

Acts 20:17-38

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Preacher: Matthew Roberts

[0 : 00] Well, please do turn in your Bibles back to the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 20, where our reading was earlier on.

For the Lord to speak to us in his word. Our Heavenly Father, we ask that the same Holy Spirit who caused these words to be written for our learning, the same Holy Spirit by whom the Lord Jesus himself was conceived in the womb of the Virgin, that he would be at work in us to bring your word to life in our hearts, to make us willing listeners and believers.

And we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. I'm going to focus on verse 28 of Acts, chapter 20.

So do find verse 28. Andrew, sitting over on the side, over there.

Andrew, as of today, you have a new duty. It is a duty to care for, to shepherd the Church of God and to pay careful attention to them and to yourself, as this verse says.

[1 : 59] Now, we're going to come to that and to what your duty is. But we, that is Andrew, you, but all the rest of us too, need to see what that is founded upon. Because this verse in the centre of Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders says something truly remarkable, which is this, that today, what we have witnessed happening right here, just a few minutes ago, is an act of the same God for the same purpose and for the same people as the great day of Christ's crucifixion at Calvary.

Now, that is a remarkable thing. Today, Andrew, the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer. That is what this verse describes ordination as.

Now, strictly speaking, today, in fact, has been the outward recognition and affirmation, solemnisation, to use the old word, by the Church, by prayer and the laying on of hands, of the Spirit's work in making you an overseer, which stretches back over years, all through Andrew's life, and it includes his upbringing and his conversion, his growth in the faith, all those who disciplesd him, his training at this church and others, his assessment by the presbytery, and including his examination just three weeks ago.

But today is the day when the Holy Spirit has publicly set you aside to be an overseer, as it's translated in this verse.

It's the same word where we get the word bishop from. But the astonishing thing about what Paul said in Miletus to the Ephesian elders is that this action of the Spirit setting aside men to be overseers of the church, of the flock, is inseparably joined in God's action and plan to what he did at Calvary.

[4 : 14] Indeed, in one sense, they are two parts of the same work. So, Andrew, your ordination today as an elder and overseer in Christ's church is part of how God is carrying into effect the work that he accomplished at Jesus' cross.

Now, that is a big thing for Paul to say. It's a big thing for us to think about. So, I want us to make sure that we've sort of followed what Paul is saying and understood it.

So, here is the first big thing that I'm going to try and convince us of, that God ordains ministers by his Spirit to shepherd the flock bought by his Son.

God ordains ministers by his Spirit to shepherd the flock bought by his Son. Let's give a bit of a backstory. So, we're in a town called Miletus.

It's a port town on the coast of what's now Turkey. It was Asia Minor, it was called then. It's a few miles away from Ephesus. Ephesus was also a port city then.

[5 : 17] But Paul is sailing to Jerusalem, but he's deliberately bypassed Ephesus because I think he just knows he knows too many people there, and it'll take too long if he stops. And so, he's gone past there.

He's stopped a few miles further down the coast at Miletus. But he sends a message to the elders of the church in Ephesus to travel the few miles to Miletus to meet with him because he wants to speak to them.

And the reason he wants to speak to them is because he knows he's never going to see them again. And this is his chance to give them a final charge, a final explanation, and an exhortation for them to understand the task that they have been given as elders in Christ's church and to carry it out diligently.

And the result is this wonderful chapter, Acts 20, with probably the most important description of the work of an elder that the Bible has.

There are others that are important too. But this one is particularly significant. And it's a long description. We read all of it earlier on. But there's actually only one command, which is in one verse right in the middle, verse 28, which is, it's sort of like, if ever you had one of those pinwheel windmills as a child, you know, which you blow and it spins around.

[6 : 40] This is the pin in the middle that the whole thing rotates around. Verse 28, Now, look carefully at what is said here.

The Holy Spirit, the Father, God, and the Son, Jesus Christ, though he's not mentioned by name, the blood of Christ is there at the end.

They're all present in this verse. The Father, Son, and Spirit are all active and present, working together to achieve the single work of the salvation of the flock, as they're described here.

This is how the church of Jesus is pictured. The sheep for whom he cares. Indeed, actually, that image is here twice. It's hidden in our translation, where it says to care for the church of God.

That is a word that means shepherd. Both that, care for, and flock both come from the same Greek word for sheep. And so the church is the sheep whom God has intended, planned from eternity, and put into action his work to gather them, to care for them, and to bring them to the full enjoyment for eternity of all the things that God has intended for them.

[8 : 11] It is one grand plan, a single purpose that God, that the one God has. And how is he achieving that?

Well, in this one verse, you can see there are two parts to it. The first is at the very end of the verse, that he obtained them with his own blood.

And the second is that the Holy Spirit has made certain men overseers, shepherds, pastors, and elders.

Those are all the same people. This is addressed to the elders of the church. This is the, well, it's either the session of the church in Ephesus, or it could possibly be the presbytery, depending on whether by now they've got more than one congregation.

We don't know that. But they are all the ordained elders of the church who have been gathered together, and they're described with all of these words. And so you see that Paul here presents it as being a two-part, if you like, work of salvation.

[9 : 20] There is the accomplishment, the purchasing, the buying of the people of God by the blood of Christ. And then there is the application of that, the bringing it to reality, the gathering and the caring of people so that they may benefit from what Christ did at the cross.

And that is achieved by the Holy Spirit appointing overseers. God intends both. They're part of the one plan of salvation of the one God.

My first ever car was a Vauxhall Chevette. I bought it for 400 pounds. I went halves with a friend, 200 pounds each. It had a magnificent engine.

As I discovered, two days after I bought it, it had an absolutely terrible clutch. The result being that you tried to move off, and the engine went vroom, and the car didn't move anywhere.

Because the power was being generated, but there was no transmission of power to the wheels, and therefore to the roads. And therefore it cost me rather more than 400 pounds, as you can imagine, to get that fixed.

[10 : 32] Now, Mr. Vauxhall, when he designed the Vauxhall Chevette, no doubt intended both. There should be an engine, and there should be a clutch that would transmit the power to the road.

Now, that's kind of the same picture here. God intended and achieved, at the cross of Christ, the full salvation of his people.

But he always intended that his people would receive that salvation, that the power of what was achieved at the cross would be transmitted to his flock by the men appointed as overseers.

The Spirit of God would apply the work that the Son of God had achieved. Now, this should strike us, well, it should strike the elders in Ephesus, it should especially strike those men who are ordained, and Andrew, that now includes you, as being an extraordinarily high requirement for an elder.

What an incredible privilege to have something bought with something so expensive. Now, I asked the children beforehand whether any of them had ever saved up for something, kept your pocket money for a number of weeks or months to buy something you really wanted.

[12:05] When I was about 10, Nintendo released the first Donkey Kong game. And those of you who are young won't even believe what it looked like.

It was about the size of two iPhones, sort of hinged together, but it did nothing other than the Donkey Kong game. Couldn't do anything else on it. But I wanted one so much that it cost £20. I saved up for months and months and months. And I can still remember the feeling of going to the bank and getting the first ever £20 note that I'd ever owned and walking to the shop.

I don't know what it was, but what shop sold that kind of thing. But anyway, and handing it over and buying this thing. I treasured my Donkey Kong game. In fact, I treasured it so much that I still have it in a drawer in my study today.

It doesn't work anymore, but nevertheless, I still have it. Now, something that costs lots of money will be something that you value enormously.

[13:04] Even more if someone else paid the price and entrusts it to you. I remember my very elderly grandmother in her 90s showing me the ring that my grandfather had bought her.

She'd worn it, obviously when they were married, but for more than 50 years as a widow. It was worn so thin that it almost had fallen off her finger. And yet she valued it because it had been bought for her by one who loved her so much.

We even talk sometimes of things being bought in blood, don't we? Our freedom in this country with the blood of the soldiers of the Second World War. Nothing's more valuable, I think, than that.

Any Star Wars fans will know that's the whole idea of the film Rogue One. I know I'm a little bit retro here, but maybe you're into this, that the plans for the Death Star, so essential in order to defeat the Empire, had to be bought at the cost of the blood of all of the people who went in the Rogue One ship to go and steal them.

And the film ends with them finally, by Princess Leia, entrusting them to R2-D2. Protect these. They are so valuable. Well, that's a silly image.

[14:26] But what we are told here about the value of Jesus' flock is beyond price. They were bought with God's own blood.

Now, that's a phrase that has really puzzled people who have read this. How can Paul speak of God's own blood? I mean, God doesn't have a body. How can God have blood?

But actually, that is exactly the point of the Son of God becoming man and living with us. The Eternal Son became one of us and took flesh and blood so that when he went to the cross, the blood he bled for us would be God's blood.

For Jesus is God himself in human flesh and the value of the blood that ran down his face, that stained the cross, that was drunk by the ground beneath his cross, the value of that blood is beyond price and that is the currency with which you, as a Christian, have been bought.

It's the currency with which the flock of Christ has been bought. There is nothing on earth so valuable as the church of Jesus Christ for nothing has been bought with such a high price.

[16:06] but Jesus did not bleed God's own blood for the salvation of his sheep at Calvary with the intention that they should then be just left defenseless to be destroyed.

Even less did he bleed God's own blood with the intention that he then wouldn't do anything in order to go and gather these sheep together into a flock. He didn't bleed God's own blood and then kind of just think well let's just kind of leave it to!

has in every age of the church appointed that there will be overseers who are also elders who are also shepherds who will care for this flock.

That is what we have witnessed today with Andrew's ordination. We have witnessed God here today in 2025 putting into practice his plan to gather nurture and save his flock.

Not just today but for many years into the future. Now therefore I need to say to you I can say this to you because I'm not a member of this congregation so to you who are the congregation of this church Andrew's ordination is an act of love of the same God to you and it is an act out of the same

love which he exerted at the cross of Christ.

[18 : 12] Now it is not only to you also part of the intention is that overseers shepherds pastors elders should bring in more sheep that's all part of it isn't it part of the work of a shepherd in Christ church is to go and gather the flock to keep on growing it and that's a vital thing for them to do and Paul we haven't referred to the rest of the speech yet but the whole of the rest of Paul's speech here is about him describing his ministry so that the Ephesian elders know what their ministry should look like they're called to be shepherds now Paul was their shepherd first and they're supposed to imitate him and one of the things he did was that he first came to them and told them about the gospel of Christ when they had never heard it before verse 21 he testified to Jews and Greeks of repentance to all God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ now that will undoubtedly be a major part of Andrew's ministry and we have already prayed and we will go on praying that the Lord will use him to bring many people who today do not know of

Christ to membership in this flock those whom God has bought but as yet do not know it to understand what they have been bought for but in the first instance it is you in this church for whom God has sent his spirit in order to set Andrew aside to be your shepherd it's an indication of his care for you to feed you and care for you therefore it is essential that you must pray for him you must receive him as from the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ you must honour him thank God for him hear his teaching gladly encourage him submit to him out of thankfulness to Christ all of those things are part of the duty the glad and happy duty that is yours as a result of today but now

I need to turn to you Andrew and to say some things more directly to you and this is the second part of what I have to say you must as Paul says here pay attention to yourself and to all the flock pay careful attention to yourself and to all the flock this is the reason why you must do so because you have been set aside to shepherd those bought with nothing less than the blood of Christ the oversight the shepherding must be what your life is all about if you look back to verse 24 this in a sense must now be your watch word as Paul says but I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of

Christ so you must pay attention to yourself and to the flock let's do those two things one at a time you must pay attention to yourself it is your duty to maintain yourself as a fit instrument for the Holy Spirit to do this great work through Paul describes in verse 33 his own purity of heart I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel that means clothing I didn't allow myself to get into this for the money or for other benefits that come from it you too must watch yourself you must cultivate and preserve your holiness and the godliness of your life Andrew you must be rigorous in putting your sinful flesh to death don't allow sinful habits to rise up in you and when they do because they will you must not allow them to remain don't let yourself grow fond or tolerant of the weeds that grow in the garden of your soul it must be your daily duty to examine yourself and to put those things to death positively you must cultivate patterns of worship and of prayer of repentance and praise of reading of scripture and the praying of the psalms for yourself one of the greatest temptations and the easiest adjustments to make in a life of a minister is to cut down on private prayer and devotion to make space for all the multitude of other things that you need to do but you must not do so paying careful attention to yourself means you must develop your abilities your knowledge your skills in teaching you must identify your weaknesses and work hard to overcome them you must strive to live the kind of life which is an example to all

Paul speaks about that as well verse 35 in that by working hard in this way we must help the weak hypocrisy is the easiest thing for a minister of the gospel to achieve all you have to do is do nothing to oppose it and you will become a hypocrite to teach one thing while your life starts to look like something else it's terrifyingly easy ask yourself with every sermon you prepare am I myself doing the things which I'm calling God's people to do practice your discipline make sure your life is well ordered organize and plan what you will do when fight the wasting of time fight the lusts of your heart the moment they arise be ready for reflection all these things you are called to do pay careful attention to yourself but alongside that you must pay careful attention to the flock pay careful attention to the flock now it's obvious why isn't it now it is as if you have been given an incredibly precious heirloom bought by someone you love and said!

[24 : 58] remember this there is nothing more valuable in the world than the flock over whom you have been placed therefore pay careful attention to them be diligent in your preparation you'll soon learn that it's impossible to prepare as well as you would like to that's always true but never let that

be an excuse for preparing less well than you could or should be diligent in considering what you should teach Paul says in verse 27 he didn't shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God everything that the flock needs here you have the privilege of having Paul tell you what to do sometimes and but you won't always and you must be careful and prayerful am I covering all that the Lord's people need to hear am I giving the sheep the full diet that they need for them to be healthy you must pay careful attention to their protection verse 29

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock from among your own cells will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them it's your task to protect the church it can be an unpleasant task you'll have to read about things that you would much rather not think about listen to speakers who are awful and teachers who speak of wickedness but don't shirk the task for you must do it for the protection of the people the flock for whom Christ shed the blood of God you must be ready to do all of these things and it is an enormous task today you have been set aside so that your life no longer is about yourself your life from today is about shepherding the flock of

God pay careful attention to yourself and to all the flock which well I don't know how we're all feeling about all of that perhaps some of you are feeling a bit sorry for Andrew now I've said all of those things Andrew maybe you yourself are a little overawed by it and rightly so who is equal to a task like this how can Andrew or Paul or Reuben or any of the elders who've been gathered here how can any man do what has been set aside here how can how can God put into the hands of people like us something so valuable it was bought with God's own blood how can any of us imagine that we are fit for such a charge well the answer is we are not but remember

Andrew the rest of the elders of this church and I say this to myself as well we are instruments in God's hands appointed by the Holy Spirit and equipped by him the Spirit calls us to the task Andrew the Spirit has called you to this task and he will equip you for it and so what does this mean what do we do with the enormity of this task the answer is we must pray that's the last and very simple thing to see and I think this beautiful scene at the end of it verse 36 when he had said all these things he knelt down and prayed with them all and that they're all weeping and that they weep with sorrow because they're not going to see Paul again Paul knows by the Spirit that he's never going to be a free man again he's going to Jerusalem he doesn't know exactly what will happen but he knows he will be arrested and indeed

Paul is never free again from that point onwards they're not going to see him again so they're deeply grieved out of their love for Paul but I think a big part of this is also this sense of they are now the ones holding the baby up till now it's always been possible to say well when Paul comes we can ask him what to do we can go to Paul years ago I used to run a children's holiday camp and for the first few years I did it I was just a junior leader under another leader a chap called Peter who was absolutely brilliant he always knew what to do in every circumstance and then one year he asked me and another chap if we would take over and we did and we had one year where he was still in charge but he didn't really do much we ran it but he was there so we could go to him and say what do we do with this what about that and it we carried on doing it for about another ten years and I never got away from the thought of thinking

[30 : 23] I need to ask Peter what to do next I can't decide what to do what do I do I'm not big enough for this job and I think that's what these elders and Ephesus are feeling it's like when Paul is gone the flock is now in our hands what can we do with a task like this how are we equal to it well there is only one thing to do verse 36 is that they kneel down and they pray and cry to the Lord cry to the Holy Spirit who has appointed them to equip them for a task so great and so precious and that therefore is what we all must do so you congregation of IPC Eling you must pray diligently for Andrew and for all your elders and Andrew you must pray diligently and the rest of the elders you must pray with him we must pray for the spirit to equip us to equip you to be faithful shepherds of a flock of a flock bought with the blood of

God himself well shall we do that right now let's bow our heads and let's pray let's