

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

Acts 20:1-38

Chadron Berean Church

In the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said, “Go and make disciples” not go and make converts. There’s a reason for that. The population of Chadron, Nebraska is approximately 5,000 people. Let’s say that every year a core group of 100 of us make 100 converts. They’re saved, but never taught how to follow Jesus. And every year after that, 100 converts. It would take us 50 years to reach everyone in Chadron with the gospel that way. However, if each of us just made 1 disciple, who in turn made 1 disciple, the math would look something like this: 100 people make 100 disciples. Then 200 of us make 200 disciples. Then 400 of us make 400 disciples. Then 800, then 1600, then 3200. make 800 disciples. 1600 make 1600 disciples. Then 3,200 of us makes 3,200 disciples. In 6 years, we’ll have reached Chadron and beyond. That’s not very realistic but it demonstrates why Jesus said make disciples, not converts. Multiplication is faster than addition.

Today in the book of Acts we’re going to see the discipleship heart of Paul as he revisits the churches he planted to encourage and strengthen them. If we really want to reach the world with the gospel, we need strong, healthy churches that are making disciples. So that’s the direction we’re going with today’s message, looking at some characteristics of a healthy, disciple-making church. We pick it up in Acts 20 in the middle of Paul’s 3rd missionary journey following a riot from the tradesmen at Ephesus.

“After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had encouraged them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. 2 When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. 3 And there he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. 4 And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. 5 Now these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas.

I. RETURN TO GREECE. (VV. 1-6)

Paul leaves Ephesus and moves on to **Macedonia**, the northern region of modern-day Greece. Back then the northern half was Macedonia and the southern half **Achaia (Greece)**. It says he gives these churches here—Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea—much encouragement. The Berean Standard Bible says he **spoke many words of encouragement**. The word **encouragement** here “has a full range of meanings, from rebuking to comforting... instruction, appeal, affirmation, warning, and correction.”¹ He’s discipling them. Strengthening their walk with Jesus. That’s really the theme in this chapter. Encouraging and strengthening the local churches and disciples.

He knew God's work today is primarily through the local church and therefore, we need strong churches. We also see him encouraging much through the pen during this time period in life. He **writes 2 Corinthians** while in Macedonia, telling them to prepare for his coming.

You probably don't remember this from last week—the account of burning magic books and 7 men getting beat up stole your interest!—but Luke revealed that Paul purposed to go to Jerusalem after passing through Macedonia and Achaia (19:21). Why? For one, to **continue discipling** them. And two, he was **collecting an offering** for the saints in Jerusalem that had fallen on hard times. The generous gift from the Gentile churches would have blessed the Jewish church there (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Romans 15:25-27 says, *“But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.”* Have you ever thought about how we're indebted to the Jews for all of our spiritual blessings? Through them came the promises, the Savior, the Scriptures (Rom. 11:4-5). That verse convicts me to support ministry to the Jews and stand for Israel. But for Paul, he thought this gift would help unify the Jewish and Gentile church in Christ. It was symbolic and practical. **On the first day of every week** they took an offering for this so that when Paul arrived, they could present it to him (1 Cor. 16:1-4). And I think we find here our first characteristic:

A healthy church is a generous church.

They're generous with their time, money, talents, and gifts. And this church is generous! It's incredible. At the same time we want to keep challenging ourselves to be more and more generous. I think of Paul wrote to the Thessalonians “excel still more” (4:1, 10). One of the reasons why I like this Care Ministry because I can tell it's making us even more generous with our time and money and resources and the gifts that God gave us. Yesterday while we were doing some siding on a garage and trimming a tree I kept thinking it's more blessed to give than receive (v. 35).

After Macedonia, he travels south to **Achaia** for three months. He spends the **winter of 56-57** here in **Corinth**. Corinth was a church with many problems and in need of serious attention. It's here that he would **write the letter of Romans**, informing them of his plans to visit soon (Rom. 1:11-15). So in person or by mail, Paul is in full on discipleship mode making sure that the churches he leaves behind are healthy because he won't be around forever.

It's also apparent he does not travel or work alone. He shares the burden of ministry with **seven disciples**. Seven disciples are mentioned here from Macedonia, Asia (western Turkey), and Galatia (central Turkey). To that list we could add **Dr. Luke** (the beloved physician, Col. 4:14), the author, because he joins them again. That's apparent by his use of the word **“we”**. It appears they left him in Philippi (Acts 16) and he joins them again when they go back through Philippi where a prominent medical school was. Paul had learned about a plot by some Jews probably on their way to Jerusalem for Passover, who planned to kill him on the ship to Syria, so he goes all

the way back through Macedonia. There's a fine line between trusting the Lord and taking foolish chances.²

II. COMMUNION AT TROAS. (VV. 7-16)

6 We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread [an 8 day Jewish festival in the springtime that includes Passover], and reached them at Troas within five days; and we stayed there for seven days. 7 On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread [reference to communion and a fellowship meal], Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. [and you all thought I preached a long time! Actually, if the apostle Paul was here for a day, you would stay here until midnight listening to him too] 8 There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were gathered together. 9 And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, Eutychus was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor, and was picked up dead. 10 But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for he is still alive." 11 When Paul had gone back up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. 12 They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

So we're back at Troas where Paul received the call to Macedonia. And there is a church gathering here on the **first day of the week**. That should get our attention because the church is not meeting on the Sabbath (Saturday), but on Sunday. In the NT, Sunday became the preferred day to meet, also called the Lord's day, resurrection day (John 20:19, 26; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). Could we meet on Sabbath? Sure! We have the freedom to meet whenever. But Paul said let no man be your judge in respect to a food, drink, festivals, or Sabbath day (Col. 2:16). I think we'll stick with Sunday!

Anyway, this gathering seems informal. It's mostly Paul talking, and talking... and talking... and talking... until one young man falls asleep in the window. No surprise, the teenager falls asleep in church. But seriously, it's the 3rd story, lots of people, small room, warm, stuffy, many lamps lowering the oxygen levels... he went to the window to get fresh air but still fell asleep. And I've got to say, this is an encouraging passage. For me, it's encouraging to know that Paul was a man of many words! He didn't preach sermonettes for Christianettes. He was serious about teaching of the Word, making disciples. It's also encouraging to know that people fell asleep on the apostle Paul too! It's encouraging for you because some of you fall asleep. I think some people think it's their spiritual gift in the body of Christ to make sure the body gets some rest! Actually, when I was working midnights on the railroad, I fell asleep a couple times on my old pastor. I even drooled a little once. But hey, it's not sleeping bodies that bothers me. It's sleeping souls. Someone can be physically exhausted but spiritually awake. Others can be physically awake while spiritually sleeping. Read Romans 13:11-12. Paul says to wake up!

Anyway, the natural reading of the text indicates this kid died when he fell but was brought back to life by Paul. Paul reminds us of the ministries of the prophets **Elijah** and **Elisha** in the OT,

Jesus in the Gospels, or **Peter** in Acts 9 who brought people back to life (Luke 7:11-15; John 11:38-44; 1 Kings 17:19-22; 2 Kings 4:34-35; Acts 9:36-41). There's certainly a parallel there being portrayed for us. Paul is a powerful NT figure like the prophets or Peter or in keeping with the ministry of Jesus. After the young man is brought back to life, what do they do? Call it a night? Nope! They have a midnight snack and Paul teaches until daybreak! Look: Paul spends every last minute he can discipling them. This may be his last time with them and he wants them grounded in the Word.

A healthy church is a grounded church.

Just like our church's big vision, a healthy church is **rooted** in the Word of God. Disciples of Jesus need to be ground in the Word so they can teach others how to follow Jesus.

13 But we went ahead to the ship and set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for that was what he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. 14 And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. 15 Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day we came to Miletus. 16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to lose time in Asia; for he was hurrying, if it might be possible for him to be in Jerusalem the day of Pentecost."

So Luke describes some of the travels here. It's very typical for ships back then to hop one day at a time from port to port. It was tricky to navigate the rocky coastlines. Interestingly, Paul walks 20 miles to **Assos** while the others go by ship. We don't know why, but maybe he wanted to go on a prayer walk. Maybe some from Troas went with and he was teaching on the way. Personally, I think this is his last prayerful walk alone with the Lord before being arrested in Jerusalem and he knows it. Anyway, they end up at **Miletus**. He skips Ephesus because he wants to get this gift to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, but calls the Ephesian elders to him.

III. PASTORS CONFERENCE IN MILETUS. (VV. 17-38)

17 From Miletus he sent word to Ephesus and called to himself the elders of the church. 18 And when they came 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, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was beneficial, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that chains and afflictions await me. 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 God's grace.

25 “And now behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 26 Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all people. 27 For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. 28 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. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. 31 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. 32 And now I entrust 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. 33 I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes. 34 You yourselves know that these hands served my own needs and the men who were with me. 35 In everything I showed you that by working hard in this way 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.’”

36 When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And they all began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, 38 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.

I honestly thought that when I arrived at this text I would spend an entire sermon on it because I cherish it so much. But I think that I want to summarize it more for us in keeping with the emphasis of strengthening churches. Paul calls the Ephesian church **elders** (presbyterous, from where we get our word presbytery/masculine) to him, also referred to as **shepherds** (poimaino) and **overseers** (episkopous/masculine) in this passage. This is a really helpful passage on church leadership. An elder (from where we get the word presbytery, a shepherd/pastor, and a overseer (from where we get the word bishop) are all the same thing. And it’s not one bishop or pastor presiding over a church. Churches are to be led by elders, plural and masculine, just like 1 Timothy and Titus teach. These are the ones responsible for the oversight, or guidance of the church. These men must be faithful, humble, have some experience, and are able to teach. Like shepherds, they guide the “flock” of God. Every flock needs shepherds to keep the church healthy.

A healthy church is a guided church.

They have godly leadership. What does that look like? Well, Paul begins by simply referencing himself as the model. We see Paul’s example as a good shepherd:

1. **With them the whole time (v. 18)** – live an exemplary, open life before them.
2. **Served the Lord with all humility, tears, trials (v. 18)** – persevered as a bondservant, as one carrying out his duty rain or shine.
3. **Did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God publicly and privately (vv. 20, 27)** – didn’t water down the message, withhold any truth. Didn’t shrink back. Helped them understand the comprehensive will of God from eternity past to eternity future. This

is why we go through the Word of God like we do, a little at a time, book by book. Over the long haul, this makes for a strong, healthy flock acquainted with even the most difficult subjects. It keeps me from focusing on my interests and the easy passages.

4. **Didn't count his life as dear to himself (v. 24)** – He lived with eternity in mind. He was willing to die for the gospel. He has a singular desire/focus to finish his **God-given course/race** by continuing to testify to the gospel of grace. He had this rare trait called commitment. Have you guys heard about the young man who wrote a love letter to his girlfriend expressing his commitment to her? *“My dear, I would climb the highest mountain, swim the widest stream, cross the burning desert, even die at the stake for you! P.S. I will see you on Saturday if it doesn't rain.”*³

As a model shepherd, Paul then turns to the Ephesian elders and exhorts them to **shepherd the flock by being on guard for themselves and for the flock**. If they are going to guard the flock, they have to guard their own hearts first. They have to feed their own hearts and guard their own hearts and minds in Christ, and then help do the same for the church. That's mostly what shepherds do: **feed and protect**, feed and protect, feed and protect. It's also a sacred task. Look at verse 28, *“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.”* What's that verse tell you about Jesus? He's God. The Lord God's blood was shed. It also tells us it's not the elders' church, but God's church – the Church of God. One man said, *“Such a sacred form of down payment for the church makes the responsibility of the elders sacred.”*⁴

Notice too, this is something God calls men too. The Holy Spirit has made them overseers. God gifted them for it and Paul, and the church recognized it. And **the main way that they are going to feed the flock and protect the flock centers around the gospel**. Paul calls it the **gospel of grace** in verse 24 and the **word of His grace** in verse 32. Paul's ministry is summed up in the phrase *“testify to the gospel of grace.”*

A healthy church is a gospel-centered church.

Preaching the gospel of grace protects the flock. If a flock understands God's grace in Christ, everything else—every other religion—becomes into focus as not from God. Only authentic Christianity preaches we are saved by grace. Salvation is a free gift offered through faith in Christ—not by works. True shepherds seek to ward off, alienate, or even excommunicate any wolf undermining the gospel of grace by turning it into a gospel of works through moralism or legalism or performance-based jargon. Wolves deny the gospel of grace by adding to or taking away from Christ's work on the cross. I think wolves prefer to dress up as shepherds, not just as other sheep. And it doesn't matter how nice they are, how good of a person they are, if they carry a Bible and have many of the same beliefs – if they have a different definition of grace and won't receive correction on it – it's the job God's true shepherd to protect the flock from them.

Preaching the gospel of grace also feeds the flock. It builds us up. We never tire of hearing the message of grace preached. The gospel of grace must stay at the forefront of our minds. If we

forget the gospel, we'll just become another country club and eventually we'll shut our doors, and someone will turn this building into a restaurant. Worse yet, we'll stay open and become a counterfeit church for Satan to work through, preaching a false gospel of works. A healthy church is a church rooted in the gospel of grace and sharing it with others.

I can't help but think of our church's big vision of a healthy fruit tree that has deep roots and bearing fruit. A healthy church is rooted in the Word of God and the gospel of grace but also bearing fruit with seeds in them to reproduce. Our vision is a vision of discipleship. Through the roots, gospel in, and through the fruit, gospel out. I challenge you to fulfill our vision by discipling one person. If you need a discipler, consider asking someone who is further along in their walk with the Lord than you, someone you look up to.

¹ Dr. Thomas Constable, *Notes on Acts*, 2022 Edition, https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm#_ftnref1148. Cited: *The Nelson Study Bible*. Edited by Earl D. Radmacher. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997.

² Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 5* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 397.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 276.

⁴ Darrel L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 633.