

## Acts 20 vs 13-38 Our Calling as Ambassadors for Jesus Christ

### Introduction

What kind of impression do you and I want to leave with other people who have been in our company? What kind of impression do we as a church wish to convey to new people who come along to a service in this congregation? All of us are witnesses by virtue of the way we live. The question is this: What kind of witness am I? What impression do other people have of Jesus as a result of my interaction with them? In his 1984 book *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, Roald Dahl tells a number of stories about his early life. In one chapter entitled 'The Headmaster' (pp.144-146) he described the most significant influence in his life against believing in God. The individual in question was the head-teacher of Repton Independent School in Derby. They had very few conversations, but Dahl described him as having 'lots of energy but not much charm'. What was of huge concern to this schoolboy was the violence meted out in corporal punishment. Dahl was not opposed to corporal punishment and was of the view that moderate use of the cane was probably justified in some cases of misbehaving pupils. However, what disturbed him was the excessive violence and wounding that was carried out by masters and especially by the head-teacher. Roald was never a victim of this excess, but his best friend Michael gave a graphic description of his experience of this ordeal. It was a surreal experience of multiple heavy blows on bare flesh with pauses between the strikes during which the head-teacher alternately smoked his pipe or lectured the pupil bent over his sofa about evil and wrongdoing or sinning and malpractice. At the end of the session a basin, sponge and clean towel were provided for the pupil to wash away the blood, before he was allowed to pull up his trousers. Where does the link to God come in? The head-teacher was also an ordained Anglican clergyman. Dahl remembered chapel sermons from this man, preaching about the Lamb of God and of mercy and forgiveness, but in sharp contrast to his brutal treatment of the pupils under his care. Forgiveness and mercy appeared to be in short supply to the small boys who broke the school rules. The head-teacher, Geoffrey Fisher, left the school at the end of Dahl's third year to become Bishop of Chester in 1932. Soon after he became Bishop of London (1939) and finally Archbishop of Canterbury (1945-61); and had the honour of crowning our present Queen in Westminster Abbey. Dahl concluded the chapter by stating: 'It was all this, I think, that made me begin to have doubts about religion and even about God. If this person, I kept telling myself, was one of God's chosen salesmen on earth, then there must be something very wrong about the whole business.' Fisher's religious views were far from Evangelical. He advised Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister, about his possible successor as Archbishop. He was reported to have said: I have come to give you some advice about my successor. Whoever you choose, under no account must it be Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of York. Dr Ramsey is a theologian, a scholar and a man of prayer. Therefore, he is entirely unsuitable as Archbishop of Canterbury. I have known him all my life. I was his Headmaster at Repton. To which Macmillan replied, Thank you, your Grace, for your kind advice. You may have been Doctor Ramsey's headmaster, but you were not mine [quotation on wikipedia]. Fisher was an ardent Freemason and Grand Chaplain in the United Grand Lodge of England. The Prime Minister with more discernment than the Archbishop ignored the advice and appointed Ramsay to the post. What influence do you and I have as Christians? Are we good ambassadors for Jesus Christ?

## 1. Our Past Ministry (Acts 20:13-21)

<sup>13</sup> We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. <sup>14</sup> When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. <sup>15</sup> The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Chios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. <sup>16</sup> Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. <sup>17</sup> From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church (a) **Our Lifestyle** (Acts 20:18-19a) <sup>18</sup> When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. <sup>19</sup> I served the Lord with great humility and with tears. After a description by Luke of Paul's travel plans in Acts 20:13-16, he records how Paul asked the leaders of the Ephesus Church to meet him in the nearby port of Miletus. This record of his conversation with his fellow church leaders reveals some clear principles about the nature of effective Christian discipleship. First of all, Paul draws attention to something that was clearly open to challenge if untrue. He said 'you know how I lived when I was with you'; the apostle wanted to stress the consistency of his daily life. He was far from perfect, and so are we, but there was a serious attempt to live a life that brought honour to God. To say: *I served the Lord with great humility and with tears* (Acts 20:19) is only effective if it true. If this claim was unsubstantiated then what followed would have been seriously undermined. Other people notice how we go about our everyday lives. How we handle the ordinary situations which everyone goes through; there will always be people who observe what difference our claim to follow Jesus makes. Why do they do this? simply because a significant number of people are less than happy with their lives and they are looking to see if there are other people managing significantly better. In the testimonies of the majority of people who profess faith in Christ there is usually an acknowledgement of the influence of a Christian family member, friend or work colleague who has modelled in the ordinary situations of life that their faith does indeed make a difference. None of us are perfect this side of heaven; and people aren't looking for that, but they do react very badly to hypocrisy and want to see a serious attempt by Christians to live out the truth they proclaim. It is an astonishing claim to speak of your own *great humility* truthfully, but it appears that this assertion was accepted as accurate. Paul's behaviour provided openings for him to use words in his witness for Jesus Christ and will do so also for us today. The great third century AD advocate for the Christian faith, Tertullian, in his *Apologeticum*, chapter 39, verse 7 stated the clear contrast between the Christians of his day and the majority pagan community amongst whom they lived.: Look," they say, "how they [Christians] love one another" (for they themselves hate one another); "and how they are ready to die for each other" (for they themselves are readier to kill each other). It was a time of severe persecution and martyrdom, but the church continued to grow as more people were attracted by its higher ethical principles and its strong emphasis on a high quality community life within the congregation. Never underestimate how effective a consistent Christian lifestyle can be. Even if it provides verbal opportunities for other Christians to witness rather than ourselves, we are building God's kingdom. A second quality of ambassadors for Jesus Christ is:

(b) **Our Perseverance** (Acts 20:19b) *and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents* Christian service is not all happiness and a stress-free existence this side of heaven. Paul speaks here of 'tears' and being *in the midst of severe testing* by Jewish opponents of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Few people in this country, outside the Armed Forces, can even begin to imagine the kind of violence Paul suffered. Yet he continued serving the Lord year after year with astonishing perseverance. He challenged the Corinthian Christians to display this characteristic in I Corinthians 15:58: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.* Here was a man who as much as any Christian alive was

practising what he was preaching to others in this regard. If Paul were here today I have no doubt that he would ask us how we are getting on in our service for the Lord. Can you, can I, be relied upon, week after week, in serving the Lord? Are we willing to put ourselves out to ensure that His work gets done, and done well? In the good times most people can keep going pretty well, but it is when we are seriously under pressure that the strength of our character is revealed. Only in the power of the Holy Spirit can we keep going for the Lord. In view of the major building project that lies ahead of us, there will be increased demands not only on our finances, but also on our time and concerning our willingness to step forward and take up leadership positions in a variety of areas of church life to ensure that all that needs to be done is accomplished. The work of the gospel is like a farmer planting seed. Our investment, in time, will produce a harvest. We have been blessed in recent years in no small degree by the hard work of a much smaller group of people who remained faithful to the Lord and this church when there was very little sign of blessing, in comparison to what has been experienced in the last decade. It is only as we take a step back and recognise the bigger picture of what we are doing that we get a right perspective on the decisions we are making at the present time.

(c) **Our Consistency** (Acts 20:20-21)<sup>20</sup> *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.* <sup>21</sup> *I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.* This is a sign of true friendship when people can be totally honest and open with each other when difficult things need to be said. The cheesy grin and superficial friendships that characterise too great a proportion of friendships in our society today are tragic. Everyone needs to be loved and to love; to have friends and to be a friend to other people. The rapid rise of the percentage of our population, albeit currently fairly small, whose friends are 'Facebook Friends' or belonging to some other equivalent social network on-line, at the expense of meaningful relationships with living human beings in the real world, is so sad. The Church is not immune from this phenomenon. There are a growing number of virtual churches whose members co-operate exclusively online through their characters in a virtual congregation. We value the internet and the potential it brings in terms of communication opportunities and the provision of vast quantities of information on any conceivable topic, but there is nothing that can replace consistent Christ-like conduct and speech in our churches for strengthening the integrity of relationships between us. I praise God for the positive reports of our church in the wider community in this town but may we never get complacent thinking that there is no room for further improvements in coming days. This side of heaven whether it is preaching from the pulpit, pastoral care, or any of the vast number of other activities carried out under the auspices of this congregation, we have the potential to do ever better. We thank God for Paul's consistency over many years. May that be equally true of you and me in the years to come in the work of this congregation, for the glory of God.

## 2. **Our Future Mission** (Acts 20:22-27)

(a) **Realistic about the challenges** (Acts 20:22-23) <sup>22</sup> *“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.* <sup>23</sup> *I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.* There are special times in our lives when we cannot miss what God is saying to us. It may be something we have resisted doing, but the words of a number of people, or a variety of unexpected circumstances and often God speaking to us through His Word or as we engage in prayer presents a powerful call to us. This was one of those times for Paul. He knew that some serious difficulties would cross His path, but he did not shrink from the challenge. Each of us at times faces health issues, personally or in our families; employment issues; the pain of bereavement; the

disappointment of unfulfilled career expectations; and a whole lot more besides, but we declare that God's grace is sufficient to get us through these difficult times. Paul never entertained any notions of cheap grace or a prosperity gospel that proclaims an easy life free from the trials and tribulations so many Christians around the world have experienced. Jesus made some equally frank comments to His disciples at the Last Supper. In His concluding words in John 16:33, He declared: *I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* The Church of Jesus Christ is growing at its fastest rate in history since the first century AD, not in areas of great material prosperity but in some of the most difficult and dangerous places on earth. Why? because the gospel of God is good news for the needy. Remember Jesus' Nazareth manifesto at the start of His ministry in Luke 4:18-19: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,* <sup>19</sup> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*" In a country with economic hardships, with job concerns; with pension problems; with a whole host of concerns for so many people we have good news that they so desperately need, even if many are not even aware of their need of Him. Many people are searching for meaning and purpose to their lives, but they are not rushing to the churches; the largest proportion of them have never ever been associated with a church and wouldn't have a clue how to connect with us. This is why we have to be His witnesses in the wider community, knowing that the work will be hard and that the spiritual harvest may take much longer to reap than we would have wished.

(b) **Resolute in maintaining our priorities** (Acts 20:24)<sup>24</sup> *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.* How we start out in our spiritual lives is important, but it is less so compared to how we finish at the end of our days. Paul's secret was to grasp the bigger picture. In essence, it is not about me, but all about Him. This truth releases us from taking all the pressures onto ourselves and contains a recognition that what I am doing is part of something far bigger than I ever imagined; for a Lord and Saviour who is greater than I have ever grasped; Paul wanted to keep his eyes fixed on Jesus for the remaining weeks, months, or as it turned out years of life left to him, at the time of this address to the Ephesian elders. Shortly before the end of his life, in his last letter to Timothy the pastor of that church, Paul wrote: *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing* (II Timothy 4:6-8). It is not a question of whether you are young or old; or whether you think you have decades to live or a much lesser timescale, are you, like Paul able to say: *my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.*

(c) **Conscious of the shortness of time** (Acts 20:25-27) <sup>25</sup> *“Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. <sup>27</sup> For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.* We live in time, in the light of eternity. There is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun. There are people even in this wonderful community who give no thought to their eternal destiny. There are even people attending places of worship, and some even in pulpits, who have made no provision for eternity. In a society where we take insurance for an endless series of possible events, why is it so many fail to plan and prepare for the biggest day of their lives when they will enter eternity? I am thrilled that this church agreed to go ahead with our building project, not primarily for our comfort, but to enable many more people in this community to come through these doors for a range of activities through which they will experience something of the love of God as they interact with His people here. There will be

great inconvenience for that time when we are out of the building, but in the coming days let us keep before us the urgency of our mission of bringing God's wonderful love and grace to people who need to place their faith and trust in Him.

### 3. Our Present Message (Acts 20:28-38)

In the last part of his message the apostle turns to these relatively young Christians with advice about how they should live in the present and into the future. How best can we serve the Lord? The advice here is applicable to all Christians, but primarily directed in context to people in positions of leadership within the local congregation. Are there people entrusted to your spiritual care and direction? If the answer is yes! then these words apply to you. The fundamental priority, says Paul, that undergirds everything else we may say or do is: (a) **Keep watch over yourselves** (Acts 20:28) *Keep watch over yourselves* invest in your own relationship with God. It is right to hold the JOY principle (Jesus first, others second and ourselves last) in ministry, but if we are giving out spiritually and not taking in His Word then eventually we will dry up. A mean farmer, according to the probably apocryphal story, was once alleged to have decided to save costs by reducing his donkey's food to a few carrots a day. The weeks passed and the donkey was still completing his work which pleased the owner no end. The animal was a bit thinner, but otherwise all was well. There came a day when he began to wonder if costs could be trimmed further and the carrots dispensed with and only water provided for the donkey. Unfortunately the poor animal got weaker and weaker and died, to the surprise of his foolish owner. Are you being mean to yourself? Do you need to pamper yourself with more time for reading God's Word and prayer? It may currently be Lent, but too many Christians choose by neglect to fast from personal time alone with God in prayer and the study of His Word. Do you need to prioritise over time? Time for God personally but also prioritising time for meeting with His people each Sunday; unless we think it reasonable for God to take time off from listening to our prayers or being available to run His universe for a fortnight! Why do His people act in this way? Watch over yourselves with financial priorities, does God's Work have first claim on your financial choices? Or do we only give our tithes and offerings if we have enough left at the end of the week or month? In Malachi 3 the prophet brought one of a number of accusations against the Jewish people of God in his day. He wrote: *Return to me, and I will return to you,* says the Lord Almighty. *“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’”*<sup>8</sup> *“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob Me. “But you ask, ‘How are we robbing You?’ “In tithes and offerings.”*<sup>9</sup> *You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing Me.*<sup>10</sup> *Bring the **whole tithe** into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this,”* says the Lord Almighty, *“and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.* I thank God for the increases each year in the offerings in this church, not just because it helps us meet our financial needs, but without it the mission work of this congregation could not take place. I praise the Lord also for the effective tithe of our income that is used to invest in mission work elsewhere in Scotland and overseas in a number of different countries. *Keep watch over yourselves*; the apostle wrote first, if this is not done everything else will eventually fall apart. The sad scandals that occasionally befall the Christian Church, especially when key leaders dishonour their Lord, is primarily due, in the first instance, to a failure by these people to keep watch over themselves; We will all face trials and temptations to sin, but with the enabling power of the Holy Spirit we can be victorious every time. This does not mean we are, but potentially in Christ we can. Listen to these encouraging words from Paul in I Corinthians 10:16: *No temptation [or test] has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* We do fail and need to repent of our sins, but we need not fail through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Therefore, there is*

now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,<sup>2</sup> because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. However, this is only a reality if through the enabling power of the Spirit we keep watch over ourselves.

(b) **Keep watch over all the flock** (Acts 20:28) 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 love sheep and lambs and spent many hours on the farm on which I grew up seeking to assist in caring for them, especially the young lambs. Frequently the people of God are called His flock and our Lord took up the Old Testament image of God the Father as the shepherd of His people (many references, for example, Ezekiel 34) and described Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10), who provides the best possible care for His flock. These words are very apt for myself as a pastor, for the deacons and pastoral team members; but let it not stop there; leaders of various children's and youth organisations linked to the church have the blessing of teaching and working with several hundred people; together with those who work with older people both through meetings in the church and residential home services each month. When sheep on a farm have problems they rarely have the ability to solve them on their own. The walk round in circles getting nowhere or stand still frozen with fear, or simply get lost, if the problem has been how to return to a field from which they had escaped through a hole in the fence. This pastoral care is a privilege that can be exercised by all God's people towards others. We don't need a title or an office or a label to share God's love in different practical ways.

(c) **Guard against wolves** (Acts 20:29)<sup>29</sup> I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. A near-neighbour to our farm kept a number of dangerous dogs. One morning my dad who was rather deaf heard some awful cries from his flock of sheep. He went to the fields where his sheep had been kept and saw a brutal sight. One of these dogs had attacked a number of the sheep. Some had already died from their injuries; others would do so later; the dog ran off but the shepherd saved the flock from further attacks. Getting the dog's owner to admit liability and put down that dangerous animal was another matter altogether. Dangerous animals or even humans who cause death or physical injury to others are easily dealt with, but those who cause spiritual harm are much harder to call to account. This passage warns that there will be religious leaders who deny the truth of God's Word, from outside mainstream Christian Churches, who claim to believe the Bible, but whose religious input can only cause harm rather than good amongst the people of God. Be on your guard against such people says Paul.

(d) **Guard against deceivers** (Acts 20:30-31)<sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them<sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Much more serious are Christian leaders from within the Church who deny the truth of God's Word. When someone in a pulpit says: the Bible says this –but I disagree, be on your guard! The damage to the witness of the Christian Church in the last hundred and forty years in Scotland through liberal theological views and denial of the authority of God's Word is very serious. Watch carefully and don't believe all you hear or read in Christian (or other) books. Test it by God's Word. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, also addressed this issue: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. The worst punishments on the Day of Judgement will be meted out to those who set themselves up as Church leaders and led the people of God astray by their false teaching on foundational issues. Never say it cannot happen here. Be vigilant all the time is what matters. Like the Berean Christians (see Acts 17:11) may we always test by the Scriptures whatever we hear proclaimed as God's Word.

(e) **Maintaining our principles** (Acts 20:32-38) <sup>32</sup> “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. <sup>35</sup> 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.’ ” <sup>36</sup> When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. <sup>37</sup> They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. <sup>38</sup> What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. We thank God for those whose earthly witness has been completed. However, will you, will I, complete my service on earth with the same passion and dedication as a good ambassador of Jesus Christ? May He help us to do that for Jesus’ sake, Amen.