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# Spiritual Formation and Leadership in Paul's Address to the Ephesian Elders (Acts 20:17–35)

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## 1. Introduction

While most of the parenetical sections of the New Testament could be summarised under the heading “spiritual formation,” relatively few passages particularly address issues regarding leadership within the Christian community.<sup>1</sup> Other fields of leadership—such as Christians as leaders of civic communities—are not directly in view.

One of these passages is Paul's so-called *Miletus speech* of Acts 20:17–35, delivered at Miletus to the elders of the Ephesian church when Paul was on his way back to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23–21:16). In this speech Paul first describes his past ministry among the Ephesians (Acts 20:18–27). This section serves as a summary of Paul's ministry among the nations before his return to Jerusalem, the place where he was commissioned for this task by the risen Christ (Acts 22:21). Paul then outlines the task ahead for these elders (Acts 20:28–35). For good reasons these instructions have received much attention in quests for Christian ministry and leadership. Jacque Dupont's insightful study *Le discours de Milet* remains one of the classic expositions.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's instructions are particularly interesting when read against the notions of social status and leadership ideals in the Graeco-Roman world. In this essay, I want to examine how Paul challenges

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent survey, see A.D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000); for a detailed analyses see also his *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6* (AGJU 18; Leiden: Brill, 1993); and S. Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians* (SNTSMS 106; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> J. Dupont, *Le discours de Milet: Testament pastoral de Saint Paul (Acts 20,18–36)* (LeDiv 32; Paris: Cerf, 1962).

these notions and defines the task of Christian leadership against these all pervasive values.

This exercise indicates that the exercise of good leadership requires the spiritual formation of leaders so that Christian leaders are able to lead in Christ-like manner and not simply behave as would secular leaders in their society. It will also become clear that some of the particular challenges that Paul addressed in his own context (and that had to be overcome) are still very relevant to our day-and-age and analogously reflect the challenges of Christian leadership in a South African context: be it in the church, other Christian contexts or in society at large. These challenges, both ancient and modern, indicate that leadership among the people of God cannot simply follow the culturally dominant notions of leadership and lifestyle in whatever age.

## **2. The Challenges of Leadership in Paul's Miletus Speech**

### ***2.1. Paul's own ministry***

At the beginning of his address, Paul recalls his own ministry among Gentiles: he *taught* in public and private (Acts 20:20), *proclaiming* and promoting not himself but *declaring* the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27), *testifying* about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus/the gospel of God's grace and *proclaiming* the kingdom (Acts 20:24–27). Paul served the Lord (and the Ephesians) with all humility (Acts 20:19), not with the attitudes elsewhere associated with Gentile leadership (Luke 22:25f; cf. the displays of Gentile pride and arrogance, e.g. Acts 12:23; 18:12–17). Paul's reference to *all humility* is striking in a context in which honour was one of the most prevalent values. As shepherds of the same flock, these Gentile Christian leaders are to continue this exemplary ministry. Roloff rightly observed the close relation of Paul's exhortation to the Jesus tradition.<sup>3</sup> The example and teaching of Jesus is the supreme standard for these Gentile Christian leaders.

### ***2.2. Christian leadership in Ephesus***

In the direct instruction of the elders in Acts 20:28 and 31, Paul's emphasis is on issues where the elders (Gentile Christians as

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<sup>3</sup> J. Roloff, "Themen und Traditionen urchristlicher Amtsträgerparänese," in *Neues Testament und Ethik* (ed. H. Merklein; Freiburg: Herder, 1989), pp. 507–26 (507–508).

well as Jews living in a Gentile environment and value system), were specifically in danger of misusing, misunderstanding or neglecting their office. This applies irrespective of the social position of the elders. Even elders from lower social classes would be well acquainted with the model provided by their society as leadership was very much a public issue and likely to follow it. Six observations can be made from these warnings from vv. 28 and 31:

### **2.2.1. “Keep watch over yourselves”**

To counter the danger of hypocrisy, superficiality and frivolity, the elders were first charged: “Keep watch over yourselves” (Acts 20:28).<sup>4</sup> Weiser notes that “the urgent call to ‘keep watch over themselves’ clearly indicates, that the impetus of this statement is not on a splendid emphasis on Spirit-initiated dignity and status, but on impression the great responsibility regarding office.”<sup>5</sup> What they were to ensure and guard in others, they had to display and exercise themselves. This warning is directed against (and dismisses) Gentile notions of leadership, where office and personal conduct/commitment were less firmly linked.<sup>6</sup> Paul’s warning reminds them that their own spiritual formation and their role as leaders are inseparably intertwined.

### **2.2.2. Guarding all the flock**

The elders were to guard over *all* the flock. All Ephesian Christians were committed to all elders to the same extent and care. Their ministry was to exclude favouritism or partiality with the expectation of corresponding behaviour patterns of the beneficiaries as clients vis-à-vis their patrons. This charge is directed against the continuation or introduction of pagan ideas of patronage, clientele and benefaction into Christian leadership principles.<sup>7</sup> Even elders

<sup>4</sup> Dupont discusses occurrences of this expression in Luke 12:1; 17:3; 20:46; 21:34, again relevant to leaders (*Le discours de Milet*, pp. 136–39).

<sup>5</sup> A. Weiser, *Die Apostelgeschichte: Kapitel 13–28* (ÖTBK V.2; GTBS 508; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn / Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1985), p. 324.

<sup>6</sup> See Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*, pp. 73–88.

<sup>7</sup> A technical term of these notions, *euergetes*, refers in Luke 22:25 to those in authority over Gentiles; cf. J. Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53* (WBC 35C; Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 1064; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2nd Edition (ABC 28; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), p. 1471; F.W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982); H.R. Balz and G. Schneider, *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, II* (Stuttgart: Kolhammer Verlag, 1992), pp. 191–93; B.

needed such exhortation, prone as they were to continue or re-establish these traditional unchristian notions. The patterns of Gentile leadership are incompatible with Christian values.

### **2.2.3. By divine appointment**

The elders were reminded that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. They had this task due to the Spirit's choice and supernatural equipment, not due to factors qualifying for offices in their Gentile society such as birth, relations, party-membership or financial means.<sup>8</sup> What was advantageous and/or considered crucial for office and leadership in Gentile society is dismissed for Christian service.

### **2.2.4. Shepherding the church of God**

The elders were to shepherd the church of God. The church was God's flock entrusted to them, not their own and to be treated as such. They were to tenderly care, guard and feed God's flock, rather than to exploit it.<sup>9</sup> Paul also called the elders to be alert in fulfilling their task. They were to remember how Paul *constantly* warned *everyone*. Various threats to the church require such alertness, continuous concentration and dedication.<sup>10</sup>

Paul summoned the *elders* ("presbyters," Acts 20:17), but then addressed them as *overseers* ("bishops," Acts 20:28; Luke's only occurrence of the term). Benoit concludes his study of the differences between overseers and presbyters as follows:

Kötting, "Euergetes", *RAC* 6, (1966), pp. 848–60; L. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms in der Zeit von Augustus bis zum Ausgang der Antonine I* (10 ed.; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1922), pp. 225–35; H. Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. J.H. Neyrey; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 241–68. For the transformation of Graeco-Roman civic institutions in the early church see B.W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> For offices in ancient Ephesus, see D. Knibbe, "Ephesos," *RE S* 12 (n.d.), pp. 248–97; 259–65.51, 271–76.19 and L. Birchner, "Ephesos", *RE* 5 (n.d.), pp. 2795–97; pp. 2803ff.

<sup>9</sup> See Jer 23:1–4; Ezekiel 34; Mic 3:1–3; Zechariah 11; Dupont, *Le discours de Milet*, pp. 143–150; G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte, Kap. 9.1–28.31* (HThK V.2. Freiburg: Herder, 1982), p. 296; for Graeco-Roman material see F. Orth, "Schaf", *RE II A*, (373–99) 384–87.60, "Hirt und Weidegang", cols. 388.39–92.47, esp. col. 389.58–62.

<sup>10</sup> See Dupont, *Le discours de Milet*, p. 142; Roloff, "Themen und Traditionen," pp. 510–12. ("Unlimited commitment to the task at hand"), 524ff)

... les Presbytres sont des Notables, que leur âge, leur dignité de vie, leur fortune, leur ascendance familiale revêtent d'une autorité naturelle et imposent au respect des autres membres de la communauté. Ils sont investis d'une dignité officielle mais collective, et constituent un Conseil où chacun d'eux participe à l'administration de la communauté, d'une façon indirecte ... Il en va tout autrement des Épiscope. *Ce sont moins des dignitaires que des fonctionnaires.* Leur activité n'est plus collective et anonyme comme celle des Presbytres, elle est personnelle et responsable. Ils sont chargés de quelque office précis, normalement d'inspection ou de surveillance, comme le suggère leur titre.... On voit la différence qui sépare ces deux titres: *l'un exprime une dignité, l'autre désigne un office.*<sup>11</sup>

Both commands contain a deliberate distinction from Gentile notions of authority and leadership: their office was not to be understood as an *honour* once acquired or bestowed. Gentile notions of acquisition and tenure of office were not to be imported. In contrast, the elders' office was not to be materially or status-wise profitable, rather it was a call to a function involving diligent hard work (Acts 20:31). Weiser comments:

... the designation *episkopoi* is not to be understood as a title of an office, rather in the context of the Old Testament shepherd metaphors for leadership serve as the designation of particular functions. ... Responsibility and the readiness for service are to determine the relationship of the presbyter-bishops towards the church. Bracketed by statements which are taken from the Old Testament metaphor of shepherd and flock [Acts 20:28]... they are told, that as overseers they are to guard the flock with proper care and are to protect it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> P. Benoit, "Les Origines de l'Épiscopat dans le Nouveau Testament," *Exégèse et Théologie II* (Paris: Cerf, 196, 1961), pp. 232–46. Italics are from the present author. For Jewish and Greco-Roman usage see E. Nellessen, "Die Einsetzung von Presbytern durch Barnabas und Paulus (Apg 14:23)," in *Begegnung mit dem Wort* (ed. H.J. Zmijewski and E. Nellessen; BBB 53; Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1980), pp. 185–87; for Luke's motivation cf. G. Bornkamm, *ThWNT 6* (1959), p.665.

<sup>12</sup> Weiser, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, p. 320. All translations in this article derive from the author. Cf. Luke 17:7–10 and Roloff, "Themen und Traditionen urchristlicher Amtsträgerparänese," pp. 511–12.

In his monograph *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*, Clarke describes the delicate interplay between secular and Christian leadership notions in Corinth. Clarke's conclusions regarding Corinth also apply to Ephesus:

In addition to his identification and criticism of secular leadership in the church, Paul constructed for the Corinthians different parameters of leadership. This positive definition offered a stark contrast to the secular patterns of leadership. Paul focused not on status, but on task; the terminology used was specifically that of function; and the individuals whom he referred to as examples of good Christian leadership were specifically chosen for their commitment to service and not status.<sup>13</sup>

The elders' task was to be an active duty not limited to occasional civil or cultic occasions rife with publicity and honour. Their responsibility is emphasised by the high price that was paid for the flock entrusted to them (Acts 20:28): "they were to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own (Son)." The flock which the elders are to guard does not belong to them, but to God. It is entrusted to them and they are to guard it accordingly. It is noteworthy that the only direct statement in all of Luke-Acts regarding the saving significance of the death of Jesus occurs in the context of admonishing leaders.<sup>14</sup>

### ***2.2.5. Leadership and material gain***

Material benefit is directly addressed in the final part of Paul's speech. In the light of the close relation between financial interests and religious devotion previously displayed by pagan Ephesians (Acts 19:25–27) and the stunning amount of money involved in *one* aspect of the local pagan religion (books with magic spells worth fifty thousand silver coins, referred to in Acts 19:19; curiously only mentioned for Ephesus), Paul's disclaimer in Acts 20:33–36 is noteworthy: he himself did not covet anyone's possessions, but worked with his own hands to support himself and his companions. Paul did not share the material concerns of the silversmiths, but displayed true unselfishness. Weiser notes:

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<sup>13</sup> Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*, p. 131. Consult Clarke's sections on "Profile and practices of secular leaders in Corinth," "Secular practices of Christian leaders" and "Paul's principles of Christian leadership" (pp. 23–39, 59–88, 109–27).

<sup>14</sup> See U. Mittmann-Richert, *Der Sübnetod des Gottesknechts: Jesaja 53 im Lukasevangelium* (WUNT 220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. 2008).



According to Luke, unpretentiousness in dealing with material wealth and a high measure of social responsibility characterise the life of the Christians. This Lukan concern can be seen throughout all of Luke-Acts. He also emphasises the unpretentiousness of the messengers of Jesus and the bearers of service-offices in the Christian communities (see Luke 12:41–46; 17:7–10).<sup>15</sup>

In addition to serving as a distinguishing mark from false teachers of the future, Paul's attitude was to serve as a model for the elders. The money-mindedness displayed by Gentiles was to have no place in the church. The Gentiles' material preoccupation is a recurring Lukan theme (see: Luke 12:29f; 17:27f; Acts 16:19; 24:26). It is therefore not surprising that a Gospel directed to Gentile Christians should address this concern repeatedly.<sup>16</sup> Fitzmyer rightly observes that

no other NT writer ... speaks out as emphatically as does Luke about the Christian disciple's use of material possessions, wealth and money. ... Obviously, he is not satisfied with what he has seen of the Christian use of wealth in his ecclesial community and makes use of sayings of Jesus to correct attitudes within it.<sup>17</sup>

Paul gave the church and its elders an example "that by such work we must support the weak" (Acts 20:35). This expression refers to manual labour to care for the *materially* poor or *socially* weak or to the teaching ministry mentioned previously for the spiritually weak,

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<sup>15</sup> Weiser, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, p. 321. R. Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte (Apg 13–28)* (EKK V.2; Zürich: Benzinger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1986), p. 205 comments: "Apparently this constitutes an important criterion of distinction over against heretics coming into the church from the outside ... as also over against heretics from within the church ... for whom selfish striving for material gain is characteristic," cf. also Roloff's treatment ("Themen und Traditionen urchristlicher Amtsträgerparänese," pp. 513–16) and illuminating reference to Luke 16:1–8; cf. pp. 520–24 for the relevance of Luke 12:35–38, 42–47; 22:24–27 for church leaders.

<sup>16</sup> For the readers of Luke-Acts see D.A. Carson and D.L. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 210–11, pp. 301–302.

<sup>17</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, p. 247 and pp. 247–51. For a recent study of Lukan wealth ethics see C.M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (WUNT II, 275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

though the former is usually understood.<sup>18</sup> Christians have to care for these weak people.

This charge is motivated by a maxim of Jesus (“remembering the words of the Lord Jesus”; cf. Luke 6:30). The elders are not to follow the values and practices prevalent in their society, but to implement fully in their lives the teaching of the Lord Jesus with whom they aligned themselves as Christians and whose authority they accept. This reminder of his Lordship divests this command of any optional character. That “it is more blessed to give than to receive” is the opposite of the attitude elsewhere ascribed to or displayed by Gentiles prior to faith. Jesus’ words directly counter this Gentile agenda.

Luke does not indicate here how Gentiles usually treated the poor. An example is the dire treatment of the prodigal son by his Gentile “employer” (Luke 15:16; see the different picture in Acts 10:2 and also Luke’s criticism of the greed of the Jewish leadership in Luke 11:37–41; 20:47).

That the poor are specifically mentioned in the Miletus speech suggests that Gentile elders, following the patterns of their society, were in danger of misusing them (in creating a clientele or other relationships of dependency which they could exploit for themselves rather than providing genuine charity), overlooking or deliberately neglecting the weak as or when they were no use to them. The Christian task is genuine support (“we must support the weak”; see Luke 1:54).

Paul previously defined “... such *work*” as *manual* labour in Acts 20:34: “I worked with my own hands.” On this, Bruce comments: “These words occupy an emphatic position at the end of the sentence; they would be accompanied by the appropriate gesture.”<sup>19</sup> This emphasis in Acts 20:34 and the previous reference to Paul’s work and trade (“they worked together—by trade they were tent-

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte, Kap. 9.1–28.31*, p. 299: “probably (predominantly) understood as socially weak people, as people in need”; Weiser, *Die Apostelgeschichte: Kapitel 13–28*, p. 321: “socially disadvantaged people”; W. Bauer, K. Aland, and B. Aland (eds.) *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th Edition (Berlin: Walther de Gruyter, 1988), p. 231, list Acts 20:35 under “economically weak, lacking resources, being in need and metaphorically used to describe religious and moral weakness” (all translations are from the present author).

<sup>19</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd Edition (Leicester: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 436.

makers”) in Acts 18:3 implicitly criticises the Greco-Roman evaluation of manual labour and economic structure: “Greek culture had a deep rooted scorn for any occupation ... which involved working with the hands.”<sup>20</sup> The description of “vulgar tasks” by the Roman upper class “gentleman” Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) is representative and includes manual labour and work by artisans in workshops:

Unbecoming to a gentleman, too, and vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere casual labour, not for artistic skill; for in their case the very wages they receive is a pledge of their slavery. ... And workers/artisans are engaged in vulgar trades; for no workshop can have anything honourable about it.<sup>21</sup>

These leaders were not to follow the values of their own society and despise manual labour, but Paul’s example embodying and expressing different values. He did not exploit the flock but worked to provide for himself and for others. Barrett comments: “They would do well to follow Paul’s example and work for their living, in order that, far from receiving payment for their work, they may be in a position to give money away to those who are in need.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 391ff. L.C.A. Alexander, “Luke’s Preface in the Context of Greek Preface Writing,” *NT* 28 (1986), p. 70, notes that “this attitude was not shared by the scientific writers, who though not craftsmen themselves, speak of the *technitai* with deep respect.” As Alexander sees Luke in this scientific tradition, our conclusion should perhaps not be overvalued. See Alexander, “Luke’s Preface,” p. 70, and R. Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* (BZBW 80; Berlin: Walther de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 135ff, on the assessment of manual labour in Ephesus. See also F. Hauck, “Arbeit A. Nichtchristlich,” *RAC* 1 (1950), pp. 585–88 and K.H. Schelkle, “Arbeit.III.NT,” *TRE* 3 (1978), pp. 622–24.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis* I (42), p. 150. Another pertinent example is Plutarch’s *Vita Periclis*, p. 2. Paul differs from these views and follows Jewish tradition which highly treasures manual labour. Genesis 2 even speaks of the “work that God had done in creation ... out of the ground the Lord God formed [with his hands] every creature”; for the positive Jewish evaluation of work see the surveys of H.D. Preuss, “Arbeit. I. AT. 4,” *TRE* 3 (1978), pp. 615–18 and M. Brocke, “Arbeit. II. Judentum,” *TRE* 3 (1978), pp. 618–19.

<sup>22</sup> C.K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament*. The 1983 Didsbury Lectures (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985), p. 53. For a discussion of Paul’s own references to his manual labour and the reasons for it see P.W. Barnett, “Tentmaking,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed.

### 2.2.6. *Leadership and the lure of status*

The reason for the elders' alertness (Acts 20:31: "therefore be alert") enforces the urgency of their task: in addition to detrimental outside influences, even from within the group of elders some will distort the truth—which Paul carefully taught and which was authenticated by God through tremendous signs and wonders (Acts 19:11–17)—in order to gain a following of their own (Acts 20:30).

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Such distortion and ambitious vainglory would occur even among the elders. Even the structures established to continue Paul's ministry are threatened by the human nature of those appointed to this office. The motivation for such a drastic step was to gain eminence in the new community (and over fellow-elders): "in order to entice the disciples to follow them" (Acts 20:30). This motivation again reflects Gentile notions of leadership and gaining personal status through gathering a clientele who in turn would support and enhance their patron-elder. This concept was still so engraved in the elders that in order to achieve it, some would not even shrink from distorting the truth which they had received. Again the deep entrenchment and longevity of Gentile concepts becomes apparent. Even elders would sacrifice truth for personal promotion according to Gentile schemes.

The danger of such endeavours lies in the fact that *other* Gentile Christians will follow such elders and their distortion of the truth. Even after the prolonged time of Paul's ceaseless ministry to everyone, apparently their understanding of Christian doctrine was either still insufficient to recognise these distortions of the truth as such, or their appreciation and commitment to recognised truth

G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and D.G. Reid; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), pp. 925–27.

<sup>23</sup> As to outside influences, Paul indicates "savage wolves" from outside will come into the church, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29). As their appearance is linked to Paul's departure, this is probably *not* a reference to Gentile persecution (Gentile persecution is not linked to the presence or absence of Paul, it rather arose through Paul's presence and ministry), but refers to *false teachers*. They will not treat the flock as Paul did. The identity of these false teachers is not indicated; cf. J. Zmijewski, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (RNT; Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1994), pp. 744–45; Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte, Kap. 9.1–28.31*, p. 297 and Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte (Apg 13–28)*, p. 205; extensive discussion by G.W.H. Lampe, "'Grievous wolves' (Acts 20:29)," in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (ed. B. Lindars, S.S. Smalley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 263–68. Acts 15:1; 21:21 could suggest Jewish origin.

was wanting. They will follow elders who teach according to their taste and identify with them to the extent of becoming *their* particular following, no longer following the “Way.” This explains Paul’s previous intensive ministry and the elders’ commission to personal alertness and over the flock.

These six areas (2.2.1.–2.2.6.) contain Luke’s re-definition of leadership against the background of practices of office bearers and leaders in the Hellenistic world.<sup>24</sup> Notions prevalent in Greco-Roman society were not to be continued or introduced into the church. These patterns and the values which they reflect were not suitable. In this regard Greco-Roman society has little suitable to offer for the kingdom.

This picture is confirmed by Luke’s several direct critical references to Gentile leadership practices and misuse of power (Luke 3:19–20; 7:25?; 22:25; 23; Acts 12:1, 21, 23; 16:22–24). Paul spoke to Felix about righteousness and self-control, suggesting Felix’s misuse of authority in these areas (Acts 24:25). Paul addressed what was needed to overcome this failure. The majority of Luke’s references to Gentiles in authority are negative. Of the exceptions (e.g. Luke 2:1; 3:1; Acts 25:8, 10–12, 21, 25–27; 26:32; 27:3, 24; 28:7–9, 17–19) most only mention a Gentile ruler without any further comments.<sup>25</sup>

### ***2.3. Divine equipment for the task ahead***

Not surprising in the light of the previous charges and predictions, the elders are not referred back to themselves and their natural capacities, but commended to God and the message of his grace (Acts 20:32).<sup>26</sup> God’s grace accomplishes what they themselves cannot achieve: it can build them up (cf. Acts 9:31) and give them an inheritance among all those who are sanctified by grace and not through their own efforts. For sanctification and perseverance the elders were dependent on God. Despite all of Paul’s teaching, preparation for their task and pastoral care, the grace of God was still the determining factor.

<sup>24</sup> Obviously Greek and Roman authors discuss how leaders ought to conduct themselves and commend appropriate behaviour, e.g. Aristotle argues that the king’s task is doing good: “As a good man he provides for the well-being of his flock, as Homer understood when he called Agamemnon the ‘shepherd of the people’. The love of a father for his children is also of this nature” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11).

<sup>25</sup> For detailed treatment see C. Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith* (WUNT II, 108; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> See Dupont, *Le discours de Milet*, pp. 326–42).

Though the Ephesian elders and the Christians under their care enjoyed all benefits of salvation (e.g, the presence of the empowering Spirit) and had received much instruction and pastoral care, their Christian existence was not to be taken for granted but threatened by adaptation to their pagan environment. Even under faith their position is endangered and possible only by God's gracious intervention.

### 3. Conclusions

Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders is not a timeless example of spiritual formation and leadership. Drawing on the Old Testament, early Judaism and the teaching of Jesus, Paul charges them against the particular backdrop of Greco-Roman notions of status and leadership to a different understanding of *Leadership and Lifestyle*, to play on Walton's well-chosen title.<sup>27</sup> An awareness of this backdrop indicates how relevant but also how radical Paul's call to leadership was for his audience. In some ways it was counter-cultural.

Some Greco-Roman leadership ideals (and other facets of Hellenistic moral philosophy, discussed by many ancient authors), such as personal integrity or generosity, Paul obviously would have valued as he elsewhere commends "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise" (Phil 4:8). Mott observes regarding Paul's ethics:

In Titus 2:12 the state to which people are brought in conversion is described by the Greek cardinal virtues. ... Paul recognises knowledge of genuine values by secular people. His followers are to take into consideration "that which is morally good in the judgement of all people" (Rom 12:17; cf. 2 Cor 8:21). The are to conduct themselves becomingly with outsiders (1 Thess 4:12; Rom 13:13). The term implies a common standard of what is decent, and traditional elements of morality are cited in both passages. Paul also conducted himself in a way which would commend him to every human conscience (2 Cor 4:2; cf. Tit 2:5,8–10).<sup>28</sup>

However, this was not the focus of this article.

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<sup>27</sup> Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle*.

<sup>28</sup> S.C. Mott, "Ethics," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp. 269–75 (272).

At the same time, some aspects of this ancient backdrop for Paul's charge are very much up-to-date and reflect contemporary notions and practices of gaining and maintaining status and/or exercising leadership. In view of these parallels, Paul's charges to the Ephesian elders directly applies to today's elders and other church leaders. In addition, they also present a challenge to all people in leadership positions in our society.

Martin Meredith's enlightening survey *The State of Africa* can also be read as an account of political leadership in post-colonial Africa.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, it is by and large an account of poor, at times extremely poor, leadership from which almost all of the peoples of the African continent have suffered and continue to suffer tremendously. In some cases, the record of leaders who confessed to be Christians was better, in other cases it was and is not noticeably better. An examination of the track record of leaders of churches or Christian organisations in Africa will be more encouraging but would also indicate areas for improvement.

Paul's insights in spiritual formation and leadership in his charge to the Ephesian elders can help in developing church leaders that are aware that the flock of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son is entrusted to them. This status of the people whom they lead requires leadership in attitude and deed in accordance with the Gospel of Christ, the humble Messianic king. Paul's charge also challenges other leaders to humility and selfless service, not to position, status and self-aggrandisement that is so often associated with leadership. For both task Christian leaders may draw on God and the message of his grace, a message that is able to build them up and give them an inheritance among all who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

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<sup>29</sup> M. Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (Johannesburg, Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2005).