

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Role of a Shepherd

by Dan Trygg

“May Yahweh, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, ¹⁷ who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of Yahweh will not be like sheep which have no shepherd.”

Numbers 27:16-17

“And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field...”

Ezekiel 34:5

“Therefore the people wander like sheep; they suffer affliction because there is no shepherd...”

Zechariah 10:2

“When He saw the crowds, He felt compassion for them, because they were harassed-to-exhaustion and stuck, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Matthew 9:36

In Numbers 27, the Lord instructed Moses to ascend one of the mountains on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. From there, he would be able to view Canaan, the land God had promised to give to the children of Israel. God was permitting him to get a glimpse of this land, but he would not be able to enter it. Instead, he would die there on the mountain. This was not a shock to Moses. Months earlier, God had told him that this would happen, and he knew that his time had come. In response, **Moses cried out to God to appoint someone to take his place, to be an example and leader to them, so that the Lord's gathered community would not be “like sheep without a shepherd.”**

“...like sheep without a shepherd” was a word picture that was clearly and commonly understood, at that time. It was a phenomenon that everyone would have recognized and immediately connected with. Folks were well aware of what being a shepherd entailed, and why it was important. **Unfortunately, over the centuries, our connection to this word picture has been separated by time, unfamiliarity and religious traditions.** When we hear the word “pastor” or “shepherd”, we often have a *distorted view* of what that means. One thing that *is* clear from the passages listed above is that **it was very undesirable to be a sheep, or a flock, without a shepherd.**

In the time of the patriarchs, being a shepherd was a respectable occupation. After the Exodus, and the settlement of the land, agricultural interests shifted to farming, instead of sheep and animal herding, *per se*. Then, shepherding was seen in a less desirable, less respectable light. Many people still had sheep, but they tended to stay in a smaller range, instead of traveling all throughout the land. To be a shepherd was not a particularly pleasant job. **Shepherds had to design their lives around their sheep.** They were up early in the morning, to bring the sheep to a good grazing area while the day was still cool. **Unlike modern-day shepherders, biblical shepherds led their sheep.** They did not *drive* them, except under duress. **The success of their work relied upon keeping the sheep well-watered, well fed, safe and contented.** Then, the natural processes of growth and reproduction would take place unhindered. They *knew* their sheep, and *called them by name*. Shepherds walked in front of their flocks, leading them to *good grazing areas* and *watering places*. All the while, *they had to pay attention* that none wandered off, or were attacked by predators. **Sheep needed lots of care. It was the shepherd's job to see that they received the care and oversight that was required.** Shepherds had to deal with parasites, bugs, cuts, sheep that were sick, or that were stuck in a thicket, or who had fallen over, and were trapped on their backs. Sheep would sometimes try to eat too much desirable food, and would get sick. The shepherd would have to “make them lie down in green pastures”, so they could properly chew and digest their food. **Shepherds carried a long stick, curved at one end, to extricate sheep from bushes or holes. They also carried a club or rod to fight off attacking predators.** Lions, wolves and bears were not uncommon in ancient Israel. Shepherds had to stay with the flock, night and day, in the heat of summer and in the cold of winter, in the rain and snow. **The job was somewhat undesirable because of meager wages, having to live in the elements, keeping the night watches, and being all but cut off from the rest of society.**

With this background, we can better understand the passages above. In Numbers 27, Moses prayed for God to appoint someone “who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in”. What was he talking about? Many of us think in terms of authority, and military leadership, especially because Joshua was military leader. That does not fit with the word picture of sheep and shepherd, however. How would this fit with sheep? **A shepherd who would “go out and come in before them” would be a person who would become a familiar part of their life.** They would develop familiarity and comfort with seeing this person on a regular basis. From that growing relationship, the shepherd could then “lead them out and bring them in”. **The leadership and effectiveness of a shepherd came with developing a relationship of trust and familiarity.** The last phrase, “so that [they] would not be like sheep without a shepherd” in this context refers to the flock's need for the guidance and care. Without the wise direction and leadership of a shepherd, a flock would aimlessly eat up the food in one area, and go hungry. **Wise guidance and direction will supply their needs for food and water.**

Ezekiel 34 has a much *more extended description* of the value and function of shepherd-leadership than the verse mentioned above. This chapter is a great study resource for better understanding the dynamics and effects of healthy and abusive shepherding. There are two issues mentioned in the single verse quoted above. First, **without an effective shepherd, the flock will be scattered**. Whether by distracted wandering, or by being driven apart by the attacks of predators, or by being forced to wander farther from the flock because of lack of ready foraging, a flock without a shepherd tends to drift apart. **An effective shepherd will keep the flock together, where there is safety**, wise guidance, and the needs of the sheep can be adequately met. The other issue mentioned by Ezekiel is that **without an effective shepherd, the flock is defenseless against predators**. **Good shepherding care will provide protection** against the attempts of thieves, robbers or predatory animals to steal or kill sheep.

This is reinforced by Zechariah 10:2. The Israelites had been lured away to false religions, spiritism and fortune-telling, and were listening to false visions and dreams. Because they had no shepherds to warn and protect them from error, they had wandered away to deceptive influences. **Zechariah adds another component: Without effective shepherds, the people of God will experience painful afflictions and judgments** that are the consequences of waywardness. **Good shepherding will lead to healthy lives, filled with God's blessings**.

The passage from Matthew 9 shows how deep and problematic soul-sickness, bondage and affliction can get. The description is very vivid in the original language. **Jesus saw the people as being picked-on and harassed until they were exhausted, and totally stuck. He drew the comparison, "They are like sheep who have no shepherd."** His inward emotional response was not judgment, but compassion! His external response was to call out to those who were worn out and stuck, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest!" **Tired people need to rest, and heal. They need to be cared for and be nursed back to health.** Effective shepherds recognize this, and compassionately bind up the wounds of the broken and wounded. **Good shepherding will help free those who are stuck, and will nurse the hurting and exhausted back to health.**

Negative characteristics of evil or poor shepherd-leaders were described in Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 11:15-18. They took advantage of the people, and ruled them by force and severity. They were in it for the power, prestige and money. They abandoned the flock, showing them no real care or attention. They did not search for the lost sheep, or care for the sickly. They did not intervene to stop bullying among the sheep. They did not have compassion on the people. They piled up judgment and religious duties, and controlled people by guilt. They loved the fancy clothes, honorific titles and special treatment. **Jesus exposed the inflated egos of religious leaders of His day** (e.g. Matt. 23), and told His disciples that leadership in God's Kingdom was "upside-down" from that of the world-system. **Those who would be great in His Kingdom are those willing to be humble servants** (Matt. 20:25-28; 23:1-12).

What is the point of all of this? **Spiritual leadership in the Kingdom of God is associated with the word picture of a shepherd. Elders are to "oversee" and "shepherd" the "flock of God"** (Acts 20:17,28; I Pet. 5:1-3). They are to *keep watch* and *care for* the people, just as a good shepherd would attend to the needs of his sheep. Note, this is a function and responsibility of *all* elders, not just "the pastors". **What about "pastors"?** First of all, **the word, "pastor", only occurs once in most English Bibles, in Ephesians 4:11, yet it is the exact same word as "shepherd" that occurs 17 other times in the NT!** Why is it translated as "pastor"? It is a practice that comes from church history and tradition. **The word itself is simply the Latin noun for "shepherd"**. It came to be associated with a parish priest. Then, after the Protestant Reformation, the title *stuck*, ...at least in some denominational traditions, ...although other denominations prefer words like "minister", "deacon", "elder", "overseer", or "bishop". **Eventually, it came to be a title for a "religious office"**. Soon, there were even attempts to differentiate between "Senior Pastor", "Associate Pastor", etc., as a way to designate positions of authority or power among church leaders. **All of this is a very strange departure from the teachings of Jesus on the nature of authority in His Kingdom.** Unfortunately, **the real meaning of what it means to function as a shepherd in relation to a group of people has been confused, obscured, or lost.**

From a biblical standpoint, a "pastor" or "shepherd" is *not* the title for a "religious office". **It is a word that describes a serving role, a leadership style that is based upon relationship, example and attentive care.** A "pastor" is *not* the "boss", the "general", the "church executive", or the "religious professional". He or she is one given the responsibility of caring for the welfare of a group of people. **There usually are multiple shepherds and shepherding roles in a given church Body.** Through relationship and example, these functional shepherds will become evident. **We need to consciously develop such relationships in our lives. Those who "shepherd themselves"** (Jude 1:12) **lack perspective, and often are headed for trouble.** **We need** the input of others. **This is what the Church is all about, ...gathering for interaction, input and accountability.** God has placed shepherd-teacher types to help us along our journey (Eph. 4:11-13). Ultimately, **Jesus is the Chief Shepherd, the Good and Great Shepherd of the Sheep** (I Pet. 5:4; Jn. 10:11-14; Heb. 13:20). **He is our example, and we will have to answer to Him for how we respond to godly direction and counsel, and how we speak into the lives of others and serve them** (Matt. 25:31-46).