



SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

ERIC SWANSON

Wherever the work of God has gone forward, it has always had a leader at the helm. It has been a singular person called by God to lead people to accomplish his objectives.



God called a man to begin a nation (Abraham), to preserve that nation (Joseph), to lead that nation out of slavery (Moses), and to lead them in conquering the land (Joshua). He used individual men and women to further his agenda. He directed judges and kings to govern and prophets to reprove his people. And finally he sent one man to die for the sins of the world. Take these few leaders out of history and you have a radically different history. In God's economy, one person can make a difference. Little wonder God says, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap..." (Ezekiel 22:30)

The mystery and privilege of Christian work is that God uses people like us to accomplish his work. We are his "fellow-workers," his "ambassadors," his "representatives," his "servants," and "ministers." The Psalmist expressed it best when he wrote, "Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." Psalm 77:19,20

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

Spiritual leadership is a blending of natural and spiritual qualities utilized for influencing God's people to accomplish God's purposes. Even the natural qualities are not self-produced but God-given and therefore reach their highest effectiveness when employed in the service of God and for His glory. The work of ministry requires that it be accomplished by spiritual people, utilizing spiritual methods to accomplish God's objectives. If you take any of these out of the mix and you cease to have Christian work.

THE CRISIS OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

We face a spiritual leadership crisis...and have faced a spiritual leadership crisis for the past 2,000 years. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." There is more work to be done than laborers and leaders willing to work. When looking at spiritual leadership, we may need to set aside some traditional thinking on what makes a leader. Yes, spiritual leaders are change agents. Yes, they influence followers. Yes, they accomplish objectives. But their motives and methods are radically different. We march to the beat of a different drummer. A spiritual leader is always a person being lead before he or she is a leader. Jesus, did or said only what the father did or said (John 5:19, 8:28). Following precedes leading. Jesus identified his leadership roles in new terms. He came to be a servant (Mark 10:45) and a shepherd (John 10).

THE LEADER AS A SERVANT

In Matthew 20:24-28 Jesus explained how kingdom values affected leadership style. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.



Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus did not criticize a person's desire for leadership, he simply defined the path to that leadership. A servant is committed to the success of another.

In John 13:1-17 we see Jesus in action. In the absence of a servant he took on the role of a servant and washed the disciples feet. After washing the disciples feet he concludes with this poignant lesson on leadership; "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13:14)

The essence of spiritual leadership is following Jesus and serving people. The tasks of leadership may vary. You will lead programs, people and projects. But the method of leading never changes. We don't move from servanthood on to something else. The silver thread running through everything we do is that of servant-leadership. Leadership that does not involve servanthood is not spiritual leadership. Once we stop serving we stop walking in Christ's footsteps of leadership.

THE LEADER AS A SHEPHERD

In 1 Peter 5:2-3 Peter writes to the leaders of the church. "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

The primary duties of a shepherd are to lead, feed and meet the needs of the sheep. When we stop caring for people we relinquish the right to lead. Our care for people is the basis for ministering to them. The adage is true...people don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.

Servanthood pertains to the task. Shepherding has to do with people. The style of a Christian leader will always be serving and caring--having a high concern for the task and high concern for the people involved. Little wonder that the offices of Christian leaders are "pastor" (shepherd) and "deacon" (servant). Leadership training then, is really learning to

shepherd and learning to serve.

A LEADER PEOPLE WANT TO FOLLOW

Spiritual leadership is a combination of acquired traits that when blended together form the basis of leadership. The more of these traits a leader has and the more developed each trait is, the more potential impact the leader wields for God. Each of us wants to be led by those over us who exhibit these traits. Our staff and students want leaders with integrity whom they can respect and follow. The following ten traits form the basis from which we lead.

1) Vision. A leader without vision is not a leader. The person God uses has a clear idea of what God wants done and his part in doing it. Moses met with God at the burning bush and received his marching orders. God gave Joshua crystal clear instructions of what he wanted Joshua to do and how he wanted Joshua to live. If you do not know where you are going, you have forfeited the right to ask others to follow you. As a team leader, do you have a clear mental picture of what God wants done? What is it that you want accomplish for God? Where you are going? What kind of people does God want you to build?

2) Example. A visual illustration of the Christian life is far easier to emulate than written theories in a book. The apostle Paul did not hesitate to invite people to imitate and follow him as he closely followed the Lord. "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) "You became imitators of us and of the Lord..." (1 Thessalonians 1), "Join with others in following my example..." (Philippians 3:17), "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put into practice." (Philippians 4:9) "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example." (2 Thessalonians 3:7)

Leading by example is extremely difficult to do over a lifetime. The life of a leader is one of building and battling (Luke 14:25ff). Our flesh (the part of us that likes to eat donuts and watch TV) wants to be comfortable. We would rather sit back and take an executive position and theorize about ministry than lead out again. However, once you stop leading by example--once you begin saying, "I used to do this..." you relinquish your leadership role in the truest sense of the word. You can be a consultant or a manager but you can no longer lead by example. What have you stopped emphasizing because it is presently absent in your own life?



3) Integrity. When choosing a king for Israel, God told Samuel who was enamored with the appearance of David's oldest brother, "Do not consider his appearance or his height...The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7). Integrity is a matter of the heart. "And David shepherded them with integrity of heart..." (Psalm 78:72) Once you've lost integrity, you've lost credibility. Once credibility is gone you won't be able to get a cat to follow you. Integrity is built through making and keeping promises and commitments. It is consistency of life. It is a word that means "wholeness." It is putting all of the areas of our life in the same direction. Integrity does not signify perfection. Perfection is unattainable but integrity is within our grasp. God will not use a leader who lacks integrity.

4) God's Word. Leaders are readers. Christian leaders are devoted to the word of God. Because a man of God depends on God, he learns to listen to and depend on God's word for goals, methods, insight and power. It is the word of God that makes him "adequate, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:17) Our audience... our followers need the assurance that we are regularly meeting with God and hearing his voice--that we are leading them from the guidance we are getting from God. They want to listen to the person who listens to God. If a leader is to influence people to accomplish an objective, then a Christian leader must be certain that the objective is something God wants done. To lead a ministry you must devote yourself to the word. The dispute in Acts 6 caused the disciples (leaders) to clarify their job description. "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables" (Acts 6:2). Waiting tables is good and necessary. However, people will survive without clean silverware. They will not grow and thrive without leaders who feed from and teach the word of God. In Hebrews 13:7 the author writes, "Remember you leaders, who spoke the word of God to you." Leaders give people the word of God. An essential characteristic of Christian leadership is the ability to receive truth from God. What are you doing to feed yourself from the Scriptures? What are you doing to feed others from God's word?

5) Prayer. "We (leaders)...will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." Acts 6:4 The weakest link in the life of a spiritual leader is probably prayer. Leaders, by their nature, are activists. They want to get things done. Prayer is often seen as in

interruption of the work. It's tough talking to an invisible being for any length of time. Yet Jesus, for all he came to do, "would often slip away to a lonely place to pray" (Luke 5:16). E.M. Bounds wrote, "Men are looking for better methods. God is looking for better men--men of prayer." Joshua's first lesson of leadership was learned on the battle field against the Amelekites (Exodus 17). While he was slicing and dicing Amelekites in the valley, the real battle took place on the mountain. As long as Moses interceded for him, the Israelites prevailed. Spiritual battles are won in prayer. If the success of your work and ministry was a reflection of your prayer life, where should your ministry be right now?

6) Spirit-filled. Spiritual leadership can be exercised only by Spirit-filled people. Other qualifications for spiritual leadership are desirable. To be Spirit-filled is indispensable. Jesus said "...apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) Even those whose duties are largely temporal in nature must be people controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 6). Wherever you see spiritual leadership, the Holy Spirit is behind the scenes, empowering, directing, leading. Paul wrote, "...not that we are competent to consider anything as coming from ourselves but our competency is from God, who made us competent ...(by) the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:5,6)

7) Hard Work. 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13 "Now we ask you brothers to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you." Leadership in the God's kingdom is not a life of executive privilege but that of hard work. The work may be very enjoyable, challenging and rewarding but it is work. That's why it is called "the work of ministry." We are admonished to "...lead with diligence" (Romans 12:8).

8) Faith. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7) Philosopher George Santayana said, "It is better to have one lion leading a thousand sheep than one sheep leading a thousand lions." A leader has the responsibility of leading the charge in believing God. A person of faith is a person of inner strength, courage and action. Faith is that which inspires courage in one's followers. The leader's faith quotient must be ahead of (or at least on par with) his followers.

9) Growth. A leader is not perfect but is always in the process of taking the next appropriate step in his



or her life of faith. Once a leader stops learning and growing he stops leading.

10) Home Life. Howard Hendricks says, “If it doesn’t work at home, don’t export it.” If you fail with your wife and children you have failed as a Christian leader...period! All of the above characteristics can be developed by a family man.

In 1 Timothy 4:12-16 the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about his style of leadership and how he could overcome his handicap of youthfulness. Observe how many of the above elements are present in his admonition: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift which was given you...Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.”

PURPOSE OF LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

Every spiritual leader is “one who will give an account” for the lives of his followers (Hebrews 13:17). Spiritual authority is bestowed by God for the benefit of those being served. Paul writes about “...the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down...” (2 Corinthians 10:8). God gives leaders to his people “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11,12). How well does your purpose as a leader fit God’s purpose for a leader?

QUALITIES OF PEOPLE GOD USES

Spiritual leadership does not rest in a title or in a position. The biblical approach to leadership rests on the quality of life of the individual leader. Because of the very nature of the term, “leader,” the followers will follow his or her example. In Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 we see a list of life-qualities, probably pursued by few, available to all and deniable to none. The attributes are a combination of character, maturity (“must not be a recent convert”), skill (“able to teach”) and track record (“they must first be tested...managing their household well...a good reputation with outsiders”).

There are times when you need to draft spiritual leaders and they too must be qualified. If there is not a pool of potentially qualified leaders, you have not been giving yourself to the right things in your ministry.



Eric Swanson is a former Campus Crusade staff member who now serves as a Leadership Community Director for Externally Focused Churches. He received his Doctor of Ministry degree from Bakke Graduate University.



By Bobby Jamieson

Biblical Theology and Shepherding

How would you write a pastor's job description? Where would you look for models? Maybe you'd ask a few other local churches for theirs and make a few tweaks to reflect your own church's schedule and programs.

That assumes, of course, that everyone already knows what a pastor is supposed to be and do. But how do we know what a pastor's fundamental role is?

Certainly we should look to Scripture to tell us what a pastor is. But where in Scripture? We could start with the work implied in elders' qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–10), and carefully consider explicit commands given to church leaders. When we scratch beneath the surface of some of those commands, though, an interesting picture emerges. Consider Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:1–3, both addressed to elders of local churches:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for [Gk. *poimainein*] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

So 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 [Gk. *poimanein*] 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. (1 Pet. 5:1–3)

In both of these passages, the main task of pastoring is summed up with the Greek verb *poimaino*, the basic meaning of which is “to shepherd,” as in, care for sheep (Luke 17:7; 1 Cor. 9:7). Both Paul in Acts and Peter in 1 Peter sum up the work of pastoring in one word: to shepherd.

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul refers to pastors as “shepherd-teachers,” again demonstrating that the idea of shepherding is basic to the pastoral office. In fact, the English word “pastor” itself comes from the Latin *pastor*, which means “shepherd.” So shepherding is basic to the word “pastor” and to biblical descriptions of pastoring.

But where do we learn what it means to shepherd? If you have a basic acquaintance with sheep and their needs, then you get the basic gist. Sheep need feeding and tending and guiding and protecting. Pastors do this for their people, transposed into a spiritual key.

SCRIPTURE'S STORY OF SHEPHERDING

But this metaphor takes on a whole new depth when we see how it unfolds throughout the story of Scripture. Ultimately, pastors learn what it means to be a pastor from how God himself shepherds his people.

The Divine Shepherd of the Exodus

Scripture's story of shepherding begins in earnest when God brings his people up out of Egypt, guides them through the wilderness for forty years, and leads them safely into their own land.[1] Describing the whole period of the exodus and the wilderness, Psalm 77:20 declares, "You led your people like a flock / by the hand of Moses and Aaron."

Like a shepherd, God was personally present with his people (Ex. 33:15–16). Like a shepherd, God protected his people (Num. 14:7–9; Deut. 23:14). Like a shepherd, God provided for his people. He fed them (Ps. 78:19, 105:40–41). He healed them (Ex. 15:26; Num. 21:8–9).

Like a shepherd, God guided his people to fertile pastures: "You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode" (Ex. 15:13). Like a shepherd, God gently, tenderly drew his people along:

I led them with cords of kindness,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos. 11:4)

In all this, God shepherded his people through Moses, the human leader he appointed to shepherd them (Ps. 77:20). And Moses himself asked the Lord for a successor, in order that "the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:17).

So the Lord, the divine King of creation, is also the shepherd of his people. And he shepherded them through a human shepherd of his own appointing.

David the Shepherd-King

Hundreds of years later, this pattern continues in the reign of David and his dynasty. The Lord took David from shepherding sheep and made him shepherd of Israel (2 Sam. 5:1–3, 7:8). The psalmist declares,

He chose David his servant
and took him from the sheepfolds;
from following the nursing ewes he brought him
to shepherd Jacob his people,
Israel his inheritance.
With upright heart he shepherded them
and guided them with his skillful hand. (Ps. 78:70–72)

Just as David tenderly nurtured the sheep under his care, so, in the main, he led Israel responsibly and compassionately, shepherding them in integrity and wisdom.

Yet God himself remained the true shepherd of Israel. Israel confessed, "For he is our God, / and we are the people of his pasture, / and the sheep of his hand" (Ps. 95:7). And David, God's appointed under-shepherd, proclaimed his trust in God's provision, protection, and guidance in the sublime poetry of Psalm 23.

But not all of Israel's shepherd-kings led Israel in the green pastures of obedience to the Lord's Word. Instead, most of them led God's people into the barren wastelands of idolatry and injustice. So God scattered his flock among the nations as a punishment for their sin (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 4:27, 28:64; 1 Kgs. 14:15).

New Shepherds in the New Exodus

But the same God who scattered his people promised to gather them again. In Jeremiah 23:1–2, the Lord pronounces judgment on Israel's wicked kings, the shepherds who destroyed and scattered God's sheep. These shepherds failed to attend to God's people in care and protection, so God will attend to them in judgment. Not only that, in verses 3–4 God declares,

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.

The Lord will restore the fortunes of his people, and they will have shepherds who care for them, provide for them, and protect them. How will these shepherds serve God's people? The parallel passage in Jeremiah 3:15 tells us, "And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." The leaders of God's re-gathered people will lead the people by feeding the people the knowledge and understanding of God's ways and Word.

Not only that, but God will also raise up one supreme ruler, the heir of David, who will secure the salvation of all of God's people:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (Jer. 23:5–6)

This re-gathering of God's people, this new exodus back into their land, will outshine even God's mighty deliverance of his people from Egypt, and will be the deed by which God's people name and remember him from this time on (vv. 7–8).

So God will gather his people as a faithful shepherd. And God will raise up many faithful shepherds to care for his people. Yet one shepherd-king in particular will save the people and ensure their secure flourishing in God's place, under God's rule.

Isaiah 40:11 provides another glimpse of God's new-exodus act of gathering his sheep himself:

He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

Ezekiel 34 paints a more detailed portrait of God's work as the shepherd who will save his people. The current shepherds of Israel have fed themselves rather than the sheep and failed to heal the sick and seek the straying, so now God's sheep have been scattered (vv. 1–6). For all this God will judge these wicked shepherds, and will rescue his sheep himself (vv. 7–10). God himself will seek them out, rescue them, gather them into their own land, feed them, and lead them to lie down and rest (vv. 11–14). "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...I will feed them in justice" (vv. 15–16).

Yet God also promises, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (v. 23). So God himself will be their shepherd, but so will his “servant David.” And when God again shepherds his people, they will have peace, blessing, security, abundance, freedom, honor, and the true knowledge of God (vv. 25–31).

Jesus the Good Shepherd

Who is this shepherd whom God sets over his people? Jesus, the good shepherd. Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). Jesus is the good shepherd who came to give abundant life to God’s sheep (John 10:10), who lays down his life for God’s sheep (v. 11, 15), who knows his own sheep (v. 14), who gathers all his sheep into one flock (v. 16).

The metaphor of God’s people as sheep first took shape to describe Israel in the wilderness: hungry, thirsty, scorched by the sun, not yet at their true home. Transposed into a spiritual key, all this is true of the church in the present age. Like Israel in the wilderness, we have not yet entered God’s rest (Heb. 4:11). We’re threatened not just by hunger and hardship, but opposition and persecution.

Now we are weak and wandering, pressed by hardship. But in Revelation, John catches a glimpse of our final destination:

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 7:16–17)

The Lord Jesus is our shepherd, and he is a good shepherd. One day soon, though, he *will be* our shepherd, and we will never again hunger or hurt.

SHEPHERDING LIKE THE CHIEF SHEPHERD

So what does this story say to the church’s shepherds? Jesus’ famous words to Peter point us in the right direction. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him; three times Peter replied “yes”; three times Jesus charged Peter to care for his sheep (Jn. 21:15–17). John’s Gospel uses two different Greek words for “tend” or “feed” in this passage, but they mean the same thing. Both refer to the comprehensive care shepherds show sheep: feeding, tending, guiding, protecting. And that is exactly the kind of care pastors are to give their people.

Pastors are to feed their people with the Word, exhorting them in sound doctrine (Tit. 1:9–10), proclaiming to them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Pastors are to guard their people against false doctrine and those who would lead them astray (Acts 20:29–31). Pastors are to lead their people by providing a godly example (Heb. 13:7), equipping them for ministry (Eph. 4:12), and wisely directing the affairs of the church (1 Tim. 5:17). Pastors are to care for their people by tenderly providing whatever counsel, help, and encouragement they need.

In a word, pastors care. They don’t just care about their people, they care for them. They know them. They seek them out. They give their people what their souls need, even when the people themselves don’t know or want what they most need.

In all this, pastors image God the Father. Paul exhorts church leaders, “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:14). That kind of person-by-person care

is exactly what God promises to do for his people when he pledges to seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and feed them all in justice (Ezek. 34:16).

And pastors image our Lord Jesus Christ, who shepherd the people of God before any pastor, and shepherds them throughout the course of every pastor's ministry, and will shepherd them after every pastor's ministry ends. That's why Peter calls Jesus the "chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4). Jesus is the heir God raised up for David; he is the one true Shepherd-King of God's people. Yet Jesus' shepherding ministry doesn't rule out human shepherds—instead it equips and empowers them.

Pastor, have you ever considered that your own ministry to your local church participates in the fulfillment of prophecy? Remember that God promised to set *many* shepherds over his people when he set his supreme Shepherd over them (Jer. 23:4, 5). These shepherds would feed God's people with knowledge and understanding (Jer. 3:15).

How well do your priorities in ministry match those of the divine shepherd? How well do you know your sheep's spiritual needs? How much time and effort do you devote to meeting those needs one by one? Are you more concerned about how many new bodies enter the building or about how their souls are fainting or flourishing?

Are you vigilant against threats to your people's soundness in the faith? Or do you leave your sheep easy prey for false teachers by failing to equip them with a deep grasp of biblical doctrine?

Do you know which of your sheep are flourishing and which are malnourished? Which are spiritually strong and which are sick? Which are safely in the fold and which are wandering into the wilderness?

If you want a refresher on your job description as a pastor, consider how God has shepherded his people throughout the story of Scripture. Marvel at his gentle care and powerful protection. Learn from his patient attention to his people's diverse needs. Be amazed at the depths of God's tender compassion, that the one who holds galaxies in his hand also stoops down and picks up those sheep who are too weak to walk. And pray that, by his grace and in the power of his Spirit, God would make you a shepherd after his own heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks, a member of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and the author of *Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love and Holiness of God* (Crossway, 2013). You can [follow him](#) on Twitter.

Life as a Shepherd Leader

THE YOUNG MAN WHO DECLARED HE WANTED TO BE A PASTOR BUT DIDN'T WANT TO DEAL WITH PEOPLE WAS CONTRADICTING HIMSELF. YOU CAN'T BE A SHEPHERD WITHOUT LIVING AMONG THE SHEEP.

A couple of years ago, an individual who thought he might be called to pastoral ministry informed me (Jones), “I love to teach, and I want to preach – but I can’t stand people.” He went on to describe his dream position: to provide a polished exposition of Scripture every Sunday morning, to decide the church’s vision and direction, but never to deal directly with the people in the congregation. It was a pleasant-sounding dream with one fatal flaw: no such position exists in the very Scriptures that he claimed he wanted to proclaim.

What this young man needed wasn’t merely an improvement in his people skills – though, frankly, he could have used that too. What he needed was to understand the difference between cattle and sheep.

Throughout Scripture, sheep provide a primary metaphor for God’s people (1 Kgs 22:17; Ps 77:20) and God himself is the great shepherd (Gen 49:24; Ps 23:1). Yet the imagery doesn’t end there. Divinely designated leaders are seen as shepherds too (Num 27:15-18; 2 Sam 5:2). In the New Testament, “shepherds” (or “pastors”) becomes a term to describe the church’s God-ordained overseers (Eph 4:11).

So what does all this have to do with differentiating cattle and sheep?

Cattle might meander among the oaks of Bashan or find themselves being fattened in pens (Amos 4:1; 6:4); either way, their tending did not require their keepers to live among them. Sheep, on the other hand, need a shepherd, and shepherds live among their sheep. When the shepherd fails to guide his sheep, the flock becomes fragmented and vulnerable (1 Kgs 22:17; 2 Chr 18:16; Zech 10:2).

The young man who declared he wanted to be a pastor but didn’t want to deal with people was contradicting himself. You can’t be a shepherd without living among the sheep.

The struggle to live as a shepherd is not new, of course. Leaders who failed to care for their flocks were, in fact, part of the problem that the prophet Ezekiel saw in the sixth

century B.C. when he looked at the rulers of Israel. Ezekiel's inspired pronouncement did not point his people toward some new leadership technique; instead, the prophet pointed them toward the sacrificial life of a leader yet to come.

SHEPHERDS OR SOVEREIGNS?

Even in the nations that surrounded Israel, "shepherd" functioned as a metaphor for rulers and gods – but Israel's kings were called to shepherd God's people in a very different way. The kings of Israel were never to present themselves as royal owners of the flock. God alone was the Lord of Israel, and the people were his property. The kings were under-shepherds. Like shepherds in the field tending the flock of a higher lord, the kings were responsible to live among their subjects, to guide them and to guard them for God's glory.

But the kings of Israel and Judah failed. In the decades after David, they began to treat God's people as their own property. According to Ezekiel, they failed to feed God's flock (Ezek 34:2). Instead of serving among the people of God's flock, these kings "ruled them" with "force and harshness" like Pharaoh in the days of Moses (Ezek 34:4; cf. Exod 1:13-14). The protectors became predators. The people became like sheep without a shepherd, scattered and slaughtered for the sake of their rulers (34:3, 6).

Fixing this failure would require something far more radical than a tweak in the shepherding habits of human kings. The sole solution would be the arrival of God himself. The Lord of the flock would live among his people as their shepherd (Ezek 34:12). God himself would show up to seek out his scattered sheep, to separate the sleek from the weak and to fill the feed-troughs of the oppressors with judgment (34:11, 16-22). Once again, it would be clear that these people were the property of God alone.

God did not, however, give up on working through the offspring of Eve. He predicted through Ezekiel that he would raise up a human ruler as well: one like David, who would live not as a sovereign but as a servant, a prince, and an under-shepherd (34:23-24). This ruler would also live "among" his flock, and God himself would remain "with them" forever (34:24, 28-30).

All of this was partly fulfilled in the post-exile period – but only partly. On this side of the cross and empty tomb, it's clear that Jesus provided the ultimate fulfillment of both predictions. As God enfleshed, he was the rightful Lord and King of his people. Yet he willingly became not only the servant and the shepherd but also the sacrificial lamb. The shepherd was stricken by God for sins that were not his own and then rose to life to gather his own from every nation (Zech 13:9; Matt 26:31-32; 28:19; John 10:14-18; Rev 7:9-17).

As he gathers his own, Jesus the exalted Shepherd King has chosen once again to work through human shepherds. In the Gospels, the apostles began as sheep (Matt 10:16) but wound up as shepherds (John 21:15-18) who then recognized other God-appointed men as shepherds of this flock (Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 5:1-2). Yet, now as in the days of Ezekiel, God himself remains the Chief Shepherd, the true owner of the sheep (Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4). Pastors are not lords of the sheep but servants of the King, called to imitate the chief Shepherd.

IMITATING THE CHIEF SHEPHERD

So what does all of this mean for pastoral leaders in the church of Jesus Christ?

1. Shepherd leadership calls for feeding the flock.

The primary responsibility of the shepherd is to provide nourishment for the flock (Ezek 34:2). So it is in church life, the pastor must consider that his leadership is most strikingly demonstrated through his teaching and preaching ministry. The Chief Shepherd was known as one who taught with great authority (John 1:29; Matt 7:28-29). Remember when Jesus invited his disciples to retreat to a deserted place? When they arrived, the spot was no longer deserted because the people had anticipated where Jesus might be headed. Compassion welled up within Jesus when he saw the people because “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” His immediate response is telling: “he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34).

Later, along the shores of Galilee, Jesus prepared breakfast for the disciples. This post-resurrection appearance concluded with Jesus asking Simon Peter three times, “Do you love me?” The response to Peter’s affirmations of love were “Feed *my* lambs. ... Tend *my* sheep. ... Feed *my* sheep.” Peter was reminded that he had been called to serve Christ by being a servant who feeds the flock. It was through feeding God’s people he was to demonstrate authentic love for the Chief Shepherd.

Pastoral leadership is rooted in the responsibility of living as an under-shepherd with eyes fixed on the Chief Shepherd. True compassion for people and love for God compels the pastoral leader to make Christ known through the teaching of God’s Word.

2. Shepherd leadership calls for guarding the flock.

In God’s rebuke against Israel’s leaders, he indicted them as predators rather than protectors. The rulers of Israel were devouring the flock for their own gain so that God’s sheep were scattered and became “food for all the wild beasts” (Ezek 34:3, 5, 8). God, who would reverse the evils of the leaders, declared that he would rescue his sheep and give them rest so that they would no longer be prey (Ezek 34:12, 14, 15, 22). A mark of divine leadership is protection. So it is with shepherd leaders in Christ’s church.

3. Shepherd leadership leads to sacrificial service among the people.

Jesus, the model shepherd, makes this clear in his words to the Pharisees: “the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). This is exactly what Christ did on our behalf through his finished work on the cross. It is no wonder then that, immediately after calling Peter to feed his sheep, the resurrected Jesus also called Peter to follow him to the point of death (John 21:18-19).

The difficulty is that there are pastors who choose to live as self-centered shepherds, much like the rulers described in Ezekiel. But there is another category of shepherds in the church – those who are *flock-centered*. This descriptor sounds positive, but it too falls short of authentic imitation of the Chief Shepherd. These leaders encourage their sheep and may even know their sheep, but they are marked by a desire to keep the flock happy and satisfied. They keep peace in the fold at any price. This well intended desire can lead to unwillingness to deal with sin or false teachings. The result is contentment to gather with the 99 – and to gather more “99s” – without seeking or correcting the one who wanders (Ezek 34:4-5, 8; Matt 18:12-14). This approach to shepherding ultimately produces weakened churches and a diminished display of God’s holiness and glory. Leaders who understand their role as shepherds do not peer down at their people from a holy hayloft and drop an occasional bale of sustenance in the form of a finely crafted homily. Neither do they allow their flocks to live in false peace. Shepherd leaders live among their people and pay “careful attention ... to all the flock” (Acts 20:28). They see themselves neither as sovereigns over their churches nor as hirelings of their churches but as under-shepherds of the living God.

By Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones