

ST. PAUL'S EXHORTATION TO ELDERS

"Take heed to yourselves,...for grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." – ACTS 20:29,30.

THESE words were addressed to the Elders of the Church at Ephesus. St. Paul, going toward Jerusalem, had found himself not far from Ephesus, and had sent word to the Elders that he would remain there a little while, and would be glad to meet them once more. They came and held a lengthy conference with him. This text is part of his message to them. He told them that he would not see them again, and exhorted them to take heed to themselves. It behooves every one to take heed to himself more than to others. And unless a man learns to rule his own spirit, he could not be in a proper condition to rule others.

This is particularly true of all Elders. They should watch *themselves*. Because of the honor which the Church gives them, they are in danger of being carried away by a feeling of self-importance – self-conceit. They are in danger of becoming arrogant. But the message is to take heed to *themselves*, and to *the flock of God*, over whom they are made overseers. They are to recognize their position as representatives, not only of the Congregation, but also of the Lord. This position being given them in the appointed way – an election by the stretching forth of the hand – they are not only to take this as the word of the Church, but also to realize that they are chosen of the Holy Spirit. They are to recognize this care of the Church as their great mission, an important service to be rendered in the name of the Lord.

WOLVES AND APOSTATE SHEEP

There are two particular reasons why Elders need to be on guard. The first reason, as given by the Apostle, was that grievous wolves would enter in among them, who would not spare the flock. The intimation seems to be that the wolves are not *part of the flock* at any time. They would not represent themselves as *wolves*, however. The Apostle's warning would seem to imply that a certain class of people of a wolfish nature [R5388 : page 30] would seek to associate themselves with the Church. Our Lord warned, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." (Matt. 7:15.) This seems to imply the thought of deception – walking like sheep, going about amongst the sheep and representing themselves to be sheep, wearing sheep's clothing, but never being real sheep. Their object in coming into the flock is selfish, their influence is that of a wolf amongst sheep. A wolf worries the sheep – his intention is to kill them, to suck their blood.

So there seems to be a class who, for no reason that we can imagine, pervert the truth, injuring the flock, stirring up arguments that confuse the flock, destroying them as New Creatures, and dragging them down to death. Presumably there has been such a class all the way down through the Age. While our text does not imply that sheep could ever become wolves, perhaps some of us have known persons who at one time were sheep, but who after a while manifested a wolfish disposition, and took pleasure in doing all that they could to injure the flock. The Lord and the Apostle warn us that we should beware of those who come in amongst the sheep, palming themselves off as sheep.

In addition to this danger from wolves, there will be dangers among themselves. The Apostle points this out as a *very subtle* danger. In addition to those of the wolfish nature, some in a class will engage in service as teachers, and by speaking perverse

things will seek to draw away disciples unto themselves. They seek [R5389 : page 30] to draw them away as *their own*. Their sentiment seems to be, This is *my* class, *my* flock – not recognizing that the Church is the *Lord's Flock*, that they are the *Lord's* sheep. In this there is a selfish attitude quite contrary to the Spirit of the Lord and to the Scriptures. "He that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" is a principle of the Divine Government. If any one would be a true Elder, a real servant of the Lord, he is to remember these things, and to avoid everything that would be of a self-seeking spirit. Otherwise, he may be sure that he will do injury, not only to himself, but to others also, by such a course.

RESPONSIBILITY PROPORTIONATE TO ABILITY

Sheep are very timid animals and need some kind of leading. In the absence of a shepherd, they need some one of their own number to be, as it were, leader for them. In flocks of sheep there are wise sheep – rams of the flock, leaders – that the sheep learn to follow, in the absence of the shepherd. These old rams of the flock would represent Elders in the Church of Christ. The ram's horns constitute a means of defense, with which he could drive off adversaries in a time of attack, and the sheep would be able to get behind him.

But the Scriptures speak of danger as respects some of the rams of the flock – certain leaders of the Lord's people. (Ezek. 34:17-23.) These rams got into the stream and made it muddy, defiling the water. He-*goats* are also mentioned; this is an illustration of the disposition of some Elders of the Church of Christ, and should not be lost upon us. We are told that owners of sheep sometimes use a *goat* as a leader of the flock, because a goat is more combative than a sheep, and thus supply the sheep courage, etc. We do not know how many of the Lord's Flock are being led by a goat. But

whenever any one manifests the goat disposition, the Ecclesia should strictly avoid making him a leader.

The proper leaders are those who show the proper disposition. The Church is very much at the mercy of the leaders; hence the latter have the greater responsibility. So the Apostle says, Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that a man who is a teacher has the severer trial, the severer test. (Paraphrase of James 3:1, R.V.) He has the greater responsibility in proportion to his ability. It would seem, then, that all who accept the position of Elders are, to some extent, representing the Lord, who is the great Shepherd of the Flock.

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