

Shepherds of the Flock of God

Introduction

1 Peter 5:1,2“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: FEED THE FLOCK of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind:”

Deuteronomy 8:3，“And he humbled you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.”

We live by God’s Word, that which proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”.

And it is our shepherds who have the duty to provide us with this nourishment, lest we waste away in spiritual malnutrition!

My aim in this article is to provide a thorough introduction to the Bible concept of shepherding, from Jehovah and the Lord Jesus Christ as Shepherd, to the Christian believer who feeds and cares for the “sheep of His pasture.”

Pastors and elders are shepherds. The Greek word (**poimeinos**), used a single time in the New Testament in Ephesians 4:11, is translated “pastor”. On other occasions, such as in 1 Peter 5:2, the verb form (**poimeinw**) is translated “to feed”. So pastors and elders are “feeders”, and Christians are the “flock” which are to be fed.

I intend in this article to develop a full description of what a Christian spiritual shepherd is, including a shepherd’s qualifications and duties. This description will be derived from a study of what the whole Bible says about shepherds, by examining the following:

- Jehovah as Shepherd
- The Lord Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd

- King David as shepherd of his people. He was both a shepherd-boy and the shepherd of the kingdom of Israel

- Pastors and elders, including all those who “feed the flock of God”

I think that the Bible passages I cite in this study will demonstrate that there are well laid out Bible standards for the function of shepherd, and that when one is known a true shepherd of the sheep, certain objective criteria have been met.

Titus was given the task of choosing shepherds (elders) for the local congregations on the island of Crete. When choosing a shepherd, it’s important to have a good idea of what God intends a shepherd to be.

To illustrate:

- A good shepherd puts the needs of the sheep first, and has an abiding sense of obligation toward them. One who does not know how to care for sheep, or who neglects sheep, is not a good shepherd.
- A good shepherd leads sheep to good pasture and water. A person who does not provide food and water for sheep is not a good shepherd.
- A good shepherd protects the sheep and sets up defenses against those who would harm the sheep. An individual who deliberately harms or frightens sheep is not a good shepherd.

Jehovah as Shepherd

There is a chain of command in Christian affairs. In a chain of command, such as in a military organization, when one level of command fails to function properly, the responsibility is taken over by the next higher level of command.

God the Father, Jehovah, is always watching His sheep; and He is always ready to take over when the sheep are not being well handled by their appointed shepherds..

READ Jeremiah 10:19-22

[I will show scripture passages to illustrate these ideas, but it's up to you to examine the whole context of the discussion in any passage I cite. Be aware that the verses I indicate are only pointers to a broader portion of the Bible that needs to be reviewed in context.]

Suggestion: read the whole book of Jeremiah from the standpoint of shepherds, good and bad, and their duties toward their "sheep." But especially read:

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Jeremiah 50:4-19

Psalms 23

Isaiah 44:24-28

Even a heathen king, Cyrus, was named shepherd, to fulfill a specific function, to contribute to the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

READ Ezekiel 34.

From C. F. Keil, Commentary on Ezekiel

The shepherds of Israel, namely, the political and religious leaders, have been feeding themselves and neglecting the flock. The flock has been scattered and has become a prey to wild beasts. The Lord will remove the bad shepherds from their office.

The Lord will take charge of His own flock, gather it together from where it is scattered, and feed and tend it on good pasture in the land of Israel. He will sift the flock by getting rid of the "fat" and "violent" ones.

He will appoint His servant David shepherd over His flock, make a covenant of peace with His people, and bless the land with fruitfulness, so that Israel may dwell there in security, and no more suffer by internal strife and famine or be carried off by their enemies.

This chapter (Eze. 34) is a repetition and expansion of the prophecy of Jeremiah 23:1-8. Both prophecies deal with the salvation of Israel and the fact that the sheep will be gathered and tended by the Lord and His servant David.

Rev. 7:17, "For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

Rev. 12:6, "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand, two hundred, and threescore days."

The Lord Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd

Jesus Christ is presented as the "Good Shepherd" in that He lays down His life for His sheep. This refers to Christ's saving work on the cross, the atonement.

In Hebrews 13:20,21, He is called the "great shepherd," a title that refers to divine blessing to advanced believers.

In 1 Peter 5:4, the title "Chief Shepherd" is the title for Christ as we face Him after death.

The Lord Jesus provides for His sheep in many ways.

- The believer, like a sheep, is helpless and has no sense of direction; a sheep must be guided by a shepherd. We need Bible truth as our guide in life.
- A sheep cannot clean itself; this a reminder of our Lord's provision of cleansing, as shown in 1 John 1:9.
- A sheep is helpless when injured. So, when we are injured by the various problems in life, only the Lord can provide the necessary therapy.
- A sheep is defenseless; he depends on the shepherd for protection. The Lord provide the armor of God for protection.
- A sheep can't find food or water for itself. A sheep must depend on the shepherd to lead it to water.
- A sheep is easily frightened or panicked. The shepherd calms the sheep with songs in the night; i.e. Bible truth in the soul.
- When the sheep produces wool, it belong to the owner of the flock. It does not belong to the sheep.

Every Christian is supposed to be "like Christ." Pastors and elders, in particular, must have the qualities of good shepherd that the Lord Jesus embodies.

An elder must have the "mind of Christ." This means that, as he grows into his job as elder, he will become more like Christ in his thinking and shepherding. If he does not, he will be a bad shepherd.

Matthew 9:35-38

Matthew 25:31-34

Luke 15:4-7

John 10:1-18

John 21:15-17

Keep in mind as we study - the sheep belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. All through the scriptures that we are studying, the flocks belong to God. They do not belong to the human shepherd. By illustration, David was the shepherd for sheep that belonged to his father, Jesse.

In Heb. 13:20, Christ is called “the great Shepherd of the sheep.”

1 Peter 2:21-25, “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously. Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”

Matthew 18:10-24

Psalm 78:51-54, “He smote all the firstborn in Egypt; the chief of their strength in the tabernacles of Ham: But made his own people to go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. And he led them on safely, so that they feared not: but the sea overwhelmed their enemies. And he brought them to the border of his sanctuary, even to this mountain, which his right hand had purchased.”

Psalm 79:13, “So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks forever: we will show forth thy praise to all generations.”

Isaiah 40:10,11, “Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

If an elder has the mind of Christ, he will have the attitude of Christ toward his flock and toward his job as shepherd. This is the attitude and motivation to look for in anyone who aspires to the office of pastor or elder.

David as the Shepherd of Israel

1 Chronicles 17:3-9

1 Chronicles 21:16,17

In this passage, David takes the responsibility for the poor handling of his human flock when he numbered the people.

Spiritual Qualifications for an Elder (Shepherd)

The most important function in a church - and the most important activity that a Christian can engage in - is the study and teaching of the Word of God. Bible truth is the theoretical and practical support for every other feature of Christian life, including worship, prayer, evangelism, missionary service, discipling, and fellowship. Without a solid foundation in Bible principle and doctrine, a Christian can spend his life flailing around trying to serve the Lord while never understanding the basic plan of God for his life and ministry.

In a local church, someone has to teach, to organize things, to arrange for the activities of the organization, no matter how small. If no hierarchy is imposed on a community of people, leaders will emerge anyway, either chosen by the group to take charge, or, by default, to move into a leadership void.

In the Bible, Christian leaders are not chosen politically, or by seniority, or by submitting a résumé. An “eldership” is a battlefield commission; a person tested and proved in battle is seen to be the natural choice for a position as a bishop or elder.

The most highly decorated American soldier of World War II, Audie Murphy, received a battlefield commission to 2nd Lieutenant, after he had proved himself in battle. His leaders had seen in him the qualities of leadership and proven ability that made him eligible for that honor. (He was prevented by his physical disability from wounds from attending the U. S. Military Academy after the war.)

In the Epistle to Titus, the task given to Titus was to observe which individuals were qualified to be appointed, according to the criteria Paul outlined.

Chief among these qualifications was that the elder was to “hold to the faithful word as he had been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine to refute and to convince the gainsayers.” An elder is primarily a teacher of the Word of God. If he does not teach his flock what the Bible says, his sheep will perish of malnourishment!

The qualifications of elders (pastors, bishops, overseers, presbyters, deacons) are given in such passages as 1 Peter 5, Titus 1 and 2, 1 Timothy, and Acts 7.

Think about Titus's job of selecting elders on Crete.

He had to observe men in the communities on Crete and decide which to appoint as elders. Maybe he interviewed likely candidates. Maybe he asked other believers to describe the qualities they say in various people.

It's possible to fake many things in the Christian life. A person can smile, talk the language of the church he attends, refrain from certain taboos, and generally fool most of the people most of the time. After all, we don't go around questioning people to their face about the genuineness of their profession or claims. If a person claims to love the Lord and be devoted to Christian service, how can you tell if the claim is genuine?

Well, there are two things in which it is extremely difficult to fool an experienced person like Titus. First, it is hard to give the appearance of having a great love for the Word of God. And second, it is hard to fool a discerning Christian into believing that one has the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Love for the Word of God

When a person genuinely loves the Lord, a love for the Word of God naturally accompanies that love. That person will give evidence every day of immersion in the Bible. After all, the Bible is the communication of the Lord Jesus, the One loved. A desire to know the Word, to meditate in it, and to talk about it, will be just as natural as a young person's total captivation with romance.

In fact, this characteristic can be used to discern the true merits of any candidate for Christian office. A person can attend church, engage in worship and Christian service, and use Christian vocabulary. But there may be some ulterior motive in this.

A young man who is interested in a young woman can readily adapt himself to her surroundings and seem to be something that he is not. People are chameleons when trying to impress others. But it is very difficult over a period of time for a person to establish a reputation as one who is absorbed by the Word of God, unless the Bible is the center of attention and devotion.

A Christian who is motivated by a desire for recognition, a lust for power, or an ambition to have a religious career, can adopt almost any appearance or conform to any program or set of standards. One of the most difficult things to fake, however, is an occupation with the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word.

The Fruit of the Holy Spirit

The other thing that is hard to cover up is a lack of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But how can you tell when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit?

The people in Acts 7 were expected to do just that when they selected the first seven deacons. They were expected to select men to handle this job, based on just this one qualification. If you had been in that church, how would you have known whom to vote for?

Would you believe that a man is Spirit-filled because he tells you he is, or because he says he has had a spiritual experience? Would you be impressed by a person who is sweet, smiles, and uses spiritual vocabulary? The outward appearance is easy to counterfeit. When one person exhibits some genuine spiritual power or ability, it's quite natural that others will envy that and want to fake it, or buy it (Simon the Sorcerer)!

But Titus was looking for some very objective evidence of genuine Christian character in the men he was considering for positions of responsibility on Crete.

LOVE - The first fruit of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5 is Love.

Titus 1:8 states that an elder is to be "a lover of hospitality": (**philozenos**); he is to have a love for strangers. This word carries the connotation of hospitality, of doing something for someone who does not earn or deserve the good treatment, because there has been no previous acquaintance. This word reflects a Grace attitude toward people who have not yet earned one's consideration.

This is a word of impersonal love - the type of attitude that is free of arrogance, envy, hatred, or even disdain for other people, even if there is sharp disagreement about doctrine or practice. This is the type of love that permits a Christian to love even his enemies or people that he doesn't like.

There is no envy, self-righteousness, or sinful judging accompanying this love. There will be no hatred, maligning, or malicious gossip involved in this love.

This is the type of love that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It does not come from emotion, although it may cause emotion. This is the "professional" love of the mature Christian believer, analogous to the Love of God, the quality of which does not depend on the behavior or character of the one being loved, but on the character of the one who loves.

JOY - Joy is the happiness which God provides, a happiness that does not depend on people, circumstances, or things to maintain it. Joy is the relaxed mental attitude that comes from casting one's cares on Christ, knowing that He cares for us. A person who does not possess spiritual joy will chase after the world's attractions and provisions because there is no satisfaction in the things of the Lord.

PEACE - Peace is the result of exercising Faith-Rest. Faith-Rest is the process of trusting God the Father to keep his promises, to make provision for every contingency and trial, and then enjoying the tranquillity that abiding in Christ provides. A person without godly peace will fret and stew, try to solve problems in flesh, and will generally exhibit the same anxieties as the unbeliever in the same position.

PATIENCE - the long view; the quality that results from having eternity's value in view, of being occupied with Christ, of living in the Word of God, and of knowing what God's plan is and how it is working out in the life. The impatient person wants things now and will avidly pursue "things", not being willing to wait for the Lord to provide or promote.

The Elder's Professional Qualifications

An elder must be an accomplished instructor of the

Word of God. There are many other duties of elders, especially of those who are overseers, such as priests, pastors, bishops; but the underlying basic responsibility is that of teaching - feeding the flock.

To the spiritual character and personal integrity described above must be added the training and growth in "knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" that allows the elder, as the chief among edified believers, to serve as an effective shepherd.

A local church needs at least one person who teaches the Bible with sufficient quality, and in sufficient quantity, to provide nourishing spiritual food for the congregation. The teacher needs to have a thorough knowledge of the Word and the ability to correlate the facts and doctrines of scripture and make application of those principles to Christian living.

A Christian needs to know what the Bible says and what it means. A Christian is supposed to live "by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." There is no substitute in any believers' life for a thorough overall knowledge of the facts, the doctrines, and the spiritual principles of the Word. A pastor must be willing and able to spend the hours studying and teaching that are required.

If there is no shepherd to teach these things, the people will be hungry.