

"HOW TO DEAL WITH BOARS IN GOD'S VINEYARD"

(Romans 16:17-20)

(Chuck Swindoll)

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X issued an official decree condemning the teaching of Martin Luther. In it, he likened Christendom to a vineyard, planted by God and entrusted to Peter and his successors. He also likened Luther to a wild boar from the forest seeking to destroy and devour the vineyard. This is ironic, coming from a man who consumed the papal treasury within two years—not to support works of charity, but to surround himself with lavish abundance and to stage extravagant festivals. After Pope Leo X had swallowed the last morsel of worshipers' penance, he sold church positions off to the highest bidder. When every vacancy had been filled, he created more positions and sold them as well. Still, as the treasury shrank, the pontiff's appetite grew. Eventually, he reduced the Catholic Church's assumed role of dispensing grace to little more than a business transaction, most notably by selling indulgences as fast as they could be printed.

The corruption of Leo X was not new. There have always been boars who ravage God's vineyard. Jesus stood alone in opposition to hypocritical Pharisees and proud Sadducees. Paul warned the elders in Ephesus of wolves in their midst (Acts 20:29) and routinely confronted false teachers and deceivers throughout his ministry (Acts 13:6-11; 2 Cor. 11:11-15,26; Gal. 2:4-5; Phil. 3:2; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14-15; 2:16-18; 4:14)- Many of John's writings were an answer to one kind of heresy or another, and near the end of his life he wrote letters to encourage churches to reject false teachers (1 Jn. 4:1; 2 Jn. 1:7-8; 3 Jn. 1:9-11). Peter and Jude faced the same difficulties (2 Pet. 2:1-3; Jude 1:4). So it should come as no surprise that the church in Rome was susceptible to boar-like intruders.

To prepare the Roman believers, Paul taught them how to detect the presence of boars (Rom. 16:17) and revealed their quintessential character traits (16:18). Fortunately, the congregation was strong, so his instruction on how to defend God's vineyard was brief and mostly took the form of affirmation (16:19-20). His advice is succinct, which makes it especially valuable.

Anything worth protecting will eventually come under attack. But don't expect the assault to come from barbarians at the gate. More often, churches are subtly taken apart from within by those who divide people and spread false teaching, usually in hushed conversations, one person at a time. Ironically, these destroyers think they are accomplishing something good. French mathematician and Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

When boars invade God's vineyard, leaders must



not remain passive. They must act swiftly, firmly, and decisively. Three words describe the best means of preserving a congregation from the destruction of divisive people and false teachers: observation, confrontation, and separation.

Observation (16:17). Like a shepherd who constantly scans the flock for predators, leaders must remain alert, watching for schisms, looking for deceivers, and listening for error. I'm not counseling a totalitarian approach to leadership, and paranoia would be counterproductive. Nevertheless, don't be surprised to discover a divisive person whispering in the shadows of your congregation. Every church has them—even healthy, growing churches.

Confrontation (3 Jn. 1:10). "Confrontation" has become an unpleasant term in our vocabulary, perhaps because it is rarely done well.

Confrontation is nothing more than bringing the truth of a situation out of the shadows and into the light by choosing to discuss it openly. This can be done tactfully by avoiding accusations, choosing to ask the responsible person some honest questions instead. As facts are discussed and explanations are sought, truth will inevitably rise to the surface. And, thankfully, that's often enough. Divisive people and false teachers thrive on secrecy, so once their cover is blown, they usually back off. On occasion, they move on.

Separation (Titus 3:9-11). Sometimes divisive people and false teachers retreat for a time and then resume their destructive activity later. There are those who openly defy spiritual leaders, feeling they have enough support to usurp authority. Unfortunately, leaders must remove such destructive people from the congregation in order to preserve the integrity of the body. Boars, if allowed to run loose, bring disorder, promote distrust, and create serious messes.

Leaders rarely confront divisive people and false teachers, and even more rarely follow through by removing them. Sometimes they fear criticism; usually they unwisely hope the problem will resolve itself if ignored. They also fear that confrontation and separation will lead to the loss of some church members. In reality, leaders cannot prevent the loss of members either way. However, by acting swiftly and decisively, they can limit the damage. The longer they wait, the larger the rift will become and the larger the destruction will be.

If you are a leader in your church, someone appointed to shepherd the flock, don't hesitate when you spot a destructive person sowing discord or teaching error. Don't wait for problems to solve themselves. They won't. Confront swiftly and firmly, yet wisely. And then press on, doing what must be done to preserve unity.

If you are a member of a congregation, do whatever you can to support your leaders when they must accomplish this very unpleasant task, even if you aren't aware of all the details. They need advocates—faithful and true friends in their corner. This is not something they enjoy, and they have undoubtedly exhausted every other option. Trust them to lead with integrity and then praise their courage. Leadership in any ministry is a lonely task filled with misunderstanding. Those who lead well deserve your loyal support.