

Shepherds Of The Flock

by Bryan Gibson

It is God's will that elders be appointed in every church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). When God talks about their work, He describes them as shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3). Let's look then at some characteristics of a good shepherd, making sure that we apply these characteristics to the work of elders.

1. A good shepherd will make sure his flock is fed (Genesis 46:32: "...the men are shepherds, for their occupation has been to feed livestock...").

Elders make sure the flock receives spiritual nourishment: "And I will give you shepherds...who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). They can accomplish this in several ways. First, they can set a good example for the flock. "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you...being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). Secondly, they can feed the flock through their own teaching. "Able to teach" is one of the qualifications a man must meet in order to become an elder (1 Tim. 3:2). According to Titus 1:9, elders must hold fast to the faithful word, and "be able, by sound doctrine, to exhort and convict those who contradict." Thirdly, they can ensure that others within the flock do some teaching, and that what they teach is the word of God.

2. A good shepherd watches over his flock (Luke 2:8: "...keeping watch over their flock by night").

Here is what Paul says to a group of elders in Acts 20:28: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." "To all the flock"—elders have to watch out for every member, being careful that they show no partiality. Elders are called "overseers", and there is a big difference between overseeing and overlooking. Elders must overSEE, because one day, they will have to give an account to God for how closely they've been watching (Hebrews 13:17).

3. A good shepherd will protect his flock (1 Samuel 17:34-35: Note how David protected his father's sheep).

Shepherds who watch closely know when the flock is in danger, and will do what is necessary to protect them. This is exactly what Paul urged the Ephesian elders to do in Acts 20:28-31. Sometimes the whole flock may be threatened, perhaps by false teaching. At other times, it may be one or two individuals—ones who may be in danger of being lost to the love of money, the love of pleasure, peer pressure, etc. Whatever the threat may be, elders need to be prepared to protect God's flock from danger.

4. A good shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).

Laying down one's life includes much more than literally dying for someone (see 1 John 3:16-18). The idea here is that elders must be dedicated to the flock, willing to sacrifice time, energy, etc., to make sure the flock is cared for. Elders need to have the same attitude expressed by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:15: "I will spend and be spent for your souls."

5. A good shepherd knows which sheep are sick, or weak, or hurting, and is prepared to help them.

This was one area in which the shepherds of Israel failed: "The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken..." (Ezekiel 34:4). In just about every "flock," there will be sheep who require special care, due to their delicate condition—"comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Nursing these precious souls back to health will take some effort, but it will be effort well spent.

6. A good shepherd will seek those who are lost (Luke 15:4-7; Ezekiel 34:6).

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4). One lost sheep is too many—every effort should be made to bring him back to the fold. Even if one is impenitent and has to be withdrawn from (1 Corinthians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14), effort should still be made to restore him (2 Thessalonians 3:15). Remember, at one time we were all "like sheep going astray" (1 Peter 2:25; Isaiah 53:6). Think about how much effort the "chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4) spent to bring us back.