

Acts 20:13-38, No. 42
“The Church in Peril”
August 28, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Paul was *en route* to Jerusalem, needing to reach the capital by Pentecost. As Luke tells us in v. 16, he was in a hurry. But, having left Ephesus some months before, he was anxious to have a final word with the leadership of the church there.

Text Comment

- v.13 An interesting historical detail, the kind of thing a participant in the history would remember. It is all the more an eyewitness touch because no reason is given for Paul having taken a different route than most of his party. The distance was about 20 miles from Troas to Assos.
- v. 15 Sailors in the ancient world were coast-huggers. They sailed small ships that were vulnerable to storms and ordinarily they stayed quite close to the shore.
- v.16 Remember, he had celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread – that is, Passover – with the saints at Philippi. That feast would, of course, have been for the Christians the celebration of the Lord’s death and resurrection, what we know as Good Friday and Easter. There were 50 days between Passover and Pentecost, plenty of time to make the trip to Jerusalem if one didn’t dawdle. Paul knew that if he stopped in Ephesus, with so many friends there clamoring for his attention, it would be difficult to get away, so he didn’t go there. But he wanted a chance to speak to the leadership of the Ephesian church. It would have taken at least three days for a messenger to reach Ephesus and for the elders to return to Miletus some 30 miles south of Ephesus.
- v.17 What precisely Luke means by “elders” is one of the questions that is forced upon us by the rather Spartan description of church government provided in the New Testament. The term is used for church officers with a range of responsibilities, as it was in the Judaism of that day. The “elders of the people,” or the Sanhedrin, for example, were the leaders of Judaism, both priests and lay-rulers. There was, of course, a clear distinction between priests and lay-rulers, but the term elder could be used generically of both. Both Peter and John refer to themselves as elders in this generic sense. But though an apostle was an elder in the generic sense, no one would have supposed that being an elder made one an apostle, or being a lay-ruler, the specific sense of “elder,” made one a priest. So the term “elder” can refer to men we would call elders, that is lay-rulers; it can refer to men we would call ministers – the English word priest, remember, is simply an old transliteration of the Greek word for elder, *presbyter* –; or it can refer to both lay-rulers and ministers together as a general term for the leadership of the church. The precise meaning of the term here may be sharpened in vv. 28ff, as the emphasis seems to fall on their role as pastors and teachers. That is, these were the men we would call the ministers of the church in Ephesus.

- v.18 By the way, it has been long noticed how “Pauline” this speech is in both theme and style. Luke was there and perhaps he took notes so that his summary is a collection of verbatim statements he heard Paul make in his address to the Ephesian elders. [Stott, 324]
- v.21 We are given here a beautifully simple summary of Paul’s preaching and of New Testament preaching in general. Do you want to know what Christianity is all about? Well, it is about “repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ.”
- v.23 Did this knowledge come from prophets who told Paul what to expect – of which prophetic foresight we will have an example in chapter 21 – or by direct revelation to Paul in a vision or a dream. Or is he simply deducing from his circumstances what is most likely to happen to him in the future? We can’t say.
- v.24 Paul’s version of Samuel Rutherford’s adage: “Duties are ours; events are the Lord’s.”
- v.25 This statement presents a problem since Paul’s Pastoral Letters seem to indicate that Paul *did* return to Ephesus. What we have, then, is an impression on Paul’s part, perhaps mistakenly drawn from the revelations he had received, or simply his expectation given the circumstances. The apostles were not infallible men, except when writing Holy Scripture. After all, Paul has already admitted that he doesn’t know what is going to happen to him. [cf. Bock, 628-629]
- v.28 Here the term “overseer,” the Greek word *episkopos*, is used interchangeably with “elder” in v. 17. In other words, the same men were both elders and overseers, the latter term often translated “bishop” in older English translations of the Bible. The one term refers to the man and his qualifications for office – as an “elder” he is a spiritually older man, an experienced man, a wise man; the other to his function of the office – as an “overseer” his responsibility is to look after the Church of God. Nowhere in the NT are the terms distinguished from one another as if referring to different offices, an overseer (or bishop) holding a higher office than presbyter or elder.
- “His own blood,” if it refers to God would be a powerful proof-text for the deity of Christ. It is perhaps more likely that the text should be translated, “the blood of his own,” that is the blood of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. [Bruce, 416n]
- v.35 Paul here cites a saying of the Lord Jesus that is not recorded in any of the four Gospels, There is another such dominical saying unmentioned in the Gospels cited by Paul in 1 Thess. 4:15. Remember John saying in his Gospel that the Lord said and did so many things that it would literally be impossible to have recorded them all.

Now we begin by observing that this is the only speech in Acts – a book full of speeches, addresses, and sermons – that is addressed to a Christian audience. All the other speeches are either evangelistic sermons to Jews or Gentiles or legal defenses before Jewish or Roman authorities. But here Paul is talking *as a Christian to Christians* about the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here he sounds a very different note than has been sounded so far in the book. Think about it. Up to this point we have read account after account of Peter and Paul's amazingly successful work of evangelism and church planting. Wherever they went people believed the message they proclaimed – counterintuitive as that message was for a member of the Greco-Roman civilization – and churches were formed. The gospel was spreading outward from the Holy Land and, as we have read in Acts, beginning to overspread the Greco-Roman world. We have so far read of churches being formed in the Roman provinces of Abilene, Phoenicia, Syria, Cilicia, Pamphylia, Galatia, Asia, Mysia, Macedonia, and Achaia, and all of this in just a few years. No doubt there were many more churches established in many more places than Luke has reported.

What is more, the rapid growth of the church had been such that it had come to the notice of groups of people, both Jew and Gentile alike, who felt threatened by this development, from Jews in various Roman towns who saw a steady stream leave the synagogue for the new church to Gentiles, such as those in Corinth, who saw their livelihood being threatened by the number of people abandoning idolatry for the Christian faith in a God who could not be worshipped in an image.

True enough, this progress has not been without pain and suffering. Peter was imprisoned. Paul was stoned on one occasion, jailed on another, and threatened with violence more than once. But without question the narrative so far has been a record of the gospel's triumphant advance.

But here Paul sounds a very different note. The churches that have been established, the new community that has overspread the eastern end of the Mediterranean world, is threatened by peril on every hand. Indeed, so great is the danger that threatens the very life of the budding church that to counteract it, to protect the church from it, will require the tireless, sacrificial effort of consecrated men who devote their lives to caring for the church of God.

To be sure, we find this teaching everywhere else in the New Testament, and an observant reader of the Old Testament will already know that the people of God have adversaries, that they are always poised on a knife-edge between faithfulness and apostasy, and that their history is a history of periods of spiritual triumph followed by periods of collapse. But for the first time in Acts we learn that the story of the church in the world is not going to be a story of uninterrupted progress, of triumph upon triumph until the world has been reached and the Lord returns. It would not surprise me at all, given the thrilling history of the gospel's advance we have so far read, that Paul's stirring summons to these elders was for some of them a bucket of cold water to the face. They knew they would have opposition, they had witnessed that themselves in Ephesus, but the opposition was being overcome and the gospel was rapidly advancing. But now Paul was telling them that danger lurked around the corner and that much of it would surface *within the church* not come from outside. The last thing they would have said about the church's situation in their day, from their experience, was that it was *tenuous*, hovering at any moment between life and death, between victory and defeat.

To be sure, this fact of the life *of the church* in the world is the necessary implication of the situation of the life *of the Christian* in the world. That life too is tenuous. How often are we taught in one way or another that salvation is *a difficult thing*? It was Peter who summarized a

great deal of biblical teaching by saying, “It is hard for the righteous to be saved.” [1 Pet. 4:18] The ESV renders that line, “...the righteous are scarcely saved...”

John Bunyan was simply being faithful to this pervasive biblical teaching, and to all the history of salvation stillborn in human life, when he depicted the pilgrimage to heaven as lonely, steep, difficult, and beset by dangers of every kind. Over and over his Christian is saved in the nick of time, and frequently he encounters those who began the journey but never reached the destination.

We know only too well how often we are taught that many who once professed faith in Christ never make it to heaven, that those who do make it do so only through trial and suffering – unless a man or woman is willing to take up his cross and follow him, Jesus said, he or she cannot be my disciple –, and some of those, as Paul says so startlingly in 1 Cor. 3 are saved only as though through fire, while their works, the works that are supposed to follow them to heaven, are burned up. This is the serious warning that is found face up on virtually every page of the Bible but which has been largely ignored by entire generations of Christians, our own among them. Why else would Paul of all people, with all of his experiences as an apostle – a man who worked miracles – with all of his success in ministry, nevertheless say, “I beat my body and make it my slave, *lest having preached to others I myself be disqualified for the prize.*” Paul never took even his own salvation for granted and so, sure as shootin, he never took anyone else’s for granted either.

Alexander Whyte, in his magnificent series of sermons published as *Bunyan Characters* (I, 72) relates this anecdote.

“‘Would to God I were back in my pulpit but for one Sabbath, said a dying minister in Aberdeen. ‘What would you do?’ asked a brother minister at his bedside. ‘I would preach to the people the difficulty of salvation,’ he said.”

And then Whyte himself added these comforting words, “All which things are told, not for purposes of debate or defiance, but to comfort and instruct God’s true people who are finding salvation far more difficult than anybody ever told them it would be.”

Now, to be sure, all of this is looking at the matter from a human perspective. From God’s viewpoint and Christ’s viewpoint the sheep are perfectly secure. No one can pluck them from the Father’s hand; nothing can separate them from his love. But the human perspective is the only one available to us. For us salvation is a difficult thing and, indeed, in some respects a tenuous thing. We are beset by enemies and by difficulties and are always at risk of squandering the gifts that God has given us. “Do not receive the grace of God in vain,” Paul warned the Corinthians.

Well here in his speech to the Ephesian elders Paul said that what was true of the individual believer – Lydia, the jailer in Philippi, Crispus, and all the rest of the thousands upon thousands of new Christians now scattered across the eastern end of the Mediterranean world – was true of the church in general, of the church as an institution and as a community. It too was threatened by peril every day and both from without and from within.

As it had been true of Israel, so it would be true of the church in the new epoch. False teaching spread by aggressive advocates – Paul calls them wolves –, the inroads of a hostile but tempting culture, and even simple spiritual lethargy that sets in as the years pass, all of it can bring the church, or a generation of Christians to ruin. As early as the end of the New Testament period, as we learn in the letters to the seven churches in Rev. 2-3, the church in Ephesus had lost its first love, the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were tolerating some false teaching, and the churches in Sardis and Laodicea were near to falling asleep, a sleep from which they might never awaken.

And, of course, as you know it has been the case ever since that the church has often been tempted by the culture or seduced by false teaching only to see its former spiritual vitality and commitment to the Lord wither until scarcely the memory of Christian faith and life remained. During the early centuries the church was beset by false teaching at almost every turn and only some of the congregations were sturdy enough to resist it. Divisions were introduced that seriously weakened the body of Christ – not divisions to reveal who truly belonged to Christ but divisions that unnecessarily tore into pieces Christ's seamless robe. A church at war with itself has much less energy to spend in reaching the world around it.

As the church moved west and north, it also moved east, reaching China by the 7th century. But believers suffered state-sponsored persecution there and in the 10th century, a monk who had been sent east to inquire into the state of the church in China, returned to Europe to report that he had found no trace of Christians in the Chinese empire. [S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 94-97]

During the medieval period the faith of the Christian church in Europe slowly and tragically was transformed into a dismal and ugly caricature of the real thing. Living faith survived but only here and there, the church as a whole was, as even a recent pope has acknowledged, more an enemy of the faith than its friend.

The Reformation restored a living faith to much of Europe but it was not long before that faith was being eclipsed by the rationalism of the so-called Enlightenment, a movement that has continued to undermine the faith and life of the church into our own day.

And again and again, as Paul warned here in v. 29 and 30, much of the threat to the church's survival would come from within the church herself. It is not too much to say that you could write a history of the Christian church, an informative and accurate history, by simply telling the story of all the false teaching, of all the heresies, that have found a hearing in Christendom, from the Arians in the 4th century to the sexual progressives of the 21st.

And what is true of the church in its larger manifestations, national churches or large denominations – most of which in the modern western world are far beyond Sardis or Laodicea in being overtaken by spiritual death because they willingly harbored within themselves false teaching of various kinds – I say, what is true of larger sections of the church is true as well of individual congregations. Any of us who have been Christians for any length of time know only too well how quickly a church that seemed sound and thriving can be dying or dead soon

thereafter. As Paul warned the Ephesian elders would be the case, its leaders were asleep at the switch and did not keep the wolves at bay.

Paul would not deny the danger posed by many other temptations – the love of the world, of money, of influence, pleasure, and power, and so on – but he is particularly concerned here about the deadly virus of false teaching. He knew that the Devil made it a strategy to disguise himself as an angel of light and that he could dress up any religious idea – no matter how obviously incompatible with the Christian faith – and make it enticing even to Christians if only he could find and equip men with powers of intellect and oratory to teach these errors. And so he has done. He has found a way to insinuate killing error into the mind of the church throughout the centuries and is doing the same today. Isn't it remarkable that though the church has learned again and again and again the deadly effects of false teaching in her midst and life, though the church has been crippled and crushed by such false teaching repeatedly in her history, she is allowing it today again as she has allowed it so often in her past.

I'm not talking about the disagreements Christians may have about this doctrine or that: such disagreements as, alas divide Baptists from paedo-baptists or Arminians from Calvinists or Pentecostals from those who doubt that the supernatural gifts such as prophecy or speaking in tongues continued past the age of the apostles. Real Christians have never seen eye to eye about everything. That is not what Paul is talking about. He seems even here to remind us of that while he taught the whole counsel of God to his congregations, he was careful to concentrate on that which was profitable. He didn't make an issue of everything, but only of those things of great importance. His letters are proof enough that he was content for the church to harbor within herself a measure of disagreement.

But those disagreements are of an entirely different order than that introduced by teaching that denies the deity of Jesus Christ, or his incarnation, or his bodily resurrection from the dead, or his miracles, or his atonement, or his Second Coming, or the last judgment, or the necessity of faith in him, or the authority of Holy Scripture, or, indeed, the reality of the infinite personal God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It was false teaching of this latter kind that decimated the great Presbyterian churches in England, Scotland, and in our own land. And if you think it's not relevant to us, such were the churches that gave birth to us as a congregation years ago. Alexander Zenos, professor of theology at McCormick Theological Seminary, a PCUSA school in Chicago, in the first third of the 20th century, argued in his book *Presbyterianism in America* that the doctrine or teaching of the church should shift with the winds of change in any culture, the Word of God being updated as it were to conform to the new discoveries or new ideas of modern life. Each generation of Christians, he said, must interpret the Bible according to what he called the "prevailing corporate mind." He noted that in the Presbyterian church the generation that led up to the watershed controversies over the authority of the Bible in the 1920s and 30s was marked by an indifference to biblical doctrine, an indifference of which he heartily approved. The result was that the church didn't so much run to unbelief as slouched to it. As Paul had warned would happen, the whole counsel of God was no longer being taught in the church and its leaders were not guarding the sheep against the encroachment of the wolves. Before long the only iron fist left in the church was that brought down on the heads of the defenders of the apostolic faith. Zenos himself was

the prosecutor of our Dr. Buswell in the church courts when Dr. Buswell was drummed out of the Presbyterian Church USA. His crime: insisting that Presbyterian missionaries should preach the gospel and not advocate for unbelief. And so it is that in the PCUSA today – that dying church – the leaders are mostly wolves and the Lord’s sheep have largely been scattered to the winds.

Now teaching like this is not easy to apply in a sermon. It is not easy to describe what you must do in obedience to Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders. Paul himself regards the bulwark protecting living faith in the church to be consecrated, godly, and faithful leadership that insists upon and provides teaching that is faithful to the Word of God and pastoral care that adorns that teaching. Obviously it falls to you from time to time to choose that leadership and so it is your calling to be sure that you have chosen men able and willing to fulfill the calling Paul laid out for them here.

But, of course, as Jeremiah admitted in his day, Israel’s faith may have been subverted by the teaching of false prophets and priests, “but the people loved to have it so.” Paul’s challenge may have been addressed to the leadership, but Luke wrote it down for us all to read. All of us are to recognize how tenuous the church’s life is and must be in a world like ours and with hearts like ours. False teaching would never advance in the church without the connivance of the people. The safety of the church will always, finally, depend upon a community of believers alert to the wiles of the Devil, who know that false teaching is going to show up sooner or later - usually sooner rather than later, and are determined to remain faithful to God and his Word come wind, come weather. You, as members of a Christian congregation, can take from Paul’s exhortation a sense of responsibility not only to choose leaders who will care for nothing so much as the preservation of the church’s fidelity to Christ and devotion to the cause of his kingdom, but to be the sort of people yourselves who will be able to detect the false note when first it sounds. So many churches, so many ordinary Christians – real Christians – have failed to do this through the ages and have paid the terrible price, or their children have.

The better you know the Bible’s teaching, the more you have incorporated it into your life and proved it in the secret places of your heart, the more clearly you will see the futility of life built on any other foundation than that of Christ and his gospel, the less willing you will be ever to hear in the church teaching that, however subtly, undermines or contradicts the truth of Holy Scripture.

We can summarize Paul’s exhortation this way: it is a hard thing for the church to be saved and harder still for it to be saved in the next generation and the generation after that. Only Christians who know this, have taken this hard truth to heart, will be steeled to do the hard work of salvation, first for themselves and then for their church.