the midst of a similar and increasing battle in our day. Added to this we have those who are seeking to set a new course for the influence of the church in government and in our relationship to government as Christians.

Where is the answer to be found? Just one place: in the Word of God. That is why Paul said what he did in Acts 20:32. If we depart from the Word of God, even though our intentions may be sincere, the course of the church will be downward and away from the Lord.

Do you remember the letter our Lord sent to the Ephesian church in Rev. 2:1-7? Do you remember what he said about the church in that day? That was about 40 years later. Do you suppose that some of the elders who knelt that day with Paul that day in Miletus were still living and elders in the church. It could have been possible. But how different the picture was then! What went wrong, we do not know. The service was continuing, but the life had gone out of the work.

What a warning this should be for us to be careful in our day to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way in order that the coming generation of leaders may see how to do the work of the Lord so that the Lord's blessing may continue.