

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## GUARDING THE FLOCK

Acts 20:29-32

By

Steven J. Cole

December 16, 2001

© Steven J. Cole, 2001

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

December 16, 2001  
Acts Lesson 54

## Guarding the Flock Acts 20:29-32

We live in a day of tolerance where, even in the church, good feelings take priority over sound doctrine. If you dare to question whether someone's teaching is biblically orthodox, you will be labeled a "heresy hunter" or, even worse, a "fundamentalist," in the same league with the Ayatollah or the Taliban!

A few years ago, *Christianity Today* (5/16/94, pp. 38-40) ran a news article titled, "Hunting for Heresy." It told of how prominent evangelical authors, Karen Burton Mains and Tony Campolo, had separately come under fire because of some of their books. Even giving her a lot of grace, Mains was into some weird Jungian psychology and introspective nonsense that had nothing to do with biblical Christianity. Campolo caught flak because of urging the church to overcome its "homophobia" and to "work to stop discrimination that denies homosexuals their civil rights." He also said that many Christian homosexuals had been born with that orientation. And critics found problems with his views "on the environment and the sacredness of animals."

In spite of the fact that both Mains' and Campolo's writings, at the very least, called for biblical critique, the flavor of the news article was that those criticizing them were a handful of self-appointed judges, carrying on a witch-hunt. The implication was that we are not acting with the love of Christ if we call into question teaching from a professing evangelical that may be false.

But on the contrary, as Charles Simeon said, "To warn men of their danger is the kindest office of love" (*Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 14:520). If false teachers are like savage wolves that do not spare the flock (20:29), then we certainly are not loving God's people if we fail to warn them about specific false teachers or teaching that may destroy their souls. Just as our President has called our nation to be on a high state of alert against terrorist attacks during this holiday season, so Paul calls these Ephesian elders to be on the alert against the dangers of false teachers. And, he gives the antidote to false teaching, namely, to stay cen-

tered on God and the word of His grace. Thus a major responsibility of elders is to guard the flock of God in these two ways:

Elders must guard the flock by tenderly warning against false teachers, and by staying centered on God and the word of His grace.

1. Elders must guard the flock by tenderly warning against false teachers (20:29-31).

To do this task well requires at least four things of elders:

- A. To warn against false teachers, elders must be doctrinally knowledgeable.

To spot a false teacher, an elder must know what constitutes sound doctrine and what goes outside permissible limits. He must know which truths are essential to the Christian faith, and which issues allow room for disagreement among true believers. To do this, an elder needs to have some knowledge of the great doctrinal controversies that have been debated and resolved through church councils down through the centuries.

There are some core doctrines, where there can be no room for tolerance. These include the inspiration and authority of the Bible; the Triune nature of God; the person and work of Christ, including His absolute deity, His sinless humanity, His substitutionary death on the cross, His bodily resurrection, ascension, and second coming; and, the gospel, that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We cannot give an inch on these truths, or we compromise the Christian faith.

Other areas of doctrine are important, in that they affect the spiritual health of believers, but not essential for salvation. These would include a person's view of God's sovereign grace in salvation; baptism; Bible prophecy; and, the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. These doctrines are worth debating, but we should not label those who disagree with us as heretics or false teachers, unless they insist on dangerously unbiblical views in these areas.

For example, to hold to infant baptism is not heresy (although I disagree with that view). But if a person teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation, he has crossed into the realm of heresy. A person can be premillennial, post-millennial, or amillennial without

being heretical. But I know a man who teaches that Jesus has already returned (in A.D. 70), and thus there is no future return of Christ. As I understand it, he is promoting heresy. Some of the “word-faith” teachers, who teach that God must obey our commands, are clearly heretical. But the point is, elders must have a handle on biblical and theological issues so that they can spot such false teachers and warn the flock of the dangers.

- B. To warn against false teachers, elders must be alert to the insidious connection between heresy and sin.

Paul alludes to the sinfulness of the heretics by calling them “savage wolves” that will not spare the flock. They will speak perverse things, twisting verses out of context or taking something that is true and stretching it to an unbiblical extreme. Behind their false teaching is a selfish motive, to draw away the disciples after them. They want to gain a following for themselves, not for Christ. Thus pride is at the root of almost all heresy. The false teacher has not humbled his heart before the majesty of God.

John Calvin points this out in his comments on verse 30 (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], Acts, 2:258-259). He says that almost all corruptions of doctrine flow from pride and selfish ambition. The pure and sincere handling of Scripture leads to Jesus Christ alone having the preeminence. But false teachers are invariably “addicted to themselves,” and thus study to advance their own glory, thereby robbing Christ of His rightful glory. In 1 Timothy 1:19, Paul refers to two heretics in Ephesus, Hymenaeus and Alexander, who had rejected faith and a good conscience and thus had suffered shipwreck in regard to the faith. In his commentary on this text (p. 46), Calvin observes, “All the errors that have existed in the Christian Church from the beginning, proceeded from this source, that in some persons, ambition, and in others, covetousness, extinguished the true fear of God. A bad conscience is, therefore, the mother of all heresies ...”

We do not know whether or not Hymenaeus and Alexander were amongst the elders that Paul is addressing in our text. But he warns these elders that the danger of heresy does not just come from outside the church. Even from among themselves, men would arise, speaking perverse things, and drawing away the disciples after them. Paul is not just warning the ignorant or untaught.

He is warning men that he has personally admonished and taught for three years. This means that if we think that we are not vulnerable to the danger of false teaching, we are most vulnerable, because we do not understand the perversity of our own hearts!

Being a wolf is a matter of the heart, not of outward appearance. That's why Jesus warned about wolves that come in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). It takes a fair amount of discernment for a sheep to recognize that this isn't another sheep; it's a wolf! Paul calls them "angels of light," disguised as "servants of righteousness." But then he adds, "whose end will be according to their deeds" (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Their evil deeds expose them for what they really are, false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing, who are out for personal glory and gain, not for the glory of Christ.

In his book, *The Cruelty of Heresy* ([Morehouse Publishing, 1994], p. 17, italics his), C. F. Simmons Allison writes, "We are susceptible to heretical teachings because, in one form or another, they nurture and reflect the *way we would have it be* rather than the *way God has provided*, which is infinitely better for us." For false teachers, the motive may be to gain a following in order to further their own love of self. But for those that follow them, the motive may be that they do not like what the Bible teaches about God or about sin. Perhaps they want an excuse to indulge in their favorite sin. So they reject sound doctrine and embrace teaching that allows them to continue in their sin. For example, to justify immorality, a person must reject the notion of a holy God who will judge all sin. So he invents a "God of love," who would not judge anyone. But he does so to his own ultimate destruction (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Thus elders must first of all be on guard for themselves (20:28), that their hearts are not in rebellion against God, that they are not being seduced by pride or self-love to seek a following. And then they must be on guard for the flock. False teachers and those that follow them invariably are people who have not judged their own pride, greed, ambition, or lust.

C. To warn against false teachers, elders must keep in mind the destructive results of false teaching.

False teachers do not spare the flock. What people believe has consequences. The picture is that of a wounded, devastated flock,

with many of the sheep killed, as the wolves rapaciously feed on them. Usually, wolves go after the lambs or the already wounded, especially those that may be straying from the flock. Perhaps a person makes a profession of faith and begins to come to the church. But then someone wrongs him or he goes through a difficult trial, and he does not understand how to submit to God's purpose in the trial. He begins to distance himself from the fellowship, nursing his bitterness toward God and toward the church. He is a target for savage wolves! It is in the context of enduring trials that Peter warns that Satan is like a lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* ([Zondervan, 1970], p. 37), Phillip Keller says that he has heard of two dogs that killed 292 sheep in a single night of unbridled slaughter. One morning at dawn, he found nine of his choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead after a cougar had attacked the flock in the night. From then on, he slept with a loaded rifle and flashlight near his bed. At the least sound, he would leap from bed and dash out into the night to protect his sheep. That is a picture of the job of godly elders. Because the flock is precious to God, since He purchased it with the blood of His own Son (20:28), elders must guard it from spiritual wolves that would destroy and wound the flock, especially the lambs. Allison's title is true: Heresy is cruel!

D. To warn against false teachers, elders must clothe their warnings in love.

Paul points these elders to his own example of faithfully admonishing them with tears during the time he was with them. "Admonish" is a word that points to correction. Paul had the courage to point out to these men where they were wrong, and to point them toward a more thorough submission to Jesus Christ. But he admonished them with tears, showing his compassion and concern for these men. Paul does not mean that he was always literally weeping, "but that his whole ministry was something more than a cold and heartless exhibition of the truth, being warmed and animated by the tenderest affection towards them, and a heartfelt desire for their salvation" (J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [Klock & Klock], p. 715).

I read about a church that had dismissed the pastor and gotten a new one. Someone asked a member why they had gotten rid of the old one. "Because he kept telling the people that they were going to hell." The questioner asked, "What does the new pastor say?" "Oh, he keeps telling them that they're going to hell, too." "Well, what's the difference?" "The difference is that when the first one said it, he sounded as if he was glad about it. But when the second one says it, you know that it is breaking his heart."

I think that that may have been the problem in the *Christianity Today* article that I mentioned earlier, although the author never stated it. The critics were probably right in what they were criticizing, but wrong in the spirit of how they did it. In fact, in a subsequent issue, Karen Mains has a letter to the editor in which she commends the Christlike grace that Dr. Joe Stowell of Moody Bible Institute had extended to her during her season of criticism (7/18/94, p. 10). I hope that Dr. Stowell did not gloss over the errors that Mains was promoting, but that he offered his correction with grace and compassion, recognizing that he, too, is a fellow sinner who may at some time need correction.

Thus a major task of elders is to guard the flock by tenderly warning against false teachers and their teaching. But if all they do is warn against false teaching, they will be out of balance. They also need the positive focus of God and His grace:

2. Elders must guard the flock by staying centered on God and His word of grace (20:32).

In taking leave of these men, Paul commends them to God and the word of His grace, which is able to build them up and to give them the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. God and His word of grace will keep the elders from falling into false teaching. By implication, as they keep the flock focused on God and His word of grace, the flock will be kept sound in the faith.

- A. Elders guard the flock by staying centered on God Himself.

As Allison states, "Faithfulness to correct doctrine and loyalty to the creeds is not the same thing as trust in the God whom the creeds describe" (*ibid.*, p. 65). We learn that about 30 years later, the

church at Ephesus actually fell into the trap of dead orthodoxy. In Revelation 2:2-4, the Lord Jesus indicts the church:

“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”

It is possible to be theologically correct and to be diligent to reprove false teachers and to guard the flock from error, but at the same time to lose our first, heartfelt love for the Lord Jesus! The point of studying theology is not to be able to set everyone straight with correct doctrine. The point is to encounter the living God who has revealed Himself in His Word, and to have our hearts properly humbled before His majesty.

In his introduction to Calvin’s *Institutes* ([Westminster Press], p. lii) editor John McNeill cites A. Mitchell Hunter (*The Teaching of John Calvin*), who says of Calvin, “Piety was the keynote of his character. He was a God-possessed soul. Theology was no concern to him as a study in itself; he devoted himself to it as a framework for the support of all that religion meant to him.” McNeill goes on to say that “in Calvin’s pages we are everywhere confronting God” (*ibid.*). He cites Calvin’s commentary on John, where he writes, “The Scriptures are to be read with the purpose of finding Christ there” (p. lvi).

Thus every elder should study theology so that he can know God in a deeper way. We must read and study all of God’s Word so that we do not get a humanly warped view of God. If we only camp on our favorite passages, we can get out of balance. God is loving, but He is also fearfully holy and just. He is absolutely sovereign, and yet He holds us accountable for our choices. He can use evil to accomplish His sovereign will, and yet He Himself is separate from all evil. He dwells in unapproachable light, and yet He invites us to draw near to His throne through the blood of Christ to receive grace for our needs. Stay centered on God Himself as revealed in His Word and you will not fall into false doctrine.

B. Elders guard the flock by staying centered on God's word of grace.

By "the word of His grace," Paul is referring first to the gospel, but then beyond to the whole of the written Word of God. That Word is a word of grace to every sinner. It begins with the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, and how they sinned and plunged the entire human race into sin, under God's righteous judgment. But even in that story, there is the word of grace, that from the woman's seed, one would come who would bruise the serpent's head. The narrative goes on to tell of God's gracious promise to Abraham, that from his seed, one would come who would bless all the nations of the earth. As the New Testament makes clear, Jesus Christ is that seed of Abraham. God sent His own Son to bear the just penalty that we all deserved for our sin. His sacrificial death is freely applied to every sinner who trusts in Him, apart from any merit or works. Thus the main message of the Bible is a word of God's grace.

Most doctrinal errors stem from a misunderstanding or a deliberate perversion of God's free grace. The Roman Catholic Church denies God's grace by mingling it with human works as necessary for justification. Legalism, the attempt either to justify or to sanctify oneself by works, is a perpetual error that seeps into the church (Galatians and Romans were written to confront this). Any system of righteousness through human effort or works glorifies man and feeds human pride. Thus Satan is always injecting such false teaching into the church.

But the doctrine of God's free grace glorifies Him alone and robs us of any ground for boasting (1 Cor. 1:26-31). Thus elders must understand, personally live by, and constantly teach God's word of grace.

That word is able to *build up* the saints (20:32), to strengthen them spiritually so that they can resist the schemes of the devil. It also can give them *the inheritance* among all those who are *sanctified*. The inheritance refers to the future fulfillment of all of God's promises of salvation to those that believe in Christ. It is only those who are sanctified, or holy, both in their standing before God (Gal. 3:18) and in their daily walk (Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5), who have an inheritance in God's kingdom. Thus elders must guard themselves

first, to make sure that they are living daily by God's sanctifying grace. And, then they must guard the flock by leading all that profess to know Christ into a daily walk where they experience His sanctifying grace.

### Conclusion

Many in our day say that doctrine is not important or, even worse, that it is harmful. Experience is what we seek. But experience that is not based on sound doctrine is not godly experience.

Years ago, a seminary professor told his class at the beginning of the semester that they would work together on one major project during that semester. They would move systematically through the New Testament to categorize every area of truth and determine how many times each area is addressed. Their goal was to find what one thing is emphasized more than any other in the New Testament. When they completed the project, they were amazed to see that warning against false doctrine is emphasized more than any other thing, even more than love, unity, and experience (Renald Showers, in "Israel My Glory," [April/May, 1995], pp. 24-25). Apparently God thinks that it matters greatly what you believe!

Charles Spurgeon, in the heat of the "Down-grade" controversy, when liberal theology was being tolerated by the Baptist Union, wrote, "Those who do away with Christian doctrine are, whether they are aware of it or not, the worst enemies of Christian living. The godliness of Puritanism will not long survive the sound doctrine of Puritanism. The coals of orthodoxy are necessary to the fire of piety" (cited by David Kingdon, in *A Marvelous Ministry* [Soli Deo Gloria], p. 128). The author who cites him goes on to point out how Spurgeon realized that a decline in vital godliness would result from a departure from the doctrines of the depravity of the sinner, the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the absolute necessity of regeneration and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

So elders (I'm preaching to myself here), guard yourself first, and then guard the flock by tenderly warning against false teachers and by staying centered on God and the word of His grace!

## Discussion Questions

1. How can we know which doctrines are worth fighting about and which ones we can be tolerant of different views?
2. Someone says, "They will know that we are Christians by our love, not by our doctrinal correctness." Your response?
3. A man once told me that if I claimed to be right on a doctrinal matter, I was being proud and judgmental of those who did not agree, and thus was in sin. How would you answer him?
4. Many err by thinking that God's grace means permission to be sloppy about our sin. What does His grace mean and why does it not lead to sloppy living (see Romans 6; Titus 2:11-15).

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2001, All Rights Reserved.