

Paul had a specific goal in rehearsing with the elders his prior labors at Ephesus. Going forward they would have to fulfill their calling without him, but he could continue on with them through his example and instruction. They had witnessed his life and ministry in service to the gospel and they needed to carry on that work in his absence. Paul sought this meeting to exhort and admonish them, but for the purpose of encouraging and strengthening them for the challenges they were going to face. Ever the faithful shepherd of Christ's flock, Paul was here tending to his fellow shepherds. Paul knew what lay ahead for the Ephesian church and he wanted its leaders to be prepared. The gravity of the threat is evident in the fact that Paul chose to make it the focal point of this final meeting even though he'd addressed it throughout his three years in Ephesus (20:31). The danger to the church remained, and therefore so did the need to continue warning of it.

No doubt Paul lamented having to use his time with the elders in this way, especially since his admonition hit so close to home (ref. v. 30). His words were as difficult for them to hear as they were for him to speak, and the finality of the occasion must have made them all the more awkward and uncomfortable. But for all the difficulty, Paul had never shrunk back from declaring to them anything that was profitable (v. 20), and he wasn't about to start now. They needed to hear his warning, and he issued it to them in its two constituent parts.

- 1) The first pertained to them personally and to the discharge of their ministry (20:28). The gravity of their calling and responsibility resided not in the fact that they were the recognized overseers in Christ's body at Ephesus, but that their appointment was by divine ordination: *The Holy Spirit Himself had appointed them overseers.*

Neither Paul nor Luke explained how the Spirit did this, but the broader scriptural text indicates that He appoints men through His illumining and guiding work in the Church as the saints seek, through prayer and patient consideration, to identify the men God is raising up. In a word, when the Church orders and administers its life with the mind of Christ – the “mind” which itself is communicated and nurtured by the Spirit – its perceptions and determinations are effectively those of the Spirit Himself.

The Holy Spirit set apart these men as overseers, and their work of oversight involved first and foremost their obligation to oversee themselves: “*Be on guard for yourselves...*” (20:28a). In context this verb refers to a sober and careful attentiveness – in the first instance, one directed toward themselves. Paul was warning these elders to “take heed” to themselves, but not as some form of self-fixation. Self-oversight isn't “navel-gazing,” but discerning and disciplined vigilance regarding one's own soul and life. *Indeed, self-preoccupation renders a man just as susceptible to the threat Paul predicted as does carelessness and dissipation:* Both equally distract a person from the proper spiritual self-concern that serves to shield him from deception, error and harm.

In the case of overseers, failure to oversee their own souls destroys their ability to oversee Christ's flock. In the first place, a man who lacks the capacity and skill to oversee himself does not possess them with respect to others. But even where such capability is present, the failure to properly employ it in personal oversight leads to the same failure regarding others.

The most obvious reason is that a man who is negligent toward himself will be so toward others. But there is another reason that isn't so immediately evident: An overseer's failure to oversee himself results in personal spiritual decline and dissolution which inevitably strip him of his ability to rightly and faithfully oversee those under his charge. Many think of this forfeiture in terms of the overseer's compromised reputation and credibility – his no longer being above reproach (1 Timothy 3:1ff; Titus 1:5ff), but it has a more profound dimension implicating the man himself.

Overseers – as all Christians – who fail to safeguard their souls and properly govern their lives will experience an insidious, steady decline in their spiritual vitality that eventually leaves them empty and incapacitated, having nothing to give to others.

- 2) Overseers must first look to themselves, but with the goal of fulfilling their charge to oversee those whom Christ has entrusted to them. Overseers have a duty, but it is important to note that every Christian is ultimately responsible for governing himself. Elders cannot “keep watch” over a person's soul in the way that the individual himself can and must; no one knows the things of a man but the spirit of the man within him. Overseers fulfill their role when they act as *shepherds* of Christ's flock (20:28b), and shepherds are responsible for leading, feeding, protecting and otherwise tending the sheep – not micro-managing them or seeking to become their conscience. No person can live the Christian life for another.

Shepherds are care-givers, but as under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd. This means that every arena of their care is centered in the ministration of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ – that is, the *word of the gospel*. So the Ephesian elders were to “be on guard for all the flock,” but with the sober recognition that their shepherding included protecting them from a particularly dangerous threat – one that could only be met and defeated by discerning devotion to the gospel.

- f. Paul's language might seem to indicate two separate threats, but they are actually one. The distinction pertains only to how the threat finds its presence in the Church. In the one instance, it enters from the outside; in the other, it arises from within. This threat comes in the form of human beings – men Paul calls *wolves* in keeping with his metaphor of a sheepfold. These individuals scatter and devour Christ's flock, and they do so with their *words*. Whether as formally recognized teachers or influential voices, their speech serves to undermine and desolate the Church by cultivating confusion, error, division and discord.

Because such men are wolves among the sheep, the only way they can prevail is by *deception* – by appearing as one of the flock. Sometimes this deception is conscious and willful; other times the “wolf” sincerely believes himself to be one of Christ’s flock. Both deceive the flock, but the latter does so as one who is also *self-deceived*. This makes him more dangerous because he is less discernable; he is able to operate within the flock without even the slightest hint of pretence.

The self-deceived “wolf” poses a more insidious threat to the flock than the willful one, and the same is true of the one that arises from within the flock. The reason is that a person entering a body of believers from the outside is automatically subject to the congregation’s scrutiny. He cannot get close without being observed, and he won’t be granted access until he has been examined. But this is not the case with the “insider.” The flock isn’t wary of him because he’s already recognized as one of them. The saints have afforded him their confidence and trust and so are more susceptible to his influence.

- g. Paul’s description indicates that this sort of individual frequently attains a leadership position in the Church. This is not unexpected, given that the “wolf” uses his *words* to deceive and destroy. Men who are skilled with words and rhetoric are able to influence others and so situate themselves in places of authority. This relationship between speech and authority isn’t itself evil, for God has ordained that His shepherds should be “*apt to teach*” (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7-9 with Ephesians 4:11-13). The spoken word is both central and critical to the Church’s oversight and nurture, but for that very reason it is also highly susceptible to misuse: *That which is necessary for leading Christ’s people toward Him can also act to lead them away from Him*. And where a man’s speech leads others away from Christ, it inevitably – if unintentionally – leads them toward **him**. So it would be at Ephesus: Those Paul was warning about would use their words to “*speak perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them*” (20:30).

A couple of observations about this statement are crucially important:

- 1) The first pertains to the nature of such perverse speech. Heretical teaching immediately comes to mind, and in a certain, very specific sense this approaches Paul’s meaning. Paul was indeed referring to words and instruction that run counter to the gospel, but not in the way Christians naturally suppose. Most believers associate false teaching and the notion of *heresy* with specific, discrete doctrinal or theological constructs that deviate from the biblical text. So, for instance, a “heretic” is a person who denies the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the bodily resurrection, justification by faith, etc. Heresy can certainly take such an overt form, but Paul was warning about a deviation that is far more subtle.

The Greek word *heresy* connotes that which is distinct and set apart, and so often denotes a particular sect or party. With respect to doctrine, it refers to ideas which deviate – that are distinct – from an accepted norm.

Thus the notion of heresy doesn't apply directly to the threat Paul was addressing. "Perverse things" can indeed denote false doctrine or teaching that falls outside of accepted biblical truth, but that wasn't Paul's concern at this point. Paul's adjective (*perverse*) refers to an entity that has become misshapen or corrupted in some way. *The thing itself remains intact and identifiable, but it has the effect of creating a false or contrary conception in the mind of the one observing or considering it.* In this instance of perverse speech, the ideas are misshapen in the mind of the hearer and he responds accordingly. And so, whereas false doctrine involves competing, contrary ideas, "perverse things" involve ideas that result in a contrary effect; the point of divergence ("heresy") is found in the conclusion drawn from an idea or teaching rather than in two divergent ideas themselves.

In this context Paul wasn't warning these elders about competing doctrines, but about notions and ideas whose promotion serves to disrupt and distract the saints and ultimately move them away from "the simplicity of their devotion to Christ."

Orthodox doctrine can secure this outcome just as surely as false doctrine; all that is needed for this to occur is that a particular idea or teaching have the effect of displacing Christ Himself as the object of true concern and devotion. In doctrine as well as practice, men are always vulnerable to the seduction of having a form of godliness while actually denying its true power (ref. 2 Timothy 3:1-5). They are ever ready to direct their devotion to *doctrine* (teaching about Christ), *practice* (conduct emulating Christ) or *men* (representatives of Christ) rather than to Christ Himself.

This dynamic gets to the very heart of the biblical notion of *antichrist*. For "antichrist" refers, not to that which directly or overtly opposes Christ, but that which stands alongside or in the place of Christ. This is the reason the Scripture treats "antichrist" first as the principle which defines the estranged world's relationship to God, and only secondarily as a particular individual (cf. 1 John 2:15-26, 4:1-3; 2 John 1-7). The "spirit of antichrist" is the *spirit of religion*; in their alienated state, all men are "antichrist" for the same reason that they are magicians: Enslaved within their own estranged minds, they cannot help but perceive and interact with God and His truth through the lens of themselves and their own self-interest. To the natural mind, Christ Himself is not the end, but rather the means to an end.

It's precisely because this dynamic is the property of the natural mind that it continues to threaten Christ's Church. The Scripture repeatedly calls Christians to *repentance* – to set their minds on things above; to take their thoughts captive to Christ; to employ His mind in living out their lives in Him, and this exhortation highlights the truth that Christ's life and likeness aren't yet perfected in any of His own (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:1-14). Every Christian must yet contend with "natural-mindedness."

And because natural-mindedness continues to confront Christ's people, they continue to be vulnerable to "perverse things." As much as they might be carried away by false doctrine, they are far more susceptible to being misled through a wrongful – a *natural* – perception of the meaning and implications of doctrines and ideas that are themselves true.

- 2) The second observation pertains to the goal of this perverse speaking. At first glance it might appear that these deceivers are bent on the destruction or dissolution of Christ's Church, but this isn't the case; such men would be immediately unmasked as wolves. Their goal isn't to obliterate Christ's Church, but to gain personal power in and through it. They don't want to eliminate Christ, but to effectively supplant Him (John 10:1-15). As wolves they scatter and devour Christ's flock, but only as a byproduct of their true design. Their goal isn't dispersion, but transference; they seek to bring Christ's Church under their own lordship. *What these men seek is a personal following, and they attempt to realize it by creating a new consensus within the body of believers (20:30b).*

The individuals Paul was warning about don't promote ungodliness or even heretical doctrine per se (though some might hold to certain doctrinal errors). Nor do they promote themselves as the proper object of devotion in the place of Christ. Their success depends upon deception, and this sort of presentation would immediately expose them as wolves. Whether entering from the outside or arising from within, these men devastate Christ's flock by appearing to be sheep among the rest of the fold. Like Absalom, they seek to transfer the kingdom to themselves, and their weapon is a veiled appeal to the natural thinking of the unvigilant and undisciplined. They woo the sheep with their "smooth and flattering" speech, thus devastating the Church by "*drawing away the disciples after them*" (cf. 2 Samuel 15:1-6 with Romans 16:17-18; cf. also 2 Peter 2:1ff).

Paul would not see these elders again, and the finality of this meeting added urgency to his warning. He knew what lay ahead for the church at Ephesus because he discerned the dynamics of the Church's existence in this world. Though Christ's Church is the colony of heaven – the beginning of God's new creation, it awaits its consummate glory. It hasn't yet realized the fullness of its perfection in the new Adam, and it exists in a world that still sets itself against the Lord and His Christ. And so, while Paul directed his words to a particular set of leaders overseeing a particular local congregation, his admonition to the Ephesians is his charge to every church in every place and generation.

Paul recognized what was coming to the Ephesian church because he understood that the kingdom of God in the present age is a kingdom under assault. The saints at Ephesus would indeed face the threat he warned of, and they would not escape untouched. Neither three years of ceaseless, tearful admonition (20:31), nor a climactic reminder that day at Miletus, nor Timothy's faithful ministry would prevent the Ephesian church from losing its first love (1 Timothy 1:1-11; Revelation 2:1-5). Paul knew that wolves would succeed in drawing away disciples, but he also was fully convinced that God, through the word of His grace in Christ, would prevail to build His Church (20:32; cf. Matthew 16:13-18).