





EVANGELLYFISH

DOUGLAS WILSON



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CONTENTS

// ONE //

Father Confessor 9

// TWO //

Nylon Strap and Winch 21

// THREE //

Ganglion Ministries 37

// FOUR //

News Babe 53

// FIVE //

Some Normal People 65

// SIX //

Harmonic Convergence 77

// SEVEN //

Those Darn Back Rubs 91

// EIGHT //

Deep Communicating 103

// NINE //

Propping Up Robert P. 119

// TEN //

Dinner with the Mitchells 130

// ELEVEN //

Freezing the Linebackers 143

// TWELVE //

Justice Schmustice 157

// THIRTEEN //

A Steady Bearing Rate 169

// FOURTEEN //

Enough Courthouse Histrionics 187

// FIFTEEN //

In Which Some People Learn the Wrong Life Lessons 201

// SIXTEEN //

Chad Blinks a Couple Times 213

// EPILOGUE //

But I Love to Watch You Go 227

FATHER CONFESSOR

I have only two comforts to live upon; the one is the perfections of Christ; the other is the imperfections of Christians.

Nathaniel Ward, Puritan

AS A CONSCIENTIOUS PASTOR, John regretted having given a fellow clergyman a black eye. Not entirely intentional; more a confluence of events that was larger than everybody involved. But still, hardly what he had learned in seminary.

John Mitchell was a Reformed Baptist pastor, the sort who drank a little, but not in front of folks from other churches, and made sure that nothing more exciting than ping-pong happened in the youth group. When asked what he did for a living, he would sometimes quote *Fletch*—“I’m a shepherd.” He generally had to explain the reference, and it was never as funny as he hoped. When asked what his degrees were in, he would say that his undergrad was in philosophy, and he had an MDiv from Westminster, but that everything he did was “deeply rooted in the blues.” Some people didn’t get that either.

He was a man diligent in his ways and not easily discouraged. His flock was small, in a relatively large Midwestern city, and they got along well with each other. He was not the kind of pastor that any of his flock would have guessed as capable of any kind of ministerial mayhem at all.

He had gone to junior high and high school with Michelle Lester, the wife of his adversary, but had only met Chad Lester twice before the incident. The Rev. Lester, the recipient of said eye-blackening, was the leading light and chief shaman at a mega-church across town. The two congregations, and the two men, were in the same city, but they existed in entirely different realities. Pastor Mitchell had the advantage of his reality being more or less real. Chad Lester, by way of contrast, had some time ago opted out of reading his moral compass with any reference to true north. Having inscribed directions on the edges of your moral compass, and a needle that works, was entirely too confining.

Pastor Mitchell was sitting quietly in his study after dinner, scratching his gray beard. It had been twenty-four hours since—as the diplomats would phrase it—the frank exchange of views had taken place. His knuckles were still throbbing gently. Cherie, his wife's cousin, had panicked at him over the phone, and he had hurried over to her condo, unsure what the problem was. He surprised, and was in turn surprised by, Chad Lester, who was there with Cherie trying to . . . well, it was not at all clear now what he had been trying to do. But Mitchell had *thought* at the time he knew what Lester was trying to do. Words had been

exchanged, including some bits of high-volume exegesis and penetrating theological insight. Chad had stumbled on his way to the door, lurching into Mitchell, and Mitchell had taken that opportunity to unload a punch which connected with a less-than-perfect tenderness. But as punches go, analyzed merely in the interests of dispassionate science and apart from any ethical considerations, it had been exquisite.

Afterward, Chad had straightened up, looked at him with an expression that Mitchell had interpreted as a spiritual rebuke *in excelsis*, and then staggered out the front door, his hand over his eye. The look he directed at Mitchell had actually been a look which simply acknowledged receipt of a complete novelty, but Mitchell had a tender conscience, and under the circumstances couldn't be expected to know that. Mitchell felt, down in his soul he felt, that Lester saw him as a hypocrite. And to have someone like *Lester* look down on him for hypocrisy was just the utter, frozen limit. But it seemed that Lester, if he thought that, would have a *point*, would he not? Gkkk.

So here he was, a day later, playing teeter-totter in his soul, going back and forth about what he ought to do. He really was a humble man, and did not mind seeking forgiveness where necessary. He had done so many times in his life, most recently for calling a young man a baffle-headed young dope during a counseling appointment. But this thing was different. Asking that man's forgiveness would involve *talking* with him, and talking to Lester was about as much fun as fishing in an outhouse. Of course, Mitchell had what a strict recording angel would

have called “ample grounds” for all his reluctance to talk with Lester, but he was still worked over by the whole thing. He did know that his feelings for Lester went somewhat beyond the legal limits of righteous indignation. After what Lester had done to Cherie years before, and to all the other women Mitchell knew about—and then factor in the ones he didn’t know about—the end result was a stew that Mitchell felt to be quite beyond his capacities to eat. But there was e-mail. He could e-mail an apology.

The phone rang, and John stared at it balefully. He glanced at the clock—it was a little before seven, and he had to leave about quarter after for his daughter’s volleyball game. They were playing at some obscure Christian school—he thought it must be a Christian school with a name like Joppa—located on a street he had never heard of before. He had given himself fifteen extra minutes for getting lost and found again, but he did not really have any time to chew up on the phone. It rang again, and John pursed his lips and picked it up, hoping it wasn’t Deidre Hannock. She was a solo-obsessed soprano in their makeshift choir and was always calling with criticisms of the choir director disguised as prayer requests. Mitchell’s mother had always called church choirs the war department. Luther once said that when Satan fell, he fell into the choir loft. Please don’t let it be Deidre . . .

“Mitchells’.”

But the voice was low, nowhere close to soprano, and kind of slurred.

“Hello, Pastor Mitchell?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Chad.” This was followed by what sounded like the *thup thup thup* sound of sobbing.

John Mitchell lurched forward in his chair, and without thinking, pulled open one of the drawers of his desk. *What am I doing?* he thought. *Looking for rubber gloves? A gas mask? Grace? No grace in there. None around here anywhere.*

“What do you want?” he said.

“I . . . I need help,” the voice said.

Instinct and long experience nudged Pastor Mitchell, poking him helpfully on the shoulder. “Have you been drinking?” he asked.

“Sort of,” Chad said. “I have never done anything like this before. I need help. I couldn’t think of anyone else to call.”

“I punched you in the eye. What makes you think I would help you?”

“You’re a pastor. It’s a brotherhood. I really need—” A crash cut Chad off.

“Chad? Lester?”

“Sorry. I just tripped.”

“Where are you?” John asked. He knew he was stalling.

“I am at the Hyatt. Room 306. Just a second.” A couple of moments went by with the sound of a door opening and then closing again. “Yeah, 306. You should come here. I can’t drive.”

“You’re drunk, and you want me to come over there? You don’t want my kind of help, Chad. You really don’t. I can give you all

I got right now. Stop drinking, stop screwing around, repent to your congregation, and resign your pastorate.”

“I don’t usually drink.” Chad was crying again, schlupping all over the phone.

“And read your Bible,” John added. “Start now. I’m sure the Gideons left you one.”

“John, please.”

“Sorry, Chad. My daughter’s got a volleyball game.” He took the sobbing away from his ear and looked at the phone. With one lonely beep, Lester was gone, and the room was silent.

John Mitchell just sat in his chair, trying not to think. Scenes from dozens of bad movies played through his head. Villains dangling from balconies, cliffs, various ledges, villains calling out for help. Then there was John Mitchell, pastor, follower of Christ, busily stepping on their fingers. Hanging up on the tax collectors and prostitutes. He glanced at his watch and stood up, trying to embrace the role of dutiful father—*gotta get to my daughter’s volleyball game*—but it didn’t wash. Joppa was a small school, and Sandy’s coach was almost certainly going to play the B squad. Sandy was varsity. She had told him specifically that he would be wasting his time if he came, but that she’d still love to see him going above and beyond the call of duty. He had perfect liberty to go talk to Lester, and he knew it. He had made all her other games, the ones she had actually played in. He knew he should go see Lester, but deep within the recesses of his rib cage, an insistent voice was loudly maintaining something along the lines of, “I don’t wanna!”

John Mitchell started down the hallway to go say goodbye to Cindi, his wife, but then remembered that she was at a ladies' fellowship. So he wheeled around, and clumped dejectedly out the front door to the driveway. Hopping in, he started his truck up, put it savagely in gear, and pulled out into the street. He would have to decide right or left at the corner, and he didn't want to decide *anything*.

By the time he got to the corner, it had occurred to him that he could also make his final decision closer to the freeway, so for the time being he turned left and headed off for Joppa Christian. What kind of group would name their school after a Philistine seaport? What was with that? He decided that he needed to be on his toes and keep an eye on the home crowd. He might learn something new about yet another little odd church group, and he settled in a little more comfortably to the idea of watching a volleyball game.

He took the freeway and found the school with no trouble at all. It was a little cinder-block affair, with a larger steel gym right next to it. All the parking was on the street, so he found a spot and walked glumly in. The teams were both warming up. Sandy saw him, waved happily, and trotted over to greet him. She kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for coming," she said. "Coach just told us for sure that we won't be playing. They're playing the bench for sure. If you have to do something, please go."

John found himself chafing at her generosity, and wanted her to be a bit more clingy and needy and demanding. If his daughter was a big mess, like Lester, then he would have a parental

duty to stay and to not step on *her* fingers. No, he didn't want that. But he managed to say, "I might. Thanks."

He started up into the bleachers, and then realized that he needed to use the men's room. He glanced at the clock and walked out into the hallway that connected the gym to the school. Nothing there. The doors to the school were open, and a wide hallway opened up to the right. He could hardly see, but close to the entrance he could make out that the first door on the left was a ladies' room, and there were a couple doors beyond that, deeper in the gloom. He walked to the second one, opened it, and stepped in, fumbling for a light. The door clicked shut behind him, and he kicked a hard metallic object at his feet. He turned around and tried the door. Locked. Groping to the left and right, all he found were janitor's overalls, or what he judged to be something very much like janitor's overalls. He just stood there for a moment, flummoxed.

A pipe! *I smoke a pipe*. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a lighter, and flicked it. He had just bought the thing yesterday, so he had plenty of fluid, while recognizing at the same time that *plenty* is a relative term. He looked around at his warm little broom closet, and then looked at the offending doorknob. Had he been there just the day before, he would have witnessed the janitor, a man named Earl—not that it matters—warning the principal about the doorknob. "Lot of little kids in this school. We have to replace that thing." The principal had nodded his sage agreement.

But this well-intentioned administrative desire did nothing to help John Mitchell out. He continued to look around, noting that the object he had kicked coming in was a mop bucket on wheels. He shouted a few times and then realized that it would likely do little good. So he grabbed the handle of the mop and began to tap it on the door, insistently and regularly. Anybody in the hall would have to come and check out such a noise. He would just be here a few minutes.

Half an hour later, still tapping, his mind began to drift in a typological direction. In seminary, he'd had very little use for that kind of stuff, and had not really paid much attention. As he put it when asked, extravagant exegesis was not his bag. But here he was, and it was kind of creepy. He did not want Chad Lester to do anything but self-destruct, just like Nineveh was supposed to. And he had run off just like Jonah had. And here he was in Joppa. But what was supposed to be Tarshish in this deal? And was he going to be here three days and three . . . Suddenly the door popped open, and a worried-looking woman with a kindly face peered in, her hair done up in a tight, fundamentalist bun. "Are you all right?" she asked.

John Mitchell stepped out into the hallway, brushing his jacket, as if to get the closet darkness off. "I'm fine, thanks so much." They laughed together for a moment about it, she made a mental note to talk with the janitor about the doorknob *again*, he thanked her effusively, and they parted friends and comrades. John went into the next door, which really was the men's room, emerged a few moments later, and walked straight

out the double doors to where he had parked. The Hyatt was a couple miles south.

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Chad Lester was sitting at the small hotel room table, staring at the bottles in front of him. He had no idea how to go about it, but he was still laboring manfully away. There was a small platoon of alcoholic soldiers standing there, waiting to give up their lives. "Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you." There was a bottle of bourbon, one of vodka, a six-pack of beer, and (he really didn't know what he was doing) a bottle of tawny port. He had just walked around that section of the store, grabbing items at random. Where was Mitchell? He had downed a bottle of beer and several shots of bourbon since he had called. He felt like calling again, but did not trust himself to try to make it to the phone. And the concept of specific phone numbers was starting to slip beyond his grasp.

A knock at the door brought Lester partway out of the fog that was descending upon him. "Minute!" he yelled. He staggered past the bed without toppling over on it, and then navigated his way past the television, which was filling his room up with hotel porn. He had turned that on out of habit when he had checked in and, also out of habit, ceased to be aware of it. He got to the door, fumbled with the latch, and pulled it open. John Mitchell was standing there, and Chad tried to beam in a welcoming manner. John took a sudden step backwards. "Yikes!" he said. It was quite a shiner.

“In, in,” Lester said, motioning helplessly with his right hand. “Where have you been, you pastoral bastard? You said you were coming.”

John bit his lip and came slowly in the door before making his way over to the whiskey table to sit down. When he got next to the television, he jumped and looked around for the remote. When he found it, he turned the flesh tube off and stared angrily at Chad Lester, who was just standing there, expressionless. “What is *that* for?” John asked. “Are you trying to get an appetite for dinner by watching people chew with their mouths open?” Chad Lester just blinked at him, not comprehending.

A slow moment passed while the two men made their way to their chairs, moved them around a bit, and then sat down. Chad was being a little bit slower on the motor skills front, and so John waited patiently for him. And by “waited patiently,” John had been a pastor long enough to know it meant he was actually waiting impatiently. Whenever he was waiting patiently, he didn’t notice that he was waiting patiently, and John was noticing.

Chad finally eased down, did not miss the chair, and looked across the table at John with an air of minor triumph. For his part, John knew he had to be there, but he was not yet glad about it. Apart from his detestation of Lester, there was also the pastoral folly of counseling drunks. He had learned *that* lesson years before—like sweeping water uphill. But here he was. What was he supposed to say? Yet forty days and the Hyatt will fall down? What he did say was, “Well, you called.” He did not add, “I’m waiting,” because that would have sounded impatient.

Chad was grinning at him with his puffy cheeks and bloodshot eyes. “I knew you’d come,” he said. “Guys like you have to come. The better-than-you boys always come. Like the ambulance.”

NYLON STRAP AND WINCH

Christian, n. One who believes the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor. One who follows the teachings of Christ in so far as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE BLACK EYE, and counting . . .

Things were not supposed to unravel this way. Not this way. Some other way, maybe. Perhaps even inevitably some other way. But this charge is *false*. Reckless. Not on the menu. Deeply and profoundly unfair.

Chad Lester leaned against the inside of his office door, the newspaper sticking to his sweating hands. A secretarial heads-up had reached him just half an hour ago, and he had stopped to pick up the paper on his way in. Front page and above the fold. The last time that had happened, he'd been wearing an apron at a soup kitchen. Why hadn't the paper called him? He'd just golfed with Bryan three weeks ago. Area minister accused in sex scandal. His picture lurked in a tiny smudge box right next to another picture in a tiny smudge box. Who the hell was *that*?

Never used to even think profanities, but a whole string of them were lining up now.

“Robert P. Warner II,” the caption said. Chad forced himself to read through the article again. He had never heard of the gentleman in question. Not only had he never heard of the gentleman in question, but he knew he was innocent of all charges, whatever they might happen to be, because he had never ever been with *any* gentleman in question. Why would God allow this? Deeply and profoundly unfair.

To be honest, Chad thought, between deep calming breaths—a technique he had picked up at his wife’s birthing class—there was some material lying around in his life out of which a sex scandal could be assembled. But all that material involved different chromosomes. He muttered fiercely to himself, “I’m not . . . gay.”

An all-knowing but disinterested observer might have said that the Rev. Lester was a compulsive sexual predator. *Call me Chad, no need to stand on ceremony here. We have an informal approach to worship. We do church differently here. This is not your grandmother’s church.* Compulsive sexual predator? Call-me-Chad wouldn’t have put it to himself that way, of course, but fair was fair, and he was an average red-blooded male, with perhaps above average red-blooded male problems. What could he say? He and King David both. Chad had slept with quite a number of women who did not have the last name of Lester, but it’s not like he was even in Solomon’s league. A friendlier age would have simply called them concubines, except maybe the married ones. He wasn’t sure what they should be called.

Some less-than-positive facts about his sexual monkeyshines were out there, certainly. And there were more than a few participants in these irregular ecclesial liaisons who were women from his own congregation. But, Chad reasoned compellingly to himself, people relate better to ministers who have their own deep personal struggles. Women especially. Empathy? Is empathy the word? There was probably a way to make it all seem kind of tawdry, and Chad would not have been surprised if the front page of the newspaper had headlined some accusation or other from some of these women. He had been more than a little braced for *that* for years, and the dozen or so church payoffs to various women had headed off more than one close call. Most of the women he had been with had not needed payoffs, but he had the resources available for those who did. Miguel Smith, the church's CFO and Chad's personal-accountability-of-sorts confidant, had been most cooperative. There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother. Is that Proverbs? Not sure. The writers would know. They'd put it in a sermon once, and he'd made a note to remember it.

But all these mutually affirming relationships—though some had been mutually affirming for less than half an hour—had one thing in common: the nature of Chad Lester's undecalogue-like activities had been extensively and exclusively hetero. He was straight. Straight and narrow. He didn't leave that path, at any rate, imagining it as a point of pride. He just found special visitors along the way—in the ditches, good Samaritan-like. Not all of the women had been beaten and robbed by others, though

some had been. But all of them had been in need. He had merely met needs, lots of needs. He had needs too, and some of those women had needed to meet needs, needed to be needed, if only as a needy recipient. It had probably even helped some of their marriages. And now here was this guy named Robert leering out at him from the front page of the smudgy, damn newspaper! Roberta was a possibility. There might have been a Roberta. But there had certainly never been a Robert P. Warner, the First *or* Second. Chad Lester cursed his way through the article again and resolved to stop swearing. *Keep yourself clean, Chad. Think it, and you'll say it; say it, and you'll say it at the wrong time. Be above reproach, untouchable.* He cursed loudly, a whole string of rather awkward and unpracticed words.

Fifteen minutes later, externally composed, his executive voice summoned his secretary into his office to take a memo. “Sharon,” he said, “I need you to send an e-mail to the leadership team. Schedule an emergency meeting for this afternoon.”

Sharon Atwater took down the notes for the e-mail, marveling at the confidence that radiated from Chad’s voice like heat from a stove. *Unshaken. He had to be shaken. But he didn't sound shaken. Chad could be president. Cool customer. Don't know how he does it. What a talented toad.* She had read the article already and knew as completely as he did that the charge was false, but she had thought he would at least have been shaken. She’d looked forward to him being shaken. He wouldn’t like being called gay.

A good portion of the permanent staff knew something of Chad Lester’s tomcatting. Chad knew that some of the staff

knew, and Sharon knew more than most, and she knew more than he thought she did. On a night during her first year attending the church, the last night of an older singles retreat, she herself had even made the great sacrifice to Chad Lester's virility in the back seat of his BMW. And there had been another incident in her first year working at the church, to the point of an all-night-long indiscretion. Chad had been all aura then—charisma, smiles, and eyes that penetrated what you thought at first was your soul, but then just turned out to be your clothes. And so if the nearby riverboat casino had been taking bets on the subject, she would have laid long odds against any Robert being one of Chad Lester's incidents.

Sharon was two years away from having saved enough money to get out, get out, get out, and of her eleven years of service—twelve, if you include her early informal role—all but six months had been fraught with cynicism. Having been burned, she was almost entirely skeptical. She was probably the only church secretary in that region of the country who would call herself (but only *to* herself) an atheist. And she had been chaste since then. An atheist evangelical nun. *Chaste* is a much better word than *sour*.

Hang tight. Just two years. Back to Tennessee.

/////

“You see the paper?”

“I most certainly did.”

“Think the prosecutor saw it?”

“You kidding? He doesn’t *say*, but he wants to run for governor. The average newspaper reader doesn’t know how to spell his name yet. Not that I blame them. Radavic. It’s his own Yugoslavian fault. What’s with that? My desk phone is going to ring within fifteen minutes. No way to avoid it. I am resigned to the will of Zeus.”

The two detectives sat in the gray, formica lounge at the station, each holding a stained mug of coffee. Daniel Rourke was the veteran, and Mike Bradford wasn’t. They got along all right and made a decent team. Bradford was a quick study, and Rourke knew the department rules up and down, how real non-departmental police work was done, up and down, and was on the honest side of not too scrupulous. They had been together for a year and a half and had done some good police work together. At least that’s how the chief put it on the last round of evals.

Bradford grinned. “What’s he gonna say?”

“He will express his concern that Robert P. Warner should have had to bring the charges before the public in this way. Allow me to summarize for you what our boss man will think and/or say: ‘No individual citizen should ever carry that kind of weight alone. Newspaper interview’s not the way to go. Civil suit’s not the way to go. As a prosecutor I am a public servant, and I have a solemn responsibility. Prosecutors have a thankless task, but all very serious anyways. Nosy reporters. Ecclesiastical misdoings. Furrowed brow. We cannot let this kind of thing happen here in our community. I want you to open a file on this, Detective Rourke, and pay yourselves a visit to Camel Creek Community Church.’”

“Huh.” Bradford got up and filled his coffee again. Rourke’s phone rang, and as Rourke headed out into the hall, Bradford yelled after him, “You’ve been reading Nostradamus!”

Bradford stared at the formica for five minutes and picked at his teeth with an unwound paper clip until Rourke came back in. Rourke said, “That was Radavic. It was all there except for the furrowed brow part. On that point I shall remain undecided. The phone has its limitations. But his brow *sounded* furrowed.”

Bradford nodded. “Well, let’s go. I haven’t been to a church since Easter.”

“I was there last week, and my priest is going to be really happy about this. Finally, the Protestants are doing their part to get the heat off us. True Christian unity is a wonderful thing. That’s what he will say. He’ll probably send Lester a card.”

/////

At five to three, the leadership team of Camel Creek silently began to assemble in the executive meeting room. On the wall opposite the two doorways was a small bulletin board. In the upper left-hand corner was a motivational poster, a retro image from a lost world. A soft-faced woman in a pink uniform and apron was handing a hobo a milkshake on the sidewalk in front of a 1950s diner. But behind the hobo, semitransparent, stood another figure, a figure with a clean beard wearing a sheet and smiling approvingly with his blue eyes. “It’s great to serve the KING” sprawled across the bottom. Chad had designed it

himself, and had actually made a lot of money on it. A copy of it was in virtually every room of the entire church complex, and it wallpapered most of the computers.

Those who arrived early were silent, shifting nervously in their seats, and all their customary business-traveler-in-the-hotel-lobby chatter was absent. There were quiet hugs, tears, and a few murmured exhortations to prayer. A Christian man was being fed to the hungry lions. Persecution never rests. Eleven men and women, not counting Chad, were expected. Along the mahogany table, at each place, Sharon Atwater had placed a blank notepad, a sharpened pencil, a copy of the newspaper article, and a roll of Testamints®. A matching mahogany box cover for some Kleenex was in the middle of the table, and a pitcher of water and ice was down at the far end. The thick carpet muffled the sounds of the few greetings that were exchanged, and finally, when all were there, Chad motioned for them to sit. Sharon sat in the corner with a notebook on her knees.

“Miguel,” Chad said. “Why don’t you read something from the Word and open us up with prayer?”

Miguel had just seen Hebrews 13:1 on another poster at the church radio station, and it seemed like just the ticket. Two hands holding in the foreground, and a roaring California sunset as the backdrop. Unfortunately, the poster had not let him know what to expect in the following verses. He picked up a copy of *The Message* on a side table and found the place. The elder board all joined hands and looked down at the table like they were bowing their heads. Miguel cleared his throat and began.

“Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love [*so much for the poster*]. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it’s needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it! Regard prisoners as if you were in prison with them. Look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you. Honor marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband. God draws a firm line against casual and illicit sex.”

His voice faltered at the reference to prison as well as the bit about God drawing a firm line. Prisons and firm lines were a bad combination in his book. But he soldiered through anyway, and then said a quick prayer. *Why do these things happen to me anyhow? Have to stop looking at those stupid posters. But at least I’m not Chad.*

When Miguel was done, Chad lifted his prematurely gray executive head, from long habit murmured a belated *amen* that everyone could hear, and looked slowly around the room.

“Brothers, sisters. I do not need to tell you the charge is monstrous and false. The enemy is a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. We have a good deal of work to do in finding out where this charge comes from, and what the point of it is. I confess that I am entirely baffled. You know me. We are close companions on this leadership team, and we have labored together in this vineyard for a number of years. We shall weather this together, and whatever doesn’t break us makes us stronger. At the same time, we need to make a plan.”