

The Church in the New Testament

(Sunday AM — Church Campus)

Week 8: Shepherding the Church-- Acts 20:17–38

Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders is one of the most personal and emotionally charged passages in the book of Acts. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul stopped at Miletus and sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus. He knew he would likely never see them again, and his words carried the weight of a final charge.

Paul begins by reminding them of his own example: he had served among them with humility, tears, and trials, teaching them publicly and from house to house. He had not shrunk from declaring the whole counsel of God. He was not a hireling who worked for comfort; he was a servant who poured out his life for the flock.

Then Paul turns to the elders themselves. He charges them to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. He warns that after his departure, fierce wolves would come—false teachers from outside and distorters of truth from within. The elders' job was to shepherd, protect, and feed the church of God. This passage is essential for understanding the New Testament pattern of church leadership: local congregations guided by qualified, faithful shepherds who guard the truth and care for the souls entrusted to them.

Group Discussion: Paul describes his ministry among the Ephesians as one of humility, tears, and complete faithfulness to the truth. How does his example challenge the way we think about leadership—both in the church and in our own lives?

Personal Reflection: How well do you know the elders or shepherds of your congregation? What can you do to encourage them in their work, and how can you support them in protecting the spiritual health of the church?

Read Acts 20:17–38

Study Questions

1. In verses 18–21, Paul reminds the elders of how he had lived and served among them. Why is personal example so important for those in leadership, and what qualities does Paul highlight?
2. Paul says he “did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” (v. 20). What does it mean for a teacher or leader to declare the “whole counsel of God,” and why is selective teaching dangerous?

3. In verse 21, Paul summarizes his message as “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Why are both repentance and faith essential elements of the gospel?
4. In verse 28, Paul tells the elders to “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.” Why must shepherds guard their own spiritual health before they can effectively care for others?
5. Paul says the Holy Spirit made them “overseers, to care for the church of God” (v. 28). What does this verse teach about the origin and purpose of the eldership?
6. In verses 29–30, Paul warns about “fierce wolves” from outside and men from within the church who will “speak twisted things.” What forms do these threats take today, and how should elders respond?
7. Paul urges the elders to “be alert” (v. 31). What does spiritual alertness look like in a shepherd, and why is complacency so dangerous?
8. In verse 32, Paul commends them “to God and to the word of his grace.” Why is dependence on God’s word—rather than human wisdom or tradition—the shepherd’s greatest resource?
9. In verses 33–35, Paul reminds them that he worked with his own hands and did not covet anyone’s possessions. What does this teach about the attitude and character required of church leaders?
10. Looking at Acts 20:17–38 as a whole, what picture does this passage paint of New Testament church leadership, and how does it differ from leadership structures found in denominations?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: **1 Peter 5:1–4** — Shepherding the flock willingly, not for shameful gain; **1 Timothy 3:1–7** — Qualifications for overseers; **Titus 1:5–9** — Appointing elders in every city