

ACTS 20:28-32

THE DEVIL IN PEW NUMBER SEVEN¹

“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. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”²

Whether they accept it or not, leaders within a church are assigned responsibility that is not often spelled out in the bylaws of any congregation I have ever served. Whether deacons or elders, or whether they are simply looked up to as mature believers, those who provide leadership within a congregation bear an awesome responsibility before the Lord. The duty in view is as necessary as any given them in scripture or imposed by the membership—***Be on a constant lookout for trouble and troublemakers within the congregation***—watch for devils in the pew. A writer, from whom I purloined the idea for this particular message, refers to the devil in the pew as a DIP.³ It is an appropriate designation as the insidious individual is prepared even to use violence to achieve his, or her, desires. Theirs is an all-out assault against righteousness, usually focused on removing God’s appointed overseer.

When he met them at Miletus, the Apostle Paul told the Ephesian leaders that they could expect deadly threats to the survival of the congregation; and these threats would arise from two sources—without and within [see **ACTS 20:29 ff.**]. The former they would have naturally anticipated; it is no secret that the evil one wants to destroy the churches, neutralising their effectiveness. Moreover, it is a given that Satan will use any means necessary to accomplish that nefarious goal. It was the latter source of danger—enemies arising from within the assembly itself—that must have surely have surprised the elders. Had those leaders been as trusting and naive as many of us within contemporary churches, they would have expected all the worshipers to be loving and gracious, faithful and trusting, and would have been blindsided by tyrants arising from their own number. So, Scripture warns us to be alert, to be watchful in both directions.

Keeping watch against such danger is not the job of the pastor alone. Granted, he is charged with this responsibility; but in a congregation of hundreds or even thousands, he needs eyes and ears other than his own. This multiplication of watching must begin even when the congregation is small. The pastor needs the deacons and Sunday School teachers—note that these individuals must be godly and mature—to keep their eyes and ears open, to remain ever vigilant. Plainly put, they are to watch out for the devils in the midst of the congregation.

¹ The title for this message is shamelessly adopted from the book written by Rebecca Nichols Alonzo, **The Devil in Pew Number Seven** (Tyndale House, Carol Stream, IL 2010)

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³ Joe McKeever, “Find the Devil in Pew Number Seven,” The Worldview Church, <http://www.worldviewchurch.org/insight/1092-find-the-devil-in-pew-number-seven->, accessed 12 January 2012; This article can now be found at: Joe McKeever, “Leaders: Find the Devil in Pew Number Seven,” December 2, 2011, <http://www.joemckeeper.com/mt/archives/001725.html>, accessed 30 August, 2012

Rebecca relates the story of how her father went to pastor a small Holiness congregation in rural North Carolina. Everything about the church appeared normal; the people were warm and gracious, they built a new parsonage and they appreciated Pastor Nichols' messages. There was, however, one serious problem. The devil sat on the last row, in pew number seven—and he ran this church.

Mr. Horry Watts, richest man in the county, lived across the street from the church. From his throne on the back row, he called the shots. The oddest thing about that is that the old man was not even a member of the congregation; in fact, he was not even a professing believer. It is a truism that when we tolerate just a little bit of error, even for a brief period, it has a way of insinuating itself into the fabric of life and becoming permanent. Evil that is not confronted is at first tolerated, then ignored, and at last, embraced. In time, wickedness that is left unexposed grows in influence over and the righteous ultimately become comfortable with in its presence.

Horry Watts' power and influence stemmed from his wealth and from personal intimidation over individuals and through his wife. Mrs. Watts lorded it over a women's Sunday School class and was the church clerk/treasurer. No one but the Watts knew the church's finances. There were no treasurer's reports and no one was allowed to look at the books.

Soon after his arrival, Pastor Nichols began to exert leadership within the congregation. The members voted to replace Mrs. Watts as teacher and elected another clerk/treasurer. When the time came to turn over the books to the new officer, she handed the clerk a new chequebook with the present bank balance listed—nothing else. No one ever knew what was done with the church money during her tenure.

From this point on, Horry Watts dedicated himself to getting rid of the preacher. He began with anonymous notes and phone calls. Soon, he graduated to heavier stuff—shooting up the mailbox and setting off dynamite near the house. Over a space of several years, despite law enforcement authorities becoming involved, the old man and his hired thugs continued their reign of terror. This outrage against the Faith culminated with a gunman entering the parsonage as the family sat down to the evening meal, shooting the pastor twice and killing his wife. The shooter was arrested and sentenced to life in prison, but Horry Watts was not implicated.

An FBI agent eventually put together a case against Horry Watts, charging him with conspiracy to detonate an explosive device and conspiracy to violate First Amendment and Fifth Amendment rights of the pastor. Watts changed his plea from “not guilty” to “nolo contendere” after a man testified that Watts had paid him to run over the preacher with his automobile. Watts was sent to prison, but served only one year before release on compassionate grounds.

After the death of his wife and recovering from his own wounds, Pastor Nichols was no longer able to function, forcing his resignation as pastor. In time, he suffered a nervous breakdown, eventually requiring hospitalisation and heavy medication; he died at the age of 46.

I've known a few of these devils who occupied the pews of churches I served. Unlike Horry Watts, their names sounded pedestrian—Frank, or Leo, or Peter, or Bob; each alike, however, assumed their job was to rule the congregation. Almost inevitably, that meant both opposing the preacher and gathering a cabal to join them in promoting their depraved labours. Their opposition degenerated into a reaction both personal and vicious. There was little doubt that the bitter calumny that marked their lives could turn physical, given opportunity.

Whilst I could, and perhaps even should, inveigh against such evil resident among the churches, I want to examine a portion of the Word to encourage the people of God to take ownership of responsibility to guard against such evil. I want to equip the people of God to resist evil and to protect the servants whom God assigns to serve among His people.

INFILTRATION — Underscore a sad truth in your mind: your congregation will be infiltrated by evil people. This is not supposition, mere theory; this is fact. If the insinuation of wickedness was overt, blatant, we would recognise it and resist it, or we would at the least flee from it. However, those who perpetuate wickedness within the assembly of the righteous appear sweet, reasonable, kind and even gentle; they are well-known and have assumed a place of honour and respect among the faithful. Frankly, were we to challenge them, asking the motive behind their actions, they would argue that their purpose was pure and their motive noble. Nevertheless, the ruin they leave in their wake and the injury they perpetuate causes genuine harm to God's people, scattering the flock and dispersing them across the face of the earth.

Listen to the final warning the Apostle delivered to the elders of Ephesus. "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" [ACTS 20:29,30]. Take a moment to inspect this cautionary statement more fully.

In the first place, Paul was addressing the elders of one particular congregation; however, his words are directed to each congregation that would follow the Master after that time. Indeed, the elders are charged with protecting the flock. However, did you notice that the elders are first responsible to guard themselves? If the elders fail to guard themselves, they will not be capable of guarding the flock. Against what should an elder be on guard?

Elders must guard against growing tolerant toward evil. The Apostle was compelled to warn Timothy against Alexander the coppersmith, who perpetuated great harm against himself [see 2 TIMOTHY 4:14, 15]. An evil person who would harm the Faith at one point will assail the righteous at another. To tolerate evil is to identify with that which is under divine condemnation. James has warned all who would follow the Master, "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" [JAMES 4:4].

James' warning anticipates a similar caution that was later penned by the Apostle John. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" [1 JOHN 2:15-17].

Elders are particularly susceptible to wanting to be liked and thus adjusting the message to avoid hurting feelings. Though we who are elders must never become hateful or allow ourselves to be mean-spirited, we must train ourselves to speak the truth in love.

Elders must guard against giving approval—tacitly or implicitly—of unrighteous acts or attitudes. Tolerating evil is the initial step to approving wickedness. Do you imagine that professing Christians suddenly woke up one day and said, "I think I'll disown the Bible and embrace wickedness?" Familiarity with people who denied the Faith led the churches to embrace that which the Bible proscribes.

I recall a denominational assembly in which I had presented a resolution on behalf of the congregation I was pastoring at the time. The resolution requested that the denomination refuse to set apart to sacred office any individual who was prepared to bless same-sex couples as married. I was openly assailed by one of the most prominent pastors within that group and admonished by several denominational leaders as hateful. They had become so inured to that which the Bible condemned that they were no longer able to stand boldly with the Word. It was an example of the biblical truth that "Bad company ruins good morals" [1 CORINTHIANS 15:33].

Elders must guard against becoming lax about spending time with the Living God.

Whenever an elder begins to spend more time in the affairs of this dying world than he does in the study of the Word, he is beginning a retreat from the task he was assigned and he will shortly cease to feed the flock. Recall Paul's admonition to Timothy, "No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules" [2 TIMOTHY 2:4, 5].

Elders must guard against growing complacent about bold preaching. Again, the Apostle warned Timothy "This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme" [1 TIMOTHY 1:18-20]. Hymenaeus and Alexander appear to have been two church leaders who had descended into wickedness, earning the unenviable distinction of being handed over to Satan by the Apostle.

When the elder has guarded himself, he is then prepared to watch over the flock of God. This is the reason he is called an overseer, bishop in older translations of the Bible. The elder has been made—made, and not elected—overseer by the Holy Spirit. His charge over which he watches is "the church of God"—that church having been purchased with God's own blood. It should not need to be said, but because of the doctrinal confusion evident within so much of professing Christendom, it is vital to point out that the charge the elders have received is not a charge over some undefined amorphous body, nor is their charge all of Christendom nor even to a denomination; the elders are appointed to a particular congregation. That congregation to which they are appointed is identified as "the church of God." In the strictest sense, each congregation where Christ Jesus reigns is THE church of God, and not A church of God.

What is the elders' role as overseers? Two portions of the Word in particular give us insight into the weighty charge elders have received. The first passage was written for the instruction of elders identified as belonging to the Diaspora. These are the instructions Peter issued to those who were shepherds of the flock in those trying times. "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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 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.'

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" [1 PETER 5:1-10].

According to this instruction, elders are to exercise oversight willingly, to avoid being domineering, to endeavour to be an example to the flock. They are to be humble before the Lord and to maintain watchfulness while resisting the adversary. They are to be prepared to suffer, if necessary, to preserve the Faith and to build up the faithful.

The second passage that we must consider is one which Paul wrote to Timothy. These are among his final words to be included in the canon of Scripture; as such, they take on significance beyond the superficial meaning. They are to be heeded. Here is what Paul wrote. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5].

The elder is charged before Christ Jesus who appoints His servants to this holy office to align himself fully, unapologetically with the Word of the True and Living God. Above all else, the elder is to be a preacher—a herald, a *kerux*! Paul would declare that he was appointed to be “a herald [and] an apostle” [1 TIMOTHY 2:7 HCSB]. Nor was this the only time he made this claim [see also 2 TIMOTHY 1:11 HCB]. The elder’s preaching is to be marked by readiness, by reproof, by rebuke and by exhortation. He is to be a teacher, even though he is assured that as the age nears its termination society will be distinguished by a marked increase of professing Christians who will not endure sound teaching. In fact, the godly elder will serve in an environment where people not only turn away from listening to the truth, but the churches will actively seek out people to say what they want to hear. In other words, the pulpit will be increasingly populated by hirelings who will say whatever they are paid to say.

Two additional points are pertinent to the matter at hand. First, *the role of the elder is not to make parishioners feel good about themselves*—his responsibility is to equip them for service while protecting them from assault both from within and without. He is not to treat sin as though it was a friend of grace; he is to confront sinful behaviour and sinful actions, exposing them as offensive to the True and Living God. If you are given to demanding that your pastor must be hale-fellow-well-met, prepared to pray before every turtle race and to bless the opening of every brewery, do not expect to grow in grace and in knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second point addresses a serious deficit in this day; *the elder is to be a herald of the message of life*; the elder is to be a preacher. His message is to declare what God directs him to say. That message, if it is grounded in the Word, will create the image of Christ in God’s people; as they heed the message delivered, the image of God’s own Son will be ever more clearly seen in each member. And if the elder fulfils his responsibility to preach the Word, he will irritate some who listen. Moreover, he will discover that he must spend ever more time in the Word in order to ensure that the flock is nourished and refreshed.

As an aside of some significance, I need to say for the benefit of those few individuals among the churches who complain that they pray for the preacher but they don’t like what he is saying, either they are ignorant of God’s answer to their prayers or they have been asking for the wrong thing! How can a sincere Christian ask for something and then reject it when God gives it? What sort of faith is that? What does such a negative reaction say about the faith of such people or about their obedience? PHILIPPIANS 4:6 instructs us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Here is the essence of that verse: **WORRY ABOUT NOTHING; PRAY ABOUT EVERYTHING; THANK GOD FOR ANYTHING.** Thanking God for anything must surely include the message that He sends through His spokesman. When we pray for the minister and for his message, we believe God has heard us and that what the man is preaching is what God sent.

ASSAULT — Because infiltration of the churches is certain, we may also be assured there will be continuing assaults against the Faith. Were such assaults solely from outside the congregation, we could anticipate the incursions and onslaughts the people of God are called to endure. However, the Apostle cautions that the assaults were coming from outside and from within the congregation of the Lord. “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” [ACTS 20:29, 30]. Paul warned of an ecclesiastical Pearl Harbor; we know neither the timing of the attack nor the particular form it will take.

Two truths may be easily overlooked. Paul speaks of those who will assail the churches as “fierce wolves.” The words in that Greek text are *lúkoι bareîs*. In my translation, the word *bareîs* is translated “fierce.” The word was frequently translated “serious” [e.g. ACTS 25:7], “weighty” [e.g. 2 CORINTHIANS 10:10] or “heavy” [e.g. MATTHEW 23:4]. The connotation conveys the meaning of that which is significant, momentous or important. Reviewing Paul’s warning to the elders, it seems apparent that he was cautioning that there would enter among the churches individuals who would present themselves and who would be received as important; however, inwardly, these individuals will possess the character of fierce wolves; they will not spare the flock. The apostolic warning is that these individuals would arise from within the flock, even from within the eldership itself. In fact, it would be precisely because they had the cloak of legitimacy of an elder that they would be heeded! Paul warned that they would speak “twisted things” and that they would “draw disciples after them.”

In this respect, the Apostle’s warning anticipates that of John and of Peter. Near the end of the first century, the Apostle of Love would warn, “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” [1 JOHN 2:18, 19]. These destroyers are called “antichrists.”

Peter was also aware of the danger such individuals posed to the churches; he warned in his final missive, “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” [2 PETER 2:1-3]. These individuals would introduce “destructive heresies.”

That which John and Peter taught was first stated by the Master Himself. Jesus warned, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” [MATTHEW 7:15-20].

Inwardly, these are ravenous wolves. Focused only on their own agenda, they see the people of God as sheep for the slaughter; thus, they attack, wantonly destroying God’s heritage and leaving destruction and ruin in their wake. There are among the churches people who appear knowledgeable, noble, important, who will wreak havoc on the people of God. They may present themselves as teachers of the Word or as leaders within the congregation or they may be received as important people in the estimate of the assembly; however, they are rapacious.

Recently, a major Canadian denomination elevated to moderator of the denomination an individual who is living in open defiance of biblical morality. The great task facing this individual is to somehow staunch the hemorrhage of members from the churches of this denomination—a loss that has continued unabated for decades as the churches first doubted the Word of God and at last jettisoned the Word of God. They claim to be thoroughly modern in their outlook, but the theology (or lack of theology) sounds suspiciously like that first espoused in the Garden of Eden when the evil one asked our first mother, “Did God actually say...” [GENESIS 3:1].

It is bad enough when denominational leaders, seminary instructors and those wearing clerical garb insinuate twisted teachings into the fabric of the churches, but the more immediate danger to the churches are good people, influential people, who are seated in the pews who are prepared to tolerate a little bit of error. When the biblical message declared from the pulpit proves to be displeasing to these individuals, they push back, but not as one might suppose. Such individuals seem seldom willing to discuss their disagreements; they seek approval of their own views rather than understanding of what is taught. They begin to murmur, to gather a cabal about them, circling like a pack of dogs looking for opportunity to attack. In the process, they can destroy the flock and harm the cause of Christ in that region for many years to come.

DEFENSE — Paul wrote, “Be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” [ACTS 20:31, 32]. Paul stresses that it is because infiltration and assault are certain that the elders must be prepared; and they must equip the flock to respond as one.

You might well ask how this preparation for defence is to be accomplished. Paul says he modelled what is required so that the elders would know what to do. His primary service of preparation was through preaching the truths of God. In our text, Paul stresses that he admonished every one with tears for the entire time he was with them in Ephesus. He uses the Greek term *nouthetō* to describe his service to the Ephesians. This particular word carries the meaning of issuing a warning. Here are a few instances of the use of the word in Paul’s writings. “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:14]. Paul’s words were a warning, an admonition to the Corinthians. “We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:14]. Clearly, the Thessalonians were to warn those who were idle.

Here are a couple of other instances of the use of this word in the Apostle’s writings. “Him [that is, Christ Jesus] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” [COLOSSIANS 1:28]. Again, after providing instructions for how a follower of Christ should be industrious—engaged in gainful labour and exercising responsibility to provide for himself, the Apostle instructs the Thessalonian believers, “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” [2 THESSALONIANS 3:14, 15].

However, what is in view is not merely shaking the finger at unruly people; rather, the word connotes the idea of providing a corrective through sound instruction. For instance, Paul writes the Roman Christians, “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another” [ROMANS 15:14]. The entire congregation was to accept responsibility to teach one another!

The defence of the flock is a shared responsibility! Confronting evil is not a one-man show in which the sheep mill about and the shepherd fights valiantly against overwhelming odds. The pastor is indeed responsible to sacrifice himself for the flock; however, the members of the flock are to enter into the work of defence. Undoubtedly, the pastor must be prepared to confront wickedness, exposing evil when it attempts to insinuate itself into the congregation of the Lord. However, when an elder is attacked, how should the people of God respond? They must not stand back to see how matters will shake out; nor should they pretend nothing is wrong. Ultimately, the people of God must assume a shared responsibility to resist evil. This is nothing less than practical application of Paul's instruction, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" [1 TIMOTHY 5:19].

Joe McKeever, a retired Director of Missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans, has provided five "strong recommendations" for church leaders regarding tyrants who seek to infiltrate the congregation and harm the flock.⁴ I'm not suggesting they intend to harm the flock; but they are often so focused on their own ends that they do harm the people of God.

McKeever notes, **If the task of confronting evil is left to the pastor, you're sunk.** The preacher is the focus of the DIPS (devils in the pews); and the DIPS are counting on a passive congregation; anything the pastor does to stand up to the tyrants is considered self-serving by some, especially those who are either supportive of or intimidated by the DIPS. Being Christ like, the pastor will have an uncanny ability to absorb great amounts of pain and personal injury. He might choose to do nothing rather than do what some would interpret as retaliation. A prompt response from strong laypeople is in order if they will avert harm to the flock. To do nothing is almost certain to ensure that the church will be critically wounded, perhaps mortally.

Pastor McKeever then notes that there may be significant exceptions to the first rule. **There are rare occasions when the pastor can, and should, handle the issue alone.** Godly members of the assembly need to rely on the Spirit of God in order to know when such times are upon them. God will not lead you astray in this matter. I do not say that you should take counsel of your fears, but I do say that you must be sensitive to the leadership of the Lord and the continued viability and health of the congregation.

His third strong recommendation is, **No person should attempt to resolve this alone.** This is a good time to apply the ignored instruction of the Master. I say "ignored," because few churches actually appear to take seriously the instructions the Master gave in **MATTHEW 18:15-20**. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

McKeever suggests that because this is not specifically a conflict between the members approaching the DIP and themselves, at least two strong leaders should participate in this visit. If the matter is not resolved, then a larger, strong contingent should go the next time. His point is that because the potential for eternal damage is so great, this becomes a matter requiring immediate and forceful attention. The situation calls for unity and willingness to stand firm.

⁴ Joe McKeever, "Leaders: Find the Devil in Pew Number Seven," December 2, 2011, <http://www.joemckeeper.com/mt/archives/001725.html>, accessed 30 August, 2012

McKeever observes, **In the first visit, the leadership duo goes with a single question.** They ask the DIP the single question, “What is wrong?” They are not making charges; rather, they are seeking information. The DIP may feign ignorance, saying, “What do you mean?” They then tell their perception of what he is doing or share the reports they are hearing or say what they have seen and heard. Then, they listen to see if they are missing something.

If the trouble-maker has a genuine complaint, if he identifies some actual problem which has prompted his actions, the team that has approached him has a responsibility to take steps to address the problem. In most cases, they will report to the pastor and start there. If the man perceived as a DIP is indeed an actual troublemaker, the leadership team must let him know in unambiguous language that his actions must be stopped immediately.

If their approach proves unsuccessful, **The leadership duo then enlarges their team.** The pastor needs to be kept informed, and some of the most respected leaders should be drawn into the circle, if for no other reason than simply to keep them informed of what is taking place. If action must be taken, their counsel will be beneficial.

It's clear that this entire approach is contingent on the congregation having a small corps of dedicated and godly, mature leaders. Ideally, these leaders will be serving in elected positions within the church, and such actions will naturally fall to them. In any case, the members who take the lead will be required to have a unique blend of courage and humility. They must be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” [EPHESIANS 4:3]. This is the reason it is vital to appoint godly leaders, rather than merely influential or powerful leaders.

If the DIP is violating the law, church leaders have an obligation to the pastor, to the church and to the tyrant himself to report it. Call such action “tough love.” We do trouble-makers no favor when we allow them to destroy God's church or to ruin a man's ministry.

Leadership in the Lord's church can be one of life's greatest joys; however, there are times when it can be the most difficult task an individual will ever face. If a person lacks courage to speak the truth to power—regardless of whether that power operates in the community or stands in the pulpit—the individual should refuse to assume leadership; there is no disgrace to recognising and acting on one's own limitations. However, the one who would lead must be prepared to stand firm in the truth for the sake of God's work. If an individual is unwilling to do whatever he can possibly do to protect the ministry of God's servant and the health of the congregation, he needs to refuse appointment to the high office of leadership within the assembly of the Master. In this present age, the responsibility of leadership within the congregation outweighs any honour that may accrue to the one leading.

The shepherd must have freedom to preach the Word, endeavouring to provide rich pasturage and refreshing draughts for the people of God. He must be encouraged to watch for error and to confront such error when it arises. The church is not, however, a spectator sport. Ours is a shared ministry in which all must be willing to alert the leaders to potential problems. The congregation must encourage the appointment of strong leaders who are prepared to oppose those who would harm the flock through assault and pillage.

When the fierce wolves come, and they shall come, they will not spare the flock. Whether an individual claims he is a prophet of God, an itinerating preacher or a settled pastor, when he begins to draw away disciples after himself, he is exhibiting a wolfish heart. However, “we preach Christ crucified” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:23]; “we proclaim ... Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:5]. We are assured that when those gathered have centred their lives on Him who died for us and has risen from the dead for our salvation, that we shall enjoy the unity of the Spirit.

The question must be asked, do you know this Jesus? Have you faith in Him? Has His grace transformed your life? Are you even now being conformed to the image of God's Son? If so, then you will seek to protect the heritage of Christ, building the assembly of the Lord in the bond of peace. May He lead each of us into ever deeper grace, encouraging us to stand firm and equipping us to resist the wickedness of this present, dying age. Amen.