A Word to Church Elders (Acts 20:17-38)

An overarching observation worth emphasizing: Paul does not simply tell the elders what they need to do; he reminds them of what he has done. His own life and ministry provide the example for their future leadership. Key verse: “I consider my life of no value to myself…” (meaning: Faithfulness to God’s purpose over personal preservation - Knowing he would suffer, Paul walked into his role willinging, expectantly, and humbly. Self-preservation, reputation, and public opinion were not part of Paul’s core values - Paul considered himself dead to this world and alive to a kingdom that has no end. He modeled this for elders.)

1. Serve the Lord with humility and perseverance (vv. 18–21)

Paul reminds them of how he conducted himself among them.

- He served the Lord with humility and tears.
- He persevered through trials and opposition.
- He publicly taught salvation in Christ by grace through faith.
- He faithfully proclaimed repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ.

Essential idea: Faithful ministry requires humility, perseverance, and commitment to proclaiming the way of the Kingdom of God and salvation apart from the law. Faithful ministry does not have a personal agenda, not a financial agenda, or a political agenda. Paul’s tears represented his empathy, compassion, and pain in caring for people and the plots against him by those he served.

2. Remain faithful to the calling of God (vv. 22–24)

Paul understands that suffering and imprisonment await him in Jerusalem, but he is not deterred.

- He is compelled/influenced by the Holy Spirit.
- He is willing to suffer for the sake of Christ.
- He values completing his ministry more than preserving his own life.

Essential idea: Finishing the race and fulfilling the ministry God has given us is more important than personal comfort or safety or popularity. Paul does not influence others to follow him - Like John the Baptist, Paul pleads with others to follow the way of Jesus.

3. Proclaim the whole counsel of God (vv. 25–27)

Paul declares that he has faithfully discharged his responsibility to them.

- He did not shrink back from teaching hard things and exposing hidden things..
- He taught them the full story of salvation - God at work in history.
- He considers himself innocent of the blood of all of them.

Essential idea: The responsibility of spiritual leadership is to faithfully teach God's Word without withholding difficult or unpopular truths. Paul did not plant churches on secondary teaching.

4. Shepherd and protect the church (vv. 28–31)

This is perhaps the central responsibility Paul places upon the elders.

- Pay careful attention to yourselves.
- Pay careful attention to the flock.
- Shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.
- Recognize that false teachers and destructive influences will arise.
- Remain watchful and alert.

Essential idea: Elders must guard their own spiritual lives while faithfully shepherding and protecting the church from spiritual danger. Elders must know their weaker tendencies, live confessionally, seek accountability, know they will be hated for standing for what is true, trust other elders who have strengths they don't have, and unify around the example of Christ. Because Elders have a higher degree of influence and authority they are the most dangerous men in the local church - able to do the most harm and scatter the most sheep. One particularly important observation from Acts 20:28–30 is that Paul identifies two dangers: wolves coming from outside and men arising from within the church who distort the truth to draw disciples after themselves.

5. Trust God and remain committed to His Word (vv. 32–35)

Paul concludes by entrusting the elders to God and His Word.

- God and His Word are able to build them up.
- Ministry should not be driven by *greed or personal gain.
- Leaders should work hard and help the weak.
- They should remember the words of Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Essential idea: Healthy church leadership is marked by dependence upon God, commitment to His Word, generosity, and sacrificial service. Unhealthy church leadership is characterized by self-interest, personal ambition, and the misuse of spiritual authority or influence. *Greed in this context is NOT largely about money. In the first century context, greed was more about "admiration (respect), self-interest, control, and transactional relationships."

Illustration from Richard Baxter: When Baxter arrived in Kidderminster (England, 1615-1691), he found a community in considerable spiritual decline. Many people were poorly instructed in Scripture, and religious life was largely nominal. Rather than simply preaching on Sundays and expecting people to come to him, Baxter organized an extensive ministry of personal instruction.

Baxter and his unified team devoted two days each week to visiting and instructing families. They worked through the basic doctrines of Christianity, answered questions, examined spiritual understanding, and encouraged people to put their faith into practice. Kidderminster had

approximately 800 families. Baxter and his assistants worked through the congregation systematically, seeking to reach every household. How can this be done in 21st century context and business?

The results were remarkable. Baxter later described how, when he first arrived, perhaps one family on a street regularly worshiped God. By the time he left, there were streets where only one family did not maintain family worship. The community experienced substantial spiritual renewal.

This illustrates healthy church leadership

I see four connections to Paul's instructions in Acts 20:

1. **They shepherded rather than merely occupied positions**. They went to the people instead of waiting for the people to come to them. The Church service on Sunday was never intended to be a “come and see” but a “prepare and go out” gathering. Elders are frontline leaders who feed and warn the people.
2. **They taught rather than simply administered.** They were concerned with biblical understanding and spiritual maturity. Church leadership is not primarily business management, it never was. Church leadership is people focused and disciple building (not budgets and not buildings - those practical things were delegated to other men and women who were considered trustworthy and spiritual minded).
3. **They served rather than sought personal gain.** Their time and energy were invested in the spiritual welfare of others. Elders were not owners or managers - they were more like floor nurses concerned about health, encouraging, correcting, guiding and guarding.
4. **They pursued spiritual health rather than institutional success.** Their concern was transforming lives, not simply maintaining church activities or keeping people happy.