

Text: Acts 20.29-30

Proposition: The apostle Paul called church leaders to be on guard against particular threats to the life of the church. The Bible guides us on how to address them.

Two weeks ago, the theme was church polity: what kind of leadership does God give to the church? In a word, pastoral leadership, called “elder” or “bishop/overseer” or “shepherd/pastor.”

Each term describes an aspect of pastoral leadership.

Last week, we talked about the pastor’s job description: be on guard and be alert for threats to the flock in his charge.

This week, we are going to take time to talk about the nature of the threats. (But this is the end of the introduction, because much to say.)

Enemies Without and Within

Read Acts 20.28-31, text 29-30

Proposition: The apostle Paul called church leaders to be on guard against particular threats to the life of the church. The Bible guides us on how to address them.

I. Identifying the threats to the flock

A. Reviewing our understanding of the text

1. The threats are a fact of church life
 - a. Stated very emphatically (“I know”)
 - b. Observed through history
2. The threats are from two sources
 - a. Savage wolves who come in (29)
 - 1) They represent fearsome challenges
 - a) “savage” = “*violent, cruel, unsparing*”¹
 - b) “not sparing” = rapacious, unconscionable, without compassion or shame

¹ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc., 1889), BibleWorks, v.8.

2) Their character is to attack, to destroy: they come from without

b. Perverse speaking men from within (30)

1) They represent subtle challenges

a) They speak perversely: they deform, twist, make crooked, pervert²

b) The emphasis here seems to be on twisted teaching

c) Yet through their teaching, their intent is “to draw away the disciples” — that is, their speech is *attractive*

2) The attempt to draw away

a) It isn't just an attempt to gather disciples to themselves

(peel off a subset, cause a church split → but could be the result)

b) Rather, it is an attempt to coopt the whole congregation, “to draw away the disciples after them”

3) Their subtlety seen in the source, “from among your own selves”

a) I don't think Paul thinks one of these elders will be a Judas

Jn 6.70 Jesus answered them, “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?”

b) Rather, in the future, men will rise among the churches, twisting the teaching to gain whole followings after them

When Arias came into the church, most of the bishops and churches embraced him. Victory over Arianism came with the determined effort of the minority, especially Athanasius.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

3. To sum up

- a. External threats, determined to destroy
- b. Internal threats, determined to twist and coopt the flock for themselves

B. The comprehensive understanding of the dangers

1. The danger of false teachers

- a. We see this one readily enough
- b. The language concerning the “threats from within” especially focus on “speaking” — these truly are false teachers
- c. False teachers affect the flock in perverse ways
 - 1) They may give the flock enough good grass to allay suspicions
 - 2) Yet they take them off to certain fields, where certain weeds grow, or to certain streams, where some contamination pollutes the water

The Mormons blatantly teach false doctrine (a fairly extreme example) but one of their deceptions is the public face of morality, wholesome family life, etc., that they present.

Joel Osteen, another false teacher, but not as blatantly false as the Mormons — presents a Christianized positivism appealing to the desire for the good life.

But even more subtly, men will arrive within a church, seem to identify with it, yet begin to take subtle side positions and convince people in the congregation about it.

- Subtly contradict a doctrinal statement at some point
- Subtly criticize the pastor’s “narrowness” or personality or lack of growth or lack of love or ... the list goes on and on

These men could be laymen or an associate pastor, or even a new pastor called to take on the ministry.

d. I said, “we see this readily enough,” but I mean, readily enough to understand the concept

- 1) When these men come, even thoughtful Christians can fall for their subtlety
- 2) When these men come, Christians who sound the alarm are seen as “unloving” and “narrow”

It is possible to be too narrow, so...

Be on guard for yourselves, and the flock

Be on the alert

2. So much for false teachers: should we see wolves as false teachers?

- a. In my studies, I am reading nine commentaries (plus additional writings) to prepare
- b. On this point, I copied quotes from six of the nine naming the wolves as “false teachers” or “false prophets”
- c. However: remember their character

Their character is to attack, to destroy: they come from without

- 1) Note: they are not trying to get the flock to follow them
- 2) They are trying attack, rip, destroy, and ravage the flock

Consider some historical situations

NERO was the emperor when Paul made this speech

- The first five years were his “good years” (AD 54-59, our date is about 56, 57)
- In AD 64, Rome burned, Nero blamed the Christians, who were a recognizable and despised minority

“Vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: They were covered with

wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night."³

ELIZABETH I and **JAMES I**

- Monarchs more powerful in those days, and suspicious of dissent — could be the seedbed of insurrection and sedition
- Baptists trace their roots to Separatist churches which met outside the church of England in those days
- In 1587 authorities arrested John Greenwood (pastor of the Ancient Church) and others, later arrested another leader, Henry Barrow: these imprisoned in the Clink prison
- In 1593, authorities hanged Greenwood and Barrow
- In 1607, other Separatists meeting in the Scrooby district decided to flee to Holland, but betrayed by a sea captain, suffered arrest and imprisonment
- With leaders imprisoned, some of them escaped to Holland in 1608, including the “first Baptist,” John Smith

Note: this is just a summary, many imprisonments, beatings, goods confiscated, some executions

d. Here is the question: would these enemies represent wolves or “those arising among you uttering perverse things”?

II. Acting to protect the flock from threats

A. The question of the sword

1. You might recall Jesus giving instructions about swords

³ Tacitus, Annals 15.44, quoted by William Simmons, “Nero, Emperor, History of in the Primary Sources,” John D. Barry et al., eds., *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

- a. First, he told the disciples not to carry a sword when he sent them out two by two (implied by the texts)

Mt 10.9-10 “Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts,¹⁰ or a bag for *your* journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support.

- b. Later, he told them to carry a sword

Lk 22.35-36 ¶ And He said to them, “When I sent you out without money belt and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything, did you?” They said, “No, nothing.”³⁶ And He said to them, “But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one.

- 1) The implication of the second text is that they took no swords on their training excursion
- 2) Now, however, he said they should take a sword

2. Why?

- a. This is just before the arrest and crucifixion
- b. Did Jesus mean for them to defend him?
- c. No, Jesus told Peter to put up his sword

Jn 18.11 So Jesus said to Peter, “Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?”

- d. He also told Pilate that his servants would not fight

Jn 18.36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”

It seems that personal self-defense against brigands and robbers is one thing, insurrection against the state quite another, even a state behaving like wolves.

How do we know?

- Jesus drank the cup the Lord gave him

B. What kind of action should Christians take against these enemies?

1. Be on guard, be alert

- a. At a minimum, they should identify the enemies
- b. They should also warn the flock
- c. In the case of perverse teachers, they should arm the flock with sound doctrine and faithful teaching
- d. The Lord also instituted means to purge the flock of false teachers
 - 1) The pattern of church discipline described in Mt 18
 - 2) The doctrine of separation: Mark them, avoid them, put them out from among you

Don't have time to develop this

2. Be ready to take various evasive measures

Mt 10.23 "But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish *going through* the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.

- a. The precedent of the Separatists who fled to Holland and became Baptists
- b. The precedent of the Mayflower Pilgrims who were among those Separatists and sailed to Massachusetts and became Americans (note – they had religious freedom in Holland)
- c. The precedent of those Baptists who left Holland and went back to England, meeting stealthily, carefully, and persistently until the governments granted more freedoms

Conclusion:

Proposition: The apostle Paul called church leaders to be on guard against particular threats to the life of the church. The Bible guides us on how to address them.

2 Cor 10.3-4 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

2 Tim 2.24-26 The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, ²⁵ with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.