



HOW TO WOLF-PROOF YOUR CHURCH



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After the largest bank heist in Britain's history, investigators began to look into the crime. It didn't take long to discover who was behind the robbery, which netted the criminals a cool 60 million. The only problem was that one of the culprits had left his fingerprints at the scene of the crime, which led investigators to begin a search for him. As the story of the crime unfolded it turned out that Valerio Viccei had

help. Parvez Latif, the manager at the bank where the heist took place, had helped plan the crime and even turned off the security cameras during the heist. The most famous bank robbery in British history was an inside job. All those involved in the crime were caught and sentenced to prison. Interestingly, Viccei, an infamous Italian bank robber, had earned the nickname, Wolf.

The worst crimes are always inside jobs marked by broken trust and hidden agendas. I suppose you could say the same for the church. The worst church scandals and breakdowns are always inside jobs perpetrated by a wolf, or as the Bible calls them, “A wolf in sheep’s clothing” (Mt 7:15). It’s true that the most ravenous destructions begin from within. That’s why Scripture warns us to look out for wolves in sheep’s clothing. More than a dozen New Testament passages warn us to beware of those who might slip in among us and bring about destruction.

PRINCIPLES FOR WOLF-PROOFING

How can we ensure that these disgraceful events don’t happen in our own churches? To begin with, a body of believers that desires to become wolf-proof must consider several principles that will help align our perspective with Scripture. **First, we will do well to reject the attitude that it could never happen in our church.** There is a pride that can creep into even the healthiest churches that elevates a church to almost iron-clad status. It’s pride to think our church is beyond the reach of the evil one simply because it’s such a great church.

I remember vividly two well publicized church scandals during my college years. National news outlets regularly covered the news about two well-known TV evangelists who had fallen into sin. Even though these two men weren’t from my particular variety of faith, there was a sense of shame for all who named the name of Christ.

Just about every person who lived through the eighties knows these two stories. I remember there being a prideful “not in my church” attitude among many in ministry leadership at that time. Often this was offered up in condemning tones. No one ever said it, but too many of us thought that scandal could never happen in our own churches. It occurs so often now we hardly blink an eye. You can’t sweep the evidence away anymore. These ministry implosions leave in their wake scads of wounded saints, destroyed ministries, failed marriages, and angry kids. It’s becoming increasingly difficult to keep saying this will never happen in my church.

One of the things I’ve noticed about these implosions is that, almost without exception, they’re all **inside jobs**. No one came into these churches from the outside and destroyed them. It wasn’t some government decision that caused these disasters. There were no external forces tearing at the seams of these churches. It commonly begins on the inside, and is usually perpetrated by one or more persons in leadership. It’s almost always an **inside job**.

Why are we so surprised at this? After all, we were warned in the New Testament that this would be the case. There we find numerous warnings about various sorts of agitators and trouble makers, not outside the church, but inside. Such alarms are sounded over the possibility of disturbances in most of the New Testament letters. So, consider yourself warned. No more being caught off guard.

It makes sense doesn’t it? After all, what better way for the enemy to cause trouble than right inside the church? Foxes always do the greatest damage when they’re inside the henhouse. Likewise, the weapons of the enemy will be most destructive when they’re used to stir up trouble and strife inside the church. This is his best opportunity to discourage and render followers powerless.

We say to ourselves this won’t happen in my church; we are a Bible teaching church, or my church is solid, our passion for the Lord and our zeal for the lost is exceptional. Let me remind you, however, if your church is any of these things it is exactly the kind of church your enemy seeks to target. We would do well to apply Jesus’ instruction to “be shrewd like serpents” (Mt 10:16). We tend to think that

a particular denominational affiliation or an adherence to a certain theological persuasion will produce an impregnable shield to keep us from the evil one. We couldn't be more wrong. Thinking this way is prideful and will actually render us more susceptible to the infiltration of the evil one.

Does this mean we are to hold all leaders suspect? By no means, but it does raise the need for a new kind of discernment for God's people. We must *demand* an authentic transparency and accountability from our ministry leaders. Wise followers of Christ will understand that power is best kept in check when it's shared. So, what should we do knowing the possibility of an **inside job** exists? Most importantly, rather than being caught off guard, we ought to anticipate that it could indeed happen in our church.

Secondly, these situations show us the great need for discernment. I've often been shocked to learn the situations that seemingly wise people fall into. We fall prey to internet scams and financial schemes that backfire. A lack of discernment is the cause of many good people getting sucked into cults and all kinds of false teachings. A diminished sense of discernment will leave otherwise smart people vulnerable to being exploited by a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Sadly, Christians seem to fall into these traps all too often. There are a number of reasons for this. We want to believe the best in others. What was once considered discernment has now been labeled as suspicion. Our culture has come to see discernment as judging others and this ideology has crept into the church. Yet Jesus said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." As Christians we are commanded to keenly apply discernment.

What is it that makes wolves so dangerous in the first place? It all comes back to the fact that they just don't look like wolves; they look like sheep. Wolves always appear like the rest of us. They act like us and talk like us and by all appearances they're just an ordinary innocent sheep, but under that slick disguise they are ravenous wolves.

Thirdly, is the importance of being armed for the spiritual battle. Once we have been awakened to the reality of our enemy's schemes we must be prepared for the possibility of conflict. Whether we like it or not, when we entered the Christian life we entered as warriors into battle. We can say we don't want to fight but the battle will come to us one way or other.

PROVISIONS FOR WOLF-PROOFING



Scripture gives us the details concerning our battle armor in Ephesians 6:10-18. There are six tools for battle that Paul outlines to help the warrior in battle. They are the **belt of truth**, the **breastplate of**

righteousness, feet fitted with the readiness of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Paul also adds a note about the importance of **prayer** in the battle.

Each of these is vital for wolf-proofing our churches. The fight for **truth** is always an important element of any spiritual battle. Often in a church conflict situation the evil one will use subtle lies to further his agenda of destruction. We know that Satan is called the father of lies. (Jo 8:44) In fact his native language is lies. Any time you find falsehood, spin and untruths reigning you can be sure that Satan is at work and we must combat this with truth. Satan is quite adept at using subtle suggestions to alter our perception of truth.

Wise believers will be alert to false narratives, spin, framing and “alternate truths” when they suspect they might be dealing with a wolf. These are all devil-like tactics that should raise your level of concern about who you might be dealing with. One of the most slippery techniques of a wolf in sheep’s clothing is the framing of conversations for others. When motives are unpolluted and above reproach there should be no need for the framing of facts. As believers we should each be very wary of letting others tell us how to think about matters in the church. Many Scriptures implore us to use our minds. (Ro 7:23, 25; 12:2, 3; 2 Cor. 10:5; Eph. 4:23; 1 Pt. 1:13) Indeed, God wants to work through our minds not around them. Ministry leaders whose motives and actions are above reproach will encourage followers to use their own minds and not try to alter their thinking.

I’ve observed in numerous church conflicts and scandals that often there is a constant defending of the actions of leaders who are being questioned about ill-dealing. Those who speak truth and deal honestly will have no need to constantly be in a defensive posture over their actions. Leadership decisions should stand without the need for continual explanation or defense when motives and actions are God-honoring.

Next is the **breastplate of righteousness**. Scripture highlights the connection between a believer’s pursuit of righteousness and God’s blessing. God blesses his followers when they pursue holiness. Numerous passages demonstrate that God’s blessing is on those who pursue righteousness. (Ps 5:12; Is 3:10) We learn in Proverbs 14:11 that God withholds no good thing from the righteous. And in Proverbs 11:28; and 13:21 we are instructed that the righteous will thrive. This concept is seen in numerous places in the New Testament as well. In 2 Timothy 2:21 we learn that those who keep from sin become God’s vessels unto honor.

This transaction is extended to the corporate body as well. The church that pursues righteousness is the church that God will bless. The reverse will also be true. When we are dealing in sin or deception, God will withhold His blessing from individuals as well as the corporate body. Churches that are corporately pursuing righteousness will realize God’s blessing. This is one reason that it’s always important when conflict arrives at the steps of your church to take the high road of righteousness and not become entangled in sinful responses.

Every soldier understands the importance of footwear in battle. This is why we are advised to put on the **footwear of the gospel**. It is the gospel upon which we stand. As believers we are to advance into battle securely and without fear knowing we carry the gospel to a hurting world. One of the signs that a wolf has entered your church is when you see continual confusion and conflict at play. Satan desires to bring chaos into your church. Be sure he has a plan ready for even the best churches but we carry with us into battle a gospel that produces peace.

I've observed that there is a self-reliance that works against us in the church. Why is it that we begin the Christian life in an act of trust depending on the gospel and then proceed as if the rest depends on us? Indeed, having our feet prepared with the gospel is not just for the beginning of the Christian life but for its entirety. Our walk with Christ is one of trusting in His work on our behalf from the beginning of our relationship with Him until we meet Him face-to-face. Wise soldiers will enter each battle trusting in the work of Christ and His strength. Our reliance is never on our own strength but always on Christ's.

The **shield of faith** is also needed to protect you in battle. What does the shield of faith do for you in a spiritual battle? It protects your most vulnerable parts from the flaming darts the evil one will hurl at you. And what might these flaming arrows that Satan would like to hurl at you be? They might be doubt or particular sins that would distract you from the battle. They could be any number of tools he has in his arsenal but be sure that your faith will act as a shield protecting you in battle.

Next is the **helmet of salvation**. You may get wounded in the battle but if you're wearing a helmet you can protect your head. For the believer our salvation is the covering that protects our most important asset and that's our mind.

For the Christian our weapon is God's Word which is called **the sword of the Spirit**. It's the one offensive article of all the armor mentioned. Too many believers think they can fight a spiritual battle in their own strength but our weapon is actually God's Word. The battle that's being waged against the church is a spiritual battle and requires a spiritual weapon which is God's Word. Jesus showed us how to do this when He Himself was tempted. Satan used numerous subtle shifts in truth trying to create a false narrative and get Jesus to sin. Each time Christ combatted these untruths with scriptural truth. (Lk 4:1-13) Wise believers will take note of this and prepare for battle by hiding God's Word in their hearts. (Ps 119:11) Scripture is one of our greatest weapons against Satan when he is attacking our church.

At the end of the list of battle armor Paul adds a note about the importance of **prayer** (Ep 6:18, 19). Notice how Paul describes this particular kind of prayer. It is prayer with alertness; prayer with a watchful eye for possible battles. A good soldier is alert to the dangers of a potential skirmishes and will pray for fellow soldiers knowing that the battle has changing strategies and techniques. When we pray, we should do so with alertness against the schemes of the evil one.

The spiritual armor passage we've just looked at is wrapped in the idea that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil. (Ep 6:12) These are forces that we cannot see, however, we know they are there and that they are scheming against us. We cannot see them but we can see their effect when they advance against us. A wise Christian will pray against these forces knowing that the church is at the center of the battle. We can also be encouraged that in the end we win! Satan will never prevail against the church. (Mt 16:18) A spiritual battle requires spiritual weapons!

PRACTICES FOR WOLF-PROOFING



In this section I would like to give some practical suggestions to church leaders to protect the flock during the critical season of choosing the next lead pastor. These practices are the result of observing the devastation that comes from a wrong choice in this regard.

First, whenever possible, **hire from within**. We see this pattern in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Wherever he went, he took a young disciple, whether it be John Mark, Timothy, Silas or Titus. In the course of their evangelistic and church-planting endeavors, Paul would disciple these young men in the Word of God and in church leadership. Then, he would leave them in charge of local churches, so he could continue his pioneering church-planting ministry.

We see an example of this in the book of Titus. “Paul, a bond-servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ . . . to Titus, my true child in a common faith . . . For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Ti 1:1, 4, 5). A wise lead pastor, as he approaches the time of his retirement, will prepare one of his associate pastors in doctrine and church leadership. This associate will have proven his character and faithfulness through the years, so that the church elders can confidently **hire from within** for the lead pastor position. This practice has worked very well in many churches around the world.

A second practice for wolf-proofing the church is to **beware of celebrity endorsements**. If the church leadership decides to look outside the local assembly for their next lead pastor, often the wolf in sheep’s clothing will be camouflaged by celebrity endorsements.

A cunning, ambitious wolf will often make the acquaintance of famous church leaders or Christian media figures. Their acquaintance may be casual, but that doesn’t matter to the wolf. When the opportunity for advancement arises, the wolf will call upon the celebrity to give an endorsement during the candidating process. Such an endorsement may lead to the wolf being selected for a lead pastor position. Unwitting search committees and elder boards are often swayed by celebrity endorsements, rather than references by those who know the candidate well in a ministry environment.

This leads to the third wolf-proofing practice, which is to **secure secondary references**. Whereas the wolf will often pack his resume with celebrity endorsements, it is much more revealing to talk with those who have actually worked with, or more importantly, worked *under* the candidate. It is when

you speak with people in the wolf's previous church, particularly their subordinates, that you get a true picture of the candidate's character and leadership style.

Many ambitious wolves employ a "kiss up, kick down" approach to climbing the ladder of pastoral success. In other words, they will "kiss up" to Christian leaders and celebrities that can advance their career, while they "kick down" (harass, berate) those under their authority. It is, therefore, important to speak to staff and parishioners at the candidate's former ministry.

Once the wolf has been hired, it is too late to check the secondary references. It is much more difficult to extract a "savage wolf" from leadership than it is to prevent them from entering the sheepfold in the first place.

Editor's Note: David Schnittger wrote the section "Practices for Wolf-Proofing." Dr. Schnittger is on the Steering Team of One Hope Community Church.

CONCLUSION

Our enemy, the devil, is cunning and devious. He will stop at nothing to destroy the impact of your church. Knowing that Satan is prowling around seeking someone to devour, we can assume he despises churches where Christians meet together and strategize to advance the gospel. If you see your church languishing and you see chaos, dishonesty, broken trust, and manipulations it may be wise to ask whether the work of wolves is at hand. Wise Christians will be on the alert and ready for battle. In the meantime, we must realize that no church is above the spiritual battle.



Wise ministry leaders will prepare their people for the critical process of a transition in church leadership. Knowing that no church is above the schemes of the evil one, applying discernment and being prayerfully battle-ready will help us wolf-proof our churches.

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