

# Behold the Musk Ox

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You belong to an organization that is much-maligned, despised, and ridiculed. The world takes one look at it and laughs. You are mocked for being a part of it. “You belong to what and it demands what of you?” The persistent and persuasive call to leave is a siren song that many before you have blindly followed. You are tempted to believe the arguments because of what this organization requires from you. It interferes with your plans and disrupts your relationships. Boys that you want to date are off-limits because this group demands your allegiance. Your parents insist membership in it is one of the most important things in the world, but you don’t see it. “Seems a bit old-fashioned and antiquated to me,” you say. There are other groups you could join that would demand far less. And you’re sick of it. So, you request your papers, avoid the calls and visits of the elders, and leave the church. You suppose yourself to be free.

Your parents weep, but the devil laughs with delight. Now, you are vulnerable.

In 2015 BBC Earth released a series of eight videos called *The Hunt*. Narrated by the inimitable David Attenborough, it follows hunter and prey across six continents and is a stunning visual display of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s declaration of nature as “red in tooth and claw.”

On the frozen tundra of the Arctic, a life and death struggle is being played out. A pack of wolves is on the hunt. The musk ox is one of the most formidable opponents a predator can face. If there were easier prey, the arctic wolf would take it. But after a long, hard winter, they are willing to take on even the largest animal in their territory.

The scene is riveting as the pack of wolves’ charge toward the musk oxen. “First, they run directly at the herd. The aim is to panic them. A stampeding herd might leave a calf behind. The tactic begins to work. But then the herd regains control. They stand defiantly in a protective ring around the calves. There is no way in.” The wolves call off the hunt.

You breathe a sigh of relief; the musk oxen are safe.

But not all of them.

The next scene opens with a lone bull standing alone at the bottom of a ravine. The wolves spot him and start loping in his direction. The fact that “a single bull weighs more than the entire wolf pack put together” and “has a reinforced skull, armed with horns” does not deter them. He is alone. They surround the bull and begin to bite at his long, dense coat. “The bull is easily their match physically, but the wolves take it in turns, to wear him down.” Spinning in circles the bull fights for his very life, but he is trapped and has nowhere to go. Although it will take them hours to get him down, the wolves are relentless, and as the camera zooms out, there is no doubt as to the eventual fate of the bull musk ox. Formidable, feared, and fearsome, even this mighty beast is no match for the pack, who are intent on his blood.

As I watched this scene unfold, I could not help but think of a parallel to life in the church. The pack of wolves representing the devil and his host, charge the musk oxen,

representing the church. The church, startled at first by this fearsome attack, and perhaps lulled by years of peace, are caught unawares. They are spooked and begin to run. “The aim is to panic them; a stampeding herd might leave a calf behind.” But the church, led by a few, regains control and turns to face the attacks of the devil, the false church, and her prophets. “They stand defiantly in a protective ring around the calves. There is no way in.” The calves—the young men and young women—are preserved.

There is safety in the church for you, young person. The church is that protective ring that defends you against the onslaughts of the devil. Those attacks are real. The devil is real, and he hates you. He knows you by name, and he knows what your strengths and your weaknesses are. He knows the situations that leave you vulnerable, and he wants to keep you in those moments. He also knows his best chance to get you is when you are alone, and away from the church.

The church is the place of safety. There are spiritual thieves who come to “steal, and to kill, and to destroy” (John 10:10). The walls of the church keep the predators out, and the watchmen on those walls diligently warn you about the dangers without and the temptations within. Those walls take the shape of the doctrines that are faithfully taught, the Reformed confessions that guard against false teachers, and the elders who watch for your safety. “I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night” (Is. 62:6). You hear it every Sunday, at every catechism class, in the lectures you attend, in the books your parents insist you read, and from the elders when they visit your family every year. The magazine you are reading right now is a testament to the concern of your church for your safety.

But does it matter which church you join? The Belgic Confession Article 29 lays out the marks that distinguish the true church and the false church. Those include the “pure doctrine of the gospel” that is preached, the “pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ,” and the Christian discipline that is administered.

But you say you are just going to that other church that, ok, sure, they teach some different things than we do, but they love God just the same! Young person, “try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Don’t you see the danger? Are you moving closer to Jesus Christ whom you love, or farther away? You have your reasons for leaving, but what are they? Does doctrine enter in at all? It should be primary. Rev. Huizinga writes: “Why take heed to doctrine? Because doctrine is what we say about God, and what we say about God is more important than anything else.”<sup>1</sup> “Close enough” are words never uttered by one who loves Jesus Christ with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Re-read the last paragraph. You will see the word pure repeated twice. We will never have perfection, but we must strive for purity. You want more freedoms on Sunday. God wants, and will have, the truth taught about his name: “For mine own sake, even for mine own sake will I do it: for how should my name be polluted? And I will not give my glory unto another” (Isa. 48:11).

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Brian Huizinga, “Why?” *The Standard Bearer*, February 1, 2018, pg. 207

The temptations to leave are strong. That girl who says she loves you will never join your church, and you have to pick, her or your church. “They are so bigoted and hateful and close-minded, I will never join!” You imagine you can choose the girl and be fine without the church. But at what price? Are you willing to risk fellowship with your God for her? “The spiritual fellowship that a believer enjoys with his Redeemer, is not a solitary or a selfish joy, but one which he cannot possess alone” (James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 20). But you imagine yourself strong, and where others might fall, you can stand! Physically and mentally you *are* a match for anyone. Outside the walls and defenses of the church, however, you are alone, and “a solitary Christian is worse than a contradiction, he is an anomaly, standing out against the express institution of God” (ibid., 22). Your strength means nothing when you are alone. The devil and his slaving hosts have been patiently watching. Who do you think put that attractive unbeliever in your path in the first place? When you leave, when you make that decision casting caution and the warnings of your parents, elders, and friends to the wind, the “grievous wolves” (Acts 20:29) will move in.

The church is the means that God uses to unfold all of the doctrines that teach us about who God is, as Bavinck teaches in his *Prolegomena*; “Scripture is a gold mine; it is the church that extracts the gold, puts its stamp on it, and converts it into general currency.” This is the truth found in 1 Timothy 3:15 where it speaks of the “church of the living God” as the “pillar and ground of the truth.” You stay because you love truth, and you love the One who is truth, Jesus Christ. So closely does Jesus identify with the church that when Saul was confronted on the road to Damascus, Jesus said to him, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?” (Acts 9:4). Jesus is the head, and the church, his faithful church, is the body (Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22–23).

Give thanks for the church, be active in her, give yourself for her, as Jesus did. “Prefer [it] above [your] chief joy” (Ps. 137:6). It is not just someplace you *have* to go on Sunday. It is a place, a tremendous, glorious, magnificent place, that we are *privileged* to go to hear about God and his Son. A place where we may, with our brothers and sisters, glorify God together. When you have poured out your life for her know that you have done nothing more than your Christ, who loved the church so much that he went to the cross and “purchased [it] with his own blood” (Acts 2:28).

Psalter #163 sums up beautifully the truth found in Psalm 63, “My Savior, ‘neath Thy sheltering wings, My soul delights to dwell; Still closer to Thy side I press, For near Thee all is well, My soul shall conquer every foe, upholden by thy hand; Thy people shall rejoice in God, Thy saints in glory stand”. The church is the God-ordained place where you can press as close as possible to your Savior.

The call to leave is strong. The devil’s lie is the same today as it was 6,000 years ago, “Yea, hath God said?” Your flesh (described as “wicked, perverse, and corrupt” by the Belgic Confession Article 14), the greatest enemy you face, beguiles you with the thought of a life with no boundaries, no rules, no rebukes. It’s a lie. Safety and true joy lie within the embrace of the church.

Never leave her. Your life depends on it.