

Sheep on Offense

By Daryl Wingerd

The video showed three sheep walking down a grass-lined country road. Suddenly a wolf came toward them out of the woods. Rather than panicking and scattering like sheep tend to do, these three stayed together and stood their ground. In fact, they advanced toward the wolf and chased him away—not the outcome one would have expected.

This reminded me of all believers' metaphorical status in this world as sheep, members of a flock overseen by pastors (shepherds), men who are charged with protecting them from false teachers (wolves). Paul lays out this illustration in his charge to the elders (pastors) in Ephesus.



Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert . . . (Acts 20:28-31)

The obvious charge here is to the pastors—the shepherds of the flock—to be on guard on behalf of the flock to protect them from false teachers. Nothing is said about the believers (the sheep) being on guard, let alone of going on the offensive like the three sheep in the video. But let's face it: with no shepherd around to protect them, had these three been the stereotypical helpless and defenseless creatures, at least one of them would have likely become a meal.

BUT CAN THE SHEPHERDS DO ALL THE PROTECTING?

A pastor simply cannot be there to face every temptation for the sheep, to rebut every false argument, or to rightly explain every biblical passage that evil men twist in their attempts to lure sheep away from the truth. There are simply too many opportunities for the wolves of this world to catch the sheep alone and off-guard, and to overcome them, drawing them away from the flock *permanently*. Furthermore, doctrinally weak believers are prone to picking up spiritual

viruses—unbiblical ideas and principles that are then brought back into the church, thus exposing other weak believers to potentially lethal misdirection. Once such leaven is introduced, it inevitably spreads, often causing much harm despite the most diligent efforts of pastors to undo the damage. This is true even in the best churches with the best pastors. Well-prepared sheep, on the other hand, learn to recognize and avoid this type of doctrinal contamination, being strong and wise themselves even when apart from their shepherd.

In Ephesians 4 Paul goes farther in explaining that the purpose of the men who shepherd the church is not to do all the protecting and defending themselves. Rather, the shepherds have been given by Christ as gifts to the church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up [that is, the strengthening] of the body of Christ (4:12). He goes on to say that as a result of the shepherds' work, the sheep (the individual members of the church) “are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (4:16). The sheep have the obligation to be attentive to the shepherd's voice—to listen and learn as he teaches the Bible so as to be able to personally confront the threats that are inherent in the Christian life.

This preparedness is not merely for *self*-preservation. Paul goes on to insist that the church is to grow up in this way, thereby becoming ever more like Christ the Head (4:15), “from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (4:16). Your strength and maturity as a Christian is not for your protection alone, but serves the whole body. Correspondingly, your immaturity and vulnerability weakens and potentially harms the body as a whole.

You are blessed if you are a member of a solid church led by biblically sound men who accurately interpret and teach the Bible. In this way you have much support and protection, provided to you by Christ as a gracious gift. But you must also recognize your own obligation to be prepared to defend yourself and others against the ravages of the world's wolves—especially those who go around in sheep's clothing.