

R3171

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ELDERSHIP.

[ACTS 20:28-38](#)

**"Remember the words of the Lord Jesus how he said,
It is more blessed to give than to receive."**

THE Apostle Paul, on leaving Ephesus after the rioting there, determined to visit Jerusalem again, but first would visit the European churches—of Macedonia and Greece. It was while in Macedonia that he is supposed to have written his second letter to the Corinthians; and, on this tour, while in Corinth for about three months, he is supposed to have written his epistle to the Romans. At this time Nero, aged 21, was Emperor of Rome, and the Apostle Paul was about 56 years of age—in the full prime of his Christian life and experience.

Our lesson finds the Apostle en route to Jerusalem, on a trading vessel which was detained at the port of Miletus, about thirty miles distant from Ephesus. The number of days the vessel would be detained, changing cargo, etc., was uncertain; hence, the Apostle, instead of going to Ephesus, sent word to the elders of the Church there that they might come to him at Miletus—that thus he might have as long as possible with them, without missing his vessel when it would be ready to start. The elders came, and our lesson records the Apostle's address to them. They may have stayed several days in his company, and probably he said much more, but the final words evidently, in the mind of Luke, who chronicled them, were an epitome of the entire address, which is generally esteemed as both eloquent and touching. It is an address from a general overseer to local overseers, and to be appreciated must be viewed from this standpoint.

"Take heed unto yourselves": well did the Apostle realize that those who do not keep guard over their own hearts cannot faithfully serve the interests of the Church in general. Piety, as well as charity, should begin at home. Along this line John Calvin said, "No one can successfully care for the salvation of others who neglects his own, since he himself is a part of the flock." This thought is brought out by the Apostle, also, saying, "And [take heed] to all the flock, over the which the holy Spirit hath made you overseers"—more properly, "in the which," as in the Revised Version; for the overseers are not to be considered lords *over* the flock, but members in it who have a responsibility respecting fellow-members. The care of the overseer should not be confined to the well-favored members of the flock, financially, socially, educationally or otherwise; but as the Apostle declares, should be general "to *all* the flock"—including the poorest as well as the most uncouth naturally.

The elders were not necessarily aged men, according to the flesh; for in the Church of Christ the flesh is reckoned as dead;—their age, their maturity, their eldership, is as New Creatures. Although the chosen representatives of the Church, they were to esteem their responsibility as coming from on high;—however earthly influences had been associated with

their appointment, their obligation was really as representatives of the Lord, through His holy Spirit. The word "Elders" here is the same as Presbytery in [1 Tim. 4:14](#); and the word "overseers" is the same elsewhere in the Scriptures rendered "bishop," signifying one charged with a duty respecting others. We thus see that this word bishop, or overseer, has in modern times been divested of its original simplicity. The elders of the Church of Christ are its overseers, and should realize the responsibility of the position they have accepted. The Apostle Paul was an overseer in a general sense; as he himself expresses it, he had "the care of all the churches"—particularly of all those which, in the Lord's providence, he had been the means of establishing in the truth, or who accepted his ministry, either in person or by letter. While the holy Spirit has the supervision of such matters, it, nevertheless, remains for the congregation of the Lord's people to note the leadings of the spirit in the appointment of overseers, and to accept such, and only such, and so much overseeing and supervision as they believe to be of the Lord's providence.

Mr. Thompson-Seton, the renowned student of wild animals, relates in his work, "*Lives of the Hunted*," that "the leaders of the flock gain and hold their position as leaders, not from any authority over the flock, but from the fact that they have shown themselves wisest in finding the best pastures and the most successful in guarding against enemies,—the flock having learned to trust them." This furnishes a good illustration of what the attitude of the Lord's people should be toward those whom they accept as superintendents, overseers, elders,—according to the Scriptures. But alas! we find in the church nominal many leaders who seem to be nearly devoid of the proper qualities of leadership here referred to by the Apostle: (1) to oversee, or look out for, the interests of the flock in general; and (2) to feed them. It should be observed that the position of a bishop gives no *authority* over the Church, except that which properly comes from great piety, wisdom and experience. The flock is to be guarded against errors of doctrine, and from false teachers, and to be guided into the richest pastures of the Word of God, and into the brightest Christian experiences, and into the fields of greatest usefulness.

A prominent writer on this subject says:—

"Mr. Ruskin, in his *Sesame and Lilies*, commenting on the strange phrase, 'blind mouths,' in Milton's *Lycidas*, says: 'Those two monosyllables express the precisely accurate contraries of right character in the two great offices of the Church—those of bishop and pastor. A bishop means a person who sees; a pastor means one who feeds; the most unbishoply character a man can have is, therefore, to be blind; the most unpastoral is, instead of feeding, to want to be fed. Nearly all the evils of the Church have arisen from bishops desiring *power* more than *light*. They want authority, not outlook. It is the king's (Christ is our King) office to rule: the bishop's office is to *oversee* the flock, to number it sheep by sheep; to be ready always to give full account of it.'"

The Apostle states the grounds for so earnest an exhortation: (1) The Church which they were overseeing and feeding was to be recognized as God's Church, "purchased with the blood of His own [Son]."*

**This is not to be understood as conflicting with other Scriptural statements to the effect that our Lord Jesus "bought us with his own precious blood." Both thoughts are correct: though they view the subject from two different standpoints. From the larger standpoint, God is the originator of the entire plan of salvation—from start to finish He is thus the Savior. But He accomplishes the salvation through the Son: He laid help [for us] upon one who was mighty to save—fully qualified. ([Isa. 43:11](#); [1 Tim. 2:5](#); [4:10](#); [Psa. 89:19](#)) Thus every feature of our salvation is of the Father, though by the Son, as the Apostle clearly points out.—[1 Cor. 8:6](#). That which God so highly valued, and purchased at so great a price, is to be esteemed very precious by all who would be His servants and His servants. (2) Because dangers and foes would arise; and while these could not come without divine permission, it is a part of the divine will that they shall serve as tests of faith and loyalty of the entire flock, including the elders, overseers, pastors. The energy necessary to such resistance of evil would tend to develop character which God desires each member of His flock to have. God would not suffer them to be tempted above that they were able, but would with every temptation, or trial, provide a way of escape; but He would have them learn to trust Him, to exercise faith and obedience and vigilance and resistance of evil.*

The Apostle evidently knew by inspiration of some kind that he would never see these dear brethren again—that his mission in this field was at a close, and as a true under-shepherd he was looking out for the interests of the flock. He knew, probably from the prophecy of Daniel, that a great falling away was to come;—that the Adversary was to be permitted to develop a great antichrist system,—as he subsequently wrote to the Church at Thessalonica; and he wished the local overseers to realize the responsibility of their position, and to be vigilant. "Grievous wolves shall enter in amongst you, not sparing the flock;"—ambitious for power, influence, etc., they would not hesitate to barter the interests of the flock for their own advancement. Another source of danger would be from within—"of your own selves" some would rise up—be puffed up with ambition, to have followers, adherents, and would lead them into false doctrines, to the injury of themselves and those misled by them.

The knowledge of these things was to keep them on guard continually, not only as against wolves from without, but against the rising of ambitious ones amongst their own number—not necessarily watching each other merely, but rather each specially watching and guarding his own heart against the insidious attacks of the Adversary along the lines indicated,—too great self-esteem or desire to be great. The Apostle, we may be sure, was glad to be able to point to his own course in their midst, as an example of proper humility of spirit, and of zeal for the interests of the flock. "Remember that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn [admonish] everyone day and night with tears." The secret of the Apostle's zeal lay, evidently, in his appreciation of the fact that he was God's ambassador, and that the work of the Lord in which he was privileged to be a coworker, is a most important one—relating first to the salvation and perfecting of the saints, the elect, and ultimately through them to the blessing of all the families of the earth. Had the Apostle, during those three years, been neglecting the spiritual interests of

the flock, he could not have made such an address as this to the elders. It would not have done to have said: Ye remember how many entertainments of a frivolous character I attended with you and helped to arrange; the oyster suppers and peach-and-cream festivals; the private theatricals, charades and tableaux, and general fun- and money-making schemes which we entered into. The Apostle's appreciation of the fact that he was an ambassador for the King of kings, was ever present with him and lent a force and earnestness to his entreaties on behalf of righteousness and spirituality, which, with his tears, were much better backing than frivolities of any kind.

Turning from the darker picture of coming trials and difficulties, the Apostle commended the brethren to the Lord, who loved his Church so as to purchase it, who watches over its interests, so that the Adversary cannot harm those who faithfully follow the Captain of their salvation,—assuring them that this grace of God might be expected to come to them through His Word. The Apostle had nothing to say against colleges and seminaries and worldly sciences of themselves; but when he would mention the power that is to keep the Lord's people against the wiles of the Adversary it was not to these that he pointed his colaborers, but to the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God. We of the present time may well lay this testimony to heart; for today we see foes assaulting the Lord's flock on every hand; wolves who, in the name of science, would not spare the flock, but dash to pieces the faith, the hope, the trust, of the Lord's people, giving them nothing substantial in return; "higher critics" vaunting themselves upon their superior learning and their ability to distinguish between inspiration and non-inspiration, and who offer to select for the sheep an occasional blade of grass from the Word of God, which, however, they assure the sheep, requires much scholastic learning to make nutritive.

Today, also, we see in every direction this same tendency on the part of some amongst ourselves to arise and to seek to draw away disciples after them; and we need to remember that the defense of the sheep is not to be found in worldly wisdom, but in the power of God, as represented in the Word and plan of God. As the Apostle said to these elders of Ephesus, so we may hear him say to us, that the Word of God is able to build us up substantially, to make us "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might," and to give us eventually "an inheritance amongst all them which are sanctified."

It is worthy of note here that all the inheritances and eternal rewards held before the Lord's people in the Scriptures are to the "*sanctified*"—none of them are promised to any other class. One of the Society's colporteurs recently wrote us that when about to deliver a volume of the DAWN series to a person who had subscribed, the lady made objection, and declined to take the book, saying that she understood it denied that the Scriptures taught a hell of eternal torture; and that she was sure to the contrary, and that if there is no such place there ought to be. The colporteur replied by inquiring who she believed would be saved, and she answered, "The holy, the sanctified," the ones mentioned by the Apostle in this lesson. The colporteur asked the lady if she claimed to be one of the consecrated saints of God. She answered, "No." He then replied, "You are expecting, then, to spend eternity in torment?"

The lady saw at once the force of the erroneous argument, and said she would take the book, concluding that if all were to go to eternal torment who were not of the *sanctified* class the outlook for the future would be horrible, for almost the entire race. What a relief we find in the

clearer knowledge of the divine plan, which shows us that the inheritance of the sanctified is to be the Kingdom, at the second advent of our Lord; and that the Kingdom then to be established is to be the divine agency for blessing the world of mankind with a clear knowledge of God, and a full opportunity to accept His grace and mercy and blessing unto *sanctification* and everlasting life through our Lord Jesus.

Having commended them to the Word of God, the Apostle draws attention to his own mode of life, while with them, as a proper illustration of the effect of the Gospel in a sanctified heart—as a *proper example of an overseer and elder* in the Church, which they should seek to copy. He could speak of these things now, to these fellow-elders, in a manner that he probably would have hesitated to speak of them to the Church at Ephesus while still ministering to them, as, by some, it might have been considered boasting. He would have these brother-elders and overseers note that in his ministering to the Church at Ephesus he had not coveted their silver or gold or apparel, but instead had labored with his own hands, and had thus in all things *set before them an example of how they also* as elders (presbyters) and overseers (bishops, *episcopos*) ought to help the weak and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

The Apostle could point thus to himself as an example of a proper servant of the Church, because he had so closely followed the example of the great Head, Jesus. It is blessed to receive, but still more blessed to give. God Himself is the great Giver, continually bestowing favors upon us, and not upon the good only, but also upon the evil—even providing a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. These words of our Lord ("It is more blessed to give than to receive") are not recorded in any of the Gospels. Dr. Philip Schaff tells us that "outside the inspired memories of the Gospels we possess the record of some twenty sayings of Jesus which have floated down to us." This quotation by the Apostle Paul is one of these, of whose authenticity we can have no doubt; and surely it is in full accord with our dear Redeemer's conduct. He emulated the Father in that he continually gave, gave, gave to others. He did not selfishly see how much comfort and ease and honor he could secure for himself, but made himself of no reputation, for our sakes, daily giving his life for the assistance of others in matters temporal, as well as spiritual, until finally he completed the sacrifice at Calvary, having given on our behalf all that he had.

If all the elders of the Church of Christ could thoroughly take to heart these noble examples of Jesus and of Paul, and could become so thoroughly enthused with the Gospel message and with the privilege of being coworkers with God that they would entirely forget themselves, it would be a great blessing for them as well as for the various little companies of the Lord's people over whom, in the Lord's providence, the holy Spirit has made them overseers, to watch out for the interests of the flock and to feed them. We are not meaning to say that there are no earnest brethren today. Quite to the contrary. But we do mean to say that it is well for us to lay to heart the Apostle's earnest exhortation, that we all may be more and more faithful, more and more copies of God's dear Son, more and more like the great Apostle as regards self-sacrificing devotion to the interests of Zion.

At the close of the conference, when we may suppose the sailing of the vessel was announced, the Apostle knelt with the brethren from Ephesus, in prayer, the tenor of which may well be imagined. Then the parting took place, and doubtless the dear brethren began to realize more fully than they had ever done before what great blessings God had bestowed upon them through the Apostle's ministries, and the thought that they should never see him again filled them with sadness, and they wept as they accompanied him to the ship.

Doubtless the Apostle consoled them with the reflection that the time of partings would soon be over and the blessed eternity of union and fellowship soon begin, when they would meet not only one another, but above all meet the Redeemer himself and all the faithful in Christ Jesus. So our Lord also expressed himself on this matter, "a little while." The nineteen centuries intervening would have seemed a long while had any lived from then till now,—but since their "sleep" would be an unconscious interval, it was well that God kindly veiled their eyes and merely comforted them from His own larger standpoint of "soon," "quickly," "a little while." But now that the Kingdom is nigh, even at the door, our hearts no longer cry, How long, O Lord? but, Hallelujah! the day star is risen—the morning is here!