

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. ³² Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

THE MINISTRY IS SHEPHERDING

- I. It is established by God
- II. It is for the benefit of the Sheep
- III. It is for the proclamation of the Gospel

Dear Fellow members of Christ's flock,

Among the pictures of our Lord Jesus and His work are those that portray Him as a shepherd. Hook's painting of Jesus rejoicing carrying a lamb around His neck is among the favorites. Perhaps the most common is the picture of Jesus holding a shepherd's staff with sheep all around Him. These pictures of Jesus convey comfort and confidence to those who view them. Perhaps this is why they are often displayed on the walls in children's rooms.

Paul appeals to this picture of Christ to reach the hearts of the pastors who were gathering to see and hear him. He had some important things to say to them and he wanted to do it with a heartfelt message for them, a message which they would hold on to for years to come. Do you suspect that this is the way every pastor feels about the message he delivers to God's people? Do you think that he hopes you will remember it? I know that some of you discuss the sermon on your way home from worship and in doing so are imbedding it in your hearts and minds.

In the text Paul was on his way to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. He stopped at Miletus, the port city of Ephesus and the pastors from all around came to see him. It was a touching scene because revelation had been given that Paul would be taken prisoner in Jerusalem and what would become of him was uncertain. So they were taking advantage of the situation to see Paul, perhaps, for the last time.

This presented Paul with the opportunity to instruct these men one more time. The urgency of his instruction to these pastors grew out of the critical needs of Christ's church at that time. Paul uses a comparison to make his point. He tells them that MINISTRY IS SHEPHERDING. Three elements of ministry as shepherding are emphasized. First, Christian ministry is established by God. Second, Christian ministry is for the benefit of the flock and finally, Christian ministry is for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The text begins: **Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.** Did you hear what Paul said about how these

men had become ministers in Christ's church? He doesn't refer to the fact that he may have appointed some of them when he had worked in the area earlier. Nor does he refer to the fact that some of them may have been chosen by the casting of lots. Although these may have been ways in which these pastors were chosen, the reality of how these men became ministers of Christ is that God, the Holy Spirit, had made them overseers of the church. The Holy Spirit worked through the human process to accomplish His will.

This is why Paul could say to those who were judging his ministry in another place that such judgment did not concern him. The reason he gave for such a bold statement is that he was first and foremost accountable to God. He knew how he had become a missionary to the Gentiles. You don't have to be knocked off your horse more than once to remember the confrontation by Christ and the subsequent call to serve as Christ's ambassador, His apostle to the Gentiles.

We follow the Spirit's teaching in this matter to this day. We speak of the divine call into the public ministry of the church. While there are human elements in the issuance of a divine call, it in reality is the Holy Spirit who leads the calling body to select the person to receive the call. This is the way Christ administers His church. The elders or pastors are accountable to the One who has called them to serve. Hence, they are to guard themselves first. They are to guard their life and they are to guard the doctrine. This is the encouragement the Apostle gave to the young Pastor in his second letter to Timothy. It is important for pastors to keep their spiritual powder dry and uncontaminated. Then their message will continue to be powerful in reaching the hearts of those who hear them.

What are the pastors who are set apart by their calling to do? Paul says, **Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood.** Shepherds under the Chief Shepherd, this is how the pastors are to consider their relationship with the Savior. Christ made this all possible by pouring out His own blood to purchase the church as His own. Notice that it says this purchase has been made by God's blood. When God became man, He did not stop being God. As the God-man He was not two persons but one person. What the Man did, God was doing. What belongs to the Man, belongs to God. When Jesus' blood was shed, God's blood was shed. When God bought the church, He did it with His own blood.

So, having bought the church – an act that has already taken place – Christ, the Head of the church, now makes provision for the administration of His church. This brings us to another aspect of the shepherd's work. It is to keep the flock safe. The shepherd has to be on a constant lookout for the predators of the flock. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, warned in Matthew 7:15, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." No pastor and no church anywhere or at anytime can be complacent about the possibility of false teachers. Wolves kill sheep. False teachers kill souls. It happened at Ephesus in Paul's lifetime. This is what he wrote to Timothy, "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus, so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work – which is by faith." In commenting on this verse Professor Balge of our seminary made this remark, "False prophets do not only come from outside the church. Most dangerous are those who arise from within. They do not

oppose the truth in a straight forward way and say that it is false. Rather, they distort it. They use the right words but twist and pervert them. Their intention and purpose is to make people loyal to them and their lies instead of following Christ and His truth.”

This was a continuing warning. Paul says that he never stopped warning the Ephesians. So, he tells the pastors in this farewell message to keep watch. Tears of earnestness formed in his eyes as he pleaded with them to hold sacred the trust given to them in the Word of Christ. These are also words which all of us need to take to heart. Those who would plead for us to make an exception in their case to the teaching of the church are undermining the integrity of our message. God’s Word is not relative to circumstances. The foundation for our faith is sure and the standard for morality is fixed. And this sentence does not end with a dash, but with a period.

The text ends, **Now I commit you to God and to the Word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.** Who could keep the pastors faithful in their work and who could protect the church from the savage predators? Only God. How does God do this? He does it through His Word of Grace, the Bible! This is the Word which Paul had articulated to them. It was through this precious Word that God’s grace was proclaimed to them. It was through this precious Word that God’s grace was implanted in them and in us through faith and it is through this precious Word that God keeps us in His grace.

Paul was not going to be there to help them in their struggle to keep the Truth secure. He was on His way to Jerusalem. However, it wasn’t Paul that kept them faithful in the first place. This is always accomplished in the hearts of the believer by the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

Do you understand, then, why we often plead with you not to be negligent in hearing the Word and receiving the Sacrament? We are sheep. We are vulnerable. We need the guiding staff of the Good Shepherd to keep us where the grass is lush and the waters are quiet.

So, if the Word proclaimed raps you on the forehead, consider that it is done in love for you to bring you to the realization that your Savior is reaching out to you to draw you back to Him and to His forgiving love, His unconditional love. And when you are anointed with the balm of the Gospel, realize that this sweet unction can be applied and bring healing to your soul only because of the life which Jesus lived for you and because of the death that He died for you. He verified all this for you through His resurrection from the dead.

Sometimes when we are younger, we wonder why attending worship is important every Sunday. Could a happy compromise be reached and we skip every third Sunday. Sometime the hymns are hard to sing. Some services get so long. But, my dear friends, regular attendance is important because here the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed. And wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, there the Spirit of our God is working. He moves among us as He pleases, invisibly, but most certainly, distributing the gifts of grace which Jesus won for us. The Good Shepherd has given you shepherds so that this proclaiming of the Gospel is done week after week. Praise God for the shepherding ministry. Amen.