

THE WORK OF A SHEPHERD

Acts 20:28

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

The closer Fred got to the door of his office the more his shoulders bunched up and the lower his head drooped. He didn't know how much longer he could work under the strain. His boss, Jim, was a visionary leader. He knew exactly what it was that he wanted the team to accomplish. Everyone in the office admired him and loved the goals that they were working to attain. However, Jim had no idea how the different members of the team were feeling. Fred loved meeting new clients and persuading them to try the software the other members of the team developed. But Jim, without consulting him, assigned him to troubleshoot customer complaints. He was getting "beat up" by angry customers every day and it seemed that he could never satisfy them. He tried to talk with Jim about how he was feeling but Jim just gave him his standard "pep" talk about the value of reaching their goal of supplying 40% of the market with their software. He was losing all desire to continue working with this company and had already sent out his resume to other software firms.

Mary was so excited that her husband Sam was finally beginning to give spiritual leadership to the family. She loved his enthusiasm for reading the Bible and praying with the family each day. She was happy that he had the next three months planned. However, she was concerned that their eight year old was not only bored but actually resisting the time of Family Worship. She had tried to bring up her concern to Sam but he just talked about how exciting it was to be reading the Bible together and didn't take her concerns seriously.

How would you diagnose the problem that manager Jim and husband Sam share in common? What part of effective leadership are they missing?

In Acts 20: 17-36 Paul is giving the leaders (elders) of the church at Ephesus instructions on how to lead the church. He uses his own life as an example and then gives them specific directions in vv. 28 & 31.

STUDY

1. What commands does he give to the elders at Ephesus in vv. 28 & 31?

Keep watch over themselves. Keep watch over the flock the Holy Spirit has appointed them overseers. Shepherd the church of God. Be on their guard.

2. According to vv. 26-27, why should the elders keep watch over themselves? See 1 Cor. 4: 1-5 & 2 Cor. 5: 9-11.

They will have to give an account to God for both their actions and their motives. God is watching them and will call them to account for what they have done and taught. The only person that must be pleased is God himself.

3. According to vv. 29-30, why should the elders keep watch over themselves? See Matthew 7: 15-23. Do false teachers believe they are false teachers?

Paul is certain that some of the men to whom he is speaking are going to begin to believe and teach false doctrine and will seek to lead people away from Christ. They must keep watch over themselves because they could become "ferocious wolves". False teachers do not think they are false teachers and all of us have the potential to believe and teach what is false.

Eugene Peterson writes the following about spiritual leaders: "Deception is nowhere more common than in religion. And the persons most easily and damningly deceived are the leaders. Those who deceive others are first themselves deceived, for not many, I think, begin with evil intent. The devil, after all, is a spiritual being. His usual mode of temptation is not to an obvious evil but to an apparent good. The commonest forms of devil-inspired worship do not take place furtively at black masses with decapitated cats but flourish under the bright lights

of acclaim and glory, in a swirl of organ music... The religious leader is the most untrustworthy of leaders: in no other station do we have so many opportunities for pride, for covetousness, for lust, or so many excellent disguises at hand to keep such ignobility from being found out and called to account.”

4. Do you think this is an accurate statement? Why or why not?

5. How does this statement make you feel? How should this reality cause us to think and act towards those who are our spiritual leaders?

6. According to v. 35 (See 1 Timothy 4: 12 and 1 Cor. 11:1), why should leaders keep watch over themselves?

Every Christian leader needs to be able to say with the apostle Paul, “Imitate me, as I imitate Christ.” Every parent needs to be able to look their child in the face and say, I want you to be just like me in the way I live my life for Christ. Every small group leader needs to be able to look those in his or her group in the face and say, I want you to follow Christ just like I follow Christ. Every elder and pastor needs to be able to look each member of their congregation in the face and say, “I want you to pray as I pray. I want you to spend your money as I spend my money. I want you to treat your wife as I treat my wife. I want you to watch the media I watch. I want you to eat the way I eat. I want you to raise your children as I raise my children. I want you to study the Bible as I study the Bible. I want you to take care of your property the way I take care of my property.” I’m not saying that everyone is supposed to copy every detail of the leaders life. I am saying that the leader needs to ask himself or herself on a regular basis, “would I want those whom God has given me to lead to think like this, love like this, act like this, believe like this?”

7. According to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, how did the apostle Paul “keep watch” over himself?

Paul is hard on himself. He “beats” his body. He engages in a life of discipline so that he will not be deceived and led astray and so not make it to his heavenly home.

8. Paul tells the elders, plural, to keep watch over themselves. What is the implication of his commanding a group of elders to keep watch?

When Paul tells the elders to keep watch over themselves, he is speaking to a group of men. He is commanding each individual to not only keep watch over themselves, but also over the other members of the group. This is one of the main reasons that the pattern in the NT is for a plurality of leadership in the church. The biblical pattern is for each local church to be lead by a council of elders. The NT teaches that some of the elders are to give their full time to “pastoring”, yet all of the elders share in the responsibility for the work and that includes holding one another accountable.

Christian leaders keep watch over themselves by living a disciplined life and by submitting to regular evaluation of their life and doctrine by other leaders so that both they and those they lead make it safely to heaven.

9. What does it mean in v. 28 that the elders are to keep watch over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers? How should this motivate leaders to keep watch over the flock?

Notice first that the Holy Spirit is the one who made them overseers over this particular church. This isn’t something they decided, but it is something God decided. They are like hired men who have been given a job to do. If they are not faithful to their task, they will have to give an account to the one who gave them the task. It is critical to note that not only does God assign the flock to the shepherd, but also the shepherd to the flock. This is true for families and small groups as well. God is the one who assigns the leaders to a flock and the flock to the leaders. We are not simply a random assortment of individuals, no matter how much our consumer mentality makes us believe so. God forms congregations and appoints elders to lead them.

10. What does it mean in v. 28 when the church is called, “the church of God which he bought with his own blood”? How would this motivate a Christian leader to keep watch?

God created and owns the church. It belongs to him. He bought it with his own blood. (This is an important sidebar: When did God have blood? This is a clear statement of the deity of Jesus.) Christian leaders are motivated to take care of God's church because God shed the blood of his own dear son to purchase the church for himself. We love him and the church is valuable to him, so I take special care of what is special to God.

11. What motivation does vv. 29-30 give for keeping watch?

Christian leaders are motivated to pay careful attention to the church because enemies inside and out beset the church. Satan and all of his hosts are seeking to destroy the church by raising up false teachers within the church to lead those within it astray. Elders, pastors and parents know that there are many forces seeking to dissuade those in the church from following Christ. So we bend our energy to warn and alert people to the dangers and we teach people the truth so they will recognize what is false. We are not on cruise ship touring the Bahamas as we make our way toward heaven. We are in a battle ship fighting our way to the homeport. We are under attack from the sea and the air. Spies have slipped on board during the night and are trying to commandeer the ship. We must be ever vigilant and courageous as leaders if we are going to bring the ship safely to port.

12. According to Paul in Acts 20: 20, 21, 24, 25, 27, 31, 32 what is the main task involved in being a shepherd? See 2 Timothy 4: 1-4 as well.

Paul was committed to communicating a message. It is a helpful message. It is a message about repentance from sin and trust in Jesus Christ. It is a message of God's free unconditioned favor towards sinners. It is the whole will of God. He worked hard, night and day, teaching, proclaiming and warning all the flock. He was committed to enabling people to know the truth of Christ, then to love the truth and finally to act upon it.

13. Look at vv. 20, 28 and 31 and compare with 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12. Besides public teaching of God's word, what else does Paul believe that Christian leaders must do?

Paul's goal was not simply proclaiming the truth with no regard as to the effectiveness of what he preached. When he told people to repent and trust in Christ, he wanted them to do so. He wanted people to abandon false ways of thinking about God and to embrace the truth. He wanted people to be growing in holiness. He wanted it for the glory of Christ and for the eternal joy of the people. It is not the job of Christian leaders to simply proclaim the truth, it is their job to make sure that the truth is transforming the lives of those to whom it is addressed. That is the goal of keeping watch over the sheep. No shepherd has discharged his duty of caring for his flock when he is done talking. Rather he or she is required to find out if the sheep have been fed, are they healthy or sick, if they are in danger of being devoured by wolves. The only way you can find those things out is by personal conversation. That is why Paul went house to house and warned each one of the Ephesians. He was seeking to find out what condition each sheep was in and then to seek to administer the appropriate help that each one needed. It is the duty of every elder, parent, small group leader and other leader to "know the condition of his or her flock" by having regular, personal conversation with each person under their care in order to find out if the truth is having its intended effect.

14. Read 1 Thess. 5: 12-13 and Hebrews 13:17. How are the "sheep" to respond to this kind of personal oversight?

The sheep are to respect their leaders who engage in this work of personal oversight. They are to submit to them and cooperate in the work.

15. What are some of the benefits that you think would come from this kind of personal attention to each member of a congregation, family, small group?

- *Leaders would know if they are communicating and if not they can make adjustments to both how and what they are teaching*
- *Members would know that their leaders care for them personally and would be more attentive to their teaching.*
- *People would take growth in knowledge of the Scriptures more seriously as they know someone will be asking how they are doing.*
- *People would get their specific questions answered and get help in specific application of God's word to the details of their lives.*

➤ *There are more, keep the group brainstorming.*

16. How do you feel about having a personal conversation like this with your small group leader, an elder or another, older Christian?

17. Would you find this personally beneficial?

18. What would be some of the dangers or difficulties in having this kind of conversation? What could be done to overcome these?