

**Acts 20:17-35**  
**“An evangelical ministry”**

I wonder what answers you would get if you conducted a survey of your average man or woman in the street about what the role of the church is in modern society. I'm not saying that I *would* conduct such a survey, and even less that I would consider myself bound to follow the answers it comes up with, either.

But even if you don't cheat by loading the questions to produce the answers you want, I suspect that you would have quite a number now who might simply say that there is *no* role for the church. That it's outdated and irrelevant, and it's time for religion to just pack up its bags and go somewhere to quietly and finally die. Certainly if you were to ask some of the high-profile atheists like Richard Dawkins, that's probably the kind of line you get by way of response.

I think you'd probably get some people telling you want the church *shouldn't* be doing, even if you asked them what they think it *should*. It *shouldn't* presume to meddle in politics, for example. And I confess I'm not at all convinced about having some of the bishops of the Church of England being given an automatic place in the House of Lords, for example.

But whereas you would probably find that many people accept that it's OK for religious people to just quietly practice their religious practices, so long as it's behind closed doors and doesn't frighten the children or the animals, I think you'd still get quite a few who would say that the real job of the church should not be about funny old religious rituals, but getting stuck in into “doing good works” in the community. Caring for the homeless, for example. Or Foodbanks, stuff like that. Although I often enough hear the wringing of hands about how terrible it is that a relatively rich society like ours should *need* Foodbanks, do you notice how it is quite often people professing some kind of faith who actually initiate things like this, over the years? Hospitals and orphanages, just for example.

Personally, I think there's something a bit two-faced in presuming it's the church's job to do stuff like that. Because it seems to me to be a bit too convenient a let-off for people who *don't* have faith. Surely stuff like caring for the poor is something that is equally appropriate *irrespective* of faith? That's not a question of being Christian – or even some other faith – but simply *humane*.

And my suspicion is that it gets regarded as the Christians' job to do this stuff, simply because some other people want to establish that it is not *their* job to. They can just go about their own lives, following their own interests without guilt, leaving unpleasant stuff like that to the church as an extra, religious wing of Social Services. It's not *my* job, it's the State's ... or the church's.

Now I'm not going to argue that the church *shouldn't* get involved in things like that. Jesus didn't shy away from it, did he?

***“For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them.”***

(Mark 14:7)

But I think I'd push back against this "it's the church's job" not just by saying that *Actually, isn't it everyone's job?* But also by arguing that the church has a vital job which just *cannot* be done by anyone else. If churches *only* – or too predominantly – do, in effect, social work, it will be at the expense of their much clearer commission from Jesus.

Perhaps you remember the time when John the Baptist was imprisoned, and probably just getting depressed, sends his disciples to Jesus for confirmation of who he really is. Here's part of Jesus' answer, and notice what it *doesn't* say as well as what it does:

***"... the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."***

(Matthew 11:5)

Not that the poor have daily handouts of food at strategic points around the city. But that they have good news preached to them. And Jesus' final words in Matthew's Gospel, too. It is *not* "Feed the world", even if we might all be singing along before long, with that BandAid piece being standard Christmas musical fayre nowadays. No, what does it appear that the world needs even more?

***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

(Matthew 28:19-20)

And so, back to today's passage, after that long introduction. That long passage summarising Paul's meeting with the leaders of the church of Ephesus, summarising the key role of those leaders. And I picked that passage as underpinning for the penultimate commitment of that Church Covenant we'll be introducing at the beginning of next year. Let me show you that next paragraph, that I hope we will be willing to stand up and mutually commit to.

*We will work together for the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry in this church, as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines. We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.*

And do you get what it's saying? It puts our prioritisation in very practical terms. It's not asking for mere verbal assent to stuff, but committing to put money where our mouth is.

Now do please notice that I'm not putting this up here as part of a drive to increase the church's income. We've never arranged sermons here deliberately pitched to increase the offerings. I would like to say very publicly that I know that many of you dig very deeply to support the work of this church.

But it would still be fair for me to ask you to question yourselves if you regularly spend more on your hobbies and your holidays, or even your visits to coffee shops. Whether you're on pocket money or earned income, when have you thought to yourselves just how much of that income you will retain for yourself, and how much you will give away, and to what?

Not that money is the only criterion – you might be someone with rather less in the way of disposable income, but rather more in the way of disposable *time* – but neither does your use of money say *nothing*, either. So ... have you set yourself a target that a specific proportion of your income should be given away? And have you worked out how that money is to be divided between specific causes? Will you give a more substantial amount to a small number of needs, or smaller amounts to a bigger number?

I'm not even saying that there is “a right answer” to this question – perhaps it's one we should return to another time? – but it definitely is a question that you need to answer, if you claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And as a church, too, we have to decide our priorities, as regards use of time and of money and whatever resources. Today's passage, I would like to suggest, shows the kind of attitudes that we need to show, when we're making those decisions. If we want to really be “a Gospel church”, then we have to have Gospel priorities.

And in Acts 20, you have Paul setting out for the elders of Ephesus what *he* counts as the right *Gospel* priorities.

Commitment to the Gospel  
Commitment to the church  
Commitment to generosity

So here, quickly, is the background. Paul has already spent several years out and about preaching the Gospel around many of the major cities in what we would now call Turkey and Greece, the top far end of the Mediterranean. He has done several major tours, and his plan is now to return to Jerusalem fairly promptly ... Jerusalem still being regarded as the capital of the church, even if Paul's missionary journeys are actually commissioned by the church at Antioch.

***For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.***

(Acts 20:16)

I'm not sure I know exactly why Paul had set that target about the day of Pentecost, but that's not really too important. The thing is that he's clearly in a bit of a hurry. But there is already a church established at Ephesus, and Paul had previously spent a good chunk of time in that city:

***“... remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”***

(Acts 20:31)

But Paul doesn't have time to travel inland to Ephesus itself. His ship, however, is putting in briefly at Miletus, a port not too distant from Ephesus. So ... if Paul can't go to visit the church, with its sizeable number of people who would all love to spend time with him ... at least the leaders of the church could visit him. So that's what was arranged:

***Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.***

(Acts 20:17)

I'm sure that Luke has at least to some extent summarised what Paul said. We know how long it would take to say what is written here – we've just read it! – and I doubt it was really just a five-minute meeting. But it is clearly quite hurried, the way Luke reports what happened next.

***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; ... And they accompanied him to the ship.***

(Acts 20:36-38)

But just that need for speed should give us a clue about what Paul says in those hasty moments in Miletus. He is not going to waste any time in mere niceties. He has to get straight to the things that he considers of paramount importance. There is very little about that instant itself. There is reference to the past only to put the future into context. There is time only to mention what Paul regards as the church's most important commitments.

And here's the first:

#### ■ **Commitment to the Gospel**

Paul is really insistent that in those previous three years he has taught them all he should have:

***“... how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ...”***

(Acts 20:20)

This stuff has been delivered publicly – presumably, I think that would mean, when the church was gathered together, when people are taught together. But it was the same message when spoken about in smaller groups, back in people's homes, where questions would just naturally arise, and the teaching would take on a more conversational form.

But, whichever format, whichever setting, look at how Paul sums up the content of his teaching, in the next verse:

***“... testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

(Acts 20:21)

In one sense, isn't this just profoundly simple? It's something you could summarise in a single sermon or a Sunday School lesson. That's precisely the words I typically use when I baptise someone: “on account of your repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”. So that's what you might call entry-level theology. It is simple enough for the newest and youngest convert to adequately get their head around. But it is deep enough to be worth teaching through for three years, in public and from house to house.

*Repentance*: that 180-degree turn-about of your attitude towards God, stepping down from the driving seat of your life, and putting *him* there instead in his proper place. Which will of course have a lifetime of implications.

And *faith*: not just seeing or thinking or recognising Jesus Christ as your only hope for being made right with God, but personal, active trust and commitment to him. It can be as simple as the words of the man on the cross next to Jesus crying out, crazed by the agony of crucifixion, and mentally dulled by the drugged wine, the sole mercy in that awful method of execution,

***And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."***

(Luke 23:42)

Or it can be far more profoundly and richly understood. But it never goes beyond, in another sense, just simple faith.

So that, you could say, is Paul's Gospel, *the* Gospel, which we are never to move on from – in the sense of replacing it with something complex that obscures those roots. A Gospel that fits *all* – whether you had the millennia of Jewish theological pedigree, or you were just a pagan this moment coming in off the streets:

***"... testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."***

(Acts 20:21)

But Paul does still unpack this a bit as he goes through. He describes it in different words a couple of times. Three verses later he mentions an alternative way he could summarise his life's work:

***"... the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."***

(Acts 20:24)

Repentance and faith ... that's the *Gospel*. Let's just pause a moment and think about that word itself, Gospel. I hope I'm right in remembering its origins in our language in this form, as two simpler words from way back just stuck together.

*Gospel ... god / spel*

The way I heard it, "god" there is not "the deity", but the old way of writing our more modern word with a double O, good. And "spel", no, *don't* double the L, and think in terms of magic. It's certainly not that. But there are traces of it in other languages today, German, for example, and their word Spiel, *story*. Unfortunate that "spiel" has also been coopted to stand for an advertiser's patter, the *story* they are trying to sell you in order to get you to buy their stuff.

But the Gospel is, in essence, a *good story*. Why? See how Paul neatly slips in a summary of its contents, too:

***"... the gospel of the grace of God."***

(Acts 20:24)

It is all about that amazing grace of God, shown to us in Jesus, available to us when we place our faith in Jesus Christ and nothing else. This is seriously good news! And "good news" is exactly the meaning of the word Luke used when he wrote this down.

ευαγγελιον  
euaggelion  
evangel---

And that's the basis behind those words evangelical and evangelistic, or sometimes you might still read "evangel" as a synonym for "Gospel". So when our Church Covenant says about

*... the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry in this church, as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.*

... then that word "evangelical" there isn't just a label for a particular brand of church and its associated culture, but a commitment to the Gospel, the "evangel", that Good News about the grace of God, that we are to respond to by repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

But things flow from that. If we have Jesus Christ as *Lord*, then what he says, *goes*. This is not merely a nominal commitment, a polite nod of the head. Jesus Christ is not true "for the sake of argument", all theoretical, but it will have implications in how we live when we are together here and when we go back to our homes and families and places of work. Paul writing to this same church as a whole, referring to the ungodly lifestyle of the world around, insists ...

***But that is not the way you learned Christ! — assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ...***

(Ephesians 4:20-21)

So if Jesus Christ is really your Lord, your Master, it will – or should I say, *he* will, the Holy Spirit will – make substantial and increasing and life-long changes to what you believe, and what you now *no longer* believe. How you live, and how you do *not* intend to live. In the church. In the home. In the street. That's the outcome of a commitment to the Gospel – the good news about the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And one final verse that I'd just like to point out to you in this section:

***"... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."***

(Acts 20:27)

Implication: isn't this saying that "the Gospel" is "the whole counsel of God", or at least something very much along those lines? That means that we never go beyond the Gospel, because we already have all that God plans to tell us on the subject. There will be no tantalising drip feed of further information, no teasers to tempt us back to watch the next episode or the next series.

I know there is a movement called "Acts 29", majoring on encouraging church-planting, based the fact that the book of Acts has 28 chapters ... but, you see, the story continues. But there will be no Acts 29 *in the Bible*. There will be no Even Newer Testament to follow on from what we have in our hands already. What we have *already* can be described as

***... the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.***

(Jude 1:3)

And we are called to be committed to precisely this message of Good News, grace in Jesus Christ, the Gospel. Because, as we have hopefully memorised now ...

***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.***

(Acts 20:32)

## ■ Commitment to the church

But I think I see this too. It really is important to keep this in mind nowadays, in a society which is so individualistic. I was speaking to someone just recently who told me that they still follow Jesus, but they have stopped going to church: they just weren't enjoying it any more.

Actually, contrast that to the commitment we see in this passage not just to the message of God, but to the *people* of God. It's a commitment that we see in God himself.

***... the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.***

(Acts 20:28)

You don't get commitments bigger than that, do you? The Good News, you could say, is not *Nice* News. You know that nowadays on TV news reports they sometimes have to give a disclaimer about a report, particularly one with pictures, that "some viewers may find upsetting". No, not all news is nice news. And the Gospel, although definitely good news, isn't all nice and cuddly stuff. It deals with life as it really is. It faces evil square on, and doesn't fuss around falling over itself with euphemisms for those awful little words "sin" and "death".

***"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that [my sheep] may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."***

(John 10:10-11)

But in speaking to his friends in Miletus, Paul did not simply insist that *God* was committed to his people. He insisted that the time *he* had spent in Ephesus showed that *he* was committed to those people, too.

***"... 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, ..."***

(Acts 20:19-20)

***"... remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears."***

(Acts 20:31)

And now, he's urging these friends of his, *they* must be committed to those people, too. Because there is some very rough water ahead. That is one reason, and a pretty good one, why God's people still need shepherds. Changing metaphors, the trouble ahead is not stormy waters but savage wolves:

***“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in 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; ...”***

(Acts 20:28-29)

And whereas Paul had come and spoken God's truth, these wolves will be whispering lies. Folks, this is why *truth* is so important. And we need each other to watch over each other, to keep us from being deceived. Alone, you're just a sitting duck ... I feel like I should be saying, with wolves on the prowl, a “sitting sheep” ... but it doesn't have quite the same feel to it.

***“... and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”***

(Acts 20:30)

And yet, with all this emphasis on Gospel truth, just as we were thinking about back at the start, we are called not just to be dispensers of truth but dispensers of grace *as well*. There is also to be a ...

### ■ Commitment to generosity

Here's how Paul concludes his chosen, vital words to the leaders of the church at Ephesus. I think these are the only directly attributed words of Jesus outside the books that we call “Gospels” - that's the word used in a different, technical sense, though one that we have just become familiar with by repeated usage.

***“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.’”***

(Acts 20:33-35)

And so what you might have initially thought looks a bit odd in that Church Covenant, tacking two rather different things into the same promise, actually follows Scripture very nicely:

*We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.*

If we are called to be committed to the Gospel and to people, here are the implications, just as we've already touched on earlier.

It will touch your wallet – or maybe that's your Mobile Banking App nowadays. If the Gospel is important, we need to recognise the practicality that Gospel ministry doesn't just happen. God doesn't rain banknotes down from the sky. It comes out of your pockets and mine. Scripture definitely promotes cheerfulness in giving:

***Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.***



(2 Corinthians 9:7)

And if you can't give cheerfully, maybe the answer is not to sit back like the king in his counting-house, gleefully counting out his money, but to pray that God will give you a more generous and grace-filled heart, so that you *will* be able to delight in giving.

And Scripture at least hints quite strongly that giving regularly is a good idea, too. It doesn't have to be a regular commitment to the same amount, if your income fluctuates a lot, but regularity is still wise.

***Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.***

(1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

And the work of the Gospel *and* the relief of the poor are *both* seen as part of a Christian's calling:

***"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.'"***

(Acts 20:35)

Folks, it's not long to the New Year now, and, perhaps, New Year's Resolutions. Time to review our commitments, do you think? If we want to really be "a Gospel church", then we have to have Gospel priorities. To sustain a truly "evangelical" ministry here, overflowing full of grace and truth, we need

A commitment to the Gospel of God

A commitment to the people of God

A commitment to generosity in the name of, for the sake of, in memory of, out of our love and thanksgiving and devotion to, our Lord Jesus Christ.