

The Wolves Are Coming: Paul's Pastoral Speech to the Ephesian Elders

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ROBERT L. GALLAGHER, PHD

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Robert L. Gallagher (Ph.D. Fuller Seminary) is professor emeritus of intercultural studies at Wheaton College Graduate School in Chicago where he has taught since 1998.

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Introduction

The church in Ephesus embodies the gospel of the risen Lord as it reproduced itself within the cross-cultural milieu of its urban setting and Roman Asia. In doing so, the leaders of the church developed in their understanding of what it meant to be the community of Jesus in mission as they witnessed and imitated the godly morality and ethics of the apostle Paul and courageously rejected false teaching that would lure them away from Christ in the ever-changing Mediterranean world of the first century.

At the beginning of Acts 20 Paul farewelled the church at Ephesus and moved through Macedonia to Greece after the violent uprising in that city. In several rapid strokes the author moves the apostle hundreds of miles over difficult terrain to push his story towards the events that are important for his purpose: the mission of God progressing to the capital of the Roman Empire. Concerning this end, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders reveals insights of his pastoral care that center on warning them against false teaching that without vigilance would ravage the church at Ephesus.

Acts 20:13-16 – Sailing to Miletus

Towards the end of Paul's third missionary journey, he and his fellow travelers sailed from Troas to Assos and onto Mitylene, Chios, and Samos before arriving at Miletus, a five-day excursion of 180 miles (20:14-15).¹ Luke took only three verses to move the

¹ Paul traveled with Aristarchus, Gaius II, Secundus, Sopater, Timothy, Trophimus, and Tychicus. See Acts 20:4.

ministry band over the distance and gave no details.² The author's focus is Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, an important trading port and educational center.³

Paul sent a messenger to Ephesus and invited the leadership to come and meet him at Miletus since he did not want to delay his attendance at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem (20:16). The messenger traveled 45 miles both ways, a four-day excursion, plus a day to gather the leaders to go to Miletus (20:17). Whoever Paul sent was one of his travel group, which included Timothy whom he had sent on similar endeavors and who also had connections with the church leaders.⁴ Although not named, it probably was Timothy since the messenger needed credibility and awareness of the Ephesian situation. He knew the supporters to whom to pass on Paul's message; leaders such as Tychicus, Priscilla and Aquila, and Onesiphorus (Eph. 6:21-22; 2 Tim. 1:16-18; 4:12, 19). They in turn needed to believe that what the envoy conveyed was from the apostle.

Acts 20:17-21 – Serving the Lord

Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is divided into four pericopes. In the first pericope, he began his conversation with a recollection of the personal knowledge that the audience had about him.⁵ The stress was not on his teaching or miracles but his

² The author on other occasions also moves his players over large distances in a few strokes of the pen since his purpose lay elsewhere. Other examples of Luke's contraction of distance are seen in Acts 8:1, 25; 9:32; 11:19; 13:14; 14:6, 24-26; 15:3.

³ See Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-4 for the qualifications of an overseer. The exception on this voyage was Paul's decision to walk from Troas to Assos where he boarded the ship and rejoined the group (Acts 20:13). Why did Paul decide to walk along the Roman road—an extensive day's walk of 31 miles—without his Gentile ministry team? Perhaps Paul desired to be in solitude and silence to spend time with God in preparation for his meeting with the Christian leadership in Miletus and the coming Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Paul also withdrew into the Arabian desert after his conversion (Gal. 1:17-18; cf. Acts 9:23) following the example of John the Baptist (Luke 3:2) and Jesus (Luke 4:1). Particularly relevant was the apostle's awareness that he had warned the church for three years concerning the threat of false teaching that could divert followers away from the truth he had taught (Acts 20:31). His Gentile company did not have the same compulsion towards spiritual preparation since they were not going to instruct the Ephesian church leaders, nor did they follow Jewish religious traditions. In Troas, Paul chose a ship that was not sailing to the port of Ephesus but instead would dock at Miletus. Both Ephesus and Miletus were important shipping ports in the eastern Mediterranean that now are some six miles from the coast because of sedimentary deposits over the centuries. He did not want to be delayed by the churches of Roman Asia or any repercussions from the outcome of the Artemis riot because he was eager to get to Jerusalem (Acts 20:16). For churches planted around Ephesus, see Acts 19:10, 20, 26. In addition, Paul followed the annual Jewish religious calendar. For instance, the feasts of Unleavened Bread (Passover; Acts 20:6) and Pentecost (Acts 20:16), which indicated that the apostle was still adhering to Jewish customs as a messianic follower of the Way (cf. Acts 18:18; 21:23-26).

⁴ For Timothy's connections with the church at Ephesus working alongside Aquila and Priscilla, see Acts 18:18-19; 19:22; 20:4; 1 Timothy 1:2-3; 2 Timothy 1:2; 4:19. Moreover, Paul used Timothy as a working associate to carry messages both written and verbal to and from local churches such as to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17) and Philippi (Phil. 2:19-23) and from Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:6), as well as an itinerant preacher (1 Cor. 16:10-11).

⁵ In the fashion of first-century historiography, Luke heard Paul's speech to the influencers of the Ephesian church (as did the non-Jewish travel comrades) and recorded a summary of the crucial elements for the Christian community of the most excellent Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Luke was present at Miletus indicated by the beginning of a "we" passage in Acts 20:6. Here the author joined the party at Philippi in Macedonia having been left there by Paul during the second journey. The "we" sea voyage started in Acts 16:10 and ended at Philippi in Acts 17:1. This suggests that the first-hand observer remained behind in the city.

behavior. “You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia” (20:18).⁶ It was the leaders’ first-hand knowledge of Paul’s life that had impressed them about the authenticity of his gospel message and not merely his words or actions.

The apostle did not mention his supernatural abilities at Ephesus in Acts 19 such as imparting the Holy Spirit, preaching about the kingdom of God, causing extraordinary healing and deliverance miracles, being known among the demonic world, or enabling the word of the Lord to grow and prevail mightily in Asia (Acts 19:6, 8, 11-12, 15, 20). What motivated Paul’s monologue was the awareness that false teachers were going to come among the congregation and by “distorting the truth . . . entice the disciples to follow them” (20:30). And all the while he was with them he warned them with tears that such a situation was going to take place (20:31). God’s cross-cultural workers need to live with people to know their problems; and live with God to provide answers to resolve them.

Serving in Sacrificial Love

From the start of the speech Paul laid down the criteria of how to judge false prophets within the community (see Luke 6:26, 43-45; contra Luke 11:49-50; 11:27-28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10). He put himself forward as a standard by whom to compare other leaders. Paul served the Lord as a slave with a lowliness of mind. He had not promoted himself above others but intentionally lowered himself with tears under God’s authority. In Paul’s brief speech—the only one in Acts given to a Christian audience—he referred twice to his tears for the church (20:19, 31).⁷

The criteria of judgment of his servant leadership was character issues following the example of the Lord: humility, compassion, and endurance.⁸ He reminded them of his perseverance amid trials brought about by Jewish persecution (20:3), even though he failed to mention the Gentile riot in their city (Acts 19:23ff.). He served them in sacrificial love for their benefit not holding back the full message of Christ although his

⁶ All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

⁷ We do not normally think of Paul as a person associated with strong emotions. Yet in his farewell to the Ephesian leaders they were weeping loudly and embracing and kissing him repeatedly as they grieved over his announcement that “they would not see him again” (Acts 20:38; 20:25b). There was an intense relational bond between Paul and the Ephesian elders that was not witnessed in his farewell to the disciples at Tyre (Acts 21:5). Both Mediterranean congregates knelt and prayed on the beach (Acts 20:36; 21:5; cf. Luke 22:41). But the difference between the groups was that Paul had stayed with the Ephesian assembly for three years and only seven days with the believers at Tyre (Acts 20:31; 21:4). Over the years he had developed fervent associations with the disciples at Ephesus heightened by their banding together against the socio-religious conflicts within the city (Acts 19:30-31). Situations of this emotional fervor rarely occur among present-day Western churches, even with long-tenured leaders. Why is that so?

⁸ See Jesus teaching about humility (Luke 9:46-48), compassion (Luke 15:11-32), and endurance (Luke 8:15). As well, Paul followed the example of the Lord Jesus in humility (Luke 4:42-44), compassion (Luke 7:36-50), and endurance (Luke 4:1-2).

preaching was the reason for his suffering (20:20). The communication was centered on “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus” (20:21).⁹

Paul accomplished this pronouncement of repentance and faith by going to public areas in the city and visiting the congregants in their homes, both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Acts 19:13). At Ephesus, Jesus had broken down the wall of hatred between these two groups through his blood. The Spirit had joined them together in peace and formed one new-human identity as the family of God (Eph. 2:11-22). No longer was Paul concerned about eating with non-Jewish people as Peter was at Caesarea and Syrian Antioch (Acts 10:14, 28; 11:2-3; cf. Gal. 2:11-16). Paul enjoyed hospitality without hesitation from both Jewish and Gentile believers at Ephesus because of the cross and the Spirit’s working (20:20-21).

Acts 20:22-25 – Captive to the Spirit

In the second pericope of the speech, Paul continues the theme of being a slave to Christ by declaring that he was “a captive to the Spirit” as he moved from past to present reflections (20:22). He did not dictate the happenings of his life. He followed the orders of God as directed by the Spirit (see Acts 19:21). As Paul traveled towards Jerusalem the Holy Spirit testified in the churches of Macedonia that suffering and imprisonment were awaiting him. Through congregational prophecy God’s Spirit forewarned Paul of the coming hardships (20:23).

There are three Lukan themes that occur at the beginning of this pericope that are useful for today’s cross-cultural mission. First, the Holy Spirit guided God’s people. Explicitly, the Spirit directed Jesus and the first-century church. See the Holy Spirit’s guidance of Simeon (Luke 2:27) and Jesus (Luke 4:1, 14). Additionally, the Spirit guided Philip (8:29, 39), Peter (10:19-20; 11:12), Agabus (11:28), the church of Syrian Antioch (13:1-4), the Jerusalem Council (15:28), Paul’s second journey (16:6-7), and Paul’s movements to Rome (19:21; 20:22-23; 21:4, 11).

⁹ This proclamation was a continuation of the teaching of Jesus and the first church. From the beginning of the Lord’s ministry, he preached repentance from sin and faith toward God. For faith in Jesus Messiah, see Luke 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:25, 48; 12:28; 17:5-6, 19; 18:8, 42; 22:32. For repentance toward God, see Luke 3:3, 8; 5:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7; 16:30; 17:3-4; 24:47. Of special importance was the risen Lord’s exhortation to his followers that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name [the risen Messiah] to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). This announcement that all peoples were to change their thinking concerning God and embrace a reliance upon Christ were the same two hallmarks of Jesus’ kingdom declaration and his continuing ministry through the first believers. Paul remained faithful to these two fundamental truths as he taught in Ephesus (cf. Acts 13:38-39). In the church’s ministry of faith in the Messiah, see Acts 3:16; 6:5, 7; 11:24; 13:8; 14:9, 22, 27; 15:9; 16:5; 20:21; 24:24; 26:18. For repentance toward God, see Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20.

Second, the Spirit warned of future suffering.¹⁰ The churches of Macedonia (Acts 20:22-23) and later at Tyre (Acts 21:4), together with the prophet Agabus at Caesarea (Acts 21:11-12; cf. Acts 11:28), warned the apostle Paul through the Spirit about future hardships in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:33).¹¹

Third, God's people will suffer for the gospel. Jesus predicted that his followers would face hardships (cf. Luke 6:22-23, 27-29, 35). From the beginning, the Lord told Paul that he would suffer for his name (Acts 9:16). The apostle passed onto the Anatolian churches this same forecast (Acts 14:22). Trials were a part of the primary Christian experience. There was no discussion as to why God allowed such distress nor any fervent declarations of victorious deliverance. God was in control amid difficulties. As the apostle moved towards Jerusalem the prophecies of his suffering came to pass as the Romans imprisoned him in the capital (Acts 21:33). Still Jesus appeared in a vision bringing Paul encouragement amid sorrow with no thought of physical freedom (contra Peter in Acts 12:11). In fact, the Lord Jesus added pressure to the situation by saying that as Paul had witnessed for him in Jerusalem he would also do likewise in Rome (Acts 23:11; cf. Acts 19:21; 27:24).

What Do We Do Now?

Are these first two ministerial factors of God's Spirit guiding and forewarning the church of coming suffering currently present in our congregations? Do we expect the Spirit to guide the church or are we too reliant on leaders of church-growth proficiency and business effectiveness. Who do we allow to lead our churches? Powerful human manipulators or the Spirit of Jesus (see Acts 16:6-7)? Then there was the role of the Spirit's warnings. Why did the Holy Spirit repeatedly caution Paul of future sorrow? How did this foreknowledge help him and the congregations? Certainly, they became aware of the presence of Jesus in their midst as they undertook God's mission with the help of the Spirit. Do we expect the Holy Spirit to do the same today?

¹⁰ See Luke 9:30-31 for how the Father prepared his Son through his conversation with Moses and Elijah for God's mission of suffering that awaited the Messiah in Jerusalem. Also, see John 16:12-15 where Jesus speaks about the Spirit predicting the future.

¹¹ The Spirit is not a force or power but a heavenly Person of the Trinity, who spoke, guided, and empowered the church via his effective Presence. The force of Star Wars was not with the apostle and believers of Asia. The indwelling Spirit of God was with them. For instance, Paul spoke in the present tense about being "a captive to the Spirit" (Acts 20:22a), "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city" (Acts 20:23a), and the Spirit appointing the Ephesian elders as "overseers to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28b). In the Western church we need to change our thinking about two related errors. First, we need to repent of undervaluing that the Holy Spirit can empower our ministry through his word, history, circumstances, or any other means that he chooses. Second, we need to stop overestimating the significance of our own activities in strengthening God's kingdom. These assumptions imply that we are more proficient than the Spirit. This results in a reliance on human wisdom rather than the wisdom of God.

Lastly, is the ministerial theme of suffering. Does the prosperity gospel and the ever-victorious assumptions of Western contemporary faith hinder the purposes of God brought about by the discipline of suffering (see Luke 10:3, 10-16; 21:12-19)? The church often presents an illusion to comfort believers—followers of Christ do not need to go through trials and endure suffering. Then when affliction, worries of the world, or persecution arises, this illusion defaults to a disillusion resulting in followers falling away from the faith. Enduring faith that rests in and relies on the character of God is produced when the church embraces God’s discipline of his children through trials and hardships (see Luke 8:13-14; cf. Heb. 12:4-13).

Paul’s Reaction

Paul’s reaction before the Ephesian leaders to this news of coming discomfort was the same as he proclaimed later to the church at Caesarea (Acts 21:13). His life belonged to Christ, and he was willing to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (20:24; cf. Acts 25:11; Phil. 1:20-24; Gal. 2:20). The Spirit had already foretold the apostle, nonetheless, that he was going to Rome before he declared these assurances (see Acts 19:21). Even though he did “not know what would happen” to him in Jerusalem (20:22), he did have a divine pledge that he would eventually arrive in the empire’s capital.¹²

The most critical issue for Paul was completing Jesus’ call to ministry that he had received during his Damascus experience (Acts 9:15-16). The focus of his work was proclaiming God’s kingdom of grace (20:24-25). In this pastoral speech Paul spoke of God’s grace twice (20:24, 32). He knew about the joyful gift of God’s acceptance through his Son because of his past evil persecution of the church and subsequent forgiveness (Acts 22:16; cf. 1 Tim. 1:12-16).¹³

¹² For the Trinitarian affirmation that Paul would see the emperor in Rome, see the Spirit in Acts 19:21; Jesus in Acts 23:11; and God in Acts 27:24.

¹³ See Acts 6:9-14; 7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1-2, 13-14, 21; 22:3-5, 19-20; 26:9-11 for Paul’s persecution of the church. Grace was a prominent theme in Luke-Acts. For example, there was a sprinkling of scriptures to describe the grace of God’s Son at the beginning of his three-year sojourn in Judea Palestine. Luke’s young churches, nevertheless, had a downpour of God’s grace over a thirty-year period among those who were estranged from God. For references to God’s grace (Gk., *charis*), see Luke 1:30; 2:40, 52; 4:22; 6:32, 33, 34; Acts 2:47; 4:33; 7:10, 46; 11:23; 13:43; 14:3, 26; 15:11, 40; 18:27; 20:24, 32; 24:27; 25:3, 9. The reverse condition is evident for the concept of the kingdom of God. Whereas in the Gospel of Luke God’s “kingdom” or “king” is mentioned forty-nine times, Acts has only nine citations. In Jesus’ preaching to the Jewish people in Judea-Palestine there was a liberty to declare the inauguration of God’s kingdom because the socio-political climate was subdued during that time. Conversely, at the initiation of the church there was a need for caution in declaring the kingdom because of the volatile political milieu against the Roman Empire, which eventually resulted in the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem (66-70 CE; Luke 21:20-24; cf. Acts 5:36-37; 17:7; 21:28). The references to the Lord’s kingship and kingdom in Acts reveals the following. There are two references at the beginning (Acts 1:3, 6), five in the middle, and two at the end (Acts 28:23, 31). Philip preached about the kingdom in Samaria (Acts 8:12) while Paul declared the same at Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14:22), Thessalonica (Acts 17:7), and Ephesus (Acts 19:8, 20:25). Why were there two kingdom references connected to Ephesus? The city was 1,185 miles from Rome and 640 miles from Jerusalem. Was it because Ephesus was further away from Rome and the administrators were less concerned about the opinions of the empire? Paul afterward predicted that he would not return to Ephesus based on the churches

Acts 20:26-31 – Shepherd God’s Church

The speech’s third pericope begins with the words, “Therefore I declare to you this day . . .” (20:26). The word “therefore” was tied to the previous statement: “And now I know that none of you . . . will ever see my face again” (20:25). This instalment was bookended by a parallel expression at the end of the speech. The leaders were “grieving especially because of what he [Paul] had said that they would not see him again” (20:38). Between the two statements of verses 25 and 38 is the thrust of his plea based on the notion that this was his last testimony and therefore of supreme importance to the church.

Paul gave three declarations because it was the last time that he would see these leaders. First was a dramatic idiom that implied he was not answerable if any person had not changed their allegiance to Christ.¹⁴ “I am not responsible for the blood of any of you” (20:26; cf. Acts 18:6). The second declaration followed. If someone was lost to God then it was not his fault because he had steadfastly declared “the whole purpose of God” (20:27). He left out nothing that they should know about the Lord. Paul had a clear conscience. If people did not listen and obey the truth then he was not to be held responsible for their unbelief. He had done everything that he needed to do and without regret.

The final declaration was a double warning that stretches between verses 28 and 31. It begins with a caution in verse 28: “Keep watch.” And ends in verse 31 with the subsequent caution: “Therefore be alert.” The word “therefore” refers to the prior information he gave from verses 28b to 30. And they should heed the warning because he had continuously told them about these potential spiritual dangers for three years. “I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears” (20:31). They had heard it all before, but they needed to hear it again for the survival of the church.

Keep Watch Over Yourselves

The elders were not exempt from the forewarning. “Keep watch over yourselves. And [keep watch] over all the flock” (20:28). After first thinking about their own spiritual condition the leaders then had a duty to safeguard the church described by the same sheep-shepherd metaphor that Jesus used (see Luke 10:3; 12:32; 15:4-6; cf. Acts 8:32). Paul is dispensing spiritual authority to the leaders now that he is leaving. They needed to pick up the mantel of responsibility to protect the flock.

prophesying his future suffering in Jerusalem. That grave statement indelibly marked the thinking of the speech’s audience (Acts 20:25, 38).

¹⁴ An idiom is a group of words in a fixed order that has a specific meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own. This may be expressed verbally (Acts 18:6) and/or physically as a metaphorical idiom (Acts 13:51; 18:6).

In verse 28 he gives three reasons for this obligation. First, the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers.”¹⁵ Through the Spirit they had a charge to scrutinize—in a skeptical manner as sentries on duty—and be alert, watching for any spiritual enemies who might attack God’s sheep. Next, in taking up their duties they became shepherds of the church and by inference served under the direction of the “Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pe. 2:25). Lastly, God’s church was obtained with “the blood of his own Son” through the cross, which reinforced the seriousness of their obligation.¹⁶

In verse 29, Paul the prophet repeats that he was leaving them to accentuate the dangers. Further, he intensifies the metaphor and declares that “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (20:29). Then to underscore the solemn charge he warns: “Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore, be alert . . .” (20:30-31a; cf. 2 Pe. 3:16-17). Paul’s words drip with emotion. It was serious—a life and death situation. Cruel wolf-like false prophets will come to spiritually kill the truth of the gospel by twisting and misinterpreting his teaching (cf. Acts 13:6). Who are these “savage wolves,” particularly those who are within the church? And what is their motivation?¹⁷

Distorting the Truth

Paul’s concern about false prophets and their teaching in the church at Ephesus was dominant in his first letter to Timothy, five years after he delivered his forewarning at Miletus. From the early days of the city church, he left Timothy to instruct certain people not to teach strange doctrines such as Jewish myths, endless genealogies, and worldly fables, which give rise to foolish and ignorant speculations and fruitless discussion (Acts 18:19; 1 Tim. 1:3-4, 6; 4:7). Some of the untrue philosophies centered around conforming to godliness by using foolish controversies, disputes about the Law, and wrangling with words to gain wealth (1 Tim. 6:3-10). Timothy was to be on his guard and oppose such arguments that they falsely called “knowledge,” which caused some of the believers to be ensnared by the devil and led astray from the faith (1 Tim. 6:20-21). Among the manipulators of the truth were Hymenaeus and Alexander

¹⁵ For the concept of overseer, see Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1-2, Titus 1:7, and 1 Peter 2:25.

¹⁶ See Luke 9:23; 14:27; 23:26 (also Luke 23:23, 33; 24:7, 20); Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10, for references to the cross of the Lord Jesus.

¹⁷ We need to first establish a timeline of events to investigate the false prophets and their teaching at the church of Ephesus. Paul was at Ephesus between fall 52 and summer 55. After traveling from Ephesus through Macedonia to Greece and back to Miletus, he gave the speech to the Ephesian elders during the spring of 57. Paul was then arrested in Jerusalem (May 57), spent two years in prison at Caesarea Maritima, and arrived at Rome in early 60. Paul wrote the letter to the churches in Asia, including Ephesus (Ephesians in 60-61), and the two letters to Timothy at Ephesus (1 Timothy in 62-63; and 2 Timothy in 64) when under house arrest in the empire’s capital. In 95 the apostle John wrote about the believers in Ephesus who successfully discerned false apostles, as well as hating the deeds and teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:2, 6).

the coppersmith who Paul delivered over to Satan so that they would learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:19-20).

One year later, Paul again highlighted these two men in his second letter to Timothy, together with Phygelus, Hermogenes, and Philetus as vigorous opponents of his teaching (2 Tim. 2:23; 4:3-4). Of particular concern to Paul was their cancerous lies that the resurrection had already taken place, upsetting the faith of some (2 Tim. 1:15, 2:17-18; 4:14-15). Therefore, Paul encourages Timothy to “hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (2 Tim. 1:13-14; cf. Eph. 4:14; 5:6). At the same time, he pastors Timothy in correcting these opponents by not being quarrelsome, but by being a kind teacher, patient, and gentle so that God would grant them repentance and come to know the truth (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Acts 20:32-38 – Commended to God

The final pericope of Paul’s talk deals with him surrendering these beloved Ephesian leaders to the protection of God. The apostle presents them before God’s grace so that the Lord would come alongside these influencers and deposit his fortitude. Paul’s final exhortation highlights three inspirations about the consequences of God’s grace. First, the elders of the church would be built up like laying stone-upon-stone in establishing a house that was solid and unmovable (20:32a; cf. Eph. 2:19-22). Second, they would be guaranteed an inheritance in the Lord in which they would possess God himself (20:32b; cf. Eph. 1:11, 14, 18; 5:5). Third, the leaders would be among the sanctified. God’s grace would make them holy, pure, and consecrated unto the Lord (20:32c; cf. Eph. 5:26). Paul had taught these three themes at Ephesus, and the elders had an awareness of this reassuring commendation. This was a fulfillment of a prophecy that he had received from Jesus at the beginning of his ministry to Gentiles (Acts 26:18).

Chiasmic Summit

In the concluding section of Paul’s address he again returns to how he lived among them with hard-physical labor, an unwillingness to financially burden them, generosity to the poor, and godly integrity that mirrored the Lord Jesus (20:33-35; cf. 2 Tim. 3:10-11). This is a pattern reminiscent of the beginning of his talk and so heightens the reader’s awareness of a partial chiasm with a climatic *inclusio* as shown on the next page.

A The example of how Paul lived among them (vv. 18-21).

B Paul's future life with the Lord (vv. 22-25).

B' The church's future life with the Lord (vv. 26-31).

C Keep watch (v. 28).

D Savage wolves (v. 29)

D' Your own group (v. 30)

C' Be alert (v. 31).

A' The example of how Paul lived among them (vv. 32-35).

In other words, A = A' = Paul's model behavior; and B = B' = future predictions for the people of God.

Furthermore, imbedded within the church's future life with the Lord (B') is an *inclusio*, whereby Paul's instructions are framed by repeating the opening lines at the conclusion. This repetition provides a unity and finality that the prose would not have had otherwise. The observation of the *inclusio* is important for two reasons: it identifies that Paul's main purpose is the warning against false teachers and asserts that the audience must understand the content between verses 28 and 31 because it amplifies the theme of verses 29 and 30.

Verses 29 and 30 have the feel of a Hebraic synonymous parallelism, whereby what is stated in the first part (v. 29b) is repeated in detail in the second part (v. 30). In other words:

"... savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (20:29b) compared with

"Some even from your own group [savage wolves] will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples [not sparing the flock] to follow them" (20:30).

The parallelism highlights that the church elders should be watchful and alert because wolves from within the church will distort the truth—that Paul had taught faithfully for three years—with the intent of causing confusion and scattering the flock—in order to devour innocent disciples—so that the sheep would follow them and leave the Lord's church in Ephesus that the apostle had planted with God's help.

Begins and Ends with Jesus

At the beginning of the speech Paul underlines that he was “serving the Lord [Jesus]” in Asia (20:19). At the end he emphasizes Jesus again: “remember the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (20:35). This quote was not from any gospel record. Paul may have received the teaching from Jesus himself during his three years in the Arabian Desert (Gal. 1:15-18), several of the different accounts circulating about the Lord (Luke 1:1-2), eyewitnesses such as Peter and James (Acts 15:7, 13), or other early disciples like Mnason of Cyprus (Acts 21:16). Paul’s literary intention was to begin his talk with the Lord Jesus and end with the Lord Jesus. In addition, at the start and finish of the speech he pushes himself forward as a model of how to behave as a Christian leader to counteract the false prophets and their warped doctrine that would contaminate the truth so that the flock could not flourish as God had intended (see Luke 6:26, 43-45).

Final Reflections

In Paul’s discourse to the church leaders of Ephesus there is a hierarchical order displayed amid the intertwining of Trinitarian roles (cf. Acts 1:7; 3:19-21). The Ephesian church is designed for God’s purpose and grace although Paul’s service and faith is outworked through the Lord Jesus. The Son gives him the ministry of proclaiming the good news of repentance toward God. Paul remembers the teaching of Jesus all the while guided by the Spirit who speaks to him and chooses the eldership who are commended by God. The faith community at Ephesus is rooted in God’s ancient promises, purpose, and grace with the Lord Jesus’ covenantal service continuing in the ministry and faith of his followers by the Spirit’s selection, guidance, and teaching through the church’s leadership.

God the Father is active across all time elements of past, present, and future while the role of the Lord is based upon the past, and the Spirit’s function is in the present.¹⁸ God’s salvation purpose for his gracious kingdom is orchestrated upon the past promises of the Hebrew scriptures (Acts 24:14) and remains viable in the present and future, activated by the Lord Jesus’ past sacrifice on the cross, and continues in the present by the attendance and enablement of the Holy Spirit working through God’s church on earth.

¹⁸ The Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also eternal Persons of the Trinity. For example, Jesus was present in the visions of Paul (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11) and the Spirit was speaking in the past through the prophets (Acts 1:16; 28:25).

In the city of Ephesus, Paul proclaimed, taught, testified, and declared the message of the whole purpose of God's kingdom and the good news of his grace, which he obtained with the blood of his Son. The reality of grace is for those who repent toward God and have faith toward our Lord Jesus. Further, they need to be protected because groups within and without will come to distort the truth.

Paul's pastoral address not only sheds light on the role and hierarchy of the Trinity, his methods and topics of proclamation, and his message and manner of living, but besides gives instructions to the church leaders at Ephesus. Paul exhorts them to keep watch over all the flock and be alert because vicious predators want to come after he leave to destroy God's people by misrepresenting the reality. Paul's final direction is to remember two matters. First, he had continuously warned the Ephesians that such a heretical situation would arise. And second, Jesus had taught that to be blessed they needed to be generous, especially to the poor.

Conclusion

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church at Ephesus brought God's light to the dark places of Roman Asia, especially through Paul's missional example of holy preaching and living. Yet the Ephesian church was not only a dynamic and creative mission community cross-culturally proclaiming the good news of Christ's kingdom but was also a protecting and nurturing environment for God's family who struggled to retain the true life of the Spirit and protect itself from savage wolves within and without, whose lustful power desired to steal and kill the truth of the risen Jesus planted by the apostle Paul in the hearts of believers.

Robert L. Gallagher (Ph.D. Fuller Seminary) is professor emeritus of intercultural studies at Wheaton College Graduate School in Chicago where he has taught since 1998. He has served as the chair of the intercultural studies department (2011-18), president of the American Society of Missiology (2010-11), and an executive pastor in Australia (1979-90).