

The Church in the New Testament, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Shepherding the Church

Acts 20:17-38

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is a farewell, and your class should feel it as one. Paul is hurrying toward Jerusalem, he knows imprisonment and afflictions await him, and he stops at Miletus and sends thirty miles up the road for the elders of the church at Ephesus. He had spent three years with these men. He would not see them again, and verse 38 says they knew it, and they wept and kissed him and walked him to the ship. Teach the passage with that weight in it. These are the last words of a dying man to the shepherds of a church he loved, and dying men do not waste words. Everything Paul thought most urgent about church leadership is in these twenty verses.

The doctrinal center is verse 28, and it does more work than almost any verse on this subject. Notice the three words Luke and Paul use for the same men: he called for the “elders” of the church in verse 17 (presbuteroi, older men), he tells them the Holy Spirit made them “overseers” in verse 28 (episkopoi, bishops), and he charges them to “care for” the church, which is the verb to shepherd, to pastor. Elders, bishops, pastors: three terms, one group of men, one local congregation. Make sure the class sees this plainly, because nearly every hierarchical structure in the religious world requires those three to be different offices, and this verse will not allow it. Notice also the plural. Ephesus was one church with several elders, not several churches under one bishop.

Then let the class feel the two halves of the charge. First, Paul's example: humility, tears, trials, teaching publicly and house to house, not shrinking from declaring the whole counsel of God, coveting no one's silver, working with his own hands. He does not tell them what to do without having done it. Second, the warning: wolves are coming, from outside and from among your own selves, and they will draw away disciples after them. So be alert, and pay attention first to yourselves. Aim the lesson at a class that understands what shepherds are for, sees why the New Testament pattern of local, qualified, plural leadership matters, and leaves determined to support and encourage the men God has given them.

Question 1

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice how Paul begins, because it is not how we would begin. He does not open with instructions. He opens with, “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia.” He appeals to what they had watched. That is only possible for a man who has been watched closely and is willing to have it brought up. Ask the class whether they could say that sentence to the people who know them best.

Then take the qualities he names, because he chose them carefully. He served the Lord “with all humility and with tears and with trials.” Humility, first, from a man who could have led with credentials; he had every right to open with his apostleship and instead opened with lowliness. Tears, which he mentions again in verse 31, reminding them that for three years he did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. And trials, the plots of the Jews, the hardship that came with the work. This is not a résumé. It is a description of a man who was poured out.

Watch what he says about his teaching in verses 20 and 21: he did not shrink from declaring anything profitable, teaching “in public and from house to house,” testifying “both to Jews and to Greeks.” Publicly and privately. To everyone, without distinction. That combination is worth pointing out to the class, because leaders can fail at either end. Some will say hard things from a distance but never in a living room. Others are warm in private and silent when it counts.

Now draw out why example carries such weight. Paul is about to charge these men to shepherd the church, and he grounds the charge in the life they had seen him live. That is the New Testament pattern everywhere: Peter tells elders to shepherd not by domineering but “being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3); the Hebrew writer says to consider the outcome of your leaders’ way of life and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7); Paul tells Timothy to set the believers an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity (1 Timothy 4:12). Leadership in the church is not the transfer of information. It is a life offered for imitation, which is why character qualifications and not skills fill the lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Bring it home to everyone in the room, not just to leaders. Every Christian is being watched by somebody: a child, a coworker, a younger believer. Ask the class the plain question Paul’s opening raises. If you had to say to the people around you, “you know how I lived among you,” what would they remember first?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul appealed to a life they had watched closely, not to his credentials (Acts 20:18)
- He names humility, tears, and trials; he was poured out rather than impressive
- He taught publicly and house to house, to Jews and Greeks alike (Acts 20:20-21)
- Leaders can fail by being bold at a distance or warm in private and silent when it counts
- Leadership in Scripture is a life offered for imitation (1 Peter 5:3; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Timothy 4:12)
- This is why the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are character, not skills
- Every Christian is an example to someone, whether or not he intends to be

Discussion Prompts

- Could you say “you know how I lived among you” to the people who know you best?
- Are you bold at a distance and silent up close, or the reverse?
- Paul led with humility and tears rather than credentials. Why is that harder than it sounds?

Question 2

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Fasten the class on the verb, because Paul uses it twice, in verse 20 and again in verse 27: “I did not shrink.” That word admits something. It concedes that there were things he was tempted not to say, moments when silence would have been easier and cheaper. Paul is not claiming he never felt the pull. He is claiming he never gave in to it. Help the class see that faithful teaching is not the absence of pressure; it is the refusal to yield to it.

Then define the phrase in verse 27, “the whole counsel of God.” It means all of it: the parts that comfort and the parts that cut, the doctrine people want and the doctrine they resist, grace and judgment, the cross and the cost. Not a curated selection. Paul is telling these elders that he handed over everything God had said, and that this is why he can say in verse 26 that he is “innocent of the blood of all.” That is Ezekiel’s watchman language (Ezekiel 33:6-9): if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, the blood is on his hands. Paul blew the trumpet.

Now show the class how selective teaching actually happens, because nobody announces it. It happens by omission. Nobody stands up and says he will not teach on repentance, or hell, or giving, or purity, or the necessity of baptism, or the sins the congregation is comfortable with. Those subjects simply never come up, year after year, and the silence is never noticed because silence never is. Paul’s standard is not “I taught nothing false.” It is “I withheld nothing profitable.” A man can preach only true things and still fail this test completely.

Draw out why this is so dangerous. A church fed selectively will be malformed in exactly the shape of what was left out, and it will not know it, because you cannot miss what you have never heard. Paul warned Timothy of a time when people “will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Notice the mechanism: the hearers do the selecting. Congregations get the preaching they reward, which means selective teaching is rarely only the preacher’s sin.

Bring it home both directions. Ask the leaders and teachers in the room what they have been shrinking from, and ask the class what they have made it costly to say here. Then ask the searching version: what part of God's counsel do you personally not want to hear? That is almost certainly the part you most need.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- "I did not shrink" concedes real pressure; faithfulness is refusing to yield, not never feeling it (Acts 20:20, 27)
- The whole counsel of God includes what comforts and what cuts, grace and judgment
- Paul's innocence of blood echoes the watchman of Ezekiel 33:6-9
- Selective teaching happens by omission and is never announced
- The standard is not "nothing false" but "nothing profitable withheld"
- A church fed selectively is malformed in the shape of what was left out and cannot know it
- Hearers share the guilt; congregations accumulate teachers who suit their passions (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Discussion Prompts

- What part of God's counsel do you personally not want to hear?
- What have we made costly to say in this congregation?
- Why can a man preach only true things and still fail Paul's standard?

Question 3

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the class see how compact this summary is. Three years of preaching, and Paul boils it down to two things: repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice the directions. Repentance is toward God, a turning around, away from sin and self and back to the One we left. Faith is in Christ, a trusting reliance on the One who died and rose. Turning and trusting. The same two words appear together in his preaching everywhere because they are two halves of one movement.

Then show the class why neither works alone. Faith without repentance is a Christianity that wants a Savior but not a Lord; it wants forgiveness without any intention of changing, which is exactly what James calls a dead faith, the kind even the demons have (James 2:19-20). Repentance without faith is mere moral reform, a man cleaning up his life without ever trusting Christ, which is despair with good manners. They fail separately. Together they describe a person who has turned from what he was and put his whole weight on Jesus.

Now guard the boundary the class needs, because verse 21 is sometimes read as if it were the whole plan of salvation and nothing else is required. Notice who is speaking and where. This is Paul, at Ephesus, and Luke has already told us what happened when Paul preached there: “On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5). The same Paul wrote to this same city that Christ cleanses the church “by the washing of water with the word” (Ephesians 5:26), and told the Romans that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death (Romans 6:3-4). Paul is not giving an exhaustive list in verse 21; he is naming the heart of the response. Summaries in Scripture name the essence without excluding what is taught everywhere else, exactly as Peter’s summary in Acts 15:11 did not cancel his command to be baptized in Acts 10:48.

Help the class understand what repentance actually is, because it is widely softened. It is not feeling sorry, and it is not saying sorry. Paul distinguishes godly grief, which “produces a repentance that leads to salvation,” from worldly grief, which merely produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10). Grief is what leads to repentance; repentance itself is the turn. That is why Paul told Agrippa he preached that men “should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” (Acts 26:20). There are deeds that go with it, or the turn has not happened.

Bring it near. Ask the class which of the two they are more likely to neglect. Some carry a faith with nothing turned from, and some are working hard at reform while trusting themselves. Both are exhausting, and Paul preached the cure for three years with tears.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance is toward God and faith is in Christ; turning and trusting are two halves of one movement (Acts 20:21)
- Faith without repentance wants a Savior but not a Lord, and is dead (James 2:19-20)
- Repentance without faith is moral reform without Christ
- Verse 21 is a summary of the essence, not an exhaustive list; Paul baptized at Ephesus (Acts 19:5)
- Paul taught baptism plainly to this same city and elsewhere (Ephesians 5:26; Romans 6:3-4)
- Scriptural summaries do not cancel what is taught everywhere else (compare Acts 15:11 with Acts 10:48)
- Repentance is a turn, not a feeling; godly grief leads to it, and deeds accompany it (2 Corinthians 7:10; Acts 26:20)

Discussion Prompts

- Which do you neglect: turning, or trusting?
- How would you answer someone who uses verse 21 to argue that nothing else is required?
- What is the difference between being sorry and repenting?

Question 4

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Point at the order and let the class sit with it. “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.” Yourselves first. Paul is about to warn these men that wolves are coming, and before he says one word about defending the church, he tells them to watch themselves. That order is not an accident, and it is not selfishness. A shepherd who is not paying attention to his own soul is already the problem he is trying to prevent.

Ask the class why the danger is greater for those who lead, because it is counterintuitive. The very work makes it easy to hide. A man who studies constantly can mistake preparation for communion with God. A man who counsels others about their sin can go years without anyone asking about his. A man everyone respects will find that people stop telling him hard things. Paul told Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). Notice: yourself, then your hearers, again in that order.

Then draw out the plain reason. A man cannot lead anyone somewhere he is not going. Paul had just spent verses 18 through 21 describing his own life, because that life was the substance of his ministry. If the example is hollow, the words are hollow. Paul feared this for himself: “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27). If Paul thought that could happen to Paul, nobody in your class should think it cannot happen to them.

Help the class see the flip side of the verse too, because Paul does not stop at “yourselves.” It is “to all the flock.” All of it. Not the influential members, not the ones who ask, not the ones who are easy. The Ephesian elders were responsible for the whole congregation, including the difficult, the quiet, and the ones nobody would miss. Remember the widows in Lesson 3. All the flock means the people most likely to be overlooked.

Bring it home to everyone. Most in your class are not elders, but every one of them is responsible for a soul, their own, and most are responsible for someone else’s as well. Ask them who is paying attention to them. And then ask the question that will help their shepherds more than anything else this quarter: who is watching out for the men who watch out for us?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul says “yourselves” before “the flock”; the order is deliberate (Acts 20:28)
- Leadership makes hiding easy: study can replace communion, and respect silences correction
- Timothy is given the same order: watch yourself and the teaching (1 Timothy 4:16)

- A man cannot lead anyone where he is not going; a hollow example makes hollow words
- Paul feared his own disqualification (1 Corinthians 9:27)
- “All the flock” includes the difficult, the quiet, and those nobody would miss
- Shepherds themselves need someone watching out for them

Discussion Prompts

- Who is paying attention to you? Who would tell you a hard thing?
- Who is watching out for the men who watch out for us?
- Why is it easier for a leader to hide than for an ordinary member?

Question 5

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down here, because this verse settles more about church leadership than any other in Acts, and the class needs to see it word by word. Look at verse 17: Paul “sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church.” The word is presbuteroi, older men. Now look at verse 28: the Holy Spirit made these same men “overseers,” episkopoi, the word translated bishops. And in the same sentence he tells them “to care for” the church, which is the verb poimainein, to shepherd, the word from which we get pastor. Elders. Bishops. Pastors. Three words, one group of men, in one sentence, about one congregation.

Let the class feel what that does. Nearly every hierarchical structure in the religious world depends on those three being different things: a bishop over many churches, a pastor as the one man who preaches, elders as a board beneath him. Acts 20:28 will not allow any of it. Peter uses the same three together as well, telling the elders to shepherd the flock, exercising oversight (1 Peter 5:1-2). There is no rank here to climb. There is one office with three descriptions, and each one tells you something: elder speaks of maturity, overseer of responsibility, shepherd of care.

Now point at the plural and the local, because both matter. Paul called for the elders, plural, of the church at Ephesus, singular. Not one bishop over many congregations, but several shepherds in one. That is the pattern everywhere: Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23), and Titus was to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5). No congregation in the New Testament is ruled from outside itself, and no man in the New Testament rules a congregation alone. The class saw the same thing in Lesson 5 when Jerusalem sent Barnabas to help Antioch rather than to govern it.

Then take up the origin, because the verse is emphatic: “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Not the congregation, and not their own ambition. Men are recognized and

appointed by the church, but the office and its qualifications come from God, published in Scripture so that a congregation can identify the men He has already described (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). This is the same balance as Acts 6: God sets the standard, the church recognizes, appointment follows. And note that those qualifications describe men, husbands of one wife, managing their own households well, which is God's own arrangement of roles and not a human preference.

Finally, do not let the class hurry past the reason all of this matters: the church of God, "which he obtained with his own blood." That is what the elders are handling. Not an organization, not a budget, not a building. Blood-bought people. Notice too what the phrase says about Jesus: it is God's church, purchased with His own blood, and the blood was Christ's. Ask the class to imagine being handed something that cost God that, and being told to watch it. That is the weight these men carry, and it is why they deserve the class's prayers rather than its complaints.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Elders (v. 17), overseers/bishops, and shepherds/pastors (v. 28) are three terms for one group of men
- Peter uses the same three together (1 Peter 5:1-2); there is no hierarchy of ranks
- Each term describes an aspect: elder is maturity, overseer is responsibility, shepherd is care
- Elders are plural in one local congregation; no bishop over many churches and no man ruling alone (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5)
- The Holy Spirit made them overseers; the office and qualifications come from God, not the congregation
- Qualifications are published in Scripture so the church can recognize the men God describes (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)
- The qualifications describe men, reflecting God's own arrangement of roles
- The church was obtained with God's own blood; elders handle blood-bought people

Discussion Prompts

- How does this one verse undo the idea of a bishop over many churches, or a pastor as one man over a board of elders?
- What difference does it make that the Holy Spirit, not the congregation, made them overseers?
- If the church cost God His own blood, how should that shape the way we speak about our elders?

Question 6

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class notice the two directions, because Paul names both and the second is worse. “Fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock,” that is the threat from outside. “And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them,” that is the threat from inside. From among your own selves. Paul is telling a room full of elders that some of the danger will come from men currently sitting in that room, or men they will one day appoint. He is not being cynical. He is being a shepherd.

Then look at the metaphor, because Paul chose it precisely. Wolves do not announce themselves; Jesus said they come in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15). Wolves do not want the flock destroyed, they want it eaten, and “not sparing the flock” means these men will use people and discard them. Notice the motive in verse 30: “to draw away the disciples after them.” After them. That is the tell. A false teacher is not finally interested in a doctrine; he is interested in a following. The doctrine is how he gets one.

Now make it concrete for today, because the class needs to recognize the shapes it takes. Sometimes it is doctrinal: teaching that adds to the gospel as in Lesson 7, or subtracts from it, or claims new revelation, or dissolves the New Testament pattern into whatever the culture prefers. Sometimes it is not doctrinal at all but personal: a man who cultivates a loyal circle, who tells people what they want to hear, who makes himself the center. The word for what Paul describes is not usually heresy. It is “twisted,” which is truth bent slightly. Straight lies are easy to see. A bent truth is what draws disciples away.

Ask the class what the elders were supposed to do about it, and go back to verse 28 for the answer, because Paul has already given it. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock. That is the entire defense: watchfulness and presence. A shepherd who knows his sheep notices when one is being led off. A shepherd who is not paying attention will find out when the person is already gone. This is also why the qualification lists require an elder who can “give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). He has to know the truth well enough to spot the bend.

Bring it home without making the class paranoid, because that is the wrong response and Paul does not counsel it. He does not tell them to suspect each other. He tells them to be alert and to keep feeding the flock, and a well-fed church is remarkably hard to deceive. Ask the class the useful question: what makes a congregation easy prey? Almost always, it is people who do not know the Scriptures well enough to notice when something is slightly off, and who are more attached to a personality than to the truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The threat comes from outside and from within; Paul warned elders about men among themselves (Acts 20:29-30)
- Wolves come disguised and use people rather than sparing them (Matthew 7:15)
- The motive is a following: to draw away disciples “after them”
- The danger is “twisted” truth, not obvious lies; a bent truth is what deceives
- Modern forms include adding to or subtracting from the gospel, claims of new revelation, and dissolving the pattern into culture
- The defense is watchfulness, presence, and sound teaching (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9)
- Paranoia is not the response; a well-fed church is hard to deceive
- Congregations become easy prey when attached to personalities rather than to Scripture

Discussion Prompts

- What makes a congregation easy prey?
- Why is a bent truth more dangerous than an obvious lie?
- Paul warned elders about men among themselves. How do we take that seriously without becoming suspicious of each other?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul urges the elders to “be alert” (v. 31). What does spiritual alertness look like in a shepherd, and why is complacency so dangerous?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read the whole verse, because Paul defines alertness by his own example: “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.” That is what he means. Not vigilance in the abstract, but three years, night and day, every one, with tears. Alertness in Paul’s vocabulary is measured in years of attention to individual people, and it is wet with tears. Ask the class whether that is what comes to mind when they hear “be alert.” Most of us imagine a lookout on a wall. Paul describes a man who could not stop caring.

Draw out the three things his example contains. Duration: three years, which means alertness is not a season of intensity but a sustained way of living. Personal reach: “every one,” not sermons to a crowd but attention to individuals, one at a time. And cost: tears, which means he was moved by what he saw, not merely informed about it. A shepherd who is watching without feeling anything is not yet alert; he is just monitoring.

Then show the class why complacency is so dangerous by remembering what Paul just said in verses 29 and 30. Wolves are coming and men will arise from among themselves. Complacency does not cause that; it simply guarantees that no one will notice until it has happened. And notice the special cruelty of spiritual drift: it is silent. Nobody announces that they are cooling. A

member does not send word that he is being drawn away. By the time a problem is loud enough to interrupt a comfortable shepherd, the damage is usually done. This is why Peter says, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8), and he says it to elders.

Point out what makes complacency so easy to slide into, because the class should be sympathetic rather than accusing. Alertness is exhausting, and nothing rewards it. When a shepherd notices early and quietly heads off a disaster, nobody knows it happened. There is no credit for the crisis that never occurred. So the work is invisible when it succeeds and blamed when it fails, which is a hard way to live and exactly why these men need the congregation behind them.

Bring it near and make it everyone’s business. Ask the class who they have stopped paying attention to: a child, a friend who has quietly stopped coming, someone whose absence has become normal. Paul admonished every one, night and day, with tears, for three years. Most drift in a congregation would end if a few people simply noticed on purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul defines alertness by his own practice: three years, night and day, every one, with tears (Acts 20:31)
- Alertness is sustained duration, personal reach to individuals, and genuine cost
- A shepherd who watches without feeling is monitoring, not shepherding
- Spiritual drift is silent; by the time it is loud, the damage is done
- Elders are told to be sober-minded and watchful against a prowling adversary (1 Peter 5:8)
- Alertness is invisible when it succeeds and blamed when it fails, which is why shepherds need support
- Most drift would end if a few people simply noticed on purpose

Discussion Prompts

- Who have you stopped paying attention to?
- Whose absence here has quietly become normal?
- Why is there no credit for the crisis that never happened, and what does that cost our shepherds?

Question 8

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene before you read the verse, because the timing is everything. Paul is leaving. He has just told them wolves are coming, and he will not be there to fight them. He is the one man who could answer any question these elders had, and he is walking to a ship. So what does he leave them? Not a manual, not a network, not himself. “And now I commend 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.” God, and the word. That is the whole legacy.

Let the class feel the confidence in that. Paul was not anxious about their prospects, and he had every reason to be. He believed the word was enough. Look at what he says it can do: it “is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance.” The word builds and the word secures. That is an enormous claim, and Paul stakes a church he loves on it, knowing he will never check on them again.

Now draw out why this settles the question of authority, because it is the same issue the class met at the Jerusalem council. When Paul is gone, what governs the church? Not tradition, not the accumulated wisdom of good men, not what has always worked here, not the culture of the moment. The word of His grace. This is why he told Timothy that Scripture is God-breathed and makes the man of God “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17), and why Peter says God’s divine power “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). Complete. All things. There is no gap for us to fill with our own inventions.

Then guard the class against the two ways we drift from this. One is obvious: replacing Scripture with human wisdom, preference, or novelty. The other is quieter and far more common among people who love the Bible: replacing Scripture with tradition, with the way we have always done it, until “we” becomes the authority and nobody notices. Lesson 7 showed sincere, Bible-loving men making exactly that mistake with circumcision. Being conservative is no protection. Only Scripture is Scripture.

Notice the phrase itself, and let the class hear it: the word of his grace. Not the word of His demands, though it demands. Paul is handing them a message that is fundamentally good news, and he calls it that in his last breath to them. Ask the class whether that is how they think of their Bibles. And ask the practical question underneath it: if our leaders were taken from us tomorrow, would this congregation know how to find its way by the book alone? Paul thought Ephesus would. That is what he left them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul left them God and the word, not a manual, a network, or himself (Acts 20:32)
- He staked a church he loved on the sufficiency of the word, knowing he would never return
- The word is able to build up and to give the inheritance
- Scripture makes the man of God complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- God has granted all things pertaining to life and godliness; there is no gap for human invention (2 Peter 1:3)

- Drift happens by replacing Scripture with human wisdom, and also by replacing it with tradition
- Loving the Bible is no protection; sincere men made this error in Acts 15

Discussion Prompts

- If our leaders were taken tomorrow, could this congregation find its way by the book alone?
- Where has “the way we have always done it” quietly become our authority?
- Paul calls it “the word of his grace.” Is that how you think of your Bible?

Question 9

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice how specific Paul gets: “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.” He does not say he was generous in spirit. He holds up his hands. These men had watched him make tents in Ephesus while he preached, and they knew he had supported not only himself but his companions. He is offering physical evidence, and he can, because they had seen it.

Ask the class why this comes up at all in a farewell. Because money is where leaders fail, and Paul knew it. He had just warned them about men arising to draw away disciples, and he knows what usually funds that. The qualification lists say an elder must not be “a lover of money” and must not be “greedy for gain” (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7), and Peter tells elders to shepherd “not for shameful gain, but eagerly” (1 Peter 5:2). It is mentioned that often because it happens that often. A man who wants something from the flock cannot shepherd the flock.

Be careful the class does not over-apply this. Paul is not saying that preachers and workers should never be supported. The same Paul argued at length that “the laborer deserves his wages” and that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:9-14), and he gladly received support from Philippi (Philippians 4:15-16). He had the right and chose not to use it at Ephesus. The principle is not that support is wrong; it is that a leader must be visibly free of covetousness, so that nobody can suspect his motives.

Then let verse 35 land, because it is the summit of the passage. Paul says he showed them “that by working hard in this way we must help the weak,” and then quotes a saying of Jesus found nowhere in the Gospels: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” This is the only place in Scripture where we have those words, preserved by Paul in a farewell. And notice what he does with them. He does not use them as a proverb about generosity in general. He grounds a whole

philosophy of leadership in them: the shepherd works so that he can give, and helping the weak is the point of the strength.

Bring it home to everyone, because Paul makes it universal with “we must help the weak.” Ask the class the question this passage puts to all of us. Is your position, your ability, your income, chiefly a way to receive or a way to give? Paul’s hands are the argument. He worked so that he would owe no one and could help anyone, and he called that blessed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul offered physical evidence: hands that had supported himself and his companions (Acts 20:33-34)
- Money is where leaders characteristically fail, which is why the qualifications address it (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2)
- A man who wants something from the flock cannot shepherd the flock
- Support for gospel workers is legitimate; Paul defended the right and received it elsewhere (1 Corinthians 9:9-14; Philippians 4:15-16)
- The principle is visible freedom from covetousness, not a rule against support
- Verse 35 preserves a saying of Jesus found nowhere in the Gospels
- Strength and labor exist so that we may help the weak; giving is the blessed direction

Discussion Prompts

- Is your position or income chiefly a way to receive or a way to give?
- Why does Scripture mention money so often in connection with leaders?
- “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Do you actually believe that? How would anyone know?

Question 10

Student Question:

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?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class assemble the picture from the text before comparing it to anything. Leadership here is plural: elders, more than one, in one congregation. It is local: the elders of the church at Ephesus, responsible for the flock among them, answerable to God rather than to any external body. It is qualified: made overseers by the Holy Spirit, according to standards God published. It is pastoral: the word is shepherd, which means feeding, protecting, and knowing. It is exemplary: Paul grounds everything in a life they had watched. And it is costly: tears, hard work, hands that made tents, and a farewell full of weeping.

Now let the class do the comparison, and let the text do the work rather than your indignation. A structure with a bishop over many congregations requires that “elder” and “overseer” be different offices, and verses 17 and 28 make them the same men. A structure with one pastor over a board requires that “pastor” be a separate office from “elder,” and verse 28 makes shepherding the elders’ own work. A structure with a headquarters governing local churches requires an authority the New Testament never establishes, as the class saw in Lesson 5 with Antioch and in Lesson 7 with Jerusalem. A structure where leadership is a career step requires ambition, and this passage requires hands that made tents. None of this is a matter of preference. It is a matter of whether we will keep what God gave.

Then give the class the argument underneath all of that, because it is simpler than the details and it settles the question. Scripture uses the word “church” in exactly two senses: the whole body of the saved everywhere, whom Christ loved and gave Himself for (Ephesians 5:25), and a single local congregation in one place, like “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2). A denomination fits neither. It claims to be more than one congregation and less than all the saved, and that middle category simply does not exist in the New Testament. Notice that Paul, saying farewell to elders and warning them about wolves, has nothing to hand them but God and the word, and no organization above them to appeal to. There was none. If a family of congregations bound by a shared human creed were part of God’s plan for guarding the flock, this is the verse where Paul would have said so, and he does not.

Then say why the pattern is a gift rather than a restriction, because the class may hear only the negatives. Local, plural, qualified shepherds means the men who make decisions about you know you. It means no one man carries what no man should carry alone. It means the standard is character, which is available to ordinary people, rather than credentials, which are not. And it means the flock is guarded by people who will answer to God for it. Whatever else can be said for the alternatives, none of them can say that.

Keep the class from turning this into a boast, because that is a real temptation with a lesson like this. Having the right structure is not the same as having faithful shepherds, and a congregation can be organized exactly like Ephesus and still be full of complacency and wolves, which is precisely what Paul warned would happen at Ephesus. Read Revelation 2:1-5 with them if there is time: the Lord tells this same church, decades later, that it has abandoned the love it had at first. Right structure is necessary and it is not sufficient.

End with the mirror, because this lesson is aimed at the whole class and not only at elders. Two questions, and let them sit. Do you know your shepherds well enough to pray for them by name and by burden? And the one Paul’s tears raise: when these men give an account to God for your soul (Hebrews 13:17), will they do it with joy or with groaning? That answer is largely yours to decide.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- New Testament leadership is plural, local, qualified, pastoral, exemplary, and costly

- Elders, overseers, and shepherds are the same men, which no episcopal hierarchy can accommodate (Acts 20:17, 28)
- No headquarters governs local congregations; elders are answerable to God
- Scripture uses “church” in only two senses: all the saved everywhere (Ephesians 5:25), and a local congregation (1 Corinthians 1:2)
- A denomination fits neither: it claims more than one congregation and less than all the saved, and that middle category is absent from the New Testament
- Paul left these elders God and the word, with no organization above them to appeal to, because there was none
- The standard is character, available to ordinary men, rather than credentials or ambition
- The pattern is a gift: the men who decide about you know you, and no man bears it alone
- Right structure is necessary but not sufficient; Ephesus itself later abandoned its first love (Revelation 2:1-5)
- Members will be accounted for by their shepherds and should make that a joy (Hebrews 13:17)

Discussion Prompts

- Do you know our shepherds well enough to pray for them by name and by burden?
- When these men give an account for your soul, will they do it with joy or with groaning?
- Why is having the right structure not the same as having faithful shepherds?