

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 20 records Paul's final westward movements before his journey to Jerusalem: a sweeping travel summary through Macedonia and Greece (vv. 1–6), the raising of Eutychus at Troas (vv. 7–12), a rapid coastal journey to Miletus (vv. 13–16), and—occupying the chapter's theological center of gravity—Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders (vv. 17–38). The chapter is simultaneously travelogue, miracle account, and apostolic testament. The farewell address is the only speech in Acts addressed exclusively to Christians and is widely regarded as Paul's most sustained piece of pastoral self-disclosure anywhere in the New Testament. Paul reviews his ministry in Ephesus (vv. 18–21), previews his compelled journey to Jerusalem with its uncertain outcome (vv. 22–24), solemnly declares his innocence of the blood of all (vv. 25–27), charges the elders to shepherd the flock (vv. 28–31), commits them to God and the word of His grace (v. 32), defends his financial integrity (vv. 33–35), and concludes in prayer and tears (vv. 36–38). The Eutychus episode, far from being a parenthetical curiosity, previews in miniature the pattern of the farewell address: a minister who pours himself out, apparent death and loss, and resurrection life through apostolic presence—a pattern that describes what Paul's own ministry has been and what the word of God's grace continues to accomplish after his departure.

This Text — Intent

God is working through Acts 20 to form leaders who understand what faithful ministry looks like from the inside—its cost, its content, its divine source, and its ultimate accountability. The Ephesian elders are not merely being commissioned; they are being shown a model of ministry that is internally coherent: what Paul preached (repentance and faith, vv. 20–21), how he preached it (publicly and house to house, without shrinking back), why he preached it (compelled by the Spirit, accountable to God), and at what cost (tears, plots, chains, afflictions). God intends this chapter not as Paul's private memoir but as a living template—inscripturated pastoral theology—for every generation of church leadership that follows. The intent is to produce shepherds who are courageous, gospel-centered, self-denying, and properly terrified by the weight of their charge, all while resting in “the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (v. 32).

Subject Sentence

Subject Sentence: Paul's farewell to Ephesus models what faithful, gospel-driven, shepherd-ministry costs and demands.

Primary Claim

Primary Claim: God is calling every pastor, elder, and church leader to embrace the full weight of the shepherd's charge—preaching the whole counsel without shrinking, guarding the flock without compromise, and releasing all security to the word of His grace alone—because the ministry of the gospel is too costly and too glorious to be done any other way.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Central Debate: Is Acts 20:17–38 Descriptive or Normative?

A significant hermeneutical fault line runs through the interpretation of Paul's Miletus address. Dispensational and some Baptist interpreters treat the passage as primarily descriptive—Paul's unique apostolic ministry is being recounted and cannot be straightforwardly replicated; his "completing his course" language (v. 24) belongs to his unrepeatable apostolic office. On this reading, the passage is inspiring biography, not binding ecclesiology. The Reformed and presbyterian tradition reads the passage as normative for all ordained ministry, because the persons being addressed are not apostles but local elders (presbyteroi, v. 17; episkopoi, v. 28)—the same office that will continue in every congregation. Paul is not saying "do what I the apostle have done"; he is saying "I have modeled what you the elders must now do." The text itself supports the normative reading: the charge in verses 28–31 is explicitly addressed to elders plural, uses shepherd/flock language (drawn from Ezekiel 34 and John 10, both normative pastoral metaphors), and the warning about wolves arriving after Paul's departure assumes precisely that these men will continue the work Paul is now leaving. The descriptive reading, while not wrong to note Paul's unique apostolic authority, errs by limiting the chapter's force to apostolic biography when the speech itself is addressed to and applied to the ongoing local eldership. **Verdict:** the normative reading is correct and is the reading that best accounts for the speech's grammar and address.

The "Overseer/Elder" Identity in Verse 28

Verse 28 uses both presbyteroi (elders, v. 17) and episkopoi (overseers/bishops, v. 28) to describe the same group of men. Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and some Lutheran interpreters read a distinction between the two terms as the basis for a three-tiered hierarchy (bishop/priest/deacon) in which the episkopos is superior to the presbyteros. The Reformed reading—consistent with Acts 20:17 and 28 read together, Titus 1:5–7, and 1

Peter 5:1–2—understands the terms as interchangeable descriptions of the same office, describing different aspects of the same function (elder = dignity and maturity; overseer = the task of oversight). The text supplies no grounds for inferring two separate officers, since Paul sends for the presbyteroi (v. 17) and calls them episkopoi (v. 28) without any sense of transition or distinction. **Verdict:** the Reformed two-office reading (elder/deacon) is correct; the hierarchical reading imports assumptions the text actively resists.

Verse 28 and the Atonement: “Church of God, Which He Obtained with His Own Blood”

This verse is among the most significant atonement texts in Acts and generates real interpretive divergence. The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition reads “obtained with His own blood” as potentially supporting a universal or unlimited atonement—Christ’s blood was shed for all, including those who may finally apostatize. The Calvinist/Reformed tradition notes two things: first, the phrase “church of God” is a corporate, defined body (not “all people generally”); second, the blood obtains, purchases, and secures the church—language of definite, accomplished redemption. The passage cannot be used to resolve every dimension of the atonement debate, but its natural reading supports the particularity of the atonement as applied to a defined covenant community—which is precisely why the elders are charged to guard it. What God purchased at the cost of His own blood, human shepherds must guard with corresponding gravity. **Verdict:** the definite, particular reading of the atonement is more consistent with the verse’s logic—the magnitude of the charge flows from the magnitude of the price already paid for a specific flock.

The “Wolves” in Verse 29 — Internal or External?

The reference to “fierce wolves” who will come “from among your own selves” (v. 30) has been read by some as referring strictly to outside agitators entering the congregation (Dispensational interpreters sometimes read this as describing a future apostasy specific to a particular era). The plain reading is that verses 29 and 30 describe two sequential threats: outside false teachers who will enter the flock (v. 29), and insiders who will rise up from within the eldership itself (v. 30). The phrase “from among your own selves” (ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν) is decisive—these are not external opponents but internal defectors. This warning is directly applicable to every local church eldership and is not limited to a specific historical moment or dispensational epoch. **Verdict:** the two-source reading (external wolves + internal defectors) is correct and normative for all church leadership.

Key Canonical Support

Key Canonical Support:

- **Ezekiel 34:1–16** — God’s devastating indictment of Israel’s shepherds who fed themselves rather than the flock; provides the Old Testament foundation for the shepherd/flock charge in Acts 20:28–31 and establishes that God Himself holds pastors directly accountable for the flock’s welfare.

- **John 10:11–18** — Christ as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep and whose sheep He knows by name; Acts 20:28’s “obtained with His own blood” is the historical fulfillment of the Good Shepherd’s promise, and the elders are under-shepherds of the one who first paid the price.
- **1 Peter 5:1–4** — Peter charges elders to shepherd God’s flock willingly, not under compulsion; not for shameful gain; not lording over; but as examples—the same set of concerns Paul raises in Acts 20:33–35 regarding financial integrity and servant leadership; both passages converge on the Chief Shepherd’s return as the final accountability.
- **2 Timothy 4:1–8** — Paul’s second farewell pastoral charge, written near his death; reproduces the Acts 20 structure: “preach the word... in season and out of season” (cf. Acts 20:20–21), warns of those who will “not endure sound teaching” (cf. Acts 20:29–30), and closes with “I have finished the race” (cf. Acts 20:24)—confirming that the Miletus address is not an isolated speech but the sustained posture of Paul’s entire apostolic ministry.
- **Hebrews 13:17** — “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account”—the congregation’s side of the Acts 20 charge; the elders will answer to God, which is why the flock is to make their work a joy and not a burden.

Aim

Aim: To show from Acts 20 what faithful pastoral ministry looks like from the inside—its content, its cost, its courage, and its ultimate source—so that leaders are sobered and strengthened, and congregations are equipped to honor, pray for, and rightly expect from those who shepherd them.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3a	Paul departs Ephesus, travels through Macedonia encouraging disciples, spends three months in Greece	“Encouraging them with many words” — ministry continues in motion
3b–6	Jewish plot prompts a route change; Paul’s companions named and travel details given to Troas	Seven named companions — the mission is never solo; Troas echoes Paul’s Macedonian call (Acts 16)

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
7–9	On the first day of the week, Paul teaches until midnight; Eutychus falls from the window and is taken up dead	Lord’s Supper gathering; Paul “prolonged his speech” — extended apostolic teaching; Eutychus = “fortunate” (ironically)
10–12	Paul goes down and embraces Eutychus; declares “his life is in him”; returns upstairs and continues until dawn; the boy taken home alive	Elijah/Elisha resurrection pattern (1 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 4); ministry resumes — death does not halt the Word
13–16	Travel itinerary: Assos, Mitylene, Chios, Samos, Miletus; Paul bypasses Ephesus to avoid delay	Paul’s determination to reach Jerusalem — the Spirit-compelled urgency of verses 22–24 already governs his movements
17	Paul sends to Ephesus and calls the elders (presbyteroi) of the church	The entire farewell address is addressed to local church elders — not apostles
18–21	Paul reviews his Ephesian ministry: serving with humility, tears, trials; teaching publicly and house-to-house; testifying repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ	“I did not shrink from declaring” — the opposite of shrinking defines his method; content: repentance + faith
22–24	Paul explains his compulsion to go to Jerusalem; the Spirit testifies imprisonments and afflictions await; Paul counts his life of no value — only finishing the course and the ministry matters	“Testifying to the gospel of the grace of God” — the content of the ministry named at the chapter’s theological peak
25–27	Paul declares he is innocent of the blood of all because he did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God	“Whole counsel” — not selective, comfortable, or crowd-pleasing; innocence flows from completeness
28	Charge to the elders: pay careful attention to	Trinitarian grounding: Holy Spirit appoints; God owns;

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	yourselves and to the flock; the Holy Spirit has made you overseers; shepherd the church of God which He obtained with His own blood	Christ's blood purchases — the weight is total
29–31	Warning: fierce wolves will come; men will rise from within to draw disciples after themselves; be alert, remembering Paul's three-year labor of tears	"From among your own selves" — internal apostasy is the greater danger; alertness = the ongoing posture
32	Paul commends them to God and to the word of His grace, able to build up and give inheritance among the sanctified	The minister's resource: not Paul, not their own competence, but the word of His grace — the chapter's pastoral anchor
33–35	Paul's financial integrity: he coveted no one's silver or gold; his hands ministered to his own necessities; he demonstrated that the laboring must support the weak	Non-mercenary ministry; the saying of Jesus ("more blessed to give than to receive") cited here — unique to Acts
36–38	Paul kneels and prays with them all; great weeping; they embrace; they grieve over his word that they will see his face no more; they accompany him to the ship	The emotional weight of genuine pastoral relationship; grief as evidence of love formed over years

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Minister in Motion — Encouraging, Redirected, and Accompanied
2	7–12	The Minister and the Word — Teaching Through the Night, Life Through the Darkness
3	13–16	The Minister Compelled —

Division	Verses	Label
		Bypassing Comfort, Pressing Toward Jerusalem
4	17–21	The Minister’s Retrospect — What Faithful Ministry Looks Like from the Inside
5	22–27	The Minister’s Courage — Bound by the Spirit, Innocent of All Blood
6	28–31	The Minister’s Charge — Shepherd the Purchased Flock, Guard Against Wolves
7	32–35	The Minister’s Resource and Integrity — The Word of Grace and Clean Hands
8	36–38	The Minister’s Farewell — Prayer, Tears, and the Gospel’s Relational Cost

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Paul’s farewell to Ephesus models what faithful, gospel-driven, shepherd-ministry costs and demands.

Primary Claim: God is calling every pastor, elder, and church leader to embrace the full weight of the shepherd’s charge—preaching the whole counsel without shrinking, guarding the flock without compromise, and releasing all security to the word of His grace alone—because the ministry of the gospel is too costly and too glorious to be done any other way.

Applications (Five)

1. Preach the whole counsel — or own the blood you withheld. (*Mind/Belief*)

Paul’s claim to innocence in verse 27 is inseparable from his refusal to shrink from anything (vv. 20, 27). The logic is stark: a preacher who softens, omits, or systematically avoids portions of God’s counsel is not merely incomplete — he is complicit in the spiritual impoverishment of the people who needed what he withheld. For pastors, this means auditing the silences: What doctrines never appear in your preaching calendar? What passages are systematically avoided because they are uncomfortable, contested, or likely to cost you approval? The text does not allow the preacher to claim faithfulness while practicing editorial omission. Faithfulness is defined here as declaring the *whole* counsel

— which is not the same as preaching everything with equal frequency, but it is the same as preaching with the deliberate intention that nothing significant shall be left out.

2. The flock belongs to God, purchased with Christ's blood — treat it accordingly.

(Affections/Worship)

Verse 28 is designed to produce a specific interior state in the elder: a holy fear proportionate to the price paid. The church is not the pastor's platform, the denomination's asset, or the elder board's institution. It is "the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood." Every decision about preaching, discipline, programming, staffing, and culture in a local church should be made in the shadow of that sentence. Elders who find themselves growing casual, proprietary, or self-protecting in their leadership need to return here — not to a management principle but to a price tag that re-orients all authority. The appropriate response to verse 28 is not confidence in one's own leadership but trembling before the Shepherd who purchased at infinite cost what He has entrusted to finite hands.

3. Release your ministry and your people to the word of His grace. *(Affections/Worship)*

Paul's commendation in verse 32 — "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace" — is not resignation; it is the profoundest act of pastoral confidence available. Paul is leaving. He cannot protect them, correct them, or teach them from Jerusalem, Rome, or beyond. And he does not reach for a strategy, a succession plan, or a structural safeguard first. He reaches for the word of God's grace, declaring it "able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Pastors who find their ministries built around their own irreplaceable presence — where the ministry rises and falls with their energy, health, or tenure — have not yet learned verse 32. The word of His grace is the permanent ministry; the pastor is its servant, not its source.

4. Be alert — the wolves who destroy flocks most often come from within.

(Will/Behavior)

Paul's warning in verses 29–30 escalates from outside predators to inside defectors, and the insider threat is the more urgent of the two. Elder boards, church staffs, and pastoral teams that lack any structure for mutual accountability, doctrinal examination, and honest confrontation have failed to heed verse 30's most pointed warning. This application is behavioral and concrete: Does your eldership have a regular practice of doctrinal accountability — not just budgets and buildings, but belief? Is there a person or a process by which an elder who begins drawing disciples after himself rather than after Christ would be identified and addressed before the damage is done? The alertness Paul commands is not a vague spiritual disposition but a structured, ongoing watchfulness built into how the leadership community operates.

5. Count your life of no value — and actually mean it. *(Will/Behavior)*

Verse 24 is among the most searching self-examinations available to any Christian in leadership: "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I

may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” Paul is not being dramatic. He is describing a settled hierarchy of values that governed every specific decision in the chapter — the route change that avoided comfort (v. 13), the Jerusalem journey despite known suffering (vv. 22–23), the three years of tears (v. 31), the manual labor to avoid burdening the church (v. 34). For any leader — pastoral or lay — the question verse 24 poses is precise: What am I protecting that is preventing me from finishing my course? Name it. Comfort, reputation, financial security, health, the approval of particular people? Verse 24 does not ask whether you value your life in the abstract; it asks what you are unwilling to surrender when the ministry requires it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 20 discloses what the pastoral office is and who it belongs to with greater theological density than almost any other passage in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit appoints overseers (v. 28a) — pastoral ministry is not a human institution, a democratic appointment, or a self-generated vocation; it is a gift of the ascended Christ mediated by the Spirit to His church. The flock belongs to God and was purchased by Christ’s own blood (v. 28b) — pastoral authority is derivative and custodial, never proprietary; the elders hold something that cost more than they can repay and will be required to return it. The word of God’s grace is the sufficient resource for the church’s growth and final inheritance (v. 32) — meaning that neither the minister’s personality, strategy, nor continued presence is ultimately determinative; the word does the building. These three theological convictions — Trinitarian appointment, blood-purchased flock, and word-sufficient ministry — constitute the doctrine of the pastoral office that Acts 20 provides, and they stand against every model of ministry that is personality-centered, institution-protecting, or self-advancing.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 20 is foundational for the Reformed understanding of the pastoral office, the church, and the sufficiency of Scripture in ministry. Calvin drew on this passage extensively in shaping his Genevan ecclesiology, and the Westminster Standards reflect its doctrine of ordained oversight, the eldership, and the accountability of pastors to God rather than to mere human structures. The identification of *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* as the same office (vv. 17, 28) is one of the primary New Testament supports for the Reformed two-office polity against episcopal hierarchy — not as a mere organizational preference but as a reading of the text’s own vocabulary. The phrase “whole counsel of God” (v. 27) has functioned as a shorthand within Reformed homiletics for *lectio continua* preaching, expository completeness, and the refusal to trim the gospel to cultural acceptability — representing in miniature what the

doctrines of Scripture's sufficiency and authority require in practice. Most profoundly, the atonement language of verse 28 — “the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood” — grounds the pastoral charge not in institutional duty but in the particular, definite, accomplished redemption of a people whom God owns because Christ paid for them. The gospel is not merely what pastors preach; it is the price that defines what they are guarding.

Main Takeaway

Main Takeaway: The pastoral charge is not a career path — it is a blood-purchased trust, appointed by the Spirit, sustained by the word of grace, and accountable to God alone. Paul's farewell to Ephesus shows what it looks like when a minister has believed this with his whole life: he teaches without shrinking, suffers without defecting, guards without compromise, and releases the flock to the word rather than to himself. Stop managing the ministry. Shepherd the church that Christ bled to purchase, and do not shrink from a single thing He has given you to say.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Reducing the passage to a biography of Paul rather than a charge to elders.** The most common homiletical error in Acts 20 is treating the Miletus address as an inspiring account of Paul's apostolic greatness rather than a binding charge delivered to local church elders. The speech is not self-referential — Paul is not celebrating his own ministry but demonstrating and transferring a model. Preaching that leaves the congregation admiring Paul rather than convicting elders and equipping congregations to expect and pray for faithful shepherding has misread the speech's own address and purpose.
- **Skipping the Eutychus episode as an interruption.** Eutychus (vv. 7–12) is consistently treated as a curiosity or a parenthetical miracle story with little connection to the farewell address that follows. In fact, the episode previews the farewell address's theology in narrative form: a minister pours himself out in extended proclamation, death appears to interrupt and end the work, and apostolic presence brings resurrection life. The pattern — death confronted by the life that the gospel carries — is precisely what Paul is preparing the elders to continue without him. Skipping or dismissing Eutychus as an anecdote loses a narrative anticipation of the address's main claim.
- **Applying “whole counsel of God” to preaching style rather than content.** The phrase “whole counsel of God” (v. 27) is frequently invoked in discussions of expository versus topical preaching methodology, as if Paul's concern is

hermeneutical approach. Paul's concern is content — he has not withheld, softened, or avoided any of God's revealed word because it was inconvenient or costly. The application concerns completeness and courage in what is preached, not the technical form in which it is delivered. Methodology discussions, however valid, are not what this text is generating.

- **Missing the Trinitarian structure of verse 28.** Verse 28 provides a compressed Trinitarian doctrine of the pastoral office: the Holy Spirit appoints overseers; the flock belongs to God; Christ's blood purchased the church. Preaching that focuses only on the "shepherd the flock" imperative without grounding it in this Trinitarian structure strips the charge of its theological force. The weight of the command derives entirely from who appointed the shepherds, who owns the flock, and what it cost. Elders who miss this will inevitably drift toward a duty-based or institutional understanding of their office rather than a theologically charged one.
- **Treating verse 32 as a pious conclusion rather than a pastoral theology of succession.** "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace" is not a warm closing sentiment. It is Paul's explicit answer to the question: "What happens to this flock when you leave?" The answer is not a better organizational structure, a stronger apostolic successor, or a robust denominational framework — it is God and His word. Preaching that glosses verse 32 as emotional farewell language rather than a deliberate, theologically precise answer to the problem of the minister's mortality and indispensability misses one of the most important pastoral claims in the chapter.
- **Applying the passage only to ordained clergy and missing its implications for congregations.** Acts 20 is addressed to elders, and its primary application is to pastoral ministry. But the chapter also forms congregations: a congregation that understands Acts 20 knows what to expect from its leaders (courage, completeness, non-mercenary motivation, mutual accountability), what to pray for (alertness against wolves, fidelity to the whole counsel), and what to receive from the word of grace (that it — not the minister — is what builds them up and secures their inheritance). Preaching Acts 20 exclusively to the ordained while leaving the congregation passive misses that both the charged and the served are present in the text's field of view.