

The Unwavering Church

Unwavering with Hope

November 23, 2025

Acts 20:17-38

Introduction

Over these past eleven weeks, we've watched the early church rise with clarity, conviction, and courage as the Spirit shaped them into a people who were truly *unwavering*. We saw that an unwavering church **trusts in the King** who reigns and is returning, and **devotes herself to prayer**, seeking after God before acting for God. She **lives in the Spirit**, emboldened to **preach the gospel** with clarity and urgency. She **does life together**, sharing her resources, burdens, and joys in a supernatural fellowship. She **faces adversity boldly**, not shrinking back when pressured to be silent, and she **walks with integrity**, refusing hypocrisy and honoring the fear of the Lord. She **serves with humility**, valuing unity over status, and she **loves beyond herself**, crossing every natural barrier to welcome those whom God has made clean. She **lives with a global perspective**, sending and going for the sake of the nations, and she **proclaims forgiveness**, centering her message on the grace of Christ who justifies sinners. This is the church Jesus intended—courageous, prayerful, empowered, humble, honest, generous, global, and absolutely anchored in the gospel of grace.

As our series comes to a close, today's passage gives us the clearest snapshot of what an unwavering church looks like as it continues to grow. Right in the heart of Paul's farewell is one powerful verse—Acts 20:20:

(SLIDE) "I did not shrink back from proclaiming to you anything that was helpful, but taught you publicly and from house to house."

From this verse and many that flow out from it in this entire passage, I see three simple but powerful things that shape an unwavering church.

Body

AN UNWAVERING CHURCH SERVES WITHOUT HESITATION

I did not shrink back ...

In other words:

"I didn't hesitate."

"I didn't soften truth when it was unpopular."

“I didn’t avoid the difficult conversations.”

“I didn’t let fear steer me.”

Verse 27 repeats it:

“I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”

Paul didn’t preach selectively. He didn’t just preach the easy texts. He didn’t skip over sin, judgment, repentance, holiness, or sacrifice. He gave them Scripture with its edges intact.

This is the courage of an unwavering church.

Not harshness—courage.

Not arrogance—conviction.

Not loudness—faithfulness.

A church that wavers is a church that shrinks back.

A church that stands firm speaks the whole counsel of God with the whole heart of Jesus.

Beech Haven, this is part of our calling.

To preach what God says, not just what people prefer.

To live by conviction, not convenience.

To love people enough to tell the truth—even when it’s costly.

Unwavering churches serve unhesitatingly.

2. AN UNWAVERING CHURCH MINISTERS HELPFULLY

“...from proclaiming anything that was helpful.”

Paul wasn’t just courageous. He was *constructive*.

He says,

“I told you what would actually help you.”

That word “helpful” or “profitable” means:

- spiritually beneficial

- strengthening
- corrective when necessary
- healing when needed
- eternally valuable

Paul wasn't interested in being clever.
He wasn't aiming for applause.
He wasn't trying to create fans.

He wanted disciples.

He wanted people shaped by Scripture.
People rooted in truth.
People living holy lives.
People able to stand firm in suffering.
People who could lead homes, reach neighbors, and disciple others.

And sometimes what is most helpful is also hardest to hear.

Like a doctor who says, "This won't be comfortable, but it will save your life."

Paul's sermons—and his conversations—were **helpful** because they led people toward Jesus and into Christlike maturity.

This must shape our church.

We don't teach so people will say,
"That was interesting."
We teach so people will say,
"I'm growing. I'm changing. God is working on me."

We don't want ministries that are busy but not beneficial.
We don't want events that keep people occupied but not transformed.
We don't want sermons that entertain but do not edify.

We want a church that ministers helpfully—speaking truth that builds, strengthens, corrects, and encourages.

Unwavering churches help people grow.

3. AN UNWAVERING CHURCH IS PRESENT PUBLICLY AND PERSONALLY

“...I taught you publicly and from house to house.”

This is where Paul widens the lens.

He didn't only preach.

He didn't only disciple.

He didn't only lead services.

He didn't only visit homes.

He did **both**.

Public ministry

- preaching
- prayer
- worship
- sacraments
- vision
- unity
- shared mission

Personal ministry

- meals
- living-room discipleship
- one-on-one encouragement
- small gatherings
- pastoral care

- accountability
- community life

Paul is showing them—and us—this truth:

You cannot build an unwavering church with only public ministry or only personal ministry.

You need both.

One gathers the family.

The other grows the family.

One rallies people.

The other roots people.

One reaches the crowd.

The other shapes the soul.

A church that only meets in public will be shallow.

A church that only meets in private will be scattered.

A church that embraces both will be strong, deep, and unwavering.

This is why our worship matters.

This is why our Life Groups matter.

This is why hospitality matters.

This is why tables matter.

This is why spiritual friendships matter.

Unwavering churches don't just gather crowds.

They build communities.

THE WEIGHT OF PAUL'S WORDS

After describing his ministry, Paul turns to theirs.

Verse 28:

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock...”

Leadership always begins with your own heart.
You cannot shepherd others if you neglect yourself.

Verses 29–31 warn them of wolves—false teachers, distortions of truth, pressures from outside and temptations from within.

Paul says:

“Stay alert.”

“Watch your life.”

“Guard the flock.”

“Do not drift.”

“Do not shrink.”

“Do not lose your way.”

And then—this is so powerful—
they kneel, and he prays over them.
They hug him and weep on him.

They know what he has handed them:
a blueprint of faithfulness.

And church—we must receive the same blueprint.

APPLICATION: WHAT UNWAVERING LOOKS LIKE TODAY

1. Courage in truth

We will be a church that does not shrink back from the Word or from the mission Jesus has given us.

2. Commitment to what is helpful

We will teach, lead, and disciple in ways that actually build people up in Christ.

3. Community in both spaces

We will show up:

- in worship,

- in homes,
- in groups,
- in relationships,
- in one another's lives.

This is the blueprint Paul left Ephesus.
This is the blueprint Christ gives us.

GOSPEL INVITATION

Before Paul ends, he makes sure they know what all of this is built on. Verse 24:

“...that I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus: to testify to the gospel of God's grace.”

At the heart of an unwavering church is an unwavering gospel.

A Savior who did not shrink back.

A Savior who spoke what was truly helpful.

A Savior who ministered publicly on the cross and personally in our hearts.

If you don't know Christ today:

- He is the One Paul preached.
- He is the grace Paul died for.
- He is the Shepherd who guards His flock.
- He is the Savior who welcomes you today.

Turn to Him.

Come to Him.

Believe in Him.

Going up here to verses 20 and 21 ... By the way, verse 20 (just that one verse) has often been turned into an entire sermon. Let me read verses 20 and 21. "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

Now notice there are three pairs. "I preached and taught, both publicly and from house to house, unhesitatingly and helpfully." Those are great three little pairs. You see why it could be a whole sermon in itself. Let's look at it. First of all, he says, "I preached and taught." This is sort of the essence of what the church is here to do, and that is to convey a body of content, to convey truth.

Do you see down here in verse 30 he is concerned about that? "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth ..." So Paul's job is to guard and protect and to propagate and to preach and to teach the truth, and that's what the church is here to do. Why is that so important? If you want to know who I am, you can't just believe anything you want about me. For example, what if somebody comes up to me and says, "Tim, I like to think of you as a Greek auto mechanic who lives in Queens"?

I have three things to say. First, there's nothing wrong with being a Greek auto mechanic who lives in Queens. My family and I have known some over the years, and we like them. Okay, that's first. Second, this is a free country ... freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and all that. If that's what you want to believe about me, nobody is going to arrest you. Nobody is going to fine you. Third, it's not the truth. If you want to get to know somebody, you have to know what the truth about them is.

Do you want to know God? You can't just believe anything you want about him. If you even want to know yourselves ... Do you want to know yourself? The modern world says you are only a body. There's nothing about you ... There's no soul. There's nothing but the physical. That's all you are. The Bible says, no, you're more complex. You're soul and body. The modern world says you are only the product of both your evolutionary biology and your genes, as well as your culture and your environment.

The Bible says, no, it's more complex. You're also in the image of God. In other words, they can't both be right. They can't both be right! One of those accounts of you is the truth. Unless you know the truth about who you are, you're never going to know who you are. Unless you know the truth about God, you're never going to know who God is. Therefore, the truth is extraordinarily important. The first thing is the Christian church believes the Bible's account of who you are, the Bible's account of God, is true.

Remember those little pairs? Preaching and teaching. It means the church is here to convey truth. Secondly, it says unhesitatingly and helpfully. That is a wonderful polarity there. First of all, Paul says, "I preached and taught unhesitatingly. I didn't hesitate." That's a word that means, "I didn't shrink back. I wasn't afraid." That's a word that means biblical truth will always offend everybody somewhere.

There's no culture, there's no city, there's no town, there's no person who you can bring biblical truth to that it won't offend them or upset them somewhere. That only makes sense! You know, in New York, I'm constantly being told, "Oh, I can't believe the Bible because I find parts of it offensive." I usually say (and you should say), "That is one mark of it being really true." How so?

Well, if the Bible has come from God, it's not the product of this culture over here. It's not the product of that culture, or it's not the produce of that culture.

See, if it was a product of a particular culture, then everybody in that culture would like what the Bible says, and over here, people wouldn't. If it comes from God, then it makes sense that it would offend every culture someplace. Someplace it wouldn't quite fit in. Therefore, the Bible will be offensive to every person, every culture, someplace, but in different places.

The illustration I use often (and I'm going to use it again because it's so important) is when I talk to people from the Middle East and I talk to them about what the Bible says about forgiveness, they find it outrageous because the Bible says you have to forgive people who wrong you, even if they don't repent.

You have to turn the other cheek. You must not pay back. In a shame and honor culture, that is nuts. That makes no sense. So you tell Middle Eastern people, "Here's what the Bible says about forgiveness." They think it's nuts. When you tell them what the Bible says about sex and family, they say, "That makes sense."

Now you come to Manhattan. It's the other way around. You tell people what the Bible says about forgiveness in Manhattan, and they consider it. "Wow, that's a pretty high standard," but they like it. You tell people what the Bible says in Manhattan about sex and family, and they say, "Regressive! Terrible! It's awful!"

Ah, don't you realize if you say, "I can't believe the Bible. I'm not going to listen to the Bible because it offends me at this place," do you realize how culturally narrow you're being? Do you realize how ethnocentric you're being? Do you realize you're trying to say, "My culture's problems with the Bible are more important than their culture's problems with the Bible"?

Therefore, come on. If it's from God (and it is), it's going to offend you somewhere. It just makes sense to you rather than to say, "Oh, it couldn't be." Think about it.

So he is unhesitating, which means the church's job is to lift up the Bible, even when we know it's going to offend our culture somewhere. We can't shrink back. We can't hesitate. But we also have to convey truth, not just unhesitatingly but helpfully. Boy, this is important. Boy, this is important! I know a lot of people (maybe churches) who are good on the hesitating. In other words, they don't hesitate. They're very happy to say it and take the flack, but they're not very helpful.

See, this word helpful means more than you might think. Over in verse 32, Paul actually says, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace ..." which is, by the way, an interesting way to talk about the Bible. "... which can build you up ..." In 1 Timothy, Paul says to Timothy, "Make sure you teach sound doctrine." The word sound means healthy. Our understanding of truth is the truth is never something we just believe for its own sake.

We don't just say, "We have the truth, and now we're better than other people, or we're more right than other people. I know the truth, and isn't it wonderful? Now I know this stuff." No, no. Truth is a means to an end. Truth is food for your heart and your soul and your character. All disease (that is, all lack of health in your heart and your soul) is because the truth is not dwelling in you richly.

Colossians 3:16. Paul doesn't just say, "Know the truth." You know, "Memorize the truth. Regurgitate the truth." He says, "Let the word ... dwell in you richly ..." If you lack courage right now, if you lack love, if you lack joy, it would be psychologically very, very unhealthy for you to say, "I'm just going to make myself happy." Oh no.

But if you're a Christian and you lack joy, it's because you're not thinking about the truth. Or you know the truth, but you're forgetting it. Or you think of the truth, but you haven't figured out how to screw it down deep to where it's creating the health truth is designed to give you.

I remember some years ago, our little church in Hopewell, Virginia ... I was in my twenties, and I preached a sermon on the sovereignty of God. Like most sermons preached by 20-year-olds, it wasn't very practical. It was right out of the Systematic Theology textbook. It was all about how God knows all things. He is omniscient. He is omnipotent. He is omnipresent. I was looking for more "omnis" because I love those words. You feel so smart saying them.

I was throwing all these "omni-" words at my people and all that. It was, you know, up there. Sometime later, I talked to a woman (and her husband) who said she had really, really turned a corner, and she stopped worrying so much. She had been an anxious person. She struggled a great deal with anxiety and worry. She said, "I certainly still worry, but I'm so much better. It's much better." Her husband said, "It's really true. She has turned a corner."

She said, "It had to do with one of your sermons." I was pretty excited. I said, "Which one?" She told me it was that one. It was that sovereignty of God. I said, "That sermon wasn't about worry at all. It had nothing to do with worry!" She said, "Oh!" Here's what she learned. By the way, some of you are going to say, "So that's where he got it."

She said, "I realized that when I worry, it's like me saying to God, 'I know how history has to go. I know how my life has to go, and I'm afraid you don't, and you're not going to get it right. I'm afraid I'm smarter than you, God. That's why I'm worried. I mean, I think there's a real chance I'm smarter than you.' As you were preaching on this, I began to realize I'm forgetting who God is. That's why I worry."

What happened? The Word dwelled in her richly. She made a few connections I didn't have the wisdom or the ability as a preacher at that time to make. She did it herself. What happened there? It was helpful. It wasn't just doctrine. It wasn't just truth. It was truth that came in, and it created health in her. That's the only way we should be using truth.

Deuteronomy 29:29, which is, "The secret things ..." God knows a lot of things he has never told us. The secret things belong to God, but the things he has revealed, he reveals so we might do them. God doesn't tell you anything in the Bible just to know. Everything in the Bible is there for you to digest and to bring in.

How does that happen? Part three of this little mini-sermon on verse 20. He preaches and teaches unhesitatingly and helpfully both publicly and from house to house. Now this is very important, and it's easy to miss. Paul not only brought the truth to bear in public speaking like this but in homes, in groups, in personal relationships.

What this means is if you want the kind of truth that creates health in you, it's not enough to come here. I mean, sometimes the sermons are better. Sometimes they're not as good. But even if they're great all the time, tremendous every time and you walk away with tears, that's not enough. That's just publicly. Where the truth really gets applied, really gets into your life and your heart ...

I mean, even talking with that woman helped me understand something I didn't understand from my textbook. The truth gets in through conversations. It gets in through groups. It gets in through study. It gets in through talking and weeping together and being together. That's how it gets into you. Therefore, it is not enough just simply to come to a big meeting. It's not enough

just to come and hear the music and sing and listen and take notes. You have to be deeply involved in a community.

This also has to be a community, by the way, in which ... Verse 28. Just to say one more thing under truth, here's where Paul says to the elders now, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

What he is saying there is, "How are you, folks, going to know what the truth is? I mean, up to now, I've made it very clear. You have to have right beliefs about God if you're going to know God. You have to have the truth if it's going to come in and really change your life. But how do you know?" This is a world of cacophony. This is a world in which there are so many claims. How are you going to know that in your church community you're really digesting the truth? The answer is, according to the Bible, some people are appointed as shepherds. Now this is the only thing I'm going to say in this sermon on this idea, but it's there. Do you know what a shepherd is? It's interesting the leaders of a church are not called generals or ranchers. They're called shepherds. Why? Because on the one hand, shepherds have authority. I mean, honestly, they do.

I mean, shepherds do not turn to the flock and say, "What do you all want to do today?" There's authority. You don't ask; you direct. There's a real authority. You're overseers, he says. God has made you overseers over the flock, and you have to be careful they don't distort the truth, which means, on the one hand, your leaders are here to say, "It's our understanding on the basis of our study, on the basis of everything we know, on the basis of our own experience, this is the truth. This is what we think the Bible teaches."

On the other hand, shepherds are supposed to be tender. Shepherds are not ranchers. Shepherds are not generals. They're tender. There's a balance in the Bible about this attitude toward authority because, on the one hand, we live in the most individualistic society in the history of the world. Nobody wants anyone to tell them how to live, and yet the Bible says you need to find somebody who is your shepherd. You should not be self-accredited.

Remember Ulysses? He ties himself to the mast when he knows he is going to kind of go out of his mind when he hears the Sirens. He tells all of his sailors, "Just keep rowing until I come to my senses." If you know your own heart, you're going to know there are some times in which you need people to hold you accountable. There are going to be some times in which you're not thinking straight. You need authority in your life.

On the other hand, it has to be tender. Hebrews 13:17, a lovely verse, shows you this balance. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls ..." There's the authority part, but then it says, "Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you." In other words, you are supposed to be in a relationship with your shepherd in which both of you are having joy.

What this means is you can't just come and listen to a great talk. You have to belong to a community. You're not required to belong to a church. You have to find some shepherds who you trust. Then you need to take membership vows so you really can be under their direction. Then you get the truth, and it changes your life, not simply by coming and taking notes and listening to the great message but house to house, life to life, in conversations.

You have to be deeply involved in a community if the truth is going to be there, which means the church is supposed to be a place of the digestion of the truth.

