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A Vow to Keep

ROGER McMURRY

I first read the Apostle Paul's address to the Ephesian elders while a freshman at Iowa State College in 1957. I was a newly baptized believer in Christ, eager to obtain an introduction to the New Testament. Thus, I determined to read it through in one month. It was then that I came across these words in my Bible: "But I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24).

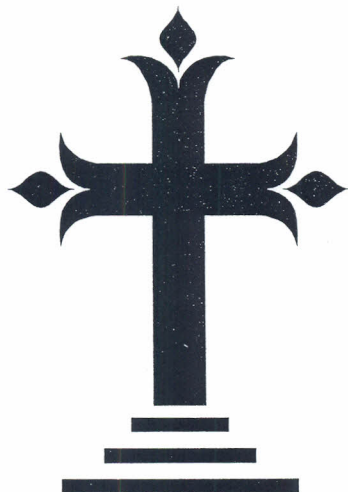
These words became immediate to my own life and described what I wanted to be. I memorized the passage and cited it often in prayer and devotion.

A COMMITMENT MADE

It is good that idealism is myopic. Had I studied the context of Paul's suffering more carefully, I might have been more cautious in agreeing to the demands of this verse. In no way has my life been comparable to the life of the apostle Paul, but the Lord has held me to my commitment. The lordship of Christ has not been so much an active pursuit on my part, but more a passive reception of the circumstances and providence that life has presented. In accepting the words of Paul some forty-eight years ago and letting go of my life as dear unto myself so that I might receive a ministry from the Lord, I had no idea of what was involved; but the Lord knew and received my feeble vows.

The occasion for Paul's statement in Acts 20 is his farewell to the elders of Ephesus. He summons them to meet him at the port city of Miletus. There have been prophetic warnings of persecution and imprisonment for him in Jerusalem. Yet he feels bound in the Spirit to go in spite of protest from the elders. They fear never seeing him again. It is in this context that the apostle speaks of his own commitment to accomplish whatever God has before him. He believes that in comparison to the privilege of speaking the gospel, his own life or death is of no account. With resolute heart he instructs the elders to continue caring for the flock of God in Ephesus. The loving care of the Chief Shepherd is to be extended, whatever the demand, under the principle "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20.35). Had not the Lord said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16.24-25).

Paul's vow of self-sacrifice seems strange when compared to 20th and 21st century presuppositions of ministry. Today, our concept of ministry is full-time salaried employment with a church or a local ministry. Yet, for Paul, it was quite different. In the setting of our text he reminds the Ephesian elders that he covets no one's silver or gold, and that with his own hands he meets the financial demands for the necessities of his life. In Corinth he had found Aquila and Priscilla and worked with them



in their shared vocation of tent making. How could he waste his time making tents when people needed to hear the gospel? Yet Paul insists that he did not shrink from his duty of admonishing the Corinthian church night and day regarding the whole counsel of God. In his letter to the Corinthians he argues extensively that anyone who labors in the gospel has full right to be paid for his or her work. But Paul's decision was to give up his prerogative to receive payment for his labor in the Lord. He had a sense that his ministry would be more effective if he supported himself. Was he disobedient to his own vow of self-sacrifice by giving his time and working with his own hands to provide a living instead of receiving from others (ultimately from God) a salary for his ministry? I think not!

I assumed that my commitment to the principles of Acts 20.24 would be accomplished in a full-time salaried ministry as a preaching/teaching minister for a church, and it was, for a time. After two degrees from two Bible colleges, I spent ten years in pulpit ministry, followed by two years in campus ministry. Then, by mutual agreement, I became unemployed. I could have easily made the customary shift to another city and another salaried position with a church. After all, I had been trained to live out my vocation in teaching and preaching, or so I thought. But my heart lay with the newly converted students who needed encouragement and support. I questioned whether or not I would be forsaking my role in God's flock if I gave up my position in full-time ministry.

A MINISTRY RECEIVED

There had been in my twelve years of full-time work a personal struggle regarding my own sense of stewardship of time and talent. I was being paid a lot of money for things I felt I should be doing just as a Christian. I struggled under the old adage, "the preacher is paid to be good but the members are good for nothing." Personally, I had a conflict of conscience over accepting pay. I was troubled with the question of whether or not I had earned my wages. The providences before me made the solution obvious.

From childhood I have been obsessed with making things out of wood. First it was toys, then sporting equipment, like a canoe built in the basement. Then it was furniture for my family and, finally, our own home. I could do carpentry, but what about my training and commitment to ministry? Would it be possible to do both? The answer was clear: of course I could!

For the past 33 years I have been a self-employed cabinetmaker. Our campus ministry resulted in a small house church that continued for 25 years. It was so small and non-threatening that we were able to develop rich connections with other ministries and churches in our city. We were free to become involved in many city-wide activities and were invited to assume leadership roles in many of them.

In recent years, neighbors have come to me with the request that I give one-third of my time to serve as pastor to two rural Disciples of Christ congregations. I had prayed that my latter years might be spent in a teaching ministry again. With this invitation of grace, I have realized a special blessing and a sense of God's recompense in this arrangement.

ROLE MODELS IN MINISTRY

I have not been without role models of ministers who served with selfless commitment, living out their vocation in the circumstances of life. Some are fictional, though nonetheless persuasive, like Bishop Myriel in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. This clergyman surrendered his palace to be used as a hospital, and he converted his carriage allowance into alms for the poor and traveled by mule. Hugo says of Bishop Myriel: "On his visits he was indulgent and gentle, and he preached less than he talked. He made virtue accessible. He never used far-fetched examples or reasoning—inventing a parable when he lacked examples, going straight to the point with few phrases and a lot of images, with the very eloquence of Christ, convincing and persuasive."

Real role models for thorough-going scholarship include Dr. J.W. Roberts, my Master's Degree professor at Abilene Christian College; Dr. Richard Hughes, colleague and church member at the University

of Iowa; and Reece Mitchell, a scholar by rights, but a missionary by choice. Worthy examples for pastoral ministry would be Maurice Hall, a pastor's pastor; Meredith Thom, who labored in a faith ministry for years with no visible means of support other than his trust in God; my father-in-law, Howard Vincent, who desired the office of elder all of his life, did the good work far and wide, but served in such a small congregation that an official eldership was never established; Carl Ketcherside, a self-supported preacher and editor; Frances Frangipane, a charismatic conference speaker and editor who helped me see the potential for unity among Christians of various persuasions; and Carl Spain of Abilene Christian University who inspired me with revolutionary ideas in his teaching on worship, race relationships, and associations across denominational lines. I list these individuals because they have taught me through their own examples, "...counting not their lives as dear unto themselves, to accomplish their ministry..."

LESSONS LEARNED

In light of my own experiences and observations of the aforementioned examples, I have reached the following conclusions regarding ministry:

1. God hears and honors the vows of faith we make.
2. Ministry is not so much what one does but who one is.
3. Success in ministry does not necessarily need to be measured as a full-time salaried position with an established church.
4. One's natural aptitudes and talents are to be embraced into the service of the Lord.
5. Every area of self-seeking and pride will be tested and found wanting by the Lord. These weaknesses are to be brought into subjection to Christ. To do otherwise is rebellion. This includes such areas as physical strength and prowess, mental and intellectual capabilities, and tendencies toward exclusivity and a sectarian spirit.
6. The essence of ministry is taking up the cross, denying self, and following Christ.

"And who is sufficient for these things? Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor 2.16b; 3.5). As I look back over my experiences, I sense that the Lord has held me to the task of "...counting not my life as dear to myself..." I am grateful for God's grace—even though my life and the expression of my ministry are quite different from my expectations, I can confidently say, "God has never left me nor forsaken me."

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