



Course Name: Shepherds/Elders (Shepherding Absentees)

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Course description:

A constant concern among leaders in the Lord's church involves those who leave, who are absent from the assembly. How can shepherds/elders deal with the challenges that arise over those who leave? This lesson focuses on the topic of absentees, those who leave. Who is responsible for reclaiming those who wander from the truth? What seems to be the root issue of someone's absence? How should leaders address those who refuse to return? These questions will be discussed in today's lesson.

Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have...

- A. Considered the responsibility of every member in relationship to those who leave or walk away from God's people.
- B. Examined scripture to see what God says about how to handle these situations.
- C. Developed additional methods to deal with absentees to help shepherds in this role.

Outline of the class:

- A. During the first few minutes of the class divide the class into groups of three or four. Then ask each table to take 15-20 minutes to discuss the following.
 1. List out at least three ways to approach someone who leaves the church.
 2. How can shepherds/elders minister to those who are absent in a positive and fruitful manner?
 3. Read James 5:19-20 and discuss how the text supports this discussion?
- B. Reclaiming those who "wander from the truth" is everybody's business.
 1. Note James' words: "...if *anyone* among you wanders from the truth and *someone* brings him back, let him know that *whoever* brings back a sinner..."
 2. Reclaiming the erring is not solely the task of shepherds, but Jesus' parables about shepherds going after just one straying sheep suggest that the church's elders have a special responsibility in this regard.
 3. See Matthew 18:10-14 "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Note the serious consequences of straying away and not being reclaimed).

4. 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 reason for submission to “leaders” (which would include shepherds) is because they have a responsibility for our spiritual welfare, and we should not make this difficult for them.
 5. As “those who will have to give an account,” shepherds should be able to account for the whereabouts of every sheep (member). No one is dispensable!
 6. The first requirement in being able to account for every member is to know who is and who is not attending worship. This can be done in a variety of ways, but it must be done. Otherwise, people will “fall through the cracks.”
 7. Although shepherds/elders should take the lead in reclaiming those who have fallen or are in danger of falling away due to non-participation in worship, it only makes sense to involve others in this process as well, especially people who may have an especially close relationship with the absentee.
- C. Someone’s absenteeism from worship is not the *primary* problem but is a *symptom* of a larger problem.
1. Someone who has been attending worship regularly, but then begins to miss, is a red flag for shepherds. Something is wrong and needs to be addressed. It should never be ignored.
 2. It is important to try to find out the *cause* of the absenteeism. Is there a problem the person needs help with? A personal problem with another member? Loss of interest in spiritual concerns due to worldly distractions? Illness? Poor priorities?
 3. Help the person who is absent see that not coming to worship is not a solution to anything (assuming they are physically able to attend) and may only make problems worse. It is important to stay connected to God and to His people.
 4. Absentees will often try to dismiss your concerns by acting (or saying) that they are fine and there is nothing to be concerned about. Help them understand that the fact they are absent IS something to be concerned about. Hebrews 10:23-27 makes this very clear. Point out that no one falls away all at once, but it is almost always a gradual process.
 5. Offer to meet with them to discuss whatever it is that is contributing to their being absent, even if they insist there is not a problem. The fact that they are not coming says there is.
 6. Give reasons why their absence is a matter of spiritual concern, not just that “we miss you.”
- D. What about those who refuse to return?
1. First, recognize that some people do fall away, and will be lost if they do not return to the Lord (See Jesus’ parable of the Sower – Matthew 13:1-23).
 - a. While attending worship is not all that is involved in being a disciple of Jesus, it is certainly an essential part of it (Hebrews 10:24-25).

- b. Remember that the word “church” means “assembly,” and a person who will not assemble with the church is not part of “the assembly.” This naturally does not include those who are unable to attend, only those who choose not to do so.
 - c. Those who refuse to attend are not only injuring themselves spiritually, but they are also withholding the gift(s) that God has given them to serve their brothers and sisters in Christ. “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10). Use of our gifts to serve one another is not optional, but necessary.
2. There are always some who will not respond to your efforts, no matter how persistent or well-intentioned. Very often such people have a poor understanding of the responsibilities of church membership and need to be taught.
 3. Such people can be a drain on the time and energy of shepherds who repeatedly make contact with them, but to no avail. While we should never give up on anyone, it is important to let them know that their continued absenteeism is a serious spiritual problem that must be corrected.
 4. A workable plan:
 - a. Each year the shepherds can take note of those who, even after repeated contacts throughout the year, are still not attending and who refuse to meet to discuss it.
 - b. Another attempt should be made to establish contact, to ask if the person wants to continue to be regarded as a member or not.
 - c. Some will simply say, “no,” to continuing their membership. If so, they should be removed from the church rolls. While this does not absolve them of spiritual responsibility, it respects their choice, and the shepherds will not need to spend unnecessary time making repeated contacts with those who will not respond.
 - d. If contact is made and the person says they do want to continue their membership, then tell them that they will need to meet with the shepherds to discuss their absenteeism and what the shepherds can do to help them be more faithful in attendance.
 - e. For those who refuse such a meeting and still do not attend, or who cannot be contacted, a letter should be sent, explaining that being part of the church includes attending worship, and that continued non-attendance will require that they will no longer be considered part of the congregation (NOTE: This is not a withdrawal of fellowship, since they have already withdrawn their fellowship from the church. It is simply an acknowledgement that they are no longer a functioning part of the body).
 - f. There should be some timeframe allowed for response (two weeks?), after which they will no longer be regarded as members if they do not respond and show a willingness to meet with the shepherds for spiritual counseling.

- g. For those who do return after a prolonged absence, it would be good to have one or more of the shepherds engage them in a period of personal Bible study, if they are willing to do so.
4. In the case of those who have fallen away due to sin, or who have been disciplined by the church, what should be done if/when they return?
- a. First, the reason for their falling away needs to be addressed, especially if it involved congregational discipline. It will do no good to “return to church” if there is unrepented sin in the person’s life.
 - b. Second, for those who do repent and return, we should follow Paul’s guidelines in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.
 - 1) Paul mentions a specific case where someone has sinned but has now repented.
 - 2) Part of this process is to offer both forgiveness and comfort.
 - 3) In addition, the church should “reaffirm your love” for them. The tense of the verb in Greek suggests an *act* of reaffirmation. Paul is probably thinking of someone whose sin and discipline were public, so now the reaffirmation of the church’s love should be public as well.
 - 4) Notice the seriousness of failing to let the penitent sinner know he/she is forgiven and accepted: “He may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” and give up in despair. In this case, Satan would have outwitted the church!
- E. What other methods of dealing with absentees can you suggest that might be helpful to shepherds?
- 1. Take a few moments to allow everyone an opportunity to think about and make suggestions.
 - 2. Use the space below to add these suggestions to help achieve the purpose of this task.

Conclusion:

- A. Christians have a great responsibility to one another, to encourage one another daily (Hebrews 3:13; 10:25). This responsibility is just as great, even more so, when it comes to shepherds/elders who have the task of overseeing those within their care.
- B. The need to reclaim those who “wander from the truth” is critical for their souls. The primary or root of the problem may go deeper than just an absenteeism issue. Consider if there is a more urgent matter that needs to be addressed. If so, how do you help those who are struggling with these priorities?
- C. Take time to develop a plan for what this looks like and how shepherds/elders can lead the way in addressing the situation of those who refuse to return, and how to treat those who do return.