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A Charge to Church Elders - Part 2

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - webteam

John Stott uses the example of the apostle Paul to show how church leadership should be done according to Scripture.

Transcript

[Music] Paul omitted no part of God's revealed message. He neglected no section of the community. He left no stone unturned.

He permitted himself no relaxation of his high standards of living and ministry. On the contrary, he shared all possible truth. With all possible people in all possible words.

He taught the whole gospel to the whole province with his whole strength.

[Music] Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott. Time magazine ranked John Stott as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

During his lifetime he impacted the evangelical church on every continent and was author of the landmark Lausanne Covenant on Evangelism. John Stott's ministry was centered on five priorities, prayer, expository preaching, regular evangelism, careful follow-up and systematic training of new leaders. But for all his global influence he had an unassuming demeanor preferring to be known as Uncle John and living in a small apartment above a garage of a rectory in London.

Indeed, the rectory of all souls laying in place which was his home church for almost 60 years. We are privileged to be marking John Stott's centenary by bringing you just some of his timeless teaching.

[Music] In last week's message on church leadership John Stott showed us that one of the features of the modern church is uncertainty about the role of its professional, full-time ministry.

We saw that eldership is not just an administrative oversight but a pastoral oversight. As

we conclude this message today we'll see how in the early church the apostle Paul sought to preach the whole gospel to the whole region. Paul threw himself into his ministry with his whole heart and soul.

He tells us in Acts 20 that he taught the people that publicly that is in the synagogue and in the lecture hall of tyrannous and privately from house to house. And if you glance on to the end of his talk verse 31 he says that he continued day and nights for three years in public and in private by day and night. He was absolutely indefatigable.

Nothing could stop him. The opposition of the Jews, the tears and trials that befell him. He says even he didn't count his life dear to himself.

If only he could fulfill and accomplish the ministry that he had received from the Lord Jesus. Such then was his tyrannous, the completeness. I would even dare to call it the catholicity of his ministry.

In modern terms borrowed from the Latin American mission it was a fine apostolic example of evangelism in death. Paul omitted no part of God's revealed message. He neglected no section of the community.

He left no stone unturned. He permitted himself no relaxation of his high standards of living and ministry. On the contrary he shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible words.

He taught the whole gospel to the whole province with his whole strength. And it's only as a result of that that he could say in verse 26 "I am innocent of the blood of all men." I dare say he was thinking consciously of God's commission to Ezekiel in the Old Testament when God made Ezekiel a watchman to the house of Israel. And said to Ezekiel "If you do not warn the people who might tell you to warn, I will require their blood at your hand." Now Paul says "I've been a faithful watchman in the whole province of Asia.

Based as my ministry was on Ephesus. I've warned you, I've taught you, I've delivered you the whole gospel with my whole being to all the people willing to listen to it, and I'm innocent." God cannot require the blood of any man of my hand. What a tremendous thing to say.

Could we say that of London? Could we say that of our own parish? We're innocent of the blood of the 10,000 people who live in our parish? I thank God for the thoroughness of this apostle Paul. Well, there was his example. I've no doubt as these Ephesian elders listened to him.

It must have been a tremendous stimulus to them as they went back to Ephesus from my leaders. The thoroughness of the apostle remained a standing challenge and rebuked to them, as I think it does to us today. So there is the first stimulus, the example of the

apostle Paul.

Secondly, there is the rise of false teachers, verses 29 and 30. "I know," says Paul, "that after my departure, that is when I've left you in a few hours' time, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves, men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore, be alert. Be watchful." Now, this exhortation that we're looking at in verse 28, that they ought to take heed to themselves and to the flock of God is obviously linked with verses 29 and 30. It is because Paul knew that after his departure, false teachers would arise in the Ephesian church that he begged these elders of the church to be all the more diligent in their teaching ministry.

Their care of God's sheep would take its shape to some extent because of the danger of the wolves. Now, imagine that in the Middle East in those days wolves were the chief enemy of the flock of sheep hunting now singly and now in packs. The sheep were utterly defenseless against the wolf, and the shepherds could not afford to relax their vigilance.

Now, it's not difficult for us to understand what the apostle Paul was referring to because he supplies his own interpretation. He moves from the metaphor of wolves not sparing the flock in verse 29 to the rise of men, the wolves are men, who are speaking perverse things, not the truth, but perverting the truth. They are false teachers, and they are drawing away disciples after them.

And we know that Paul's prophecy came true. We know from other parts of the New Testament that false teachers did arise in the church in Ephesus, and that as a result of them, the first love of the Ephesian church grew cool. They left their first love.

Now, Jesus, you know, in the Sermon on the Mount issued this same warning in general terms, he said, "Beware of false prophets, and he likened them to wolves. Although he said the wolves will come in sheep's clothing, that is, they will insinuate themselves into the church in such a way that the unwary sheep may take them for one of them's cell sheep, but underneath the sheep's fleece is a wolf, a ravening wolf, and therefore be alert. Good shepherds, you see, like those in the fields outside Bethlehem on Christmas night, should be those who keep watch over their flock by night and indeed by day as well.

For good shepherds, good pastors are concerned to protect the people from false teaching. Now, I want to ask you tonight, as at this stage, the very important point that pastors are called to a double task. The first is to feed the sheep, and the second is to protect them from wolves.

That is, the first is to teach the truth, and the second is to shield them from error. That

is, they have a positive responsibility to expand Scripture to the people, and they have a negative responsibility to warn the people of the dangers of error and heresy and false teaching. Now, this is very unpopular in the church today.

It is frequently said that we are always to be positive and never to be negative. I perhaps would venture to give you a personal example because I wrote a little book a few years ago that is called "Confess Your Sins" and has a subtitle, "A Way of Reconciliation," and the book is in two halves. The first half of the book is a positive appeal to a proper kind of confession of sin.

The secret confession of our secret sins to God, the private confession of the injuries we do to a fellow human being, confess privately to him, and the place of public confession before the church of public sins that we have committed against the church. And having positively appealed for secret, private, and public confession, the second half of the book is negative. It is a warning against what is called "arricular confession." That is confession to a human priest or to God in the ears of a human priest.

And I try to deploy arguments why I believe that, biblically speaking, this is a mistaken practice. Although no doubt when somebody has something heavily upon their conscience and cannot gain relief of conscience by confessing only to God, there is a place for seeking to share a sin or grief with a fellow human being. Nevertheless, I've argued the regular practice of a regular confession and priestly absolution cannot be defended from Scripture and negative in that part.

Now, it's so happened at book because it's published under the auspices of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion in the central lot of bishops. And I received two or three letters from bishops who said exactly the same thing. I like you when you're positive.

I don't like you when you're negative. Now, this is an example you see of the kind of attitude in the church today. Now, I can only say that those who say this kind of thing have either not read the New Testament or having read it disagree with it because our Lord and his apostles not only permit us to be negative in refuting error, but they actually lay this obligation upon us.

Indeed, I kind myself wondering if it is a neglect of this negative ministry, this warning against error is not one of the major causes of theological confusion in the church today. Now, this kind of warning is a very distasteful duty to anybody with a sensitive spirit. But I venture to say that it cannot be conscientiously avoided.

And if we sit idly by and do nothing, or if we turn, tail, and flee when the wolves are invading the flock, then we shall earn the terrible epithet that Jesus gave to false pastors being higherlings, who are in it only for the money and who care nothing for the sheep. And we need to ask, are we to abandon God's flock to the wolves and leave them

defenseless like sheep without a shepherd? Are we content to see the flock scattered or to see individual sheep who are torn as it were limb from limb by wolves? If we care for the sheep of God, then we shall want to protect them from the wolves. So far then, we've talked about the example of the Apostle Paul, the dangerous influence of false teachers.

And now thirdly, I want to finish with the value of the sheep. Look again at my text, verse 28, "Take heed to yourselves, and do all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord, which he obtained for himself with his own blood." Now, implicit in this wonderful verse is the truth that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs ultimately to God himself. Almighty God is the supreme overseer of the church.

Indeed, all three persons of the eternal Godhead share in the work of oversight. For the church is the church of the Lord, or as other texts read it, the church of God. In which ever it is, the whole New Testament says that the church belongs to God, the further.

The church is God's church. And whether we read that he purchased it with his own blood, or is it almost certainly ought to be with the blood of his own? That is of his own son, his own well-beloved son. We know that the blood that was shed for the purchase of the church is the blood of God's dear son.

And in this church that belongs to God the father, and has been redeemed by God the son, God the Holy Spirit appoints overseers. He gifts them, and he commissions them to exercise oversight in the church. And he couldn't delegate this oversight to human pastors if it didn't belong to him.

Now this is a splendid truth that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs to God, the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. And if you get hold of that, it will have a profound influence upon our own ministry. We need then to remember if we're pastors, or if we're given any pastoral oversight of the flock.

That our privilege is to shepherd God's flock. The church doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God. And we need constantly to remind ourselves that these people that we are called to serve have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

Now, I don't know if I dare to say this, but you know sheep, to use this matter for here, are rather dirty creatures. They're not always the clean and cuddly things that little lambs appear from a distance. Sheep are afflicted with various parasites and pests, and have to be dipped regularly in chemicals to keep them clean.

And not any sev at some sheep are very wayward and stupid creatures. You'll understand I hesitate to apply the metaphor. But what I would venture to say is that there are some sheep in Christ's flock who are aggravating to some ministers in Christ's flock.

And there are some who are wayward sheep. Of course, I recognize that there are some members who find some ministers equally aggravating and wayward and difficult. But nevertheless, there are some ministers who find some members wayward.

I would only say to anybody who is called to pastoral oversight if you find yourself irritated or by somebody of a whom you have responsibility, just say this to yourself. This person is one for whom Jesus Christ shed his precious blood. And if Christ was willing to die for him, am I not willing to live for him? The Son of God shed his blood for them.

The apostle Paul shed his tears for them. What are we prepared to do for them ourselves? Listen to this great word of Richard Baxter in his wonderful book, *The Reformed Pastor*. He says, "Let us hear these arguments of Christ whenever we grow dull and careless.

Did I die for them? And will thou not look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth to seek and to save that which was lost? And will thou not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is thy condescension and labor as to mine? I debased myself to this, but it is thy honor to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation? Was I willing to make thee a co-worker with me? And will thou refuse that little that lieth upon thy hands?" Here, then, as I conclude, are three great arguments, three great incentives to our ministry. The example of the apostle Paul, the shepherd, the apostolic shepherd, the dangerous intrusion of the wolves, the false teachers, and the precious value of the sheep for whom Christ died.

So I conclude with these two simple lessons we need to learn. First, we need to pray that the Holy Spirit will appoint more pastors in the church. We mustn't share the contemporary tendency to denigrate the office and work of a pastor.

We mustn't be so unbiblical as to desire a church which has no ministry. We mustn't imagine that clergy are rarely redundant. The pastoral ministry, according to the New Testament, is a permanent feature of the church.

Of course, the ministry may take different shapes, but pastors and teachers are a gift of Christ to his church. And if there are any here wondering if God may be calling you into the pastoral ministry, or indeed to the mission field, the more sheep there are, and the more wolves there are, the more shepherds are needed to feed the sheep on the one hand and to rout the wolves on the other. So that's the first thing we need to pray for more pastors.

And the second is we need to pray not only for more pastors, but for better pastors, faithful pastors. That's why I just don't want to finish without drawing your attention to the beginning of my text, which is take heed to yourselves and to all the flock. Pastors have a duty to themselves as well as to the congregation they serve.

Indeed our duty to ourselves should take precedence over our duty to ourselves because we can't be of any use to anybody else if we neglect the culture of our own spiritual life. And so God's flock will only be well shepherded if God's shepherds take heed to themselves, build themselves up in prayer and in the devotional meditation of Scripture, that they may become the kind of pastors that the chief pastor Jesus Christ in his infinite condescension can use. Let's remain seated as we pray for a moment.

Let's pray for the pastors of Christ's flock in this church, in every country continent. Let's pray that the Holy Spirit will raise up more pastors and better pastors who will fulfill this biblical ideal of ministry. Lord Jesus we thank you that you were willing to shed your blood for the people of God for the flock.

We thank you that you purchase the church with your own life blood. We thank you for your willingness to go even to death for this. We pray that we may be willing to live and to give ourselves in life to those for whom you died.

Raise up more pastors, more faithful pastors who feed the sheep and rout the wolves and give themselves to this ministry. We are our prayers for your great name, so we can go now. You've been listening to the conclusion of a message by John Stott on how church leadership should be done in accordance with Scripture.

This message is part of a series of five sermons that John gave on this subject which you can hear by going to our website where you'll find hundreds of messages by John Stott. There's also a book that John wrote on this subject simply entitled "The Church" that you'll find helpful in better understanding this subject. More details can be found at premier.org.uk/JohnStott The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world.

Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

[Music]

(buzzing)