

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

Dr. Jack L. Arnold Lesson #50

ACTS
Concerns of a Shepherd
Acts 20:28-38

Our last lesson took up the subject of the biblical position of an elder. We concluded that the office of elder and bishop were one and the same office. The title “elder” looks at the dignity of the office, referring to a man of spiritual maturity. The title “bishop” looks at the duty of the office which is to oversee the flock. An elder then is a spiritually mature man who has the total oversight of the membership of a local church. We also saw from Scripture that an elder was always appointed to this office and was never elected by a congregation. Those who were appointed to the office of elder had to meet the biblical qualifications which are found in First Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We also concluded that there was always a plurality of elders in every local church, for no church is to be run by a one man dictatorial rule or by the anarchy of a local congregation. God has placed the government of the local church into the hands of the elders.

What then does an elder do? What are his duties? What relationship does he sustain to the local church? The teaching of Acts 20:28-38 will go a long way to help us understand the ministry of an elder and an elder board. Hopefully, this lesson will show the importance of a local church with Christ ruling over that church through qualified, biblical elders. Quite often today you will hear misinformed Christians say, “Who needs the local church? I can serve the Lord better outside the local church!” This kind of statement indicates one's complete misunderstanding of what a local church is and is a spirit of rebellion to God's plan for shepherding His people.

A word of background on Acts 20:28-38 will help set the stage for this section of Scripture. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and he came ashore at Miletus, the seaport for the city of Ephesus. He called for the elders of the local church at Ephesus to come to him at Miletus in order that he might give them their last instructions on being elders, realizing that he would never speak to them again on this earth. He charges these elders with certain duties, warns them of certain dangers and uses his own life as an example as to how every elder is to conduct his life before the flock.

CONCERN FOR HIS OWN SOUL - Acts 10:28a

“Be on guard for yourselves . . .” -- The very first exhortation Paul gives these elders is to take heed to, attend to, or guard, their own souls. No elder can be of any good to the church who is not first himself warm and fervent in his spirit for Jesus Christ and the written Word of God. The very first duty of an elder is to live what he preaches, and he should always be an example to the flock. Elders must first be applying the truth they are learning to life. Their authority comes from God, but men respect their authority

when they see elders are living the truth. It is only as they are obedient to the truth which they teach that they have any right to say anything to anyone else. An elder without a heart for Christ is a man full of deceit and hypocrisy, for it is impossible for an elder to lead anyone any further in Christ than he himself has come. An elder should never ask anyone to do anything that he himself is not willing to do. Elder, guard against a cold, calculating, hypocritical heart!

A survey taken several years ago gave the five primary reasons why a minister fails in the pastorate. They were: 1) pride; 2) sexual immorality; 3) an unhappy wife; 4) a materialistic spirit, and 5) overwork and discouragement.

CONCERN FOR THE FLOCK - Acts 20:28b

“. . . and for all the flock, . . .” -- Paul's second exhortation is that the elders be on guard for all the flock, the church entrusted to them by Christ. The elders are responsible to instruct and guide and protect the local church. They are to take heed to all the flock--the poor and rich, the uneducated and educated, the old and the young. It is the duty of the elders to promote the spiritual welfare of every individual in their charge, neither neglecting the needy nor being frightened by the rich and powerful. Obviously, to have this kind of ministry with the flock, elders must be acquainted with the flock and their individual needs.

“. . . among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (bishops), . . .” -- This verse clearly tells us that it is God the Holy Spirit who makes and appoints an elder to his position. Men only recognize in a man the biblical qualifications' and the spiritual gifts which God has given. In every biblical local church, God is setting aside a few men for the office of elder. The words “among which” indicate that the elders are under-shepherds to the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, for they are not tyrants over the church but servants of Christ among the church. What this verse tells us is that elders are not made by self-appointment, vote of a congregation or ordination by a presbytery, but by the Holy Spirit Himself. The God-prepared men will become obvious in a local church in the same way that cream rises to the top in fresh milk. Men merely recognize God's men for the office of elder.

Since an elder is ultimately appointed to the office of elder by God, then that elder's final accountability for leading a flock is not to a denomination, a local congregation or even a pastor-teacher, but to God Himself. God will be the final judge of every elder and an elder must fear God and not be overly concerned about what men may threaten to do to him or say about him. It is better to be faithful to God than to compromise the Word of God at any point. God will bless the elder (and the elder board) who seeks to be faithful to the living Christ and the inspired and infallible Word of God.

CONCERN FOR THE DUTY OF SHEPHERDING - Acts 20:28c

“. . . to shepherd the church of God . . .” -- This tells us that the primary task of an elder is to be a shepherd to the flock (local church). Whatever else an elder is called

upon to do, he is first and foremost a shepherd. In a moment, we will spend more time on the duty of shepherding the flock, but we need to see that an elder has a many-faceted ministry and is called upon to do many different tasks. The elder is to have charge over the flock. “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate (know) those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction (I Thes. 5:12). The elder is to teach the flock. “An overseer, then, must be . . . able to teach” (I Tim. 3:2). He is to rule the flock. “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor; especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (I Tim. 5:17). He is to admonish the flock. “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction (admonition)” (I Thes. 5:12). He is to labor among the flock. “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction” (I Thes. 5:12). He is to lead the flock. “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). He is to oversee (supervise) the flock. “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock; among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God . . .” (Acts 20:28). He is to watch for the souls of the flock. “Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17). He is to set an example to the flock. “Shepherd the flock of God among you . . . nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (I Pet. 5:3). He is to protect the flock. “Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). He is to manage the flock. “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Tim. 3:4, 5). It becomes obvious that an elder has a big responsibility, and this is why God has ordained that a multiplicity of elders should govern a local church, for no one man has all the gifts and talents to do all these various activities.

All of the duties named are to be done because an elder is a shepherd. Shepherding is his first responsibility. A shepherd always is caring for his sheep. Shepherding involves more than teaching. It also involves protecting, guiding, guarding and disciplining the members of the local church. Christians are called sheep for a specific reason, for it makes a great analogy on how and why the elders are called upon to shepherd the flock of the local church. To shepherd sheep is a very difficult task. Sheep must be led to water and to food for they cannot find these things themselves. Sheep must be kept quiet and calm because they frighten easily. The shepherd must pull out any poisonous weeds in the grazing land because the sheep do not know how to distinguish good food from bad food. Sheep have no way of protecting themselves and will let ravishing wolves kill them without putting up a fight. When a sheep goes astray from the flock, the shepherd must break its leg so as to make it stay in the fold. In the spiritual realm, elders must see to it that the church is cared for and every basic need, spiritual, social and material, is met. Furthermore, it is important that shepherds

discipline Christians when it is needed, and no man should be an elder unless he is willing to objectively mete out discipline, even to his closest friend in the local church.

Notice carefully the words “to shepherd the church of God.” Elders are not called upon to shepherd some social club or humanitarian fraternal organization, but the church of God. Christians are God's people and God has ordained that the shepherds (elders) should govern them. This tells us clearly that no Christian is truly biblical unless he is united to a local church with ruling elders to shepherd him. This also tells us that no man should be an elder who is not people oriented, for a shepherd must work with people. The church of God is not buildings and programs per se, but people, God's people, who must be shepherded.

“... which He purchased with His own blood.” -- There is debate among scholars as to whether this should be translated, “the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” which would indicate that Jesus Christ was truly God. Others, however, have translated this, “the church of God which He purchased with the blood of His own (Son),” referring to the fact that God the Father gave His Son. Whatever, the truth is that the church is precious to God, so much so that He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for it. The Father has bought the church with the precious blood of His dear Son. Shepherds, who are really undershepherds of Christ, are to remember that the church belongs to God, not them, and if the Father and Son made such sacrifices for the church, then shepherds (elders) must be willing to deny themselves in order to serve the church of God. Shepherds must be willing to watch, pray and toil that the church may be protected, provided for and kept pure for future generations.

Let us remember that the context of Acts 20:28 is about the local church, for Paul is speaking specifically about the church at Ephesus. For a person to say that the local church is irrelevant and unimportant is to completely misunderstand the New Testament. When people say they don't want anything to do with the local assembly because it has failed so miserably, they are sadly misinformed. When this statement is made, the person should be asked, “What local churches?” Many local churches have failed in the twentieth century but this has not been true for the first nineteen hundred years of the church. Another question should be asked, “Have local churches which have desired to be biblical failed?” Then it should be pointed out that every local church will fail to some degree, for there is no perfect local church, but God has ordained the local church with elders to lead, guide, instruct, feed and discipline His children. To deny the importance of the local church is to spit in God's eye.

The whole discussion on elders raises a very practical question. Are all elders the same in a local church? It is very clear that Acts 20 teaches that elder, bishop (overseer) and shepherd, is the same office. Is every elder in a local church then equal with a man who is paid full-time in the ministry (the pastor-teacher)? Let's turn to the Bible for an answer. According to I Timothy 5:17, there are two types of elders, ruling and teaching. “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (I Tim. 5:17). Elders who rule well are worthy of double honor, especially those who preach and teach the Word. Those who do labor

full-time at preaching and teaching are to be paid. “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is treshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (I Tim. 5:18). Some elders in the local church are paid and some are unpaid. Apparently all teaching-elders help rule and all ruling-elders are to teach, but only the teaching elders have the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher. “And He (Christ) gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers (pastor-teachers)” (Eph. 4:11). There is no difference between a teaching-elder and a ruling-elder in authority, for both have equal authority in the local church. However, a teaching-elder will have different spiritual gifts, more time to give to the ministry and more influence because he is handling the Word, dealing with more people and the ministry is his whole life. However, all elders, ruling and teaching, are to be shepherds.

I Timothy 5:17 might indicate that ruling elders, as well as teaching elders, should be paid something for their labors. It would certainly make one feel more responsible for his office.

CONCERN FOR WOLVES IN THE FLOCK - Acts 20:29-31

Wolves from Without (20:29)

“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; . . .” -- Paul was convinced that false Christians would come in among the true Christians at Ephesus, and he was concerned about the purity of that local church. He was afraid that false teachers and hypocritical believers would invade the local church at Ephesus and do great damage to the flock. Jesus Himself said that wolves in sheep's clothing, unregenerate men and women, talking and acting like Christians, and perhaps even thinking they are Christians, but who are not born again, will come into the church. “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). They will have a religious air but deny the power of Christ in their lives. When they come, they will seek to destroy the flock of God.

Whenever God does a work which is to His glory and men are blessed and finding Christ as personal Savior, and there is also the joy and power of Christ, you can be sure the wolves are coming. They may fool the simple saints and the baby Christians, but they must not fool the elders. Phonies are sometimes hard to detect. Even Judas fooled the other 11 disciples of Christ for three years.

Wolves from Within (20:30)

“ . . . and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them.” – Even from among the congregation at Ephesus would arise false teachers who would try to get a following and pull people away from the local church by preaching crooked and distracting doctrines. Yet, even more specific, some of the elders of that local church would come up with moral and/or doctrinal deficiency, and they would have to be dealt with by the elders who were sound in the Faith. The most dangerous enemies which the church has had have been nurtured

in its own bosom. Men who are ambitious, who lust for power or who love popularity, form parties (sects) within the church which produce cliques, divisions and strife. John Calvin said, “Ambition is the mother of all heresies.”

In his letters to Timothy, who was the pastor-teacher at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul warned Timothy about certain false teachers and called them by name so there would be no mistake as to whom he was referring. “Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme” (I Tim. 1:20). “You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermongenes” (II Tim. 1:15).

When God gathers a large company of believers and is doing a great work, the more people there are within the local church who feel they are right and the leadership is wrong. They seek to gather a following and to lead true disciples away from the flock. Paul warns the elders and the congregation at Ephesus against following upstart leadership and splinter groups. The local church is to follow their elders who are the leaders, rulers, overseers, supervisors, managers and shepherds of the flock.

Watch and Warn (20:31)

“Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” – The elders of a local church are to be constantly watching, always on the alert, for wolves in the midst of the sheep. Paul himself warned the Ephesians for three years with tears in his eyes about false teachers, phony Christians, and wolves of all kinds who would enter into the flock and plunder it. Elders are to follow the example of the Apostle Paul and watch out for dangerous professing Christians and perverted doctrines and root them out of the congregation. Notice that Paul admonished each one, whatever his rank or position, in the local church at Ephesus about false teaching and teachers. He admonished, warned and confronted men, not as an arrogant tyrant but as a man with tears, showing his deep feeling and interest in their welfare.

CONCERN FOR THE SOURCES TO LEAD THE FLOCK - Acts 20:32

God Himself (10:32a)

“And now I commend you to God . . .” -- Paul placed the Ephesian elders into the hands and under the protection of Almighty God. He knew that God would always be with these elders even if he himself was not present. Even though Paul thought he might soon die, he knew that God never dies. Undershepherds also die, but the work goes on because God is with His people. The sovereign God shall be with His people and protect them because the Chief Shepherd is far more concerned about the welfare of His flock than any undershepherds. Elders, therefore, are to look to God for strength and power to lead the local church.

God's Word (20:32b)

“ . . . and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among those who are sanctified.” -- Paul also commended them to the written Word of God, His gracious Bible which is able to build the saints strong. The one objective source that elders have to determine right doctrine, or how to rule a local church, or how to carry on world evangelism or how to live godly lives, is the inspired, infallible written Word of God. The phrase “which is able” really says in the Greek, “which has power (dunamis)” to build up the saints. The Bible has a power, a dynamic, a dynamite about it which is able to make strong Christians. Elders must direct their own lives by the Bible; they must direct the local church by the Bible; and they must direct the lives of other Christians by the Bible, not on personal opinion, whim or logic. Only the Bible can build the saints and cause them to understand the inheritance they have in Christ with all the saints who are set apart to God. Paul wanted the elders to understand what he and all the prophets of old understood about the power of the Word. Jeremiah said, “Is not My word like a fire?” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer which shatters the rock” (Jer. 23:29).

CONCERN FOR A LIFE RELATIVELY FREE OF MATERIALISM - Acts 20:33-35

“I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes.” -- Paul desired to have a life that was as free as possible from a spirit of materialism. He took no money from any of the Ephesians while he ministered to them. He may have received special gifts from other established local churches but he took no money from the Ephesian Christians. He did not want them to think he was preaching the gospel to them for money. He never wanted to confuse the issue, for he said in II Corinthians 12:14, “For I do not seek what is yours, but you.” Paul was not in the ministry for money but for souls and for building up the church of God. The goal of the ministry is not to amass wealth but the welfare of the saints.

The ministry can be a religious racket, but woe be to that man who is a so-called minister of Christ who makes a financial killing under the garb of the ministry!

Every minister of the gospel, when he comes to lie down to die, ought to be able to say, “I coveted no man's silver or gold or clothes. It was not for wealth or ease or fame I labored but for the glory of God.”

“You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.” -- While in Ephesus, Paul made tents and ministered on the side. However, he was a pioneer missionary and he did not want the people to think he was after their money. He wanted them to hear the gospel and not feel like they were being fleeced of their finances. The spiritual principle here is that at no time should Christians ask for money from people who are not Christians. We should also point out that while Paul made tents, he gave as the norm that those who are in the full-time ministry should be paid by those to whom they minister. “So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14).

“In every thing I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” -- Paul appeals to the words of Christ, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” to show that elders must be willing to give rather than to receive. If elders give of the Word, of their time, of their hearts, of their lives, to others, then the Lord will see to it that they receive spiritual and material blessing in return.

What Paul was telling the group of elders was to be selfless in the ministry. They were not to seek glory, favor, position, prominence or financial reward, but they were to give to the flock the Word and their lives, for “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

CONCERN FOR PRAYER - Acts 20:36

“And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.” -- When Paul had finished his exhortation to these Ephesian elders, he, in reverence and humility, knelt down in their midst and prayed. Oh, how wonderful it would be to know what Paul prayed!

Paul undoubtedly prayed this prayer, not only to ask God's blessing on the elders and the Ephesian local church but to remind the elders that they could not govern the local church without much prayer. Every elder must be a man committed to individual prayer and group prayer; that is, he is to pray with other elders and the congregation. A prayerless board of elders is doomed to failure!

CONCERN FOR MANIFESTING LOVE - Acts 20:37, 38

"And they began to weep aloud and embrace Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, . . ." -- Such fond affection these elders had for their leader, Paul. Paul had dearly loved them and served them for three years. Now as he was about to leave, these strong, masculine, spiritual leaders began to hug and kiss Paul on the cheek which was an ancient custom of the church.

There should always be this kind of love between elders and between the elders and the congregation. A godly display of emotion is pleasing to Christ and certainly builds up the body of Christ.

“. . . grieving especially over the word which he had spoken that they should see his face no more.” -- For a few fleeting moments the elders turned their thoughts from their responsibilities as elders and the flock to which they had been called to minister and put them on their dear leader and friend, Paul. They knew they would see him no more and they wept.

“And they were accompanying him to the ship.” -- That walk from the meeting place to the ship must have been a glorious time of rejoicing, crying, laughing and sighing as the elders recalled the memories they had of Paul those three precious years he ministered there in Ephesus.

CONCLUSION

Are you a sheep or a goat? A sheep belongs to Christ. A goat is a rejecter of Christ. If you are a goat, I have bad news for you. Christ has promised to separate the sheep and the goats and to judge the goats at the second coming.

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations shall be gathered before Him; and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25:31-34).

The sheep inherit the kingdom and the goats are excluded and judged. Unbelievers will face the eternal wrath of God.

Yet, I have some good news for you if you are an unbelieving goat. You can become a believing sheep. You say, “How?” You must accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and Shepherd. Jesus said, “I am the door of the sheep . . . if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved . . .” (John 10:7, 9). The moment you receive Christ the Lord, you receive eternal life, for you become a true sheep of Christ, the Great Shepherd, and He gives you this promise, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give them eternal life; and they shall never perish” (John 10:27, 28). Will you receive Christ and come into His fold and under His shepherd hood?