



Savage wolves, dumb (mute) dogs and the Lord's sheep

So, you are *an elder* now.

Congratulations to you on this truly high honor and the sacred trust to which our Lord has called you!

But sympathy to you also in this difficult assignment. If faithful, you will find it exhilarating but also traumatic. Like the minister's task, there is no work that affords greater joys but also brings greater disappointments. Our prayers are with you.

Allow me to pass on to you the wish of a wise and experienced elder for me when, almost a half century ago now, I entered the ministry. His wish for this brand-new minister was that I would be given the meekness of Moses, the patience of Job, the courage of David, the wisdom of Solomon, and the zeal of the Apostle Paul. What a mouthful! He thought I would need it all. And, as an *elder*, so will you.

And now, for you as a brand-new elder, a few thoughts about *savage wolves, dumb (mute) dogs, and the Lord's sheep*. A far cry from the office of the elder? Not at all. This is Scripture and also highly apropos for just such a time as this.

Savage wolves

As an *elder* you will be attending elders' meetings to consider important matters, for which there is a good precedent in the meeting at Miletus to which Paul called the elders of the church of Ephesus. It was at this meeting that Paul spoke about *savage wolves*.

*"Guard yourselves," the apostle told them, "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. I know that after I leave, **savage wolves** will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you by night and day with tears."*

(Acts 20:28-30, NIV)

Now, that is pretty strong language as a reaction to anyone distorting the truth; language that is quite passé today for our sophisticated generation. "*Savage wolves*," said Paul, "*that's what they are*." The great apostle became so agitated about the false doctrine he foresaw that he shed tears as he warned against it by day or night.

To Paul it was that serious. To many in our day of tolerance, the apostle would be dubbed a reactionary, an obnoxious heresy-hunter. "Doctrine divides," we are being told, and "service unites." So, don't take doctrine too seriously. No matter what happens, never be shocked, keep a poker face, shun controversy at all costs, and don't ever make an issue of anything. And for good measure, just resort to that badly abused and overworked Scripture passage, 1 Corinthians 13, once again, and let any and every distortion of the truth be condoned in love, love, love — and still more love.

Faulted though they were for having forsaken their first love, this church in Ephesus nevertheless received our Lord's commendation for still being on guard when the "savage wolves" came as Paul

had predicted they would come. Note what the exalted Christ had to say in favor of Ephesus as a church that was intolerant of false teaching:

"I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary ... But you have this in your favor. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

(Revelation 2:2, 6)

The late Halford Luccock, more widely known in his day by his penname in *The Christian Century*, Simeon Stylites, wrote, possibly with greater significance for the matter here in hand than he himself realized: *"One critic of the church, an Englishman, described the average congregation as 'the uninspiring spectacle of a docile and mild-mannered gentleman trying to persuade a docile company of people to be still more docile.'"*

To be sure, it is a mistake to cry "Wolf! Wolf!" when there are no wolves in sight. But it is a greater mistake to fail to recognize the wolves when they do enter the sheepfold, or to pretend that they are not there. Paul was not the only one who warned against savage wolves. Our Lord did likewise when He said: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are **ravening wolves**. By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?"* (Matthew 7:15, 16).

Again, Jesus warned the disciples: *"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; **be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves**"* (Matthew 10: 16).

In keeping with these warnings of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and of Paul as His apostle, our present form for the ordination of elders and deacons includes in the prayer that the elders may take *"diligent heed unto doctrine and life, **in keeping out the wolves from the sheepfold of Thy beloved Son...**"* It cannot be denied that this is thoroughly Scriptural.

But now we have a new form that was approved at the 1979 CRC Synod *"for use in our churches for a trial period of three years"* — a form with no more mention of *wolves*. Is this warning about *wolves* and the exhortation to guard against them no longer needed in our day? Or was also this something "time-conditioned" and not applicable for our time? If we too have become so broadminded, tolerant, and refined that we are no longer willing to call false teachers what they really are, then we are no longer willing to use the inspired language of Paul and of our Lord Himself. The English poet and critic Swinburne once said of a certain minister and his congregation that *"for their tender minds he served up only half a Christ."* The CRC can ill afford, at such a time as this, to no longer call those who bring in heresy what the Bible says they really are.

Dumb (mute) dogs

To occupy the office of elder is a high honor. However, hand in hand with this high honor goes a grave responsibility. The elder is charged with the several duties that promote the spiritual welfare of the Lord's flock or church. And by no means the least of these duties is the charge to be watchmen on the walls of Zion, to guard against enemies that would attack the sheep both from within and from without.

The leaders among the Lord's people of Israel had the same charge. The prophet Isaiah, as the Lord's spokesman, compares those responsible for the spiritual well-being of Israel to watchdogs. If watchdogs do not bark and set up a commotion when the thief or a wolf approaches, they are useless. And the Lord says of the leaders of Israel who do not sound the warning that they are *"dumb (mute) dogs."*

This stinging accusation should be carefully considered by every elder, and especially by any elder who may suppose he can serve his term and be like the three proverbial monkeys determined to see no evil, to hear no evil, and to speak no evil. Such elders may be well-liked and popular, but they will receive no commendation from the Lord. He calls such "dumb dogs" rather than faithful servants.

The elders and ministers will do well to read and reread what Isaiah writes about this: *"All ye beasts of the field, come to devour, yea, all ye beasts in the forest. His watchmen are blind, they are all without knowledge; **they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark**; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber"* (Isaiah 56:9, 10).

We would like to believe that the too-often silent majority in the CRC is basically conservative. Always bear in mind that the true conservative is the person who is determined to safeguard that which he knows to be precious. Our Lord Jesus taught us to be conservatives when He said: *"I come quickly; hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown"* (Revelation 3:11).

New elders in the CRC, we expect to hear also from you as those who *"contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints"* (Jude 3). More important, the Lord expects this of you. It is to this that you have committed yourselves at your ordinations as elders. May our gracious God forbid that of even one among you His verdict will be, *"Another dumb dog, a dog that cannot bark."* For such there is no promise of a crown.

The Lord's sheep

The importance of the elder's task as a guardian is in direct proportion to the value of that which he is to guard. As an elder, overseer, or bishop he is entrusted with the care of the Lord's sheep. These are so precious to Christ because He purchased them not with silver or gold but with His own blood shed at Calvary.

Speaking for his Lord, Peter reminds his readers of this in this admonition: *"...pass the time of your sojourning in fear; knowing that ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, from your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers; but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ"* (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

A shepherd was once asked whether the sheep will ever follow a stranger. He replied, *"Only when they are sick. Otherwise not."* This is true of the Lord's sheep also. And the Lord's sheep often do get sick. When pulpits serve fast-food and junk-food instead of the milk and the meat of the Word, the result is a foregone conclusion — the sheep suffer from undernourishment and malnutrition. To quote Luccock once more, it is the business of the preacher *"to feed the sheep and not to entertain the goats."*

Sick and weak as the sheep become when they are led to graze in barren or poison pasture, they are then an easy mark for any and every mountebank of Pied Piper who, in the name of religion, calls them to follow him or her. It is the task of the elder to expose such religious chicanery and to insist that the sheep be fed with the sound and wholesome nourishment of the Word.

To be placed in charge of someone's earthly fortune and to be called at an appointed time to give an account of what happened to it is serious business. But this is nothing compared to the seriousness of being entrusted with the care of our Lord's precious sheep and to have to account to Him when at last the day of reckoning will surely come. However, let the elders not despair. The Lord promises to qualify also for this when in faith we ask Him for His gracious help.

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