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Sermon Notes

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Paul's Pattern for Elder Ministry, Part II

Acts 20:17-38

When God wanted His people to build a tabernacle where His glory would be displayed, He committed to Moses a clear set of plans... a pattern to follow:

Acts 7:44 It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen.

Later, when God wanted His people to build a temple where His glory would be displayed, He committed to King David a clear set of plans, a pattern to follow:

1 Chronicles 28:19 "All this," David said, "I have in writing from the hand of the LORD upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of the plan."

Now, in the New Covenant, God is building a far more glorious structure, a far more permanent display of His glory... it is the church of Jesus Christ

And just as He committed to His servants Moses and David the pattern to follow, so also He has committed to the New Testament believers a clear pattern for the local church... for its order, for its spiritual growth, for its health, for its fruitfulness

A pattern of godly leadership by elders, raised up by the Holy Spirit, identified by the congregation

Last week, we discussed the way that God has set up the church for as display of His glory... with a clear pattern of church government being a group of elders leading congregations

We looked at Acts 20, Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders... I presented it as what I believe Paul felt was a lasting pattern for elder ministry in a local church

Review

I. The Number of Elders:

Plural... a group of godly men in each church

II. The Titles of Elders

Elder, overseer, pastor... all mean the same thing for the same office

III. The Calling of Elders

Vs. 28 “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers”

IV. The Character of Elders

- A. Visible Holiness
- B. Humility
- C. Personal Courage
- D. Single-Minded Focus
- E. Freedom from Covetousness
- F. Diligence in Responsibility
- G. Passion and Compassion
- H. Hard Work
- I. Generosity
- J. Faith in God for the Results
- K. Happiness

Okay... this is what elders are supposed to BE

But what are elders supposed to DO???

Writing a chapter in John MacArthur’s book on Pastoral Ministry, Richard Mayhue listed 17 verbs expected of elders based on a single passage in 1 Thessalonians alone:

Praying... Evangelizing... Equipping... Defending... Loving... Laboring... Modeling...
 Leading... Feeding... Watching... Warning... Teaching... Exhorting... Encouraging...
 Correcting... Confronting... Rescuing

Truly pastoral ministry can be overwhelming. It is for this reason that God has given us two things: a plurality of elders to share the immense responsibility of ministry, and a clear priority structure from the word on what elders are to focus on

These duties and some others flow from the example of Paul in Ephesus

V. The Duties of Elders

A. Preaching and Teaching the Word

1. This is the most vital aspect of the ministry of the elders
 - a. Justified by faith, sanctified also by faith
 - b. Faith comes from hearing the word of God
 - c. Thus the faithful teaching and preaching ministry of the word is at the core of the ministry of the church... therefore of elders
2. Key verse:

Acts 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

- a. A sense of the urgency of this teaching ministry: "And now..."
 - b. Personal Involvement in the Ministry: "I commit you..."
 - c. The Essence of the Ministry: "I commit you to God"
 - d. "Now I commit you to God and to the **word of His grace**..."
1. Paul seems to make little distinction between God and the word of His grace here
 - a. In commending them to God, He immediately has in mind the WORD of HIS GRACE
 - i) We are entrusted to DOCTRINE... as a parent entrusts his children to a trustworthy and mature guardian
 - ii) We are entrusted to DOCTRINE... the word of his grace

Romans 6:17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.

Illus. Some time ago, my wife and I were making out our will; we had to face the unpleasant topic of those to whom we would entrust our five children in the case of our death

Few topics could be more sobering! We looked for criteria: obviously Christian, passionate about Christ, mature, able to raise children, etc.

ROMANS 6:17 says Christ has entrusted His children to a form of teaching!!

Acts 20 calls it **the word of His grace**

- b. It is not a wrathful, vengeful, terrifying deity to which the people are being committed... as though committing an armful of chaff to a raging furnace to be consumed
- c. No... it is to the God who has spoken a WORD of GRACE to sinners in His Son Jesus Christ... God's good pleasure in saving wretched sinners

2. Here at last we come to the WORD of GOD

- a. God's all-sufficient instrument for the salvation of our souls

3. Courageous Teaching

- a. All sinners tend to oppose the word of God at some level, even mature Christians
- b. Our pride gets in the way and we are easily offended
- c. Paul says twice that he never hesitated to preach the word

Acts 20:20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

Acts 20:26-27 Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

- i) The word "hesitated" = shrink back, implies a cowardly retreat from truth
- ii) Why would an elder do this? Because he is afraid of human opinion!!
- iii) Because the word of God confronts us all, humbles us all, lays us all low in the presence of God... and that is unpopular
- iv) If an elder is a coward, he will shrink back from proclaiming what the people need to hear
- d. An elder must first ask "Is it true? Is it biblical?" not "Is it popular?"
- e. Satan raises up enemies of the word... both from outside the church and inside... he calls them "savage wolves" in verse 29

Acts 20:29-31 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

An elder must understand that shepherding the flock is essentially a work of Biblical truth applied skillfully to their daily lives

The flock of Christ has bitter enemies... elders are there to protect them

- f. An elder must be courageous, and SKILLFUL enough in the word to refute the false doctrine

Titus 1:9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

4. Comprehensive Teaching

Acts 20:20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

Acts 20:27 I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

5. Different Gifts in Teaching

- a. ALL elders must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2)

NOTE: since not everyone can be a teacher (James 3:1)

James 3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers

This clearly means not everyone can be an elder... and elders will NOT be more highly rewarded on Judgment Day than those who are not called to teach... our rewards on Judgment Day will be based on faithfulness to what God entrusted to us

MANY GODLY PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH, both men and women, will receive high praise from Christ without being elders... there should be no jealousy about this

SO... every elder must be able to teach

- b. HOWEVER Not every elder will be gifted in the same way in handling the word
 - i) Some elders may do their best teaching in counseling
 - ii) Others may be gifted in small group bible studies

- iii) Some may have the gift of preaching... of public proclamation of the word

B. Prayer

Acts 20:36 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

1. One of the two things the apostles said in Acts 6 they must give their attention to... “Prayer and the ministry of the word”...they go together
2. we have already noted vs. 32 “Now I commit you to God...”
 - a. this is best done by the consistent prayer ministry of elders for the people
 - b. constantly praying for the flock... Paul’s prayers for the various churches is an excellent pattern for this
 - c. only God can protect the flock from Satan
 - d. only God can cause the church to grow to spiritual maturity... this is very humbling

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

- e. elders must kneel before God in daily prayer for the needs of the flock
- f. if a man is not a man of prayer, he cannot be an elder
- g. practically speaking, elders should spend a consistent amount of their time together in prayer for the needs of the church

C. Shepherding of Souls

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

1. Elders are called on to shepherd the flock of God
2. This implies feeding the flock, guiding its direction, and keeping it from harm
3. **Feeding the flock** we have already covered in the ongoing teaching ministry of the flock

John 21:15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

- a. By faithfully teaching the word of God, the faith of the flock is constantly nourished
 - b. The church is made strong and able to thrive spiritually
 - c. As the body needs food to survive, so the church needs the word
 - d. Elders shepherd the flock when they feed them sound biblical doctrine
4. Guiding the flock
- a. The Christian life is one of direction, of motion... we are on a journey
 - b. Godly elders give direction to the flock, to guide it skillfully
 - c. More on this in a moment in the "leadership" section
5. Protection of the flock
- a. Paul uses the image of savage wolves
 - b. The ultimate savage wolf is Satan himself... likened to a lion in another place in scripture

1 Peter 5:8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

- c. Godly elders must protect the flock from the ravages of sin
 - i) Thus elders are constantly involved in warning the flock against sin
 - ii) Speaking words of admonition or correction, with great gentleness and tenderness

Acts 20:31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

- iii) A godly elder will not stand idly by and watch a brother or sister slide down a muddy slope into sin
- d. Other dangers to the flock abound... like false teachers—both from inside and outside of the flock

Acts 20:29-31 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort

the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

6. Elders are called on to shepherd the flock of God

D. Leadership

1. Paul's leadership as an apostle and as the founder of the church was clear
2. Now he was entrusting that leadership to these elders... it was their responsibility to lead the flock in personal growth and in evangelistic fruitfulness
3. Key decisions would have to be made... they were not made by democratic processes, constant referenda on the right way to go
4. Rather, God has entrusted to these elders, these overseers, the authority to make decisions
5. Key passage on this: 1 Timothy 5:17

1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

- a. "rule" = to manage the affairs of, to govern, to lead, to have authority over
- b. I do not believe this is setting up two classes of elders: ruling elders and teaching elders, as the Presbyterians have
- c. However, it is clear that God's people need leadership, and in the NT church, the leadership is done by a plurality of elders

E. Role Modeling

1. as we've noted, Paul put his life on full display before them from the first day he set foot in their city
2. so also, they must do for the flock

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Philippians 3:17 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.

Philippians 4:9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

The Apostle Paul was no hypocrite... he lived what he preached; so must every elder live up to their doctrine

Just before he was to be burned at the stake, John Hus said “What I preached with my lips I now seal with my blood.”

Richard Baxter, in his classic *The Reformed Pastor* wrote this: “Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives what you say with your tongues, and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labors.”

“Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and when you have finished, dishonor him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ’s governing power, and yet contemn it and rebel yourselves? Will you preach his laws and willfully break them? **If sin be evil, why do you live in it? And if it be not, why do you dissuade men from it?**”

Charles Spurgeon, nearing the end of his ministry, was attacked by some enemy who wrote in a letter threatening to expose him in some way. Spurgeon responded, **“You may write my life across the sky. I have nothing to conceal!”** (from C.H. Spurgeon on Spiritual Leadership, Steve Miller, p. 58)

F. Service

Acts 20:19 I served the Lord with great humility and with tears

1. The Greek word is related to that of a common slave... a “doulos”
2. The leadership of the church must be as a servant, as Christ was
3. Elders must lead as servants of Christ, not lording it over the flock but being examples
4. Jesus was willing to wash His disciples’ feet... no task was beneath Him, no task too menial
5. obviously, elders should spend the focus of their time in prayer and the ministry of the word... but the flavor of all they do should be service to the Lord and to the people of God

G. Evangelism and Missions

Acts 20:21 I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

1. Elders are the torchbearers for the evangelistic mission of the church
2. Jesus made it plain why we are here

3. Local churches must have a strategy for reaching the lost... a passion for it, a daily discipline in it
4. Elders must lead the way in this... leading by example and by plan/strategy
5. An elder must never forget that the salvation of human souls was why Jesus came to earth

Luke 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Matthew 16:26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

6. An elder must be both active in personal evangelism on a daily basis, and a strategic thinker to mobilize the whole church for the gospel mission

VI. The Accountability of Elders

A. Paul's Statement: Innocent of Blood

Acts 20:26-27 Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

1. The expression refers to accountability for another person
2. The be guilty of blood meant to be accountable for someone's death
 - a. This morning reading in Joshua 2 about the two spies sent to view the land
 - b. They went to the house of Rahab in the wall of Jericho and she hid them from the king of Jericho and his soldiers
 - c. She made the two spies swear to protect her and her whole family when the Jews came to take possession of the whole land
 - d. They made her this promise... your house will be a SAFE HAVEN OF REFUGE... we will protect anyone inside the house... BUT

Joshua 2:19 If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head; we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on him.

So Jesus is also a safe refuge... and we must faithfully proclaim that in HIM ALONE is salvation

Acts 20:21 I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

B. Paul's Assumption: Full Accountability

1. Paul knew that his ministry had eternal consequences... not just concerning the bodies but the eternal souls of people
2. Paul never lost sight of this issue: he would give to the Lord a full account of his life and ministry
3. This especially included the souls entrusted him by God
4. Reminiscent of statement made to Ezekiel by the Lord

Ezekiel 3:18-19 When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ¹⁹ But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.

5. Paul said he was innocent of the blood of ALL men, because he did not shrink back from fully proclaiming the word of God

C. Elders Accountable to God

1. the Holy Spirit made them overseers
2. To the Lord ultimately they must give an account on Judgment Day

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

3. "Give account" = answer to God, as a steward, for what was entrusted to them
4. this is a very sober thing

D. Elders Accountable to the Church

1. The church must submit to the godly leadership of the elders... Hebrews 13:17 teaches that
2. BUT, like the Bereans, the church must constantly assess the teaching of elders, to be sure it is consistent with Scripture
3. AND, if any elder sins, it is the congregation that must discipline him, after the testimony of two witnesses
4. This balance between the congregation submitting to the godly leadership of the elders, but also observing that the elders keep their life and doctrine in order is a beautiful balance in NT church government

VII. Application

1. What does all this have to do with FBC?

- A. Basic concept... FBC's pattern of one recognized elder (the Senior Pastor), and possibly others (ministerial staff), all seminary trained and full time ministers; godly lay leaders serving as deacons... assisting the Pastor and staff with spiritual ministry and leadership; committees chosen by the nominating committee and voted in by the church; a church council consisting of all the heads of the committees... this pattern is not the one set out in the New Testament; it is not sinful, but it is not the NT pattern
- B. Rather, FBC should be led by a plurality of elders who all meet the biblical requirements for spiritual maturity spelled out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. These men should be filtered by the existing elders, presented to the church for approval, then established as spiritual leaders over all the ministries of the church. Deacons should be chosen to serve in servant roles, looking over practical and physical aspects of ministry, with no leadership or spiritual authority, except in the function for which they are called; Committees, if there are any, should be formed and terminated as the elders see fit; accountable to the elders for a specific function
- C. For the last several months, I have met with four deacons to work on an alternate set of By-Laws to change FBC's church polity and make it more biblical... over the next nine weeks, I will be teaching on this issue on Wednesday evenings; there will be ample time for questions and discussion by the congregation, especially at three Q and A sessions; the proposed By-laws will be made available to the congregation at the end of the service today... and will be open for discussion and change; on July 30, at a specially-called church conference two weeks before the August church conference, the proposed By-laws will be presented formally to the church for consideration and prayer. The actual document will be discussed, possibly amended and voted upon by the church at the August church conference
- D. Please pray that God would give us His wisdom, unity, love and truth as we follow this process