



# *Last Days Beacon*

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## WOLVES IN SHEPHERD'S CLOTHING



### *HOW SATAN ATTACKS THE LOCAL CHURCH*

*By Dr. David Schnittger*

As we approach the end of the church age, we can expect Satan's attacks against the local church to become even more intense. Paul warned believers in 2 Corinthians 2:11, "lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices" (New King James Version throughout). The implication of this verse is that, if we are ignorant of his devices, then Satan will take advantage of us. The purpose of this article is to expose an important device of Satan as it relates to hindering the work of God in His redemptive work. The Scriptures teach that one of Satan's devices in hindering the work of God is putting corrupt leaders into positions of power over God's people. This is an old but effective "device"!

### SATAN'S OLD TESTAMENT STRATEGY

One of the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant, is that, through Abraham's descendants (the nation of Israel) ". . . all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). The nation of Israel was to be God's channel through whom ". . . the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises . . ." would come (Rom 9:4). It was God's intention that an obedient Israel would be the channel of truth and redemption to the entire world. However, Israel was plagued by irresponsible, self-serving shepherds. Ezekiel spoke of them this way: "And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to

them, Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor brought back what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered” (Ezekiel 34:1-5).

By the time of Christ, Israel’s religious leaders had become even more corrupt. The ruling religious party, the Pharisees, had become so corrupt that Jesus told them, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44). That corruption was subsequently demonstrated in their orchestration of Christ’s crucifixion, leading to Israel’s being set aside in unbelief and the church-age being inserted parenthetically in God’s “mystery” shift of redemptive strategy (Eph 3:1-6). Thus, Satan’s “device” in Israel’s fall was putting corrupt leaders into positions of power over God’s people. Let’s consider whether this strategy changed with the coming of the church age.

## **SATAN’S NEW TESTAMENT STRATEGY**

As we move toward the establishment of the Church in the book of Acts, Jesus gave some instructive comments as to Satan’s devices toward His New Covenant people. We read in John 10:10-13: “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.”

This is a critical passage for understanding how Satan attacks the local church today. First, let’s identify the players: The “thief” is Satan, and his agenda as it pertains to God’s people is to “steal, and to kill, and to destroy.” There is nothing that Satan likes to do more than divide, demoralize and destroy Christians and local churches.

The second player is the “good shepherd.” The Good Shepherd’s purpose is to give life and life more abundantly. He does this by giving His life for the sheep. You would think that Christ’s power would be determinative and that Christians and the local church would be immune from Satan’s assaults. However, there are other earthly “players” involved that complicate the issue.

The third player is the “hireling.” (i.e. hired hand). Jesus describes the hireling as “not the shepherd” and as one who does not “care about the sheep.” How do you know when a person in leadership is not a shepherd, but is only a hired hand? That is revealed when the fourth player comes on the scene.

The fourth player is the “wolf.” I do not equate the “wolf” of verse 12 with the “thief” of verse 10. The “thief” is the devil, but the “wolf” is a human doing the devil’s bidding. When the wolf comes upon the scene, the hireling deserts the sheep and flees. As a result, the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling shows his true colors ONLY when the wolf appears. The hireling may seem to be a caring shepherd who truly loves the flock, but when the wolf appears, the hireling does not protect the flock, but instead looks out for his own self-interest. Could it be that, out of self-interest, the

hireling *unites* with the savage wolf, as a complicit sycophant? Let's keep that possibility in mind as we see how this drama plays out in a real "church example."

## NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH EXAMPLE

In Acts 20:17-38, we have Luke's account of Paul's exhortation to the elders in the city of Ephesus. Paul had devoted approximately three years ministering to the church at Ephesus, the longest ministry to any of the churches Paul established. After he left Ephesus for a time, he returned to deliver final instructions to the elders of the Ephesian church. These instructions reveal Paul's apostolic and pastoral devotion to the saints at Ephesus. In the course of his remarks, he reminds the elders of his proclamation of the "gospel of the grace of God" (20:24), and how he had declared to them the "whole counsel of God" (20:27). Despite the thoroughness of his teaching ministry, he then delivers to them a sober charge and warning. We read in Acts 20:28-30:

"Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to 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. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

Notice a few important truths from these verses. First, the elders are to be *overseers* of the flock. The Greek word is a compound word (*epi*, over, *skopeo*, to look or watch) and indicates the character of the work undertaken. In other words, overseers or elders are to watch over the congregation with a view toward their protection and nurture. Their basic function is to shepherd the church of God, not to be dictators (CEOs) to the church. Paul also reminds the elders that the church does not belong to them, but rather it belongs to Christ because He purchased it with His own blood. It is a serious responsibility to be an overseer of Christ's flock!

Then Paul issues a severe warning. After Paul's departure, he predicts that savage wolves would come in among them, not sparing the flock. Notice that these wolves would arise from *within* the church, not from outside the church. They would speak "perverse things." Paul does not delineate the content of their teaching, but rather the *intent* of their teaching: "to draw away the disciples after themselves." Paul leaves open the possibility that the teaching content of these wolves may be orthodox, but that the *intent* of their speech is to create a personality cult; to draw away the flock's devotion and singular loyalty from Christ, and toward the earthly leader.

As a result of this warning, Paul urged the elders to "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31). So, Paul exhorted the elders, as he had for the entirety of his ministry in Ephesus, to be watchful about the savage wolves lurking within the congregation, and to shepherd the flock of God, protecting them from the destructive influence of these savage wolves who would arise from within the congregation.

It is worth noting that Paul was prescient in his warning. It appears that, in the years following Paul's departure, savage wolves succeeded in arising within the congregation and diverted the believers from their devotion to Christ to a personality cult. We see this in John's letter to the church in Ephesus, where the angel to the church in Ephesus wrote: "Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Rev 2:4). Could it be that the believers in the church at Ephesus left their first love because they were overrun with savage wolves who *demand*ed their first love and first loyalty? It appears that the overseers in the church at Ephesus failed to protect the flock!



## A DESCRIPTION OF SAVAGE WOLVES

It is my conclusion, based upon three church splits I have been involved in, each caused by the senior pastor, that the psychological category of *narcissistic personality disorder* gives us the best descriptive picture of the “savage wolves” in the New Testament.

The *DSM-V* (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) offers a comprehensive set of criteria to define narcissism. In sum, the *DSM-V* defines narcissism as “exaggerated self-appraisal . . . impaired ability to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others . . . relationships largely superficial and exist to serve self-esteem regulation . . . little genuine interest in others experiences . . . grandiosity . . . feelings of entitlement . . . firmly holding to the belief that one is better than others . . . attention seeking.”<sup>1</sup>

In their helpful book, *How to Treat a Staff Infection: Resolving Problems in your Church or Ministry*, Craig and Carolyn Williford identify six primary characteristics of a narcissistic senior pastor:

1. All decision-making centers on them
2. Impatience or a lack of ability to listen to others
3. Delegating without giving proper authority or with too many limits
4. Feelings of entitlement
5. Feeling threatened or intimidated by other talented staff
6. Needing to be the best and brightest in the room.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association, “DSM-IV and DSM-V Criteria for the Personality Disorders” (2012)

<sup>2</sup> Craig and Carolyn Williford, *How to Treat a Staff Infection: Resolving Problems in Your Church or Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 104-10.



## CHURCH WARS

Having presented the biblical theology, an example from Scripture and a description of a narcissistic pastor, in this section, I am going to lay out how a healthy church is generally taken over by savage wolves. This is based on my observation and experience in seeing multiple churches taken over by savage wolves. By the way, each of my experiences are of savage wolves taking over healthy, Bible-teaching churches. Wolves like healthy sheep! The takeover usually proceeds in stages:

**Prospecting:** The new senior pastor begins his takeover strategy by what I call “prospecting.” He sorts out the loyal from the disloyal. He privately asks individuals in leadership, whether associate pastors or lay leaders, whether they trust him and will be loyal to him. Those who do not give unconditional loyalty (power) to the senior pastor are categorized in the narcissistic mind of the senior pastor as “disloyal.” This “prospecting” takes place behind the scenes while he is engaged in a “charm offensive” with the congregation as a whole. The “loyal” are, at this stage, revealed to be “hirelings” and become part of the wolf-pack that will eventually devour the flock. How does a “wolf” become a “wolf-pack”? In my experience, it is when “hirelings” team up with the wolf to do his bidding. Every wolf pack has a leader and compliant, complicit followers!

**Provocation:** After he has sorted out the loyal from the disloyal, he begins marginalizing the disloyal and elevating the loyal. He begins sabotaging the disloyal, removing responsibilities from them, redirecting them into lesser roles not suited for them, and eventually firing them for various reasons such as budget considerations, their jobs are no longer important, they are no longer effective, etc. Others are so harassed and oppressed by the wolf pack that they eventually resign. At the same time, he is elevating the loyal “hirelings” to key posts in the “command and control system.” After the senior pastor has taken control of all the key power posts in the church, then he holds a “vision meeting” for the church where he rolls out his new vision and five-year plan to the congregation. By then, he has taken control of the power structures of the church and congregational “resistance is futile.”

**Protesting:** The provocations listed above begin to attract notice and pushback from some of the more alert and courageous members of the congregation. Some of these individuals initiate meetings with the church leadership, circulate petitions, and begin to share their knowledge of advancing tyranny with other church friends. Shock, disappointment, and protest begins to spread.

**Prevarication:** The protests will be met with prevarication (avoiding the truth) by the savage wolves. They will circle the wagons around the senior pastor. They will spin, lie, deny and attack the dissenters with slander and intimidation. The wolves will make it clear to those with questions and concerns that they are no longer welcome at the church. “Your empty pew will make room for the new people.”

One famous church-splitter, Rick Warren, founder of the Purpose Driven Church movement, openly boasts of his agenda to drive out “pillars” of the church: “Be willing to let people leave the church. And I told you earlier the fact is that people are gonna leave the church no matter what you do. But when you define the vision, you’re choosing who leave. You say, ‘But Rick, yes, they’re the pillars of the church.’ Now, you know what pillars are. Pillars are people who hold things up . . . And in your church, you may have to have some blessed subtractions before you have real additions.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Noah Hutchings, *The Dark Side of the Purpose Driven Church* (Bethany, OK: Bible Belt Publishing, 2005) 49.

## WHAT DO I DO NOW?

What then, is the biblical remedy if your church leadership has been taken over by savage wolves? Consider 2 Corinthians 6:14-18: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.' Therefore 'come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'"

In my view, according to this passage, when lawless people take over your church, you should consider them as unbelievers and you should separate from them. If you think this evaluation is harsh, consider that the Apostle Paul referred to corrupt religious leaders as ". . . grievous wolves . . . not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). Once the senior pastor and his hirelings have taken over the command and control centers of the congregation (pastoral staff, elder board, deacon board, communications, Sunday School, etc.), you are wasting your time trying to unseat them. You have no other choice but to leave and leave quickly. I have known individuals who have tried to stand against corrupt leadership, and they always lose and get badly bruised in the process. You should no more stay in a church that is run by corrupt leaders than a sheep would stay in a sheepfold overrun by wolves!

I have personally counseled individuals who have been subjected to spiritual abuse by corrupt, authoritarian leadership in their church, and who have had the courage to leave. Recovery for such individuals is often difficult and protracted. However, the sooner they leave the quicker they recover.

Once you leave the church, you may try to find another church in your area that appears to have godly, principled leaders. But, how do you really know? Let me suggest another option. If there are enough people in your congregation who are aware that savage wolves have taken over the church, band together and *start a new church!* Be willing to start small, and trust God for growth. You may have to start by gathering your family and likeminded friends in a living room or a nearby restaurant with a private room and start holding worship services. I am reminded of the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts . . . For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:6, 10). Do not despise the day of small beginnings!

Let me share my personal experience in the first of three church splits/plants I have been involved in. I was an associate pastor of a large Bible church in the Washington, D.C. area. The church was taken over by a narcissistic senior pastor and his wolf pack of hirelings. When the church split finally occurred, there were three pastors, three elders, three deacons, Sunday School class presidents as well as AWANA workers that left the church and started a new church. Our first Sunday service was attended by about 40 people. Within six months we had grown to 120 people, and within two years the church had grown to 200 people - and these were the cream of the crop from the "mother church!"

In the providence of God, He often uses difficult situations to multiply the church and the outreach of the Gospel. I am reminded of how the Lord used persecution of the early church in Jerusalem to further the spread of the Gospel. Acts 8:1,4 states, ". . . At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria . . . Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." Persecution can come from *without*, as per the persecution of the early church by the Jews and Romans.

Persecution can also come from *within* via savage wolves. In either case, in the providence of God, Christians are scattered, new churches are planted, and the influence of the Gospel spreads.

Yes, Satan attacks the church through savage wolves, resulting in the scattering of the sheep. Yet, in the providence of God, often these scattered sheep form new *purified* congregations and the seed of the Gospel continues to be planted. I am reminded of God's providence, expressed through Joseph to his sinning brothers: "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen 50:20). What Satan intends for the destruction of the church can, in the power and providence of God, be used for the purification of God's people and the advancement of the Gospel! Praise God!

*Dr. Schnittger is a veteran of 26 years of full-time pastoral ministry and has written a book on this subject: "Corruption in Christian Leadership," available at [swpm.us](http://swpm.us).*

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