

How to keep going when your heroes have moved on

Acts 20:17-38

Canterbury Presbyterian Church, 24 March 2019

Introduction

My wife Rebecca and I were looking forward to brunch. We had been to this café before, and it was one of the best in Melbourne. We hadn't been there in a while, but our expectations were high. Someone else was looking after Samuel that day, so we would be able to enjoy the food, the coffee, and most of all, each other's company. It was going to be a beautiful Summer's day. When we got there, we found that the previously friendly service had become simultaneously hurried and indifferent. We waited for quite a while for our food. The vibe was that we were an inconvenience – that they didn't really want us to be there. When the food did arrive, it was okay, but nothing like it used to be. We were surprised and disappointed. We wondered why the place had changed. So we Googled it, and the reviews suggested that the owners had changed. What had happened was that key people left, and as a result, the place lost its direction and purpose.

This happens in other areas of life, too. Perhaps you've been in a band, or on a team, where the star player left, and everything went downhill. This congregation doesn't have a full-time minister. At Donvale, my home church, we were looking for an assistant minister, and that was hard enough. It puts extra strain on everyone. So how will this congregation keep its sense of direction and purpose? Well, today, we're looking at a passage from Acts. This book is about what happened to the church without Jesus being physically present. He ascended into heaven in chapter

1. How would his church avoid the same fate as that café that my family visited? How would it keep its sense of purpose, and keep going at all? Today's passage tells how to keep going as a church in 3 points:

1. Imitate Paul's gospel ministry (17-25)
2. Have watchmen-shepherds (26-31)
3. Draw on God (32-38)
4. Now, we're jumping into Acts about three quarters of the way through. So far, the book has followed the advance of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire, starting at Jerusalem. It has focussed on Paul, who takes the gospel further and further, through what is now Turkey, and Greece.

Our passage starts as these journeys end. From here, Paul won't retire to one of the churches that he planted. Instead, he will go back to Jerusalem, get arrested, and end up preaching the gospel in Rome as a prisoner. Paul had some idea of this. We know this because of what he says in verse 25. He is seeing them for the last time. But his address to them is more than a heartfelt goodbye. He is also leaving instructions for how they should continue after he is gone. The people who heard this speech were the elders of a church at a place called Ephesus. This is clear from verse 17. This means that as we go through this passage, the immediate application is for the leaders of the church. Now most of us here are not the formal leaders of this church – myself included. But we still need to listen. This is because what Paul has to say about church leaders affects all of us. As Paul lays down the pattern for church leaders, he is also showing us what we should pray for and expect from them. Additionally, a lot of what Paul says about church leaders applies to everyone in church.

Now Paul had been with the Ephesians for about 3 years. This is recorded in chapter 19. So before we focus on Paul's farewell instructions, let's get

some context. When Paul arrived at Ephesus, he found some disciples of John the Baptist who didn't know about Jesus. When Paul told them about Jesus, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. That's verses 1-7. Next, Paul reasoned with people in the synagogue and the Hall of Tyrannus for 2 years. As a result, everyone in the province heard the gospel. That's in verses 8-10. Then there were miraculous healings and exorcisms. In response, people burnt their valuable sorcery scrolls. That's in verses 11-20. Finally, Paul resolved to move on, but not before encountering opposition from the local pagan cult. That's from verse 21 to 20:1. That's an extraordinary ministry. Paul is about to give instructions on how it can continue after he is gone.

1 Imitate Paul's Gospel ministry (17-25)

Our first main point is that church must continue by imitating Paul's gospel ministry. In verses 17-25, he tells them what he's done, and what he will do. His aim is not really to give a report of himself, but an example to follow. We know this because of the context – that it is Paul's farewell speech. Additionally, we know that Paul's account of himself is more than a report because if you contrast it with what actually happened at Ephesus, it seems really different! Paul doesn't mention the huge number of people who heard him, the visible manifestations of the Holy Spirit, or the miraculous healings. Instead, Paul tells them that he did gospel ministry with them. There are 2 sub-points to this:

1. What to do – proclaim the gospel
2. How to do it – as ministry, i.e. service (the words mean the same thing)

1.1 Gospel

So first, let's look at proclaiming the gospel. In verse 20, he says that he "preach[ed]" and "taught" them. In verse 21, he declared. In verse 24, he

testifies. All of these are different ways that Paul proclaimed the gospel to them. The repetition tells us that this is important. Once Paul is gone, the Ephesians are to keep the proclamation of the gospel at the centre of their church! But what is this gospel? We can assume that it is included in "anything that would be helpful" in verse 20". Paul calls it "the good news of God's grace" in verse 24. But in verse 21, he gives a summary of the gospel – that everyone must "turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus". Let's pause here for a moment, because this is the message that church is all about. You see, we live in an amazing world, and God made it all. This means that all of life should be directed towards God. We owe it to him, since every moment is a gift from him. But every one of us here has lived not towards God, but away from him. We have rejected his rule over our lives. We refuse to live for him – we'll live for anything else instead – cars, gadgets, hobbies, holidays, food, homes, comfort, fun, career success, human relationships, and so on. We put these things in the place of God, and it turns out that none of them are worth it. They're all disappointing, and none of them last. And by snubbing God for these things, we invite his judgement on ourselves. These are the reasons why God requires us to turn to him in repentance. We need to turn our lives around completely – to live lives that are oriented to God – to acknowledge him in every part of life! This sounds difficult, and that's because it is. In fact, humanly speaking, it's impossible. But the good news is that God has made a way for it to be possible – Jesus Christ lived the perfect, God-ward life that we couldn't live. He took God's judgement for us when he died on the cross. And his resurrection life shows that we can rely on him. Do you rely on him in this way? That's what it means to "have faith" in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps this gospel is new to you, and you have questions about it. Or maybe you've heard it a million times, but you've never really responded personally before. If that's you, let me encourage you to sort

this out before you leave today. I'll be happy to speak with you about it after the service, and I'm sure that the leaders of this church would be, too.

1.2 Ministry

Now, this section doesn't just say to follow Paul's example by proclaiming the gospel. It also tells us to imitate how Paul did it – as personal, passionate service. This is our 2nd sub-point. In verse 19, Paul describes how he served – with “humility”, “tears” and “testing”. In verse 23, he looks forward to serving in the face of prison and hardship. Paul didn't hold back at a professional distance. He poured himself into serving, to the point of tears. He served personally. He also served passionately. Now we tend to use the word “passion” to talk about enthusiasm or excitement. But the word is actually about suffering. Your passion is the thing for which you are willing to suffer. We still have a sense of this when we talk about the passion of Jesus Christ, that is, his suffering and death. That's what I mean when I say that Paul served passionately. He was willing to suffer. Are you willing to suffer for the proclamation of the gospel? I ask this question because my own tendency is an unwillingness to suffer. A couple of weeks ago, I was asked to host our small group Bible study. At first, I was reluctant. Our place isn't central. It's also pretty small. But when I thought about it, I realised that these were just excuses. I didn't want to do it because it would involve suffering. And it really did involve a cost! That afternoon was really busy. It was a mad rush for Rebecca and I to get dinner, bathe Samuel, put him to bed and tidy up our house that evening. But this was for the opportunity to come together around God's word, and it was worth it. How will you suffer for the gospel? Will you give up time to be involved at church beyond Sunday services? Will you open up your home? This is confronting, because we like to think of our homes as private spaces. But I mention it because in verse 20, Paul says that his gospel ministry didn't just take place “publicly”, like what we are doing now, but also “from house to house”.

In all of this, Paul was instructing the Ephesian elders to imitate his gospel ministry. He was telling them to serve passionately, and to proclaim the gospel tirelessly.

2 Have watchman-shepherds (26-31)

Paul moves from describing his own ministry to describing the task of the elders in verses 26 to 31. The elders of the church are to be watchmen and shepherds. This is our second main point.

Watchmen

At first, it looks like Paul is still talking about his ministry in verses 26 and 27. In these verses he says that he is innocent of their blood because he proclaimed the whole will of God to them. Now, this is quite an odd thing to say. But actually, Paul is quoting the passage that we read earlier today in Ezekiel 33. The point is that if a city was attacked and the watchman failed to sound the warning, he would be responsible for the deaths of the people. Similarly, if Ezekiel failed to deliver his prophetic warning, God would hold him responsible for those who continued in sin to receive God's judgement. And Paul failed to proclaim the gospel – including the uncomfortable bits about the need to turn away from sin – then God would hold him responsible, too. Our church leaders must proclaim the whole will of God. Sometimes there are situations where a hard word is necessary, and the temptation is to keep quiet. This has implications for the rest of us, too. It should change how we receive hard words from church leaders. It's not easy to hear that we need to change. But when we are being corrected, we should keep in mind that our church leaders do it because they have a responsibility to God for our spiritual welfare. In verse 28, Paul extends the watchman metaphor. He says that they must keep watch over themselves. Paul writes along similar lines in 1 Timothy 4:16: “Watch your life and doctrine closely”. You see, it's just so easy to forget this. We're so busy

studying, working, recovering from sickness, looking after children, and trying to stay in touch with friends and family that we let ourselves drift when it comes to our own doctrine and personal Godliness. Even doing church stuff can distract us from keeping watch over ourselves. There are times when I fail to make keeping watch over myself a priority. I have robust theological discussions at college. I help out with stuff at church. I try to be helpful around the home. But upon reflection, sometimes I get so busy with these things that I let my personal devotional life drift. What about you? I'm not just talking about private Bible reading and prayer. I'm also talking about how we participate in small group Bible studies and in Sunday services. A couple of weeks ago, we had the ministry conference at college. One of the speakers asked this penetrating question: "When was the last time you changed something in your life in response to a sermon?" We need to receive God's word not as a curiosity, but as the standard for watching our lives. In verse 28, Paul also tells them to watch the flock. They need to be protected from the threats that Paul talks about in verses 29 and 30. False teachers will come to them from inside and out, distorting the gospel truth. Paul protected against these threats by continually and tearfully warning people, and the elders must continue doing this. This means that our church leaders must correct false teaching, even when it would be easier to keep quiet. We gave some thought to the need to warn people with the gospel earlier. I think that it's good to be more positive and proactive than that – to make sure that we are teaching everyone in our church the truth of the gospel, so that we can recognise false teachers. Delivering this sort of training will take effort from church leaders. But if this is going to be effective, the rest of us will need to put effort into active participation.

2.1 Shepherds

Now, the watchman metaphor is helpful, but it is a bit impersonal. The whole thing about warning people sounds a bit like how if you want to sue

someone, you have to serve the legal documents on them before the lawsuit starts. But Paul doesn't leave it there. His allusion to Ezekiel continues to chapter 34. So in verses 28 and 29 he says that the elders are to care for the flock as shepherds. That is to say, they must not merely teach and warn, but care – just as Paul didn't just warn, but he did it with tears! Just as Paul's example was of personal, passionate service, the elders must lovingly care for the people under them. This takes time and effort. It involves having open homes and open lives. This is hard, but it's worth it, because the church is precious. Verse 28 tells us that it was bought with Jesus' blood. Now the responsibility to exercise this sort of care is especially for the elders of the church. The rest of us should think about the role we have in supporting this. We should pray for them. We should encourage them. We should consider how we can serve at church so that they can focus on doing the work of watchmen and shepherds. So Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to be watchful and caring shepherds. That's the second way they can continue the church.

3 Draw on God (32-35)

From here, Paul commits them to God in verses 32-35. This brings us to our third main point – to continue as a church, we must draw on God. You see, imitating Paul's gospel ministry and being watchman-shepherds is hard. It's too hard for anyone to do in their own strength. The answer is that God and the word of his grace can build us up. Earlier today, we considered the need to maintain our personal devotional lives and receive God's word with humility. These are the means through which God strengthens us to lead his church, and to be his church. Paul gives some detail about how this works. He doesn't just say that "God and the word of his grace" can "build us up". He says that it can also "give us an inheritance among all those who are sanctified". What is this inheritance? Paul doesn't say in this speech, but he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that those who are in Christ will

inherit the kingdom of God, and imperishable bodies. And he wrote in Romans 8 that as the children of God, our inheritance is to share in the glory of Jesus Christ! This is what we have to look forward to. Looking forward to this inheritance will prevent us from being consumed by a desire for material wealth. Paul refers to this in verse 33. And the certainty of this great inheritance gives us the capacity to sacrifice ourselves and our possessions in order to help others, as Paul says in verses 34 and 35. As John Piper puts it:

Quit being satisfied with the little 2% yields of pleasure that get eaten up by the moths of inflation and the rust of death. Invest in the blue-chip, high-yield, divinely insured securities of heaven. Devoting a life to material comforts and security and thrills is like throwing money down a rat hole. But investing a life in the labor of love yields dividends of joy unsurpassed and unending: "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. [And thus] provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail" (Luke 12:33). [...] Come to Christ, in whose presence are fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. [...] The Lord has spoken: It is more blessed to love than to live in luxury! More blessed now, and forever.

Conclusion (36-38)

Today we have heard Paul's farewell instructions to the elders of the church at Ephesus. After his departure, they are to continue leading the church by:

1. Imitating Paul's gospel ministry,
2. Being watchman-shepherds, and
3. Drawing on God.

Now we are getting to the end of the passage. In verses 26 to 38, Paul departs, and what happens is an illustration of what church should be like.

- They prayed – recognising their need for God's sustenance for the future
- They wept – they cared about each other!

Lord God, help us to be like this. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.