

The Compulsion of the Spirit in the Farewell Speech of Paul
in Acts 20:17-38 to the Ephesian Leaders
An Exegetical Study Grounded in the Apostle's Pneumatology and Christology

by

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This analysis of Acts 20:17-38 considered the historical, theological, and exegetical issues of Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian leaders. As his discourse became one of the most important in Acts, the conclusion of the paper discussed the practical ramifications for ministry. Subsequently, a major imperative of this study unveiled that the presence of the Holy Spirit remains crucial for effective pastoral ministry.

Introduction

Luke recorded three typical Pauline speeches in Acts: the synagogue sermon in Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41), the Areopagus speech in Athens (17:22-31), and his farewell address to the Ephesian elders (20:18-35). He received information for the first two discourses from Paul, his travel companion, but of these three, Luke personally heard the third (Acts 21:1). In Acts 20, Luke recorded a homily delivered by the apostle to believers and the only account of a public occasion embedded in a "we-passage" of Acts. There remain similarities between the Acts 20 speech and Paul's letters as he addressed a Christian audience that typified the advice he shared in his epistles. Moreover, it offered the best prospect of direct comparison between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the epistles.

The structure of the speech conveyed motifs revealing Paul's theology. His farewell address to the elders on Miletus beach exposed a number of phrases presented in his correspondences. F. F. Bruce wrote, "it is the only Pauline speech delivered to Christians which Luke has recorded, and it is not surprising to discover how rich it is in parallels to the Pauline letters (especially, in fact, to the later ones)."¹ These items embodied a few illustrations from the speech:

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 412.

serving the Lord with all humility (Acts 20:19)

serving the Lord (Rom. 12:11)

with all humility (Eph. 4:2)

that I may finish the race (Acts 20:24)

I have finished the race (2 Tim. 4:7)

complete the task I received from the Lord (Acts 20:24)

complete the task you received from
the Lord (Col. 4:17)

Likewise, Ben Witherington supplemented an extensive list of phrases in his commentary on Acts.² Certainly, Luke precisely wrote the comments he heard his comrade proclaim.

Paul's farewell consistently mirrored speeches of biblical characters such as Moses, Joshua and Samuel. In fact, the discourses of both Samuel and Paul contained three remarkably similar ideas. First, both Samuel and Paul related they never misused monetary gifts in an improper manner (1 Sam. 12:3; Acts 20:33-34). Second, both men recounted the history of their journey of faith with the people (1 Sam. 12:6-15; Acts 20:25-31). Third, the call and charge to recommitment of their lives to the Lord was clear (1 Sam. 12:20-25; Acts 20:32-35). Consequently, God's prophetic message warned both Israel and the Ephesian leaders it was time to follow the Lord with absolute dedication.

Historical Background

Paul was on his third missionary journey and final tour of the region. The farewell speech revealed the pathos the apostle experienced in his three years of ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:8, 19, 22). Additionally, the date of this speech, 57 AD³ was important to note. This scene fell soon after the Corinthian controversy, persisting through and beyond the Ephesian ministry when

² Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 610.

³ Witherington, 609.

Paul's credentials came under attack. In his defense, Paul may be overtly emotional but such was the apostle, as we know him from his discourse in 2 Cor. 10-13.

Miletus was a significant city of ancient history. Mark Wilson noted that Acts 20:15-16 “mention four of the twelve cities that comprise the Ionian League-Chios, Samos, Miletus and Ephesus.”⁴ As Paul requested the elders to meet him in the city (Acts 20:17), their trip would have been a long excursion. Witherington remarked, “the time taken to go and summon the elders and lead them back would be at least five days.”⁵ Regardless, because of its locale, Miletus was an obvious city to share a parting speech as the apostle met the Ephesian leaders to say goodbye.

One final time Paul ministered to the church family he loved, delivering the speech with drama and angst.⁶ The apostle expressed great sentiment for these saints (Eph. 1:1,15, 16); however, scholars have differing opinions about the address. Bruce wrote, “the speech is mainly hortatory, but also in some degree apologetic.”⁷ Nevertheless, this dialogue was much more than a dry conversation to a disinterested crowd as Marion Soards argued, “the ‘farewell address’ is a special, recognizable form of epideictic rhetoric.”⁸ Yet, Witherington disagreed with Soard’s notion writing “that this speech does not follow the rhetorical requirement to be an encomium or piece of epideictic rhetoric.”⁹ Whatever the case, Paul plainly involved the elders with a homily

⁴ Mark Wilson, The Ephesian Leaders Come to Miletus: An *Annaliste* Reading of Acts 20:15-18a, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34.1 (2013), Art. #744, 5; doi: 0.4102/ve.v34i1.744.

⁵ Witherington, 609.

⁶ Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 369.

⁷ Bruce, 413.

⁸ Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1994), 103.

⁹ Witherington, 612.

to impart his passion. I. H. Marshall noted, “this address contains the elements that would be expected in the type of farewell discourse familiar at the time.”¹⁰ In short, the apostle’s farewell contained the essential elements of a parting salutation to his friends.

Exegesis Proper and Analysis of Paul’s Farewell to the Ephesian Leaders

Placing the speech in historical context, the uproar created by the Ephesian riot (Acts 19:23-41) convinced Paul to travel westward across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. He convened the disciples, conveying his spiritual heart before departing. The apostle could not leave without this demonstration of love to his fellow followers of Jesus. He spent three fruitful years in Ephesus, but it was time to leave. On many occasions, the elders recognized Paul as an evangelist; but in Acts 20, Luke displayed a unique picture as a pastor. The exegesis of his farewell speech to the Ephesians leaders was placed in this context. Lexical guides, as a method of grammar utilized in this exegesis discovered repeated words and phrases giving pronounced meaning in his speech. In addition, this expository exegesis included specific historical and theological emphases in connection with the Greek text.

(17-21) Paul began his farewell to the elders recounting his work among them

Vs 17-Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Μιλήτου πέμψας εἰς Ἔφεσον μετεκαλέσατο τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας *From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to*

*meet him.*¹¹ Paul asked the elders to meet him in Miletus, thirty-six miles south of Ephesus.

¹⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts, the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 329.

¹¹ All scriptural quotations are from *The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition)*, copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

vs 18-ὤμεις ἐπίστασθε *You know. You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia.* The emphasis on “you” grounded their memory of his work among them for three years. The elders noticed this intensity throughout the speech.

vs 19-Paul followed Jesus as a bondservant (**δουλεύων**) of the Lord with humility and tears (2 Cor. 2:4; Phil. 3:18). The slavery imagery became a key metaphor in his epistles.

vs 20-*I did not shrink from doing anything helpful.* He not only taught general topics but also proclaimed the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

vs 20-*Proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house.* This reading implied that particular elders oversaw the specific house locations. Acts 19:9-10 stated that Paul instructed the Ephesians and those in the region for more than two years renting a room from the school of Tyrannus. In addition, the church may have studied the life of Jesus from some of the oral tradition in that same period (Acts 20:35).

vs 21-διαμαρτυρόμενος *I testified to both Jews and Greeks.* Paul desired to testify the word of God’s to all the people. This theme was the calling of the witnesses in Acts (Acts 1:8) and the apostle fulfilled this mission Jesus given at his conversion by Jesus (Acts 9:15).

vs 21-μετάνοιαν καὶ πίστιν *repentance and faith.* Paul’s supreme goal called everyone to repentance and faith. The use of both words after the Greek article **τὴν** emphasized the terms repentance and faith as strong and clear motifs. Luke’s accent on these ideas highlighted the apostle’s divine calling.

(22-24) Paul speaks of his future in Jerusalem by the Holy Spirit

vs 22 δεδεμένος ἐγὼ *I go bound-compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.* Luke applied the same root word **δήσας** (bound) found with the prophet Agabus in Acts 21:11. Paul did not know his future, yet, like Jesus in Luke’s

gospel, the apostle resolutely decided to travel to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Thus, he submitted to God not knowing what would transpire.

vs 22 πνεύματι The Spirit became the central inspiration behind Paul's future journey to Jerusalem and undergirded the apostle's ministry in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30).

vs 23 πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον κατὰ πόλιν διαμαρτύρεται *the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me.* Once more, the Holy Spirit empowered Paul concerning future oppressions with a word of knowledge. He recognized the dangerous road ahead receiving a prophecy that exposing this danger (see Acts 21:10-11). Nevertheless, he was willing to lay down his life for the cause of the gospel.

vs 24-I do not count my life of any value to myself. Paul yielded his life for the sake of the call and the gospel (Acts 21:13; Phil. 1:20, 21)¹². His tremendous vigor for Christ disclosed his absolute devotion to Christ.

vs 24-If only I may finish my course. Paul thought of himself as a runner completing a race and nothing would keep him from finishing with joy. Additionally, he speaks of "my" aim in his race revealing he had his death in mind. It would be several years until he died but considered his remaining time on earth worthwhile.

(25) Paul announced that he would not see the Ephesian elders again

vs 25-Now I know (ἐγὼ οἶδα) *that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again.* Again, Paul knew he would never see them. He said, "I know" for emphasis. Unmistakably, his thoughts were disconcerting to the leaders.

Proclaiming the kingdom (κηρύσσω τὴν βασιλείαν) In the city of Ephesus, God ministered many amazing miracles through Paul. Acts 19:11 expressed that in Ephesus, the

¹² I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds. *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998,) 184-185.

operation of the gift of miracles flowed through the hands of the apostle. Acts 19:12 revealed handkerchiefs and aprons from his body brought healing to ailing individuals. Acts 19:15 described demonic spirits recognizing his ministry. Indeed, he preached the kingdom with signs and wonders among the Ephesians, as his ultimate goal brought the kingdom to the Jews and Greeks (Acts 28:31). The Holy Spirit was the power behind these miraculous exploits.

vs 25-*None of you...will ever see my face again.* Paul showed pronounced sadness, compassion, and courage. This moment will be his last time they lay eyes on him. He enjoyed a significant experience with these leaders, building a thriving ministry by the bonds of fellowship and friendship. Hence, one understood why he asked the elders to walk thirty-six miles to meet him. Paul's concern for the leaders and the congregation in Ephesus simply reflected Jesus' great love for the Ephesian church.

(26-27) Paul preached the whole counsel of God

vss 26, 27-*Therefore I declare to you this day* **διότι** **Therefore.** There is much meaning in this simple word. It contained the sense of the investment of his heart and life among them.

vs 26-*I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.* As if he corroborated in a court of law, Paul declared a clear conscience (1 Cor. 4:1-4) for he emphatically stated, "I am innocent" (**καθαρός εἰμι**).

vs 27-*The whole will of God.* Paul could leave the Ephesian leaders, with integrity and honor because he communicated the whole counsel of God. For this reason, the apostle departed this church with no guilt or regrets. As he concluded with this final speech, with assurance in his heart, Paul accomplished all that God set before him.

(28-31) Encouraging the elders to bestow care for God's people

vs 28-*Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.*

It is as if Luke presented another “therefore” in the text. In that sense the first “therefore” considered his life (Acts 20:26) and this second transition instructed the leaders of the Ephesian Christians to guard the flock (Acts 20:28).

vs 28-*Watch...the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.* Pay attention and care for the people of God because the Holy Spirit (**πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον**) ordained the overseers (**ἐπισκόπους**). In Acts 20:17 Paul called the same overseers as elders (**πρεσβυτέρους**).

vs 28-*Be shepherds of the church of God.* Shepherds of the church tend the flock (**ποιμνίω**) as this activity remained an elder’s main vocation. He reminded the leaders, to guide the church, and serve their house church congregations as faithful pastors. Their position in the church involved the care and feeding of the sheep.

vs 28-*That he obtained with the blood of his own Son.* (**διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ ἰδίου**). As a possessive genitive (**τοῦ ἰδίου**) “his own” connoted God’s Son. Hence, the church did not belong to the elders; she assimilated with Jesus who purchased her with his blood.

vs 29-*I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.* This urgent warning cautioned the elders that wolves would come among them. As a pastor and a leader among God’s people, Paul recognized his responsibility as a protector, just as Ezekiel 33:1-7 commissioned the Old Testament prophet as an intermediary alerting others about the coming doom.¹³ Paul proclaimed the gospel to everyone; therefore, he was not guilty of anyone’s condemnation.

¹³ Bruce, 415.

vs 30-*Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them.* Shepherds deal with the wolves that come from the outside. Heretical teachings and false teachers endeavor to turn aside disciples after themselves. In addition, unsanctified egos prompt people to undertake situations that they would never do.

vs 31-*Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.* This caution was Paul's third warning. He gave the admonition after an explanation of the urgency. For three years, he ceased not to teach everyone night and day (hyperbole) with tears. The apostle exhorted the elders to maintain the same careful concern for God's people that he exhibited.

(32-35) Paul's personal exhortations

vs 32-*And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace (χάριτος αὐτοῦ).* Paul gave everything for the Christians in Ephesus. In the end, he commended the church to God and to the word of God's sovereign grace as the Holy Spirit promoted the gift of grace.

vs 33-*I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing.* Paul concluded by communicating his heart and motives in ministry. Colin J. Hemer wrote, "the speech stresses Paul's pledge to support himself and not be a burden to his converts, or lend colour to any allegation that he was in the business for personal gain."¹⁴ Thus, he supplied for his own needs, not begging for funds from God's people.

vs 35-Something must be said of the maxim attributed to Jesus in Acts 20:35. Scholars have disputed its genuineness, for it had no parallel in the gospels. Why would Luke choose a saying of Christ that remained absent from his gospel? If Paul cited it at Miletus, certainly, he and Luke

¹⁴ Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 425.

were aware of the oral tradition of Jesus preserved in the gospels. A similar saying in the Didache 1:5 read, “Blessed is the giver...alas for the receiver.” Witherington remarked, “the Greco-Roman world was honeycombed by social networks grounded in the principle of reciprocity of ‘giving and receiving.’”¹⁵ As Paul quoted pagan poets in a Gentile gathering (Acts 17), is it strange that he cited words of Jesus to Christian colleagues? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus related how to be blessed; therefore, one ought not to stumble over the thought that Jesus taught many concepts unrecorded in the gospels. John the evangelist said as much proclaiming, “but there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). This saying of Jesus does not appear in any of the gospels, but its spirit was manifested in many other dictums of Jesus (e.g. Luke 6:38; 11:9; John 13:35). Indeed, one can trust that God preserved the necessary teachings of the Nazarene as Lenski noted, “with a word from Jesus’ own lips Paul closed his address.”¹⁶ Thus, the words of Christ embodied the benediction of the speech.

(36-38) Paul’s tearful good-bye to the Ephesian elders

vs 36, 37 *He knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping among them all.*

This tender action of Paul proceeded from a pastor who loved his people and felt great compassion for their welfare.

vs 38 *That they would not see him again.* They part with prayer and believing they would only meet again in eternity. Paul’s speech engendered tears, particularly the thought that they would never see him again. The word sorrowing (**ὀδυνώμενοι**) indicated earnest emotion. Lenski

¹⁵ Witherington, 626.

¹⁶ Lenski, 856.

wrote, “‘sorrowing’ is too weak a translation; the participle means ‘pained,’ ‘deeply,’ ‘distressed.’”¹⁷ Eventually, they accompanied him to his ship and bid goodbye. Paul concluded, as his effort in Ephesus was complete, handing his work to the overseers of the flock, under God’s grace.

Theological Issues of Pneumatology and Christology

Acts 20:22 stated that Paul was compelled by the Spirit (see Acts 21:10-11). Stanley Horton remarked, “as Paul made his last journey to Jerusalem, he went ‘bound in [by] the Spirit’ (Acts 20:22). It was not his personal desire to go to Jerusalem. He wanted to go to Rome and then to Spain (Rom. 1:10-13; 15:23, 24). He was bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem.”¹⁸ The apostle recognized that the Holy Spirit convinced him to minister in Jerusalem or he never would have ventured such a dangerous trip. In addition, the same Spirit warned him that “‘prison and hardships’” would arise (Acts 20:23) as prophetic words predicted future events in his life. In essence, as the Spirit foretold of imprisonment for Paul, these scriptures were reminders that words of prophecy were not always cheerful. The modern day charismatic movement may need this corrective in the wake of the many declarations of prosperity proclaimed over believers’ lives. Stanley Porter noted, “the Spirit played...at most of the crucial events, but working with those involved, in order to accomplish the divine purpose.”¹⁹ In Acts, the Holy Spirit provided guidance in personal and corporate decisions (Acts 8:27, 13:2; 15:28). Three times in Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders, he mentioned the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:22, 23, 27). This emphasis revealed his reliance on the Spirit for pastoral ministry. The Holy Spirit taught and brought to his

¹⁷ Lenski, 857.

¹⁸ Stanley M. Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit* (Springfield MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1977), 164.

¹⁹ Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 97.

remembrance what the Lord desired for the people to understand (John 14:26). James Shelton wrote, “clearly, in Acts the followers of Jesus received direction and empowerment from the Holy Spirit much the same way that Jesus did.”²⁰ His strong pneumatology guided his words in his ministry and farewell. Thus, he served as a pastor and evangelist to this church family for three years and the revelation of the Spirit was necessary for a fruitful ministry.

Moreover, a theology of the cross and Christology was noticed with specific words such as “kingdom” (Acts 20:25), “blood” (Acts 20:26, 28) and “grace” (Acts 20:24, 32). These particular details demonstrated the foundation of salvation history displayed in Acts. Though Luke the historian wrote little of the theology of the cross, Paul’s speech verified his belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this canonical history of the church, the kerygma of the name of Christ was found specifically in Acts 2:38 and 4:12, yet, in this speech, the apostle testified that the basis of his kingdom teaching remained the blood of Jesus Christ.

Application

During Paul’s third missionary journey, his residence for three years in Ephesus teaches several items for application. First, a pastor needs to invest time into the life of the people. Paul serves the believers generously; preaching both publically and house to house (Acts 20:20). Imparting Christ into others is investing into eternity. Second, dependence on the Holy Spirit remains essential for effective ministry. Paul is compelled or bound by the Spirit; consequently, the impressions the Spirit places upon pastors are cues to hear God’s voice through the church. Three moments in the address relay critical points of reliance on the apostle’s pneumatological foundation. In Acts 20:22; 21:4; 22:10-11 the Spirit establishes direction for Paul’s next step in ministry. The book of Acts commences with the thesis that the Holy Spirit empowers people for

²⁰ James B. Shelton, *Mighty in Word and Deed: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Acts* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 1999, 127.

the ministry (Acts 1:8; Acts 2:16-17). Third, a theology of the cross prevails as the core for christological faith. Paul reminds the overseers that the blood of Jesus is precious and special (Acts 20:28, 32). Fourth, a pastor must preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). As a minister preaches through the Bible in all topics pertaining to salvation and Christian life, the prayer is that the congregation will discern the truth when the evil one generates teachings that are not of the Lord (Acts 20:31,32). In addition, correct teaching gives protection to the people (Acts 20:28-31). Fifth and finally, Paul concludes with the oral tradition of the words of Christ “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” This statement asserts that our lives are given absolutely to the Lord; therefore, we give with no thought of usurping the parishioners through unreasonable fundraising (Acts 20:33, 34).

In conclusion, when we offer ourselves as a sacrifice to the Lord and engage in a life of authenticity before our flock, we too shall announce like Paul “we are innocent of the blood of any” (Acts 20:26). As a result, as Paul experienced, moments of weeping and celebration will be acknowledged in our ministry (Acts 20:36-37). Lead by the compulsion of the Spirit, this farewell address reveals the deepest yearning of every pastor called into parish ministry.

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