

WOLF PROTECTION



Whenever the Holy Spirit speaks specifically concerning the leadership of the church, it is time to “listen up.” This was true in the first century because of the twisted leadership that prevailed among Jewish leaders in the promotion of their religion (See Gl 1:13,14). Because the leadership of the Jews during the ministry of Jesus held the people captive by their misguided religious ceremonialism and traditions (See Mk 7:1-9), as well as their lust for power over the people, their self-righteous thinking and behavior eventually led to the crucifixion of the Son of God.

We are not over-reactive, therefore, when we are cautious concerning those who would step forward and seek to lead the flock of God. In fact, the Holy Spirit even had Scripture written to alert us to the seriousness by which we should consider this subject: *“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers [leaders], knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment”* (Js 3:1).

It was for this reason that Paul issued a stern warning to the Ephesian elders upon his departure from Mellitus. He warned these leaders that wolves would eventually enter in

among the flock in order to draw away the disciples after themselves. The reason why such wolves would come in among the sheep is quite disturbing in view of the mind of Christ that should be characteristic of every member of the body, especially our leaders (See Ph 2:5-8).

Nevertheless, if there arises among us, or one comes in among us, who is unchecked by the gospel of the incarnate Son of God, then the humble behavior of a gospel-responsive body can become the opportunity for lords to arise and dominate. The body, therefore, must always be on guard in these matters.

If the truth that is revealed through the Bible is worth believing, then it is also worth defending.

A. Living among wolves:

In the religious world in which we live today, lordship leadership plays itself out as some leaders (wolves) seek to take advantage of humble faith-driven people. Self-promoting, political-minded wolves, therefore, become opportunists who seek to lord over a flock of innocent sheep. Peter mentioned this very behavior when he addressed some who were elders (See 1 Pt 5:1-3). Therefore, if such behavior existed among some elders of the church in the first century when Peter wrote, then certainly we are not over cautious to assume that such behavior in leadership can also exist among us today.

In the Mellitus meeting, Paul warned elders about the coming wolves (At 20:29-30). And sure enough, only a few years after his warning, Peter wrote that the lords (wolves) had already showed up among the sheep in the behavior of some elders. Diotrephes was around when the apostle John wrote concerning these matters. Diotrephes was a wolf who had already taken captive some sheep (See 3 Jn 9,10).

There are always a few who behave as Diotrephes who love to be first among the body of members (3 Jn 9,10). One may be this way as a young disciple, but he must spiritually grow up in Christ in order to reflect the aroma of the incarnate Son of God (See 2 Co 2:14-16). And the **only** way one can grow out of the worldly desire for lordship is to understand and follow the Son of God on His incarnational journey into this world, and eventually to the humiliation of the cross. The Son of God lowered Himself for us. If we would follow His example—having the mind of Christ—then we must lower ourselves for others. If we reverse this order by exalting ourselves, then we have become a wolf.

The church of those who follow Jesus must never be used as an opportunity for self-promotion or to fulfill our personal desires to rule over other people.

B. In the presence of opportunists:

In the first century, Diotrephes took advantage of some gospel-responsive disciples to whom John wrote in his latter years. Just as then, there are Diotrephes-minded people today who are out there looking around for a body of humble gospel-driven disciples that they can likewise invade and dominate. For this reason, Paul prepared the leaders of the church in Ephesus, as well as ourselves, with the following warning:

*I know this, that after my departure grievous **wolves will enter in among you**, not sparing the flock. Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, **to draw away the disciples after themselves**. Therefore, watch ... (At 20:29-31).*

Unfortunately, we have often misunderstood what Paul meant in this warning. We have commonly taught that he was discussing false teachers; those who would teach some-

thing contrary to the truth. Indeed, the belief and behavior of wolves is contrary to gospel behavior. This thought is indeed inherent in the warning, but such an exclusive interpretation misses the main point of why Paul gave the warning. The key to understanding that to which Paul was specifically referring is in the phrase, “to draw away the disciples after themselves.”

Wolves can teach the truth of the gospel. But they **are not living the gospel by the very fact that they are wolves**. This is the thrust of what Paul warned the elders of Ephesus. From among themselves lords (wolves) would arise in order to lead the sheep away after **themselves**. This is what lords do. Paul’s focus, therefore, was on those who had no idea of how to allow the mind of the Son of God to be in them, and thus behave accordingly. They are wolves, therefore, and thus lords who would arise to produce a following; they would steal the sheep of Jesus through their desire to rule and dominate. This is why Paul labeled these wolves as “grievous.”

Since the church is a fellowship of innocent sheep, then it is certain that God intended that those who shepherd the sheep should be on guard for those who would take advantage of the sheep.

C. Gospel-based protection:

We must also consider another understanding of Paul’s preceding warning in reference to the truth of the gospel. If a gospel preacher comes into a religious group that has long forgotten the truth of the gospel, or even been ignorant of the gospel, **then he is not drawing away disciples after himself by preaching the gospel**. On the contrary, when Paul went from synagogue to synagogue, he preached the gospel (At 17:1,2). People responded to the gospel that Paul preached, not to the person of Paul. He did not, therefore, draw away the people after himself. The people were drawn away to

Jesus. But in reference to wolves, they draw away disciples to themselves. A wolf is always made known by that, or to whom, he seeks to draw the sheep.

We must not misunderstand this very important point. We must know that lords draw away people of faith by dominating their consciences with the bondage of religious traditions and ceremonies, just as the scribes and Pharisees did during the ministry of Jesus. In contrast to this, those who are preaching the gospel are drawing people away from such religiosity in order that the people obey and follow the Son of God. Jesus said something about this during His earthly ministry: “*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, **will draw all men to Me***” (Jn 12:32). The drawing power of the “lifted up” Son of God is that He brings freedom from the bondage of sin and religion (See Gl 5:1).

In view of the fact that there are wolves out there in the religious world drawing away sincere disciples after themselves is enough for us to take seriously the incarnational discipleship that Jesus lived and left with us in order that we be drawn to Him. Therefore, we must not be unaware of the fact that there are wolves standing at church house doors, seeking to draw people away after themselves. But these lords must never forget that when they draw people away after themselves, they are drawing people of faith away from the one Lord to whom we must give our total allegiance. Wolves always stand in competition with King Jesus.

Contrary to the desires of those who seek to draw away the sheep after themselves, those who preach the gospel seek to draw away people out of the world in order to direct them to the Chief Shepherd.

D. Wolves fighting among themselves:

Since the time Paul warned the Ephesian elders, there have always been wolves roaming around seeking an opportunity

to capture innocent sheep. But according to Peter, we must not become a wolf in order to keep the wolves (lords) out of the flock of God (1 Pt 5:2,3). On the contrary, we must live after the mind of Christ. The power to keep the lords out is to fully understand the nature of the servanthood that was taught and lived by Jesus, and refined by the instruction letters that were written by the Holy Spirit.

In the ominous presence of wolves (lords), we must caution ourselves, as well as those we would seek to lead. It is certainly easy to keep the wolves out by becoming lords ourselves over the flock. But this is not a gospel response to the presence of wolves, nor is such behavior living the mind of Christ. Before even considering oneself as a spiritual leader of the flock, he must first make his way to the foot of the cross. It is there that one discovers the significance of the power of leading with the mind of Christ who submitted to the needs of the people. It is in this manner that leaders lead in order to protect the sheep. If we become a wolf in order to keep other wolves away from the flock, then chaotic debate rages. Each seemingly autonomous pack of wolves thinks they are the “saviors” of the church, when in reality it is always the innocent sheep who suffer when two wolf packs engage.

If we are incarnational in our own behavior, then it will be easy to find and identify others who are also at the foot of the cross. Incarnational leaders live with the blessing of the continual flow of blood from the cross of Jesus. Therefore, those who would be pompous wolves among us should be careful about finding some robe to dress themselves before an audience, and thus set themselves apart from or exalt, therefore, over the sheep. In contrast to such behavior, incarnational leaders lead with the burden of the needs of the people on their backs. It is this example that the sheep crave to follow.

If one becomes a lord in order to keep lords out of the flock, then he will inevitably be in constant struggles against other supposed lords who likewise seek to be lords of the flock.

E. An incarnational leader:

The flock must be led by the example of incarnational behavior (See 1 Pt 5:3). This all involves an incarnational repentance before we come forth from the waters of baptism. It took Saul (Paul) **three days** to go through the process of incarnational repentance before he responded to the mandate to be baptized for remission of his sins (At 9:1-19; 22:16). And after his baptism, it took him at least **five years** before he was ready to lead new disciples in wolf protection. It is for this reason that when the church designates leaders, they must follow the mandate of the Holy Spirit: “Lay hands hastily on no man” (1 Tm 5:22).

Unfortunately, lordship leaders are so common among many religious groups today that these leaders find it quite difficult to think and behave outside the paradigm of lording over a particular church or religious organization. However, in such a religious environment today, we do not blame entirely the leaders themselves. The religious groups among which some labor as leaders often pressure the leaders into being the center of reference for all work and decisions. This is especially a problem in smaller churches. Since leaders are often very energetic people who seek to serve the Lord with all their hearts, the local members sometimes become somewhat indifferent, if not lazy. As a result, the members lay back and urge the preacher on to do everything, and thus, make decisions about everything. In this way, unfortunately, local churches often push their preachers into being lords over the flock.

Nevertheless, taking advantage of such situations as leaders is often based squarely on our lack of understanding of

the incarnate Son of God. Those who understand the gospel journey of the Son of God are cautious about becoming lords over the flock, even though the members do little to take ownership of their responsibility to work together as an organic body under the lordship of Jesus.

Add to the preceding scenario the fact that we now live in a religious world of corporate nonprofit religious organizations, with controlling presidents, chairmen, and governing bodies of board members. This system of religious function seems to be the norm of the day in many places of the world in order to carry out the mission that should be the business of the church. Since there is rank and file organization within these religious corporate nonprofit bodies that are controlled by government laws, then we can assume that the same organizational thinking can sometimes find its way into the organic function of the body of Christ.

But in reference to leadership in the church, we would conclude that corporate organizationalism is foreign to the very definition of the incarnational leadership by which the church is to be led. The church is not a government legal organization that is controlled by presidents, chairmen and government laws. It is an organic body that functions directly under the authority of King Jesus (Mt 28:18). On earth, the members follow those who have given themselves as examples of humble service just as the Son of God gave Himself in service to us in reference to our sin problem. Leadership among the disciples, therefore, is by the example of sacrificial servanthood, just as Jesus left us an example of leaving ourselves in order to serve others (See 1 Pt 5:3).

It is a contradiction in thinking to believe that one can become a lord of the flock of those who have responded to the incarnate Son of God.

F. The “hidden Pharisee”:

A lordship leader often seeks to be somebody in his religious behavior in reference to others. Because we all have a desire to be recognized, maybe there is a little Pharisee hidden within each of us that we fail to recognize, and subsequently, we fail to bury in the tomb of water from which we came in baptism. Regardless, if we finally discover this hidden Pharisee in our spiritual character after the water, then it is time to crucify him (Gl 2:20).

And then, the case may be that in our obedience to the gospel, we simply succumbed to a legal obedience of law without experiencing a truly repentant response to the incarnate Son of God with whom we assigned our allegiance. **The curse of legalism is that we outwardly obey law, while at the same time we leave our hearts unchanged, that is, unchecked by the gospel.**

When it comes to incarnational living, we must certainly obey the commandments. But just as important is our response to the heart of God that was revealed through the incarnate Son of God. Obedience to law with an unrepentant heart is the definition of hypocrisy. Therefore, we must dig out of our souls the “little Pharisee” who is in us, and crucify him on a cross.

It is in response to the heart of God that was revealed through His Son that our hearts and behavior are transformed. Obedience to law, “getting baptized,” may bring a sense of accomplishment, but baptism must be more than obedience to legal commands. Baptism is an outward immersion to reveal an inward cleansing of our souls by the incarnate blood of Jesus.

Unfortunately, we do not hear enough lessons preached or

taught today on the subject of the gospel of the incarnation. If the subject were preached and taught regularly, the people would be better prepared to be sacrificial slaves of Jesus who live with characters that are continuously checked by the gospel. Not only would they prevent themselves from becoming a wolf, they would also be better prepared to check for possible wolves in our midst. We must never forget that wolves flee from crosses.

The closer one draws to the heart of God, the less likely he will have any desires to lord over those to whom He poured out His heart through His Son.

Group Review Discussion Questions

[After reading the text of this bookito, answer the following questions in a discussion group with others.]

1. Why does the rise wolves among the sheep of God indicate that the sheep themselves are falling away to religion?
2. If the flock of God is giving way to the rise of wolves, then what is the danger that is arising among the sheep?
3. How did Diotrephes behave as a wolf among the sheep?
4. What is the nature of the sheep of God that allows them to become the opportunity for wolves to arise in their leadership?
5. Why is the warning against wolves not focused primarily on what they teach, but on how they behave?
6. In their teaching, what do sincere leaders teach in order to protect the flock against wolves?
7. What is it about the nature of the sheep that allows wolves to have the opportunity to lord over the sheep?
8. What is inherent in the character of wolves to always fight among themselves?
9. Why is it that only those who are seeking to live incarnationally can identify wolves?
10. Why does it take time or learn how to behave incarnationally?
11. What was it about the nature of the Pharisees that led them to have Jesus crucified?
12. What is the curse of legalistic religion in reference to the transformation of our spirit?
13. Why is it difficult for slaves to become wolves?

ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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