



# Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.  
1307-37  
Acts 20:17-38  
Mark Mitchell  
January 27, 2008

## Portrait of Integrity

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

---

Imagine yourselves for minute being given one last opportunity to speak to your children. Even if you don't have children, you can imagine what that would feel like. You know that your time is up and you have one last chance to gather them together and talk to them. What would you say? Beyond the obvious, "I love you! I'll miss you!" what would you try to get across to them? What would you want them to know and do?

If you can put yourself in that place for a moment you can feel something of what the Apostle Paul felt as he gathered with the Ephesian elders on the shores of Miletus. You may recall that Paul was moving south on his way to Jerusalem. He was in a hurry and he didn't feel he had time for a long stopover in Ephesus. He had already spent close to three years there and left a thriving church and many close friends. He hadn't been there for some time and must have felt torn. He wanted to see them and encourage them, but he also felt God calling him to move on. So Paul decided to do the next best thing to making a visit. He sent a messenger from Miletus to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to come and meet with him one last time. Somehow Paul felt in his gut that this would be his last chance to ever speak to them.

And so, starting in 20:18 we have Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. Here, Paul bares his soul perhaps more than anywhere else. In doing so, he leaves us with a virtual gold mine of truth about his life and his leadership. I would say that no other passage in all the Bible has influenced me more in my ministry and my understanding of Christian leadership than this one. In all honesty, I haven't always been able to embody everything it says, but I've aspired to it and I still do.

I don't think I have to tell you how important leadership is. There is a ton of books out there on leadership in the business world, in the home, and in the world of sports. Right now we're all trying to assess the leadership qualities of several Presidential candidates. All of us have to lead in some way at some time. But what about spiritual leadership? What about leadership in the church? What does it take to be a leader of God's people?

Before we answer this question and look at Paul's address I want to note a few assumptions that Paul makes about leadership.

### I. Three Assumptions.

**A. Christian leaders are Christians:** The first assumption is based on the observation that this is the only speech in all of Acts that Paul makes specifically to Christians. Paul's speeches are normally given to unbelievers in order to persuade them to become believers. But here he talks about leadership in the church and his assumption is that this role is reserved for those who are genuine Christians. That may sound rather obvious to us but the fact is that the existence of unconverted leaders has been a problem within the church since its inception. People have been made leaders in the church for a variety of bad reasons: business acumen, natural charisma, good looks, speaking ability. But if they don't know Christ, they should never be put into leadership in the church.

**B. Christian leaders are called by numerous terms:** The second assumption Paul makes is that leaders in the church are given a number of different names which are interchangeable. In this passage, they're called "**elders**" in v.17, and both "**overseers**" and "**shepherds**" in v.28. All three terms point to the same group. The term "elder" emphasizes their maturity. "Overseer" emphasizes the responsibility of oversight. And "shepherd" emphasizes their function as pastors of the flock. Three terms-one job.

**C. Christian leaders are part of a pastoral team:** The last assumption is that Christian leaders are part of a pastoral team. In other words, there are no one-man shows. Paul calls together a group of elders and together they're to shepherd the flock at Ephesus. This doesn't mean that they were all the same in terms of gifts and talents. Usually in a group like that there are some who are leaders of leaders and others who prefer to stay behind the scenes. But, despite their differences, they're a group of equals whose calling to shepherd the flock is the same.

With those three assumptions in mind let's look at what Paul says. Follow along with me as we listen to the entire speech.

**"And when they had come to him, he said to them, 'You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;**

how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one 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 have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship" (vv.18b-38).

As I read this, what I believe we have is a genuine portrait of integrity in leadership. We can divide up what Paul says to these men into two categories. The first has to do with Paul's example of integrity and the second with Paul's charge for integrity.

## II. Paul set an example of integrity in leadership.

You don't have to read very far into this speech to see that Paul says a whole lot about his own ministry to the Ephesians. Twice in this speech he says, "**You yourselves know...**" (vv.18,34) to remind them that they had ample opportunity to watch him and see how he carried out his ministry while he was with them. It's clear Paul is setting himself up as an example for them. St. Francis once said, "Preach the gospel constantly and, if necessary, use words." Personal example is the most powerful way to communicate truth. We know this as parents, don't we? Our kids see what we are and that communicates much more powerfully than what we say. What use is it to tell them to read their Bibles if they don't see us doing it? What use is it to tell them to clean up their mouth if they don't see us doing it? They see what we are. And what's true in parenting is also true in spiritual leadership. Paul knew that and so he reminds them of the example he set in his own ministry.

**A. Leadership must be relational:** First of all, he reminds them that leadership must be relational. I love how he says in v.18 that he was "with them the whole time." He lived with them; he worked with them; he worshipped with them. He has a very disarming kind of transparency and with that vulnerability. He says you saw how I served the Lord with humility and tears and trials. I was weak with you. I didn't always have it all together. You saw me cry. You saw me hurting. And the result of his transparency and vulnerability was intimacy. That's why when Paul is done with his talk they all just fall apart. They're weeping and embracing and kissing. They can't get their arms around the idea that they may never see him again.

There is a common notion in leadership circles that great leaders will kind of keep their distance; that you can't get too close to the people you lead. It may be true in business, but it's not true in ministry. In ministry, friendship is a high commodity. That means that much of ministry involves hanging out with people. Jesus modeled that. He had a huge job to do and only a few years to do it. Yet he spent a whole lot of time hanging out with folks at parties and weddings, fishing with them and eating with them. We tend to dismiss those things as trivial compared to the real ministry, like counseling or teaching. Jesus was into friend making, and out of that friend making he was soul making.

Think of the person who has had the greatest impact on your life. That person isn't the one who gave you the most information. More likely it's someone who spent time with you, who loved you, cared for you and believed in you. That's true in my life. I think of Ray Stedman. When I think of Ray, my memories aren't

mainly of sermons but the time I spent in his house, conversations on planes, playing chess, listening to his corny jokes. That's relational leadership.

**B. Leadership must be centered on the Word:**

Now when that kind of relationship is established, it makes your teaching much more powerful. The second thing that Paul exemplified was leadership centered on the word of God. He was amazingly thorough in that. He was thorough in WHAT he taught. He says he didn't shrink from "**declaring to them anything that was profitable**" (v.20). He taught "**the gospel of the grace of God**" (v.24). He taught them about "**repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ**" (v.21). He also "**went about preaching the kingdom**" (v.25). In short he "**declared the whole purpose of God**" (v.27). He was also thorough in WHO he taught. He says he "**solemnly testified to both Jews and Greeks.**" He wanted to teach everything to everybody. And then he was thorough in WHERE he taught. He says he taught "**publicly and from house to house**" (v.20). Besides his public teaching in the school of Tyrannus he met with people in homes and taught them. Charles Spurgeon said that preaching is like throwing a bucket of water at a row of bottles. Some of the water goes in some of the bottles. But by talking to people personally in homes, you have the opportunity of topping off every bottle.

So you can see that Paul taught everything to everybody everywhere he could! And this is what ought to mark leadership in the local church today. You may wonder at times why we're so into the Bible and so into teaching it. You come to church and you listen to someone teach straight from the Bible; you go to your Community Group and you discuss the Bible together. What's the deal? It's not that we're so into information, but it's that we really believe the Bible is God's living word and it's powerful and it changes us. So we read it, we study it, we meditate on it, we memorize it, we preach it, we even pray it.

**C. Leadership must not be self-centered:** The third thing Paul's example teaches us is that leadership must not be self-centered. Notice vv.22-24. Paul says he's on his way to Jerusalem. He feels compelled to go even though he doesn't know exactly what will happen to him there. The one thing he does know is that "bonds and afflictions await me." Well, that sounds like a lot of fun. "Gee, I think I'll go there." Who in their right mind would go somewhere when they know very well that it will mean nothing but pain and suffering? I think of the title of a best-selling book on the Christian life, *Your Best Life Now*. My goodness, Paul must have missed that one. He ought to read that. He would never go to Jerusalem with that book tucked under his arm! I think his "best life now" would have been to stay in Ephesus. He could settle down, have a family, teach in

the University of Tyrannus, get a little beach house for weekends. Why in the world do you keep pushing ahead, Paul, when you know it means trouble?

Paul tells us in v.24, "**But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.**" He says, "It's not about me. It's not about what I want. It's not about my comfort or my dreams for a better life. It's about finishing the work the Lord Jesus gave me to do." So Christian leadership isn't self-centered but Christ-centered in that it's centered on doing his will. Leadership is "followership." Now we know that not everyone is called to do the same thing. Not everyone is an Apostle Paul. As a matter of fact, these very elders he was addressing were NOT called to leave Ephesus, but to stay and lead the church. But each of us have received from the Lord a course to follow and a race to run. And, like Paul, it has to do with "testifying solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." If you want to lead you have to make it your highest priority to do that well.

I think about this a lot. I'm 51 years old. I've been doing the same thing for almost three decades. At times it's tempting for me to think, "Well, I've put in my time. It won't be long before I can stop working so hard." I mean, honestly, this preaching thing gets old. I get tired of listening to myself. And, you know, I love the Bay Area but why would anyone want to stay around here for the long haul?" But then I get a gentle nudge in my spirit, "This isn't all about what you want. It's not about your comfort and your dreams. It's about finishing well."

It's like someone asked this old saint why he kept at it so hard. Why do you keep waking up so early to pray? Why do you keep sharing your faith? Why do you keep serving in your church? You've put in your time. You're 80 years old. You deserve a break." He simply responded, "Shall I not run with all my might, having now seen the finish line?" That was Paul's mindset, and it should be ours.

**D. Leadership must be free from greed:** The fourth thing Paul's example teaches us about leadership is that ministry is to be free from greed. Paul says in v.32 that he had "**coveted no one's silver or gold.**" Can you imagine saying that. I walk through the parking lot here on Sunday morning and I covet a few of your cars all the time! He even took it one step further. He had every right to expect that they would provide for him materially. The Bible says, "Don't muzzle the ox while it's threshing. A workman is worthy of his wage." But instead of letting them support him he supported himself and his coworkers! He says, "These hands ministered to my own needs and the needs of my men. I showed you to be a giver and not a

taker like Jesus said.”

We were looking at this passage in our staff meeting on Tuesday and one of the questions we asked as we looked at these words was this: “Would I be as committed to doing this ministry if I weren’t paid for it? What if the economy goes so far into the tank that the church can’t pay us? What would we do?” There was a time when it came to that. Jeff Farrar and I were the only ones on staff and the money wasn’t there to pay all of our salary so we decided to go look for part-time jobs and do what we had to do to keep the ministry going. He was going to drive a truck and I was going to wait tables. We knew that the ministry would probably suffer but we knew it was temporary. It turned out we didn’t have to do it but it was a good wake up call for us.

If you’re going to lead anyone they have to know that it’s not all about what you’re getting from it. They have to see that you’re willing to sacrifice; that you believe in what you’re doing so much that it’s not about the money or the perks or the attention; it’s about what the Lord Jesus has called you to do. I think of our own elders. Many of them have served as elders for 10-20 years and given so much of their lives and asked for nothing in return. I think of the youth leaders who took time off work and went to Hume Lake last weekend from Friday through Monday and then woke up the next morning and went right back to work. No one pays them. That’s selfless leadership.

#### **E. Leadership must be dependent on God:**

The fifth thing Paul exemplifies about Christian leadership is that it’s dependent on God. Certainly we see this as they kneel together on the beach and prayed. I’m confident that this was a habit for Paul and these elders in those times they met together in Ephesus. Indeed, prayer is the expression of our own helplessness and dependence on God.

But I also see this dependence in what he says in v.32. He says, “**And now I commend (entrust) you to God and to the word of his grace...**” It may sound strange but Paul expressed his dependence on God by leaving them; by in a sense saying, “Listen, my job with you is done. I’m now giving you to God. He’ll take care of you. His word will build you up and make you strong.”

There comes a time when leaders really do have to get out of the way and let God take over. If leaders aren’t willing to do that people will become more dependent on them than on God, and that’s not a good thing. No Christian leader is indispensable. No leader can take the place of God. And no church should think of a leader in that way.

We’ve seen the example of integrity that Paul set. But for our last few minutes together I want us to also look at the charge he gave.

### **III. Paul’s charge for integrity in leadership.**

**A. The leader must guard himself:** The charge doesn’t come until v.28, “**Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock...**” So the charge of an elder is to be on guard or to keep watch first over one’s own self. Before we keep watch over the flock we have to keep watch over our own souls. I can’t tell you how many leaders have crashed because they’ve failed to do this.

I can think of many reasons why this is so crucial. First, if we don’t watch over our own soul we won’t have anything to offer of real value to others. All ministry flows out of our walk with God and if that walk is weak sooner or later it will show up in our ministry. Another reason would be that as one who endeavors to keep watch over others you have a target on your back, and the enemy will regularly take pot shots at you to bring you down. If you don’t keep watch over your own soul you’ll be easy prey. Still another reason would be that the realities of watching over the souls of others can become so immensely difficult and absorbing that you can easily become so engulfed in it that you neglect yourself.

Believe it or not, the greatest enemy of ministry can be ministry. Every leader must learn that there are times they must say “no” to the needs of others in order to say “yes” to the needs of their own soul. Someone said, “You concern yourself with the depth of your life, and let God concern himself with the breadth of your ministry.”

**B. The leader must guard the flock:** With that in mind the second part of this charge is to keep watch over the flock. Here is the call to shepherd; to pastor people. It’s really not a very flattering figure of speech. Most of us, myself included, know very little about sheep and the realities of shepherding. Sheep are not at all the clean and cuddly creatures they’re made out to be. In fact, they’re dirty, subject to unpleasant pests, and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, worms and ticks. They’re also stupid, wayward and stubborn. Now I don’t want to apply the analogy too closely. I, too, am a sheep! But the fact that this is what we’re so often called in scripture should at least humble us.

There are several things Paul says here that were meant to motivate these elders to keep at it. He says that the Holy Spirit made them overseers of these sheep. It’s not an optional deal. It’s not a voluntary draft. He made you an overseer. Then he tells them how valuable the sheep are to God. They’re “the

church of God which he purchased with his own blood.” That’s how valuable they are. How can you neglect those for whom Christ bled? Then to motivate them further he says, “When I leave I know that savage wolves will come in and some of them will be from among your own selves.” One of the things about sheep is that they’re rather helpless and vulnerable. Without the keen eye and the firm hand of the shepherd they’re sitting ducks.

Savage wolves are false teachers. He says in v.30 that they “**speak perverse things.**” He’s talking about bad doctrine; bad theology. That’s why we don’t just let anyone teach here. That’s why we don’t accept all ideas. That’s why we might be viewed at times as narrow minded. Everything is not true. Having said that, some people would also like us to be more narrow minded, and we won’t go down that road either. We won’t hyper focus on pet doctrines and separate us from one another and from other believers. We believe “the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things.”

And finally, the antidote to these savage wolves is what Paul says he did in v.31, “**Be alert. Do what I did. Night and day I admonished each one with tears.**” Sometimes leaders have to say the hard things, but it helps when they say it with tears in their eyes. I heard of a church which had dismissed their pastor and gotten a new one. Someone asked why they had gotten rid of the old one. A spokesman said, “Because he kept telling the people they were going to hell.” The questioner asked, “What does the new man say?” “Oh, he keeps telling them they’re going to hell, too.” “Well, what’s the difference?” he was asked. He said, “The difference is that when the first one said it, he sounded as if he were glad about it. But when the second one says it, he lets you know it’s breaking his heart.” That’s the difference Paul is talking about—admonishing with tears, not with harshness, not with judgment, but with concern and care, speaking the truth in love.

## CONCLUSION

As we close this morning I want to just leave you with what I think is the essence of all of this. It is said in Psalm 78 that God, “**chose David His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds; from the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him, to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance. So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them with his skillful hands.**”

That’s the essence of Christian leadership: shepherding according to the integrity of your heart, and guiding with skillful hands.