

A Primer on Ministry Leadership

In 2001, at age 32, Elizabeth had a picture-perfect life. She was working as a travel writer in New York, had an apartment in Manhattan, a big new house in the Hudson Valley, and a devoted husband with whom she intended to have a child. But just five years later, she found herself locked in the bathroom of her home at 3 a.m. weeping over the life she didn't want anymore.

She considered herself some kind of a cultural Christian, though she said she could never really swallow the idea that Jesus was the only path to God. So, on this fateful night she called out in prayer to whoever might be listening – The Higher Power, the Force, the Light, the Supreme Self – whoever might be listening. She prayed, “I don't want to be married anymore. I don't want to live in this big house. I don't want to have this baby.”

As Elizabeth wrote about this night months later, she said someone actually answered her prayer. She wrote, “It was not an Old Testament Hollywood Charlton Heston voice, nor was it a voice telling me to build a baseball field in my backyard. It was merely my own voice... This was my voice, but perfectly wise, calm and compassionate... How can I describe the warmth of affection in that voice, as it gave me the answer that would forever seal my faith in the divine?”

Fortified by hearing her own “divine voice,” Elizabeth Gilbert left her husband and the house and her job and the plans for having a child. Her globe-trotting, self-centered, spiritual journey led to the publishing phenomenon known as *Eat, Pray, Love* – a book that spent an extraordinary 187 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and was turned into a movie starring Julia Roberts. Ross Douthat, a *New York Times* columnist, has called Elizabeth Gilbert, “a religious Pilgrim for our post-Christian times.” Do you know what the apostle Paul would call her? ...a savage wolf.

The apostle Paul is not crossing the border to try to “find himself” or to listen to his “inner voice.” He's crossing the border to challenge false teachers whose teaching has enslaved millions of people with “feel good” platitudes that simply whitewash a person's soul but do nothing to heal a slow-growing disease that, untreated, will deposit him/her in hell. Paul is not a tourist or a U.N. peacekeeper. He's an undercover agent of Heaven, sent to establish underground resistance teams called churches, through which the Holy Spirit can begin to rescue and heal lost souls.

Paul is now on his third and last missionary journey. As he makes his way from the field back to Jerusalem, he stops to speak to the church leaders, the elders, from the church in Ephesus. His words to them are also for us. They provide a brief primer on the job description of a ministry leader. He boils it down to four items...

I. Teach Passionately

Now, you might be thinking, “Well, I'm not a ‘ministry leader.’ I'm just a regular Christian, so I guess I can just coast through this sermon.” Wrong! Jesus told

the first church leaders to make disciples (new Christians) and then to do what with them? *Teach them to obey ALL that I have commanded YOU...* (Matt. 28:20) So, Jesus commanded the church leaders to make disciples and to teach, so then every Christian is supposed to make disciples and teach. Bottom line: pay attention! This job description is for all of us.

Regarding teaching, Paul writes:

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. (Acts 20:20, 21)

With regard to the task of teaching, Paul answers two questions: where and what. His answer to “where” is “publically” and “privately” (house to house). So basically, that would mean, “Be willing to teach everywhere and anywhere!”

But, what do we teach? You know, Paul is not known as a condenser of information when he teaches. In fact, he’s the champion of the run-on sentence. He has some sentences in his letters that are 30 to 35 words long! But here, sitting in the Yacht Club of Miletus with the church leaders from Ephesus who have traveled about 30 miles to be with him, Paul becomes very concise in his teaching. To the question, “What should we teach?” Paul says:

...declare[d] to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. (Acts 20:21)

That pretty much condenses the whole New Testament, doesn’t it? Teach people that the only way into the kingdom of God is through the doorway of repentance - not good works, not membership in the church, not by listening to the “divine inner voice of self.” No, there’s only one way to have our sins paid for. It’s through repentance.

Do you understand what biblical repentance is? Elizabeth Gilbert, weeping in her bathroom at 3 a.m., was not repenting. Repentance is sorrow but it’s sorrow about a specific thing – my disobedience toward God. Elizabeth Gilbert was NOT upset and sad about the sin in her life. She was sad that she was married! If she had practiced biblical repentance that night, God would have forgiven her, changed her heart and given her joy in her marriage, in her vocation and in motherhood. Instead, she rejected repentance and chose to go deeper into her own self-centeredness.

I would be horribly remiss if I didn’t ask this question right now. Have you biblically repented? Have you ever said to God, “Oh God, I acknowledge that these desires I have been entertaining and acting upon are disgusting to You. They violate your commands. Please forgive me. Please cleanse me. Please save me and give me a new heart, a heart that desires Your will, not mine.” If you have never prayed a prayer like that, I have to tell you this – you’re not a Christian, you’re not forgiven and you’re not going to heaven. God doesn’t forgive us until we repent. Jesus said:

“...unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke 13:3)

If you’ve never repented, why not do it right now?

Secondly, Paul says we should teach people to “...have faith in our Lord Jesus.” Having faith is to trust someone and trusting someone is something that grows over time. I learn to trust you as I have experience after experience with you where you demonstrate that you are trust-worthy. Faith grows, but it can’t grow until we come

alive spiritually. We come alive when we repent and are “born again” from above. All Christians are called to teach people to repent and then place their faith in Jesus. Secondly, Paul says that we are to...

II. Be Willing to Cross Borders Consistently

Beginning at verse 22, Paul says: (Acts 20:22-23)

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

As I’ve been saying through this series, not everyone is to cross geographic borders as Paul did. Some of us are called to cross ethnic borders or emotional borders or relational borders. But we’re all expected to follow Paul across some border with the gospel. Please notice first that Paul didn’t have a Pollyanna view of what lay ahead. The Spirit was both calling him across the border AND letting him know it wouldn’t be pleasant. In fact, it might mean prison. But Paul isn’t doing this for notoriety or because of a persecution complex. Listen to his “why”:

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. (Acts 20:24)

The more literal translation of this verse from the Greek says:

I make my life of no account, not precious to me, SO THAT I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to witness solemnly concerning the gospel of the grace of God.

I understand that some of our high school students in this church have begun a weekly Bible study at their high schools. In Avon, they’ve named their group, “I Am Second.” That’s exactly what Paul is saying here. “I am second, Christ is first.” Whom do you know in this country who has had to suffer hardship or even prison time for putting God first? Oh, there have been some. Martin Luther King comes to mind. He suffered hardship, prison and assassination for putting God first.

Or how about Randy Alcorn? Randy is a pastor from Oregon whose wages were garnished in 1990 because he was convicted of blocking the entrance to an abortion clinic. Randy resigned from the church and since then, he and his wife and two daughters have lived off of his wife’s secretary salary.

If it came to that, to life-changing hardship or even prison, would you change your convictions and avoid the hardship or would you “...make your life of no account, not precious to you, so that you might finish the course” of representing the gospel? The owners of Hobby Lobby, Chic-fil-a and other Christian-owned franchises may soon be faced with this very real predicament, as our government tries to force them to pay for abortions through their employee health plans. What would you do? The time to make that decision is now, not when police officers are at your door. The apostle Peter, who history says was crucified upside down for his commitment to Christ, wrote these words:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

Christian leaders are willing to cross borders for the gospel. Thirdly, Christian leaders are expected to...

III. Keep Watch Over the Flock Courageously

Paul says: (Acts 20:28-31)

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.

Now, Paul's specific instructions here are regarding the role of the Elders in the church. The elders are to "shepherd" the church. But all Christians have someone to shepherd. Parents shepherd their children. An older Christian may shepherd a younger Christian. But Paul is being very specific with the elders here, regarding one particular part of their job. They are to protect the church members from the "savage wolves" of false teachers. What exactly is the danger of false teachers? The apostle Peter speaks at length about them. He says:

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies... Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up...

These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error... If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. (II Peter 1:21-2:3, 17, 18, 20)

False teachers can't cause you to lose your salvation, but they can prevent some from receiving salvation. They can also cause Christians to lose the "joy" of their salvation by enticing them to live in sin. The Elders of the church are charged with protecting church members from such people. How will they protect the flock? First, as Paul says, they need to *Keep watch over themselves*, by practicing healthy, spiritual disciplines. This is what Paul outlines for young Timothy in his letters to him. He urges him to pray, to exercise his spiritual gifts, to worship AND to:

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (I Tim. 4:16)

In every church, Paul appointed Elders, plural. Why? Because a team of protectors can do a better job than just one protector.

But secondly, leaders need to "keep watch" because there are spiritual predators in this world. There is an enemy who wants to get into the sheep pen. You

should pray for our elders regularly because they are standing on the walls 'keeping watch.' They are, to a man, willing to stand between you and the wolf. Your prayers will only make them stronger. Lastly, Paul tells Christian leaders to...

IV. Give More Than You Take Unselfishly

Paul reminds this baby church:

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:33- 35)

Think about this for a minute. Paul, before he became a Christian, was a high-powered lawyer. I'm sure he had the equivalent of the chauffer-driven car, the Manhattan apartment, the Sanhedrin provided tickets to the theater, etc., etc. He was used to being the "receiver," not the "giver" and probably believing he deserved it.

Now, he's traveling around on cargo ships, paying his own way by making and selling tents. Tents!! Not only that, but he's being arrested, beaten, criticized, and thrown in jail, all for establishing "outposts of hope" from which he gets not so much as a denarius. And how does this make Paul feel? How would YOU feel? Is he bitter that he has to give so much and gets so little?

Paul actually doesn't look at it that way. In his letter to these same Elders of Ephesus, Paul gives this reason for why he's really not even tempted to go back to his former life of chauffeurs and theater tickets and "billable hours." Listen:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...

For this reason I kneel before the Father... I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:7, 8, 14-19)

Wow! Paul doesn't look at his life as a sacrifice but as an incredible privilege! He's discovered that when we give to God, when we serve God, a door is opened through which we may walk and tap into the greatest riches in the universe - the fullness of God Himself. Do you think of serving God as a sacrifice? Yes, there will be hardship. But when you begin to teach passionately, to cross borders consistently, to keep watch over the flock courageously and you begin to give unselfishly, you will also be filled with the fullness of God completely. This is your high calling and your high privilege. Amen.