

Sheep, Snakes and Doves:
The Wild-Side of Apostleship
By Rick Love

I love animals. As a boy, I raised pet mountain lions, monkeys, honey bears, snakes, lizards and a large assortment of birds. If I weren't called as an apostle, I would probably be someone like the late Steve Erwin (the "Crocodile Hunter") of US television fame!

Because of my interests, I find it interesting when Jesus compares us to animals. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus makes some important comparisons when he talks about the mandate he has given us: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

Jesus says we are "sent" (the Greek word is the verb form of the word "apostle") like defenseless sheep among ravenous wolves. We are vulnerable. We face danger. In fact, apostles have always been an "endangered species."

Jesus then challenges us to live out our mission in two ways: we are to be as shrewd as a snake and as innocent as a dove. Interesting balance and combination.

I have owned more than 100 snakes in my lifetime, and I have read a lot about them. Why are snakes described as shrewd or wise? Because they fit in with their environment with their camouflage skin, they don't draw attention to themselves. They get the job done but remain low-profile. If you put a snake on a lawn it will seek a place to hide in nearby bushes or rocks.

But we are not just called to be snake-like "undercover agents." Jesus says we must also be as innocent as doves. The Greek term for innocence refers to character marked by integrity, innocence of evil and purity.

What a powerful yet difficult balance to maintain. In the context of persecution and danger (remember the wolves!), we should be low profile, yet remain guileless – be wary but wear no masks. Snake-like behavior alone can become devious. Dove-like behavior alone can become gullible. Together these images forge a striking apostolic identity that will maximize our fruitfulness.

Sheep, snakes and doves remind us of the difficulty of our calling as apostles. May God help us model all three aspects of apostolic identity in the 21st century.