

Elders As Shepherds

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A shepherd is literally one who feeds. He is a pastor. In Bible times, the typical shepherd tended his own flock, or delegated the work to his children or close relatives. By virtue of ownership, he was highly motivated to the work. No sacrifice was too great for his sheep. He sheltered them when cold, searched for them when lost, and bound up their wounds when hurt. With only his dog and staff, he protected them from wolves that were always crouching just out of sight and scent. A hireling would not be so diligent. He would not watch with the same degree of love and concern as the shepherd who cared for his own or his father's possessions.

Most of the shepherd's time was spent feeding and watering the flock. He was the shepherd, the feeder. Sheep were not fed in a pen as a farmer might feed his pigs, but in open pasture. The shepherd constantly moved his charge from hillside to valley searching for better grazing and plenty of good water. While there were occasions when searching or binding or protecting was necessary, the shepherd's continual duty was to feed and water, feed and water. And when that duty was done, he watered and fed.

God has always looked at His people as sheep. He cares for them with the tenderness of a shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms and gently leads those who are with young (Isaiah 40:11). Further, God has always considered those in positions of leadership over His sheep as shepherds. Overseers of the Lord's church are shepherds. Their position and their responsibility are put clearly in focus in 1 Peter 5:14 when Peter reminded elders to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you..." For those who discharge their responsibility well, Peter extended God's promise of "an unfading crown of God's glory" when the "Chief Shepherd" appears. On the other hand, God is against shepherds who "do not feed the flock" (Ezekiel 34:8-10). His words against negligent elders in Ezekiel's day were unmistakable. "The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost but with force and cruelty you have ruled them" (Ezekiel 34:4).

To each elder today the obligation of a shepherd over God's flock should be clear. And what is necessary for each to discharge his obligation is equally clear. He can do so only in his personal relationship with each member of the flock. Just as a shepherd on the hillsides of Judea searched for and cradled a single lost lamb against the ravages of a cold night, an elder of the Lord's church must be concerned for each individual member in his care.

That kind of concern is not possible without love, that sacrificial love which demands time. Not the kind of time and concern expected of a hireling but that which distinguishes a son of the owner. To be sure, much of an elder's feeding and watering will be accomplished when he has opened to the flock the good pasture and cool streams of God's word, but some of the lambs require individual attention. There are many in the flock who are spiritually undernourished. Some are crippled by sin, and some are only a hair's breadth from falling headlong over the precipice of Satan's domain. Will the shepherd act? The one who is truly committed to the Chief Shepherd will.

God's shepherd will be ever watchful for any telltale sign that something is wrong in the life of one of the Father's little ones. He will be available to listen, and he will be a source of spiritual guidance for those who are groping. The Lord's church has never had a greater need for godly elders than it does right now. We need men who have prepared themselves to offer spiritual counseling and who are, as

Paul said in Romans 15:14, "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish." With wise instruction and loving counsel, many members of the Lord's church today could be brought closer to the Lord.

We need shepherds who will sound a loving alarm when one's faith falters, or when a marriage shows signs of weakening. We need elders who are unafraid to go after the one who strays or question the one who does not speak as the oracles of God. We need pastors who are willing to be close to the sheep – close enough to know them, to feel their hurts and bind their wounds. Above all, we need shepherds who will see that each lamb stays on the safe path of righteousness and who will continually feed us on God's word, even those of the flock who lack interest.

Without such shepherds, God's lambs will seek counsel from the ungodly and will be led to stand in the path of sinners and sit in the seat of scoffers! We are the Lord's! We are His valuable sheep bought with the blood of His only begotten Son. Our shepherds must exercise due care in watching over our souls.