



MINISTRY
OF THE
WORD

WALLACE BENN

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This edition first published in Great Britain in 2018

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-912373-24-6

Designed and typeset by Pete Barnsley (CreativeHoot.com)

Printed in Denmark by Nørhaven

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ACTS 20:17-38

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies

to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 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 God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among

all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.



THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD:

THE ACTS 20 BENCHMARK

Paul's meeting with the Ephesian church elders (Acts 20:17-38) has long been a favourite passage of mine. If I could have been an eyewitness of any event in the New Testament, outside the Gospel descriptions of the events of Jesus' life, this is the place I would have liked to have been present.

Paul is rushing to Jerusalem, delayed by Corinthian plots against him, and wants to get there by the day of Pentecost. On his way he sends for the leaders of the Ephesian church, believing he will not have an opportunity to see them again. This was the church he had invested

three years of his time in and he cares deeply about their welfare.

I don't know if you have ever had the experience of having a known last conversation with someone you love. I remember vividly the last conversation I had with my mum – a fine Christian lady. We told each other how much we loved one another, and she very helpfully told me that she had no ambition for me other than that I should serve the Lord faithfully until he called me home too. She also told me some things she wanted doing when she was gone – you can imagine wild horses would not have prevented me from doing what she asked! It was a very important conversation.

So with Paul and the elders in Acts 20. Paul says all the crucial things he wants them to take on board as leaders of the church, so that its future well-being may be safeguarded. It is a crucial conversation they will not have ever forgotten! They came thirty-five miles or so to meet with Paul one last time. It will have been an emotionally charged meeting!

Luke's summary of Paul's address to the Ephesian elders is the only speech in the book

of Acts specifically addressed to a Christian audience, and it serves for Luke's readers as a concise reminder of the duty laid on all church leaders. In this passage we see Paul concerned about the need for healthy churches.

Here we see a pastoral Paul passing the torch to the leaders of a community he has nurtured. In a sense, the speech has the same function for readers of Acts, who should look for communities that are diligent about faithfulness and truth.¹

As we, in God's good providence, overhear Luke's record of that conversation we learn crucial things about Paul's priorities for those involved as overseers and ministers of the Word in churches. Paul spells out the authentic nature of an apostolic pattern of ministry. We must take note too from God's Word here if we care about the well-being of the church, and want to minister following the apostolic pattern.

This little book, which is about the "ministry of the Word", assumes three things taught clearly in the New Testament: