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A Charge to Church Elders - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - webteam

Whilst the leadership within each church may vary, John Stott uncovers the blueprint for church leadership that is laid out in Scripture.

Transcript

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[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stot.

There are few evangelicals who have ever influenced the global church in the 20th century as much as John Stott. And it was Betty Graham who called him the most respected clergyman in the world. Always remaining faithful to the word of God and unsuade by current trends.

The person of Christ blazed from a sermon he preached. Whilst John Stot impacted the church across the world, his home church was always all souls laying in place on the heart of London's West End. And it's from 600 sermons he preached there that were marking his centenary with some of his most powerful messages.

Clericalism is the curse of the church to many people. Others prefer more of a community approach where opportunities to lead are shared around. But whatever we may think of the church as an institution, it is very precious to Christ as referred to in the Scriptures as his bride.

So when leadership goes wrong, it's very hurtful to him. Today John Stott brings us the first part of a message entitled "A Charge to Church Elders". I want to take a few moments before I ask you to find our text, "Penting the background to our subject tonight, this charge of the Apostle Paul to the church Elders of Ephesus".

And the background I think as we meet in the 20th century here in London is that one of

the features of the modern church is an uncertainty about the role of its professional full-time ministry. There are some radical Christians today who would be very happy indeed to witness the abolition of the clergy. That is to say, they either see the ministry in exclusively sociological terms and that they consider that this work would be far better done by trained social workers than it would by the clergy.

Or else they believe so passionately in the idea of the folk church, that is to say that the church is the people's church. The church it belongs to the people and the church is people and they see clericalism, that is the domination of the laity by the clergy, as the arch enemy of the folk church idea. And so they believe the only way to liberate the church from the domination of the clergy is to abolish them.

Well, it may be a little late now to decide whether you've given your offering to the right cause or not. But I think these radical Christians fail to distinguish between what I would venture to call the blessing of the clergy on the one hand and the curse of clericalism on the other. Clericalism is the domination of the people by the professional clergy and this has always been a major curse in the Christian church.

But if only the Christian minister, the clergy, can find their right God-given role, I believe they are intended to be a God-given blessing to the church and not the curse the clericalism is. Then again today, there are some church leaders in our own country who are so burdened by economic and financial problems in that the church in many areas is no longer able to afford to train or pay its clergy, that they see the solution in an increasing voluntary and so-called auxiliary ministry of men who earn their end living by being solicitors or shoemakers or something else and offer their services free as clergy in their spare time. And then you know there is an increasing number of clergy all over the Western world today who are so bewildered about their role that they are resigning from the ministry.

I don't believe there has ever been such a number of ministerial dropouts in the whole history of the church as there has been in the last decade. Dr. Elton Troublard, who is a leading evangelical Quaker in the United States of America, tells us in one of his books that he knows an insurance company in the United States that is employing more than 200 former pastors. Now it is against this background, this uncertainty, this feeling of malaise about the role of the clergy that become to our subject tonight which is one of great importance.

To ask you to take your Bible and to turn to the lesson that was read to us earlier and in the New Testament sections of the Bible it's page 133. The book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 20, and all they were going to look at the whole of this church to some extent my text is verse 28. Acts 20, 28, and speaking to these elders, these clergy, these ministers or pastors, Paul says take heed to yourselves and to 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 Paul is on his way up to Jerusalem for the last time at the very end of his third missionary journey. He's also in a hurry. The vessel in which he has been traveling from Macedonia from northern Greece and from there passes by Ephesus but it puts into the little port of Miletus which as the crow flies is about 30 miles to the south.

And from this port of Miletus he sends a message to Ephesus that the elders of the church, the ministers or pastors of the Ephesian church will come and meet him in Miletus which they do. May effect taken them two or three days to climb over the mountains to get there but in due course they arrived and prospect to them this speech that is recorded here. Now Luke himself the author of the book of Acts was present on the occasion.

We know that reasons I can't go into but he mentions himself just after this passage. He heard it with his own ears, he gives his own summary and it is the only speech in the Acts that is addressed to Christians. All the other speeches in the Acts are evangelistic addresses which are addressed to non-Christians whether Jews or Gentiles.

And it is particularly memorable because it gives us not only some insight into the warm heart of the Apostle Paul and the clays lengths of affection that bound him to the hearts of these Ephesian pastors but in particular because of the light it thrays upon the nature of the Christian ministry. Paul calls these ministers in the Ephesian church their ships, the Greek word *Episcopoi* is the word in verse 28. They are guardians or overseers because they have been entrusted by the Holy Spirit with the pastoral oversight of the congregation in Ephesus.

This oversight of the church in Ephesus was not primarily an administrative oversight but a pastoral oversight because the church is called in verse 28 you'll notice the flock of God. It's likened to a flock of sheep. The people who have been entrusted to the care of these ministers, these young Christians who were the fruit of the three-year Ephesian mission are likened to sheep.

The elders are their shepherds or their pastors which is of course simply the Latin word for shepherd. And the chief duty of the shepherd is to feed the sheep. In other words he is called to a teaching ministry.

Now I think we got a pause there right at the beginning and see that according to the New Testament the Christian ministry is first and foremost a teaching ministry. The *presveda* or elder of the church is a pastor. The pastor is a teacher.

He exercises his oversight by teaching. Although that includes not only the public exposition of Scripture it includes also private counseling and group teaching and training as well. Now in this there is a team.

It's very interesting that Paul didn't send for one pastor over the church of Ephesus but he sent for a whole team. We don't know how many there were but there may be half a dozen or a dozen or more who came to whom the pastoral oversight had been committed. And there should be, biblically speaking in every church, a team of pastors.

Some will be ordained solemnly commissioned to a teaching ministry. Some no doubt will be lay leaders to whom is committed as in our own congregation the care of the children, Sunday school teachers. Or in addition fellowship group leaders, nurse class leaders, consultants of one kind and another and not forgetting the parents who have a responsibility to teach their own children in their own home.

So this oversight is a broad idea although it is concentrated in the care of the team of solemnly commissioned pastors. Now the message we're going to look at or listen to tonight is of consent to anybody in the congregation who has any share in the pastoral oversight of the congregation. Now what I want to ask you particularly to consider is the grounds on which Paul bases his exaltation.

The arguments that he brings forward to encourage these ministers in their work and the incentives that he gives them to heed his appeal. And there are three first. He asks them to look at the faithful example that he himself has set them in Ephesus.

For he has been a kind of chief pastor among them and they can look at and follow his example. Secondly, he asks them to think about the dangerous influence of false teachers whom he calls wolves. And third, he refers to the very precious value of the sheep who are the flock of God.

First, then the example of the shepherd, then the danger of the wolves and then the value of the sheep. And these three incentives, if we can get hold of them and meditate upon them in our minds, will be a very powerful motivation in the pastoral care that God may have given to us. Firstly, then the example of the apostle Paul.

Now in verses 18 to 27 he looks back on his ministry and he reminds them of his example. They had obviously watched his ministry closely. He had been in Ephesus for three years as we were thinking together a fortnight ago this evening.

And yet as he looked back he had no sense of misgiving, no sense of regret, no bad conscience, but there was a certain thoroughness, a certain completeness about his ministry which left his conscience clear. So let's think of the thoroughness of his ministry. In the first place, he had been thorough in his teaching.

Now much of it had been directly evangelistic. Verse 24 he says he proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God, which in the following verse 25 he calls the kingdom or the rule of God. Or if you look back to verse 21 he says he'd witnessed faithfully to the necessity of repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ.

The grace of God, the kingdom of God, repentance and faith. And so the great related gospel themes of grace and faith of the rule of God and the repentance of men had been spelled out by Paul in his evangelistic ministry. And then he didn't stop there.

Twice he says in his speech to the elders, they didn't shrink from going further. Look at these verses. Verse 20, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable to you." In verse 27 I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel that is the whole plan or purpose of God.

And I have no doubt these included the doctrines of creation and of redemption, of present Christian living and the final salvation and judgment. Paul spelled out with great thoroughness the whole biblical teaching, the whole purpose and plan of God. From the first chapter is it word of Genesis to the last chapter, although it hadn't yet been written of the revelation.

The whole purpose of God from the beginning to the end, he was very thorough in his teaching. Then be, he'd been very thorough in what I'll call his coverage. If you like the scope of his ministry, because he was as concerned to reach the whole population of Ephesus as he was to teach the whole counsel of God.

He wanted to teach everything to every body. So he says in verse 21 that he testified to both Jews and Greeks. And if you were here a fortnight ago, you'll remember that he spent the first three months speaking boldly in the synagogue that was to Jews.

Then he spent the next two years in the lecture hall of tyrannis arguing the gospel, presumably with Gentiles. And the result was, as Luke tells us, that all the residents of the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. Now thank God we've had an up to date example of that in the service tonight from Graham Scott Brown, who's told us of this desire of the little Christian church in Percran elsewhere, including himself, to push westwards with the gospel.

Among these several millions of people, these hundreds, thousands of square miles to which the gospel has not been penetrated. They want to take the whole gospel to the whole country. And that was the ambition of the Apostle Paul.

He was not content with half measures. There was a tyrannis about him and his vision, the whole gospel to the whole city of Ephesus and the whole province of Asia. And then see he'd been thorough in his methods.

Paul threw himself into his ministry with his whole heart and soul. He tells us in verse 20 that he taught the people that publicly, that is in the synagogue and in the lecture hall of tyrannis, 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 by 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 tyrannicalness, 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 ways. 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, where he is 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 a flock of sheep hunting now singly and now in packs. These 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 matter for the 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 the 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 their sheep's 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 theirs. Should be theirs 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 of 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. You've been listening to the first part 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 that 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 we are recommending today. 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 bookworlds 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.

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