

As a pastor, I find myself quite often in awkward situations where I meet people, we have discussions and then later on they find out I'm a pastor and then they backtrack quite a bit. So maybe they're holding a beer at a party (which I don't have a problem with), but as soon as they hear that I'm a pastor, they're like, "Oh, well. You know, this is the first one I've ever had." Or if maybe their mouth has been colorful and then they find out I'm a pastor, it just gets really awkward. And then I always get to say, "So you know we've got to have the conversation. When do you want to do it? Do you want to go out and grab something to eat? Do you want to do it right here? How do you want this to play out from here?" And that then tends to be inroads to me sharing the gospel. So often down here, when I get to lunch, when I sit down to have a cup of coffee, when I begin to have dialogue with men or women about the gospel, their aversion to Jesus Christ has little to do with secularism or any of the arguments that intellectuals like to try to make. They almost all go back to some experience they've had with the church or some experience they've had with Christians who have wronged them, harmed them or betrayed them. I've literally had several people tell me that the church is filled with hypocrites. Now for the first couple of years, I've always wanted to argue against that. The only problem with that is I pastor a church. So I know that that's not untrue. The church is filled with hypocrites. In fact, I contend that it's worse than that. So let's just be real honest about what the church is.

Let's start in Acts 20. We'll pick it up in verse 18. "And when [the Ephesian elders] came to [Paul], he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.'" The problem here is the Jews in Ephesus are telling and teaching everyone that they must first become Jews, specifically when it comes to circumcision and dietary law, if they're going to be Christians. So Paul is saying you have to trust in the cross of Christ alone. And they're saying it's the cross of Christ plus. They are "Jesus plus" people. So he is teaching grace and mercy alone, and they're saying you have to obey the Law and then you get grace and mercy, which by the way immediately changes the meaning of grace and mercy. So that's the argument. The Jews were adamant about this to the point that they tried to kill Paul on several occasions and beat him on several occasions. Once they thought he was dead and dragged what they believed to be his lifeless body out of the city. When he came to, he got up and went back into town.

So let's keep going here. He's saying, "I didn't shrink back from the Jews or the Gentiles, the Greeks or the Jews. It didn't matter to me. I was preaching boldly." Look at verse 22. "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." Notice the shift in the theological makeup of the church. Paul is saying, "The Holy Spirit tells me that if I do this, affliction and pain await me." So where is he going? To Jerusalem. Just because it was going to be painful and just because it was going to hurt, Paul did not interpret that as, "Oh, God doesn't want me to go." The prosperity idea is a brand new idea. It is less than 60 years old. It is far from biblical. Does God bless? Absolutely. Should we walk in biblical blessing? Absolutely. Do you know what that blessing is? You get God. And even if you go to Jerusalem and they beat the trash out of you or you get your head cut off, you've still got God. That's the blessing. The blessing is, "No weapon formed against us will prosper." The blessing is, "It doesn't matter if I live or die, I get glory." Now, is God going to bless some of you with resources? Absolutely. Is he going to bless some of you with long life?

Absolutely. Do you get to control that by manipulating Him and going, "I'm going to obey these things, and You'll have to do these things for me." No, that's a pipe dream.

Let's keep going. Verse 24, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again." He spent at least three years in Ephesus and now he's telling these men, "This will be the last time that I see you." "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, . . ." I have a patch on my arm right now, and it's not because I smoke cigarettes. I've got a patch on my arm because I start chemo tonight, and I'll do a round this week that will put a pretty good tear on me near the end of the week. Now, I think God is going to give me 40 more years. The statisticians probably don't agree with that, but here's my point. Regardless, my plan is to stand in front of God and, when it comes to you, go, "I've got no blood on my hands. I have preached the full counsel of God. I am innocent in Your sight for wanting them to know You and not them to love me." And my goal is Paul's goal of, when we don't get to see each anymore, for me to say, "No, I did what God asked me to do."

Let's keep reading. Verse 27, ". . .for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, . . ." Now keep in mind he's talking to elders. He's not just talking to a group at the church. He is talking to the men who are governing and shepherding the church at Ephesus. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them." So in this room today, according to this text, regardless of what campus you're at, there are those who the Bible would call wolves. You are not a believer in Christ; you are parading as one, somehow to take advantage of God's people. The biblical command on the eldership is to shoot and kill the wolves, not literally. I mean, I'm not packing heat. I've got a microphone back here. But we are commanded by God to take your butt and throw it out of here and to tell you you're not welcome here. We don't want you to attend, we don't want you to go to our groups. We are to bar the doors and keep you out. And there are people out there go, "That's unloving." I'm like, "So you let your kids play in the freeway?" "No, I would never do that." "Well why wouldn't you do that?" "Because I'm loving." So do you dip your kid in blood and let the pit bulls play with him? Ever chum the waters in the ocean and then chuck your kid in? Do you know why you don't do any of those things? Because you're loving parents. In the same way, love would never allow the wolves to mingle with the sheep, ever. And so there are wolves here. Some of you who aren't believers in Christ are going, "I've wounded by this. . .I've been hurt by this. . ." Here's what I would tell you. Just because people go to church doesn't make them Christians. That is a Bible Belt myth. Church attendance does not equate a love for Jesus Christ with a transformed life. There are wolves, there have always been.

Let me give you a couple more texts. 2 Peter 2:1-3 says, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." So listen to what he just said, especially if you're a skeptic who hates the church because of the Christians you've met. He just said, "Because of the wolves, the name of God will be blasphemed among the secular." He's saying that you are caught up in a lie of the enemy to distract you away from God's truths by idiots who claim to know Christ but don't know Him and attend church regularly. The wolves are in the church. So when people say to me, "This happened. . .this happened. . .this happened," I've got no argument. I just go, "It's worse than that." It's played itself out here in several ways. There are young men in the city of Dallas who know that there are young, beautiful women at the Village Church, and so they come here to hunt. And I plead with our girls constantly that good

behavior and godliness aren't the same thing, and if you marry good and not godly, you've set yourself up for sorrow, especially if you want to raise children and serve God. If you marry a man who is not interested in those things, your children are going to take their cues from their daddy. And men, that should be an unbelievable weight on you. So when we find out that you're hunting here, we're going to shoot you. It's even to the point where we've had discussions about putting your dumb picture on all of the screens and going, "Avoid this idiot."

Now I know there are those of you who are going, "Where's the grace in that?" There is no grace for wolves. So once again, I know you're like, "Well Chandler, I don't know if I agree with you." I'll just let the Bible be my defender. Let's go to Jesus in Matthew 23:13. "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in." Jesus is not politically correct when it comes to the wolves. "You hypocrites, you white-washed tombs . . ." He even tells the people in the crowds, "Don't follow these fools. Don't be anywhere around them, for yeast will work through the entire batch. Avoid them." But we've gone so soft and so pretty that we go, "No, you let the wolves lick the blood of your child's face. And if he bites the kid's face off, that stinks, but it must have been the will of God." No, you kill the thing. Maybe you hang up its carcass for other wolves to see.

Let me give you one more. This is 1 Timothy 4:1-2. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared." Now is that outside the church or inside the church? That is inside. Doctrines of demons meant to lead astray men and women seeking God through consciences that are seared by their allegiance to what is false. This is inside the church. So when people say, "The church is just filled with hypocrites. And if that's what it is, then I don't want to follow," I tell them that I don't know that those people are believers. Now if your argument is something else, then I think you might be wrong. But if you've met people and go, "If that's a Christian, then I don't want to be one," then more likely than not you don't understand some things or they're not Christians. Please don't ever confuse church attendance with fellowship with Christ. They are not the same thing. Every weekend, churches are filled with hundreds of thousands of people who know nothing of who Jesus Christ is. If you don't believe me, go read Matthew 7 where He says, "Many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" That's not a very popular verse, but it's in there.

So you've got wolves in the church, but that's not all we've got. Let's go to Romans 14, starting in verse 1. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." Now I want to stop here and save us from making a error that I see commonplace among Evangelicals. I have found that 9 times out of 10, when people are confronted about their sins, their tactic to avoid that is to scream, "I feel like I'm being judged here." You are being judged here. "Well the Bible says don't judge lest you be judged." Absolutely. Here would be my encouragement to you. Read the rest of that text. Even this text says "in matters of opinion, you don't judge another master's servant." But if the Scriptures make it clear, it's clear. We love some small group ministry here, but the idea of a bunch of adults sitting around the Bible answering the question, "What do you think this text means" is a nightmare. Do you see the problems with that in its roots? You're saying that the text has no actual meaning except what you ascribe to it. "Well, I think it means this . . . I think it means that . . ." Doesn't the Bible clearly say there is a way that seems right to man and in the end death?

My first couple of years here, when we were shifting some things theologically, I always used to say this every weekend. I don't care what you think. If you want to talk with me about any verse in this book, I'll do it all day long. But if we're talking about this doctrine or this doctrine and you start your sentence with, "Well I think. . ." then you've already lost any argument that you're going to make. Because it's rooted in you, and the Bible says you're here in the morning and you're gone in the morning. You are like a dew on the grass that is gone by morning. You're not even here today, gone tomorrow. You're here in the morning and you're gone before lunch. So when you start thinking about the things of God, you saying, "Well, I think" is like me taking stock advice from my sixteen-month-old. It just doesn't have a lot of credibility. Here's what he is saying here. There are weaker brothers and sisters among us. You aren't converted to Christ and instantly become a mature believer in Christ. It's a process. It's called progressive sanctification, and it's a dirt path, not a super freeway. Does it happen slower than you want? Aren't you still looking at your life going, "Dang it, why can't I get there?" If you could sit down with Billy Graham and ask him where he is with the Lord, I guarantee he would say to you that he's still working on this and he still wants God to do this and he still is hoping that God would do that. Because when God's done with you, you get to go home and be with Him. Until then, He's working on you. And that looks differently for everybody. Some of us are still in the kiddie pool, some of us are jumping off the high dive into fifteen feet of water and some and some of us SCUBA dive. The reality is, in this room, some of us came out of the womb just recently. So we stagger about and fall often and we're playing in the kiddie pool. It's cute when kids play in the kiddie pool. It's not cute when 50 year olds play in the kiddie pool, especially if they're having a really good time. Don't you call the cops in that situation? Why? Because as they grow, there is going to be a progression and the kiddie pool is going to get boring and they're going to want to swim. And then they're going to jump off the diving board into the deep end, and then they're going to play "Can I touch the bottom?" There is an increase in courage and an increase in boldness and an increase in desire until you hit whatever level of maturity you're going to hit. Because there are some people who are not going off that high dive. They will swim in the deep end, but they're not going off that high dive. And that's a faith issue and another sermon for another day. But some of us will jump off the high dive and swim to the bottom of the ocean if we can. And that's also a faith gift from God. But that doesn't change the fact then that there should be a real big diversity of where we are with Jesus Christ.

Now all of us should be moving if we're a believer. If there's no movement, if you're static, something is wrong. Either you've got idolatry in your life, you've got something else you're serving, you've got something you love more than the Lord, you have avoided biblical community, you are away from the Word of God on consistent basis, you are not praying or something. Because our relationship with God is not static; it moves and it grows. And if it's not moving or growing, it's a giant red flag that something is going on spiritually in your heart and mind. Your comfort in that location really is as baffling to me as atheism. Because I can't understand it. And I'm not the smartest guy by any means, but I feel like I'm intelligent. And a guy who says, "God is infinite and has promised to me infinite joy in Himself" who settles for none of that is a bit baffling to me. So the weaker brother is present.

I took this job when I was 28 years old. I have been tempted on multiple occasions to yank all the sermons that I did in 2003 and 2004. Here's the problem with the Internet. Once you say something, you've said it. So even now, I get these random e-mails going, "Chandler, you said ____." And I'm like, "I did not say that." "No, you said it. It was January of 2003." And so I think to myself, "Am I going to be judged for the rest of my life from what I said at 28?" I was a little angry back then. I'm a lot happier now. I was a little more bitter back then. I'm just mildly bitter now. In the end, there is this progressive sanctification that takes place. I hope I'm much more a man of God today than I was in 2003. I'm hoping that God gives me another ten years with you and that I'll be even godlier then. In fact, I've mentioned to the Lord, "God, if You want to bring me home, that's more joy for me. You do what You want to do, but these people had to put up with me when I was in my 20's. You keep sanctifying me, and don't they deserve my 60's?" So on top of the wolves, you have the weaker brother.

Once again, if you're not a believer in here or you're a little bit of a skeptic and you're going, "Man, Christian people make mistakes all the time," aren't you starting to see that you should feel real comfortable here? The excuse that the church is filled with hypocrites is just wrought with irony, as if you have escaped that. I could name you dozens of example of men who have absolutely punted their responsibility of leading their families, who with their mouths trash the church as being filled with hypocrites while requiring their wife to take his kids to church. Well, which is it? Is this a horrible place or is it a safe place? You're a coward running from God. And maybe I just got you here today to say that to you, and I'll see you at Christmas Eve.

So you've got wolves, you've got weaker brothers and then the third reality we find in the Scriptures is this. You have a possibility for theological and missiological drift. If you'll follow God planting churches in the New Testament, all the letters that you have in the New Testament are written to churches that were founded by the Holy Spirit saving and doing miraculous and powerful things. And yet all of the letters in the New Testament are Paul or someone correcting their drift. Probably the clearest case you can see is Ephesus that is founded by Apollos and Paul in Acts 19-20 spectacularly. The Spirit of God moves in such a powerful way that whole socioeconomic climate of the city of Ephesus shifts and people who were making their money from selling idols could no longer make money, and so they led a riot against the Way taking root in the city. How's that for a beginning? Do you know how we started? Lakeland Baptist Church thought it would be a cool idea to plant a church out here with the heathens among Highland Village. Do you know how Ephesus started? Paul's handkerchief and apron were healing people, and so many people were getting saved that there was no profit in sin. That's a booming beginning.

Now Paul tell them in the next verse, "I have to go and ferocious wolves are going to come in and try to kill the sheep." Do you know what we see happening? The Ephesians controversy starts. Go read the book of Ephesians. Go read 1 and 2 Timothy, because Timothy was an elder in Ephesus. And go read 1, 2 and 3 John, because John was also an elder in Ephesus. I love our staff. They are ferocious men and women of God who love Him and serve Him and are not pretending to be anything but who they are. And they are trusting in the grace of God to make them more and more of who God would have them to be. Now with all of that said, our staff compared to the staff at Ephesus is JV. Because if you've got an elder in your church that wrote some of the Bible, I just don't know how you compete with that in this day and age. "Well I can preach well." "Preach what well?" "What you said." I mean, this is a lights out church. So you go read through those and you'll begin to see the disintegration of the gospel taking root in Ephesus. In fact, I'll just read you 1 Timothy 4:7. It says, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness." And if we pushed it on into Revelation 2, Jesus tells the church at Ephesus, "You do this well, you do this well and you do this well. But this is have against you. You have lost your first love. Repent and do the things you did at first." What happened? They drifted. Now what did they do at first? The only thing we see them doing at all in Acts 19 is confessing to one another their sins and acknowledging their need for Jesus Christ. So somehow in the sixty years between Acts 19-20 and Revelation 2, this community of faith that was gritty and raw who were coming together and confessing their sins and worshiping God's grace ended up doing witchcraft. Their prayer requests were not, "My aunt Sally's knee got blown out when she was playing indoor soccer and we need to pray for her tonight." I'm not saying there's anything wrong with aunt Sally's knee; I'm saying when this community of faith came together, they were extremely honest with exactly where they were. And grace doesn't work where you're lying about where you really are. The prettier a church becomes, the more I don't tend to trust it. If I walk into a community of faith where I'm teaching and everybody is pretty and nobody struggles and there are not issues, then I think we've got drift. Because the church has always been a rag-tag, battered group of humanity that God is glorified because He uses such people. And we see theological/missiological drift. You see it in today's culture where more and more churches have become about themselves and the comfort of their people. They have completely lost out to the mission of God, so that Christianity has become some sort of self-betterment place. They say, "Do these things to feel better about yourself" instead of, "This is the mission of God. Let's join Him in what He's doing."

So in the Village Church, there are wolves who are actively hunting you, knowing that you'll show yourself soon and then we'll shoot you. There are weaker brothers or sisters. That's just a reality of all churches. And there is the possibility of theological drift, missiological drift. There is the possibility of losing what God is all about and what God is doing among us and us settling for less than what He would have for us. Now, my standard response to, "The church is filled with hypocrites," is always, "Man, it really is. How profound is the love of God for His people that He would still rescue, save and die on the cross for people who would continue to betray, fall short and not do what He has asked. Yes, we're filled with hypocrites. There is room. Come join us." I've said for years that no one leans against the cross and says, "All you people come to the cross." We kneel at the cross and say, "Come on. There is room." So this is the profound message of the dysfunction of the church. God knew that it was going to be dysfunctional and still sent Jesus. That's why we celebrate. That's the basis of our joy. It's not that we're better people but that Christ has loved us where we are, and that becomes the motivating launching point for all the transformation that occurs in us. When you stray away from the gospel, you clear the way for these three things to really exist in a strong way in your church. If Christianity is not about the death of Jesus Christ for your sins and the extension of righteousness from His righteous and perfect life, then all you have left to do is moralistic deism. You've got a list of things you do and don't do. How easy is it for a wolf to learn the list and just put on our clothes? "We don't watch rated-R movies unless they're about Jesus being crucified. We don't listen to these types of music. We listen to these types of music. Here is the language we use. . ." And they dress like us in language and deed and dwell among us looking for a weaker brother or sister to take advantage of. But when you're about the cross, now all of a sudden it becomes about affection, it becomes about whether your love Him, whether you pursue Him, whether you know Him, is He your joy.

Now think what happens to the weaker brother when you do moralistic deism instead of the cross. Think of what happens when you say, "Here's the behaviors that get you right standing before God," and you throw that yoke on them. It crushes them. How many of you have grown up in church and have found yourself exhausted trying to live up to a standard other than just pursuing Jesus Christ? When you begin to say, "Here are the rules. You obey these rules," and you put those on the weaker brother, how do you bear that weight without the Holy Spirit's promise of grace and mercy to you? Do you know why your kids keep walking when they're learning to walk? Because you freak out and celebrate it. You cheer them on. When they ride a bike for the first time, you go, "Good job, buddy. . .Great job, sweetheart." When they start to dive into the pool and you can not get in the urine pool yourself, there is a celebration that occurs, which leads to more courage for them. You see, it's acceptance that breeds courage. It's acceptance that breeds change. It's acceptance that brings about a desire to go farther and farther. Rejection does the opposite. If you hard press reject your children, they don't want to try things. Because you're going to freak out when they can't do it. The cross tells us, "Come on, buddy. Let's go." Aren't you told, "Boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence"?

So we have security here because people have tried to kill me. And it's not because I think I'm big time. I'll mingle with you anytime I can. Come up and say hello anytime you see me in town. But we've had incidences, and so we have security here. For all of that and all the key fobs we have to use right now for the size of our church, my kids are never nervous about running up to me. My kids are never nervous about coming back stage. Why? Because I'm daddy. In fact, I was just kissing and talking to them off to the side of the building right before we started today. They're not nervous. Why? Because they're my babies. What makes them love running around here? I'm their daddy. This is how you grow spiritually, not by having some crazy yoke put on you, not by having some crazy weight put on you of, "You've got to these things to get right standing before God." If you get right standing by doing things, then Christ died for nothing and God's plan failed.

In the end, the church is a mess. It is a group of people who are completely jacked up. To deny that is to be a liar. Now God has, in His divine plan, put a covering over the church so that we might be protected from the worst of all of this. God has never been a big fan of kings. God has never been a big fan of consolidating power into one person. Even if you

think about Israel's kings, they were submissive to the prophets and the priests made sacrifices for both of them. In fact, if you remember Saul, who rebukes Saul and then removes his crown? Samuel the prophet. So the king of Israel is told by Samuel, "You have betrayed the Lord. You are no longer king." Let that sink in. Where does that work? Where does the monarchy established by God then lose his crown by the word of the prophet who then must seek his own right standing before God through the sacrifice of the priest? You can see this in the triune nature of God, and you see this today in how God ordained the church to function. There is one King and His name is Jesus. He is the Shepherd of the church. He is the head of the church. You see this clearly in Colossians 1:18. "And he is the head of the body, the church." Jesus is the Shepherd of the Village Church.

Now what He establishes under that is what we call undershepherds. These are elders, deacons, etc. Let's read about these men. 1 Timothy 3, starting in verse 1, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife. . ." That does not mean he could have never been divorced. How many of you have heard otherwise? Study the Bible this week. Look at Acts 17:11 where Paul encourages the Bereans to look into the Scripture and test everything he says. That verse means he is a one-woman kind of man. With the woman he's with, he is all in. But study it yourself and we'll go from there. "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive. . ." May men of God never get so far away from the gospel of Jesus Christ that they begin to see their children as a reflection upon themselves and therefore strong-arm their children. Now there are boundaries in the Chandler house. We are big time believers in discipline. We love it. We believe the Bible commands all about it. We are varsity when it comes to discipline. There are boundaries in our home, and within those boundaries, we laugh a lot, we play lot and we enjoy the blessing of God a lot. You don't strong-arm your children with morality; you teach them the gospels and the rules of your house. If you strong-arm them, I think you'll lose them. That has been my experience. If there is no joy in your house, all rules, no freedom in your house, all rigid, with a long list of what it takes to be accepted, I think nine times out of ten you tend to lose your kids in their 20's or earlier. Now I'm not telling you to not have rules. I'm not telling you to not discipline your children. On the contrary, there need to be rules and discipline, but there needs to be quite a bit of laughter in your house. Let's keep going.

"He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders. . ." Paul just said, "For a man to be an elder of the church, he must not only be all of those things, but if you went outside of the church and asked other people about him who knew him, they would speak well of him, even if they disagreed with what he believed about God." Paul says that even the secular world must speak well of how an elder lives his life. I thought that was profound. "Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." So here's what Jesus does to protect His church. He is the chief shepherd, He appoints undershepherds called elders and deacons and He sets them into place. And they must meet this criteria. To not meet this criteria is to set your church up for heartache, be devoured by wolves, to have people playing in the kiddie pool twenty years later and to see theological and missiological drift occur.

Now let's go over to Titus 1. You'll hear some of the same things in this. Starting in verse 5, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you." No the word "elder" has nothing to do with age. We know that because you can't appoint age. He says, "Appoint elders in every town." He didn't say, "Once you're over fifty, you're an elder." He ties it back to maturity, spiritual, family, life maturity. So he's telling Titus to appoint elders in every town as he directed. Listen to the list again. "If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For

an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party." He calls those who say, "Yes, it's Jesus, but it's also this," empty talkers, deceivers. So God then puts in charge over a local congregation elders and deacons to govern, to lead and to walk out the faith in front of those men and women in such a way that wolves are identified and shot, the weaker become stronger and drift doesn't occur because they're anchored in the Word.

Now let me read 1 Peter 5:1-4. "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly. . ." So elders are not elders to get that power or so that they might be looked upon and awed at or that they might get some sort of gain from it. But rather they are to be as bond servants of Jesus Christ. ". . .not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." So how do elders govern? Gently and by example. Now look at their reward in verse 4. "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." That is elders, and now it talks to lay people. "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." So he's saying, "As elders deal with members and as members deal with elders, there should be humility and grace extended to both."

The Bible is clear that if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you are to be under the authority of an eldership. This goes back to local church membership. And I have no stock in the game. If you don't want to join the Village Church, as long as you're somewhere that preaches the gospel, go. God is moving all over the place, not just here. You just need to find some place that God is moving you to plug in and get involved. Or you could live the life of a leech and just suck the life out of everything until you die, but I would much rather you play. So the Bible clearly says that you are to be under a godly authority. So here is my question for you if you're not a member of any church. And notice I didn't say, "If you go to a church." Because going to a church and belonging to a church are not the same thing. The Bible clearly says that you have to be under an authority, so what elders are you under? Because there are elders everywhere. Sometimes they will swing by your house on their bicycles. What about the loons from Westboro Baptist Church? If there is a crazier bunch, I haven't read about them. There are elders. The Westboro Baptist people who hold up the signs at the soldiers' funerals, they are elders. The Bible just said you have to submit to elders. Are you submitting to them? So who are you submitting to? I'm one of the elders here. It is a very real plurality of leadership here. I have lost tons of votes here. And years from now, they'll come back and apologize because I was right. But for now, I lose tons of votes here all the time. Because God does not need me to be king here. He needs to be King, which means I've got to submit to godly men who are wiser than me. In that, are we to govern? Because Hebrews clearly says that I will have to give account for those I elder. Do we elder everybody? What about Valley Creek? Do we need to engage where they are philosophically? Do we need to engage what they are doing theologically? What about Fellowship? Are we to govern them? What about Crossroads? Are we to govern them? No. Hebrews is clear that I will give an account for you. We, as your elder board, will give an account for you. So this is probably one of the primary arguments for church membership. The Scriptures clearly teach that you are to be under a gentle, living life as an example authority and that we are to treat one another with respect and grace as we live out this thing.

Now, what do elders do? We protect the sheep. In theology and in practice, we protect the church. So if you sit through our membership class, we'll tell you what we believe, where land and what we hold with a closed hand, which means if you believe something outside of this, you're not a Christian and cannot join the church. That's pretty much constrained

to Jesus' divinity, His death, burial and resurrection. If you don't believe that, you're not a Christian. If you don't believe Jesus is God who died on the cross and resurrected for your sins, you're not a Christian. So that's the closed hand. In the open hand of theology are things we can disagree about. We can be in different places when it comes to the extent of sovereignty, for instance. We'll tell you in the membership class that there are going to be some things here that we believe so passionately about that you can join, but if you teach contrary to this, there will be a problem, and then it will be up to you whether or not you want to join us on mission. But we want to put all our cards on the deck. We want to protect the theology and the philosophy of the Village Church.

We want to handle our finances in a way that is God-glorifying. Right now, you could get online and look at all our financial statements. We have no secrets here. You can find out where every dollar goes. You can find out how much we gave away, you can find out how much we spend on ourselves and you can see how much we spend on staff. We have no secrets from you. We are entering into that season again, and so we will preach again what our mission is and where your money is going. And then we'll have a series of meetings where you can ask any question you want about how we spend money. We want to be above reproach in regards to finances.

We're the last line of church discipline. Church discipline is a wildly unpopular idea in the Bible Belt for some reason. We have uninvited people from attending. We have told probably 50-60 people, "You are no longer welcome to attend our services. You are no longer welcome to attend our home groups. You are not longer welcome in this building." Then we can roll it out to another level where we put your picture on a screen and say, "Have nothing to do with this man or this woman except to call them to repentance." Not a very popular idea these days. Where's the grace in that? I continue to go back to what I've already said to you. You don't let wolves play with the sheep. And if a guy says, "I know what the Bible says, but I don't care," we're fine with that. He just has to not care somewhere else. If you want to sleep around with a woman who is not your wife and bring your girlfriend to church while your wife sits on the other side of church, we're going to drag your butt out of here and tell you and your girlfriend that if you don't repent, you're not welcome here. Your wife and your children will find this to be a safe place. You, on the other hand, will get turned over to Satan for the destruction of your flesh in the hopes that you might repent. Does this mean we're going to lose members? I don't care about losing members. I'm going to die. I'm not building this thing on me.

Here are some more things elders do. We pray for the sick, as the Bible commands us to do in James 5. We lay our hands on them and pray for the sick. And we handle any accusations made against our pastors or elders biblically. You can bring a charge against an elder in the church. It just has to be done like the Bible says it should be done. And then we will receive those, look at those and decide on those. That's a fine issue. We are not perfect men. In fact, on more than one occasion, we've drawn up a statement, we've drawn up a plan of action and have rolled it down to the staff and had the staff go, "We don't like that," only to pull it back up and work on it some more and get more feedback from them. We let you do things that our constitution doesn't say we have to do. You vote on elders. The constitution doesn't say we have to do that. Why did we do that? Because you have to say, "I trust these guys." If you don't trust these guys, then we're in trouble.

Let me end with this. Are you a wolf? Then you need to repent. It only ends one way. And maybe that's a year from now, maybe it's two years from now or longer, but it ends with you getting shot. Are you weak? Welcome to the club. It's in that weakness that God will show His strength as He uses weak people to bring glory to Himself. Have you drifted theologically? When you talk about God, do you say, "Well, I think. . ." a lot? Then plug in and do life. Belong, don't just come. My hope is that all of us might grow into the fullness of the head of Jesus Christ and after our forty year run, we'll still be focused on the cross of Jesus Christ, the gospel of our great God and we might continue to see man and women, by the hundreds if not thousands, professing faith in Him. May we continue to give away tons of money like we do. May

we continue to believe that God is saving among all nations, and may we continue to believe He'll save your next door neighbor if you'll open up your mouth. God help us.

Let's pray. "Father, I thank You for these men and women. And I thank You for an opportunity to come in and let the Bible press on us a little bit. For those who are scheming and taking advantage of Your sheep, I pray that You would convict them. For those who have been in the kiddie pool for decades, I pray that You would stir up our hearts and minds towards you. God, we just want to enter into a time of responding to all these things, that You love us and accept despite our shortcomings and failures, by doing what saints have done for thousands of years, which is sing the truth to You, explain the truth back to You through song, to raise our hands to You, to clap to You, to worship You as the one true living God who has loved us, who has protected us, who has given us shepherds to keep watch over our souls. Help us. We need You. It's for You beautiful name. Amen."

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