

Acts Series Part 57

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we were considering Paul's account of his ministry among the church at Ephesus, and we did so in such a way as to present a portrait of the servant of God, called by Jesus to the service of Jesus, that he might make Jesus known. And we also noted that in that address to the elders from Ephesus, there were two parts to it. There was this description by Paul of his own ministry, this portrait of the servant of God, but there is also in the address words of exhortation to the elders responsible for the care of the church at Ephesus. And in these words of exhortation, we have what we might call a portrait of the church of God. Now, the portrait is not an exhaustive one, but it is certainly an instructive one. And really, most of what we want to say will revolve around one verse that we find in Acts chapter 20. We'll read from verse 28 of Acts chapter 20.

That's on page 1117, Acts chapter 20 from verse 28. It is at this point that Paul directly addresses the elders of the church at Ephesus, giving them their instructions. So, listen to what he says to them as we read from verse 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.

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So, be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you, night and day with tears. 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. In these words, as I've suggested, we have a portrait of the church of God. And in verse 28, particularly, Paul highlights three truths concerning the church. And I want to notice what these three truths are and then consider them each in turn. The first truth that Paul makes very clear in these words to the elders at Ephesus is that the church belongs to God. What does he say there in the second half of verse 28? Be shepherds of the church of God. The church belongs to God. It is God's church.

This is the first basic, you might say obvious, certainly fundamental truth. The church belongs to God. The second truth, and it's connected, indeed all three truths are very much intertwined and connected, though distinct truths in and of themselves. But the second truth is that the church has been bought by God. That is what Paul immediately goes on to say there in verse 28. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. The church belongs to God. The church has been bought by God.

But there's another truth concerning the church that we find in this verse, and it is this, that the church is cared for by God. This we see very clearly in the previous words at the beginning of verse 28, where the instruction to the elders is to keep watch over the flock, and then it says, which the Holy Spirit, or over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. So, Paul is very clear that the care of the church is the responsibility of God. God is the one who cares for the church.

[4 : 22] God, by His Spirit, delegates in a measure the responsibility to these elders, but it is God who takes it upon Himself, the care of His church. So, the church belongs to God, the church has been bought by God, and the church is cared for by God. Now, if we think about this a little bit more before looking at each of these truths in turn, we can say the following, that the richness of these truths is, if you wish, further appreciated, as we notice the manner in which all three persons of the Trinity are intimately involved in the church. If I could just develop these three truths in this way, and then explain why I think it's legitimate to do so. So, the same see truths, but develop just a little.

The church belongs to God, the Father, very particularly, or very specifically, in the thinking or in the thought of Paul on this occasion. The church belongs to God, the Father. The church has been bought by God, the Son, bought by the blood of God, the Son, and the church is cared for by God, the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who made the elders there in Ephesus overseers, carers of the church.

Now, it's not enough simply to make that statement. We need to explain it, or in any case, give a foundation for this Trinitarian structure, if you wish, that we have, or that we are suggesting, is found here in this verse. Well, on what basis can we say this? I think the third point, that the church is cared for by God, the Holy Spirit, and specifically in regards to the Holy Spirit's responsibility of appointing overseers is very clear. It's very explicit. But we do need to explain a little further the suggestion that the church belongs to God, the Father, and is bought by God, the Son, or certainly by the blood of God, the Son. On what basis do we say this? Well, let's just think for a wee moment on what Paul says here, there in verse 28. He says, or he speaks of, the church of God which he bought with his own blood. This statement of Paul, if we think about it just for a moment, not surprisingly, has generated some difficulties for those who read it. Why? Because at first light or at first sight when we read it, the church of God which he bought with his own blood, the suggestion would seem to be that there is a reference here to the blood of God. And that phrase or that suggestion, understandably, is one that people have had difficulty getting their heads round. How can you speak of the blood of God? And yet it says, the church of God which he, God, bought with his own blood. And so, it would seem that that is the outcome or the conclusion. Indeed, it created so much difficulty that it led, it would seem that this would be the explanation, to some manuscripts changing. And the statement there, for example, there, if you notice at the foot of the page on your Bibles, at that point it says, many manuscripts say of the Lord. So, in those manuscripts, what you have is the church of the Lord which he bought with his own blood. And clearly, that creates a lot less difficulty. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ, which was bought with the blood of the

Lord Jesus Christ. The difficulty is, is solved as it were. But I don't think it is necessary to go down that route. Rather, the manner in which we can understand what Paul is saying here is to understand how the second part of what he says here can be alternatively translated. Legitimately, but alternatively translated. And it would run, or it would read as follows, the church of God which he bought with the blood of his own. It seems almost the same, but you can, if you think about it, you can notice there is a clear difference there in the implications. The church of God which he bought with the blood of his own, rather than with his own blood, with the blood of his own, where son is implied. And there, if we understand it in that way, which I think is a reasonable and defensible way of understanding what Paul is saying, we are better able to identify the Trinitarian aspect of this. The church of God the

Father, bought by the blood of his son, bought by the blood of his own son. And this church cared for by God the Holy Spirit who appoints overseers over the church. Well, let's think of each of these truths concerning the church that Paul presents to us here as he exhorts the elders at Ephesus. And first of all, the church belongs to God. Now, having presented what we think to be a legitimate way of understanding what Paul is saying here and identifying a Trinitarian aspect to it, while we do believe it is legitimate, nonetheless, it is right to introduce a word of caution. The fact that Paul has in mind on this occasion that the church of God is a phrase where he is referring particularly and specifically to God the Father shouldn't lead us to overstate this truth, that the church belongs to God the Father in a misleading way. Yes, the church does indeed belong to God the Father, but what belongs to the

[10:27] Father belongs to the Son. And indeed, what belongs to the Father belongs to the Holy Spirit. While it is true that generally the term that is used in the New Testament of the church is the church of God, that is certainly on one occasion, there may be more, but certainly there's one occasion where Paul speaks of the churches of Christ. When he is extending greetings to the readers at the end of the letter to the Romans, that is a phrase that he uses, the churches of Christ. So clearly for Paul, there wasn't a difficulty to use God and Christ interchangeably in speaking of the church, the church of God, the church of Christ. But having introduced that word of caution, that we're not speaking of the Father having some kind of exclusive property right over the church, nonetheless, let's move on to think of and consider briefly the implications of this truth that the church belongs to God. And specifically on this occasion, the suggestion that Paul here has particularly in mind, God the Father. What are the implications of this? Well, really they're manifold and multiple, and what I'm going to share with you this evening are two or three, not perhaps in any particularly systematic way, and certainly not exhaustive, but I hope helpful and instructive. What are the implications then of this truth that the church belongs to God? Well, the first thing that you can say is that as the church belongs to God, the church is the object of His fatherly love. God the Father owns a church, and so we, the church, are the objects of His fatherly love. We are the apple of His eye. He loves us as His own Son. He is the Father, and we are His precious, and we are His precious, loved Son. The church, as we know, is also spoken of in the New Testament as the body of Christ, and Christ is the head. And so we are united to Christ, the Son of God. And so when the Father looks down on the church, when He looks down on us,

He looks down on His love, His beloved, His precious Son. The church belongs to God, and so we, the church, are the objects of His fatherly love. It's also true that as we recognize this truth that the church belongs to God, belongs to God the Father, it also follows from that, flows from that, that the church is bound together by our shared sonship. You know, even in this city this evening, there are a multiplicity of gatherings of Christians, and on the notice board, on the front of the building, a multiplicity of different names. And perhaps an outsider, it would seem that there's no connection between us. And yet, if we are believers in Jesus Christ, if we are part of the church, we are bound together by our shared sonship. God the Father owns us. We share the same Heavenly Father, and so we are bound together, though we may seem very separate, and though we may be guilty of disassociating ourselves with other believers, of squabbling with others. The truth that cannot be questioned is that as God is the owner of the church, so we who are His church are bound together in Him.

But we can say more concerning the implications of this truth that the church belongs to God. We can say this, that the church is subject to His fatherly authority. We are subject to God. He is the owner of the church. He has the prerogative and all the authority to do with His church as He pleases. He is the one who determines what it is we are to believe, what it is we are to teach, what our mission is, how we are to behave. All of these things are rightly determined by the one who is owner, and God is the owner. And so we must be subject to God. Now, this may seem self-evident, and yet it would appear often in the church today this is a novel concept. The church takes upon itself the authority to believe as it pleases, and to teach as it pleases, and to live as it pleases, and to determine what its mission is as it pleases, cutting or seeking to break that connection with and that subjection to the one who is owner.

How are we to demonstrate, not only by declaring it but by living it, how are we to demonstrate our subjection to God the Father, the owner of the church? Well, the very clear way that we can do so is by being subject to His revealed will as it is presented to us in the Scriptures. In the measure that we are subject to the Scriptures, as the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God, in that measure, we are demonstrating our subjection to the owner of the church, or a God.

We can go on, and I just want to suggest one other implication of this truth, that the church belongs to God, and it is this, and I hope an encouraging for us, an encouraging one for us in what can be discouraging times. Given that God is the owner of the church, the church's ultimate and indeed glorious destiny is guaranteed. It may appear often that as the church of Jesus Christ, we stumble from crisis to crisis. You know, we shoot ourselves in the foot. We do things often so badly, and we wonder, well, what is our destiny? What does the future hold for us? And of course, as we look to ourselves, it's not a rosy picture that we see, but we are invited and encouraged to look to the one who is owner of the church. He is the one who will determine our destiny. He is the one who guarantees the ultimate success of this mission that is His church. The church belongs to God.

[16 : 56] It belongs, in Paul's thought here, very particularly to God the Father. So, I ask you this evening, what church do you belong to? How would you respond to that question? What church do you belong to?

Well, you might respond, and it wouldn't be wrong or inappropriate to do so. Well, I belong to Bonacord, and that's fine. You might say, no, I belong to the Free Church of Scotland, and that's fine.

But of course, though these things are true, the fundamental answer to that question, what church do you belong to? Is I belong to the church of God. God is the owner of the church. I am part of that church, the church of God. But the second truth concerning the church in this portrait of the church that Paul presents to us as he exhorts the elders at Ephesus. The second truth that we have noticed, particularly there in verse 28, is that the church has been bought by God, bought by God the Son, bought by the blood of His own, the blood of Jesus Christ. Now, this second truth isn't, of course, an entirely distinct truth from the first one. Rather, it would seem that Paul would be providing a basis for his first statement that the church is the church of God, and he is providing an answer to any doubter who perhaps might probe, well, you say that the church is the church of God.

How so? How so? On what basis do you make that claim? And Paul could explain, well, I make that claim, I make that affirmation on this basis, that the church has been bought by His own blood, bought by the blood of His own Son. Now, we've already briefly touched on how we can best understand what Paul is saying here, that a reasonable understanding, indeed a reasonable translation of what is being said, is captured by this phrase, the church of God bought by the blood of His own.

Now, by this, again, perhaps as a word of caution, if that's the right expression to use, by this, we are not to understand that somehow the church did not belong to God before this transaction took place, a transaction that in a moment we'll think about, by no means. We know that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. All of creation belongs to God. And yet, though that is true, there is a very real sense in which the church has been bought by the blood of Jesus and so has become, we can use this verb become, has become God's special possession, having been bought by the blood of His Son, having been bought by the blood of Jesus. But what does this mean? What does it mean to say that the church has been bought by the blood of Jesus? What is this buying all about? Well, this is a large subject matter, considering what is involved in the redemption of the church. But I want to just think about it in a few brief steps. Consider this matter, this matter of the church having been bought by the blood of Christ. The first thing to say is that the verb that Paul uses here, the church of God which he bought with his own blood, the verb he uses here is a very general word that can be translated bought or purchased. But I think we can reasonably understand it to be equivalent to the word that Paul would more ordinarily use in this context of speaking of the blood of Christ and of how it is effective in buying or purchasing or indeed, and this is the word, redeeming his own.

[20 : 51] There is another Greek word that is translated redeem rather than buy. But I think here we can understand the word that Paul uses as effectively equivalent to redeem. And so what Paul is saying is that the church of God has been bought, has been purchased, has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

The word redeemed also means to purchase, but it has a more particular meaning, whereas the word here, bought, is a more generic, more general word. But as I say, I think Paul using them as equivalent terms.

But as we do think of the word redeem, that the church has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, this word takes us or certainly would have taken the hearers or the readers of this letter, or the hearers there in Ephesus, I think very quickly to the marketplace, this idea of the church having been redeemed. It would have taken them in their mind's eye to the marketplace and the redemption of a slave, a slave who, in order to gain his freedom, could be bought by a redemption price.

And the price was paid, and the slave was freed. This exchange needed to take place. He was in captivity. He was owned by another, but the price is paid, and so he is set free. He is redeemed from his slavery. This is the picture that would be conjured in the mind of those who would listen to what Paul was saying here. And of course, that takes us to an understanding of what has been said concerning the church, concerning those of us who by grace become part of the church. We too needed to be redeemed. The word implies that there was a plight that we were in and a price that needed to be paid. What was our plight? Well, our plight was that we were slaves to sin. We were in captivity to sin, and we were bound by that captivity to pay the price or the wages of sin, which was death. This was our due reward. And there was no way that we could escape from the chains of our captivity. We were incapable of buying our own freedom. This was our miserable plight as sinners, slaves to sin, incapable of saving ourselves, incapable of breaking those chains, much as we might have tried to do so.

This was our plight. And for us to be redeemed from that plight, a price needed to be paid. A price needed to be paid to redeem us. And this is what Paul is saying. The price that was paid was the blood of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 48] The church of God bought, purchased, redeemed with His own blood, with the blood of His Son, with the blood of Jesus Christ. Why this talk of the blood of Christ as the redemption price?

Well, certainly the talk of the blood of Christ would, to any informed reader, very clearly have taken them back to their knowledge of the Old Testament and of the blood that was shed, of the sacrifices to provide forgiveness of sins. And Jesus being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the one whose blood being shed served as the perfect and final and ultimate sacrifice for sin. And when it speaks of the blood of Christ, it's a word, symbol, to speak of the death of Christ.

The blood of Christ is equivalent to the death of Christ. Christ needed to die. This was the price that needed to be paid. The wages of sin is death. And rather than the sinner paying those wages, Jesus pays those wages for us. He pays the price. He offers Himself as a sacrifice to redeem us. And the moment we start speaking of Jesus paying the price, of Jesus dying the death that we had to die, it brings us necessarily to recognize Jesus as our substitute, as the one who stood in our place, the one who died in our place, the one who died for us to redeem us. Jesus as a ransom in our place, implicit in what we read here in Acts, is found more explicitly as we read in Mark chapter 10 and verse 45. There would be, and there could be, many, many other references, but we limit ourselves to this one reference in Mark chapter 10 and in verse 45. What do we read there of Jesus' own understanding of His mission? What does He say? For even the Son of

Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. To give His life as a ransom for many, as the redemption price for many. Not only for many in the sense of for the benefit of many, but for many in the sense of in the place of many. He took our place. He died on Calvary's tree as our substitute that He might take the punishment that we were due, that He might pay the price of our redemption. So, the church of God, this church that the elders in Ephesus are to care for, it belongs to God. But not only does it belong to God, but it is a church that has been bought by God, bought by the blood of His own Son. A church bought at a great price, the price of His own dearly, beloved, precious Son. And so, given the price that has been paid, the church so bought is a precious church. And as a precious church, so a church that must be cared for, given its great volume.

Which takes us on to the third truth that we find here in verse 28 in this exhortation that Paul directs to the elders at Ephesus. The church is cared for by God. We notice there what Paul says, that the overseers, the elders, the shepherds, are to keep watch over yourselves, and the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. The leaders in Ephesus did not take it upon themselves to care for the church. No, God Himself appointed them. God appointed them. The Holy Spirit appointed them, made them overseers, as God takes responsibility for caring for His church. The church is cared for by God. Now, this is a great truth. It's a very encouraging truth to know that God cares for His church. But in the light of what we have just said and just considered, a wonderful truth, but I would suggest an entirely predictable one. Of course He cares for His church, given that He owns His church, given that He has paid such a great price to redeem His church, He could do no other. It would be something that is inconceivable that He would pay such a price and then take no care for His church.

[28 : 32] It's inconceivable that such a high price would be paid for something that then subsequently would be left uncared for. So, a wonderful truth, but a very predictable one. Of course, God cares for His church.

But how does He do so? How does He exercise His loving care for His church? Well, one way, not the only way, but one way, one important way, and the way that Paul is concerned with identifying here as he exhorts the elders, one important way is by means of delegating to leaders in the church this responsibility to care for the church. Perhaps we can speak more helpfully, not simply of delegating that responsibility, but of involving the leaders in the church in a shared responsibility with God for the care of His church. The language of delegation is not inaccurate, but it's maybe has the danger of suggesting that somehow God, yes, He takes responsibility for appointing these elders in that measure He cares for His church, but then somehow He takes a step back and leaves the elders to it. That is not the idea at all. He grants these men the privilege of participating with Himself in the care of His church. That, I think, is a more helpful way of understanding it. Well, what are the duties commended to these overseers, to these shepherds, to these elders? Indeed, many words are used here interchangeably to describe these men. In fact, I think three words, elders, that's what Luke uses as he speaks of them coming, and then in the words of Paul, we have the language of overseers and the language of shepherds, and evidently they are being used of the same men interchangeably. But let's not go down that road.

All we want to do now as we draw things to a close is just to notice, to identify what the duties that are commended to these carers, these overseers, these shepherds of the church at Ephesus, and by necessary implication beyond. Now, as we think of these duties, there is clearly a very particular and very challenging and sobering application to those who are elders. But I think we can also say that there are principles here concerning the care of the church that can be reasonably and legitimately applied to all believers. What are the duties then? Well, there's two very much in particular that Paul highlights there in verse 28. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. So, first of all, these men are to keep care of themselves, and then secondly, and very much connected, they are to care for the flock. And the order that Paul gives is, we might describe a very sensible one. It makes perfect sense that they would begin by considering and taking care for themselves. How are they to take care of the flock if they don't take care of themselves?

How are they going to have any authority in exhorting and instructing the flock if they are careless in their own lives? And so, very reasonably, very logically, the duties that are presented to them begin with this duty of care for themselves. In what way were they to take care of themselves?

Well, I think we can identify two ways that, again, I think are connected. There is, I'm sure, a moral dimension here. They were to be careful as to the manner in which they lived. They were to be careful in the measure in which the words that they spoke were truthful. They were to be careful as to the purity of their lives, and we could go on and on giving multiple examples. But there is a moral dimension of caring for themselves. But there is also, and I think particularly Paul's concern here, is for the doctrinal dimension. And here, we don't want to make an artificial divorce between these two things, but they are distinct nonetheless. What Paul goes on to say concerning the savage wolves that will twist the truth and will draw away the disciples. There's no doubt that Paul's very particular and urgent concern is doctrinal, that there would be error that would come into the church, indeed would emerge from within the church. And the elders are to take care for themselves as regards their grasp and understanding of sound doctrine. They are to be careful in this regard. They are to know the truth.

[33 : 29] They are to grow in their knowledge of the truth. Indeed, the more they know and grasp and understand the truth, then in that measure they will be able to recognize what is false. This is the best antidote to error, is to know the truth. You know, we could spend a lifetime studying all different kinds of error, and around the corner, and around the corner a new one would come. Although, it's also true that even the new errors we often find are errors that in the past have been present in church history.

But nonetheless, it remains true that the best antidote to error is to know the truth, to be grounded in the truth. And so, elders very particularly have this responsibility to be students of the Word, to make use of the helps that we have in terms of theology and commentaries and the writing of men of God who have been able to explain more clearly the gospel and explain the Scriptures to us, to make use of opportunities to learn and to study courses that we might be able to participate in, taking care for ourselves, that we are growing in our knowledge of the truth.

This is one of the duties that elders have if they are to be adequately prepared to then perform the second duty, which is to care for or keep watch over the flock. In this taking care of the flock, there is also these two dimensions we've already suggested in terms of taking care of ourselves.

It is the moral dimension and also the doctrinal one, which again I think is Paul's primary concern. How are they to care for the flock in this way? How are they to protect the flock from the intrusion of error, from the appeal, the lure of false doctrine? Well, they are to feed the flock, they are to nurture the flock, and they are also to protect the flock. Now, of course, the nurturing of the flock, the teaching of the flock, really also serves to protect them. A flock that is well fed in sound doctrine will be in a position to defend itself, to recognize and detect error as it rears its ugly head. But no doubt there will be occasions when in a very particular way those who are leaders in the church will need to set up to the mark in protecting the flock from error and from those who would peddle error in her midst. In order to do these things, of course, these men must be grounded in the Word of God. Indeed, as Paul commits them to God, he commits them, there we read in verse 32, to God and to the Word of His grace. They must be grounded in the Word of God if they are to adequately care for themselves and so in turn care for the flock. Now, as I say, the particular and immediate and most urgent application, or certainly immediate application, is of course to those who, like these men in Ephesus, had been appointed by the Spirit or have been appointed by the Spirit as overseers. But I'm sure you agree that in so much of what we have said, this is true also for all who are believers. We all must take care of ourselves. We all must keep watch over our lives in terms of our moral conduct, in terms of our theological understanding, and we must also all take a measure of responsibility in caring for others as the elders very particularly are commended to do so. So then this third truth concerning the church, that God cares for His church, the church of

[37 : 35] God, a church that belongs to God, a church that has been bought by God, by the blood of His own Son, and a church that is cared for by God because it is such a precious church and precious to Him. Well, I trust that this portrait of the church is one that helps us to better understand what it is that we are part of, and indeed to be more grateful to God for making us part of such a glorious thing that is the church of God. Let us pray.