

## Guarding the Flock

GCC Caribbean Conference  
Barbados

Acts was written by Luke, to a man named Theophilus. The book began in Jerusalem and ends in Rome.

*Acts 1:8 – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”*

In Acts, the message of the gospel begins to spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. By Acts 20, Paul is on his third missionary journey, and he is circling back to some new churches, touching base for the last time.

Paul knows the end is coming, this was likely the last time they would see him, and he has parting words for them.

He is speaking to the Overseers. Overseers are elders, pastors – leaders, influencers. He calls the church a flock (sheep), speaking to shepherds, reminding us of the value of the flock obtained and purchased with His own blood.

And Paul has a message for them. This is the only message in Acts aimed at believers, all the other messages given in Acts are aimed at unbelievers. And Paul focuses on the leaders among the believers, letting them know what will happen. Not only to them, but it’s what always will happen in the church. If Jesus promised to build it, and He did and is still building it, then wherever He is building, Satan is trying to tear down.

*Read Acts 20:28-32*

In this passage, Paul speaks to the elders of the church in Ephesus. In the book of Revelation, the Ephesian church is also addressed (*see Revelation 2:1-7, especially v. 4*).

Leaders are to shepherd the flock, to watch out for, care for, and protect. In *Ezekial 3*, we see the significance in Ezekial’s life of being a watchman on the wall as a leader. If we don’t protect and warn, it’s on us.

*Hebrews 13:17 – “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will give an account.”*

Leaders, pastors, elders... this is weighty and serious.

Paul warns of two dangers:

1. A danger from outside the church
2. A danger from within the church

And the solution was to “guard them” and watch over them. Paul’s major concern was to protect the church.

Satan hates the church, and he is after it. And here, the enemy uses wolves, who come in, not sparing the flock. And from within – speaking twisted things, drawing people after them.

Jesus also warned of wolves in *Matthew 7:15* – “*Because of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*”

The dangers from the outside include those who deceive Christians – trying to make them believe lies about God, the Gospel, and His Word. They distract Christians, and they destroy Christians.

We must watch for ways that culture would be infiltrating the church, we must speak to the cultural issues in our world and nation and communities.

In America, politics have moved into spiritual issues, and the church must speak up. But people come in and pressure us to keep quiet.

We must guard against drift, from culture’s influence, by adhering to sound teaching.

Expository preaching is a way to prioritize sound teaching, keeping us addressing potentially sensitive or difficult issues that we may rather avoid.

In the book of Jude, we’re told to earnestly contend for the faith.

*1 Timothy 3:15b* – “*...the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*”

Buttress is a support or reinforcement. Truth is the whole counsel of God.

Distractions from “without” can include money, comfort, sports, sex, etc...

*Titus 1:9b* – we’re told to instruct in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. One of the best protections is to instruct the church well in sound doctrine.

We must be shepherd and watchmen who are aware of outside dangers.

But the dangers from within, I have found, are the most problematic.

*Acts 20:30, 31a*

This danger is more deceptive and problematic. There are dangers from those who seem to be one of us, on our team. In context, Paul is saying even dangers from the elders possibly.

How and why does this happen?

Pride – a lack of humility.

Offenses – Satan uses offenses as bait, even little offenses, “little foxes that spoil the vines.” (*Song of Solomon 2:15*)

Gossip and slander – which are often a result of taking up an offense. *Matthew 18* tells us the Biblical way to handle being offended is to go to the person themselves! We must refuse to listen to gossip and slander. Teach and model this well as leaders. I believe in the “law of the lid” – that as leaders, those under our care will only be willing grow in certain areas as much as we ourselves apply ourselves to grow and commit to walk in spiritual disciplines and we have the responsibility to be examples, to the best of our ability.

Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, which we are warned about in *James 3:14-16*. The passage says it’s demonic! And when bitter jealousy towards others and selfish ambition creep in, we are tempted to attack someone’s character, instead of lovingly correcting if needed. Real correction tries to restore you, criticism tries to reduce you.

Some who are motivated by pride, power, money, bitterness, jealousy, etc. will draw others away after them. Watch out for them.

In the book of Titus it tells us to warn a divisive person once or twice, then have nothing to do with them.

*Romans 16:17-18* reiterates to watch out for those who cause divisions.

One of the greatest threats to the church is internal strife. We must guard against divisive behavior and actions. If it takes root, it will fracture and harm the body. It disrupts the witness. It leaves the church weak and vulnerable.

Important ways to protect against false doctrine are by teaching what is sound, walking through the fullness of Scripture with expository preaching, knowing your mission and vision. Keeping the main things, the main things – knowing and walking out the gospel. Protect from within by walking in repentance and leading others to do the same. Guard against the love of money in your own heart.

But I think the text gives more things that are destructive that we must guard against.

Paul stresses in verse 31 to “be alert.” So we must guard against laziness, carelessness, and apathy. We must stay awake and be alert. In verse 32, he calls us to maturity. So we must guard against shallowness and immaturity.

In all these things, we must guard against them both individually and in the life of the church – as leaders, we must instruct, teach, and disciple.

*John 15:7* – “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.”

*John 8:31b-32* – “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

In discipleship and guarding the flock, be abiding in Christ.

Part of guarding the flock also is guarding our own hearts from covetousness. It's easy in ministry to covet, to covet others' gifts, money, buildings, number of church attenders, relationships, opportunities... It can creep into our hearts so quickly. Guard your own heart here – remember the “law of the lid.”

*Acts 6:4 – “We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”*

Devote yourselves to prayer, fasting, and the Word – knowing you will give an account.

*1 Timothy 4:16 – “Keep close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save yourself and your hearers.”*

Persist in this.

Feel the weight of guarding your flock. But remember the power and grace of the gospel as you lead, in your life and the life of your church.

Remember Who is building the Church, Who purchased it with His own blood. We are simply stewards.

Fear God. Love God. Remember Revelation 2, especially verse 4, and the letter to the Ephesian church. Do not forget or abandon your first love. Walk in repentance. Stay alert. Guard your flock from without and within.