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Pastors And Their Chief Shepherd

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One of the five words used of the leader of a local congregation in the New Testament is "pastor," which is really only the word "shepherd" employed in a specialized sense. A study of this one phase of the work of the local leader is particularly rewarding. Five passages here are being considered: John 21:15-17; I Peter 5:2-3; Ephesians 4:11; I Corinthians 9:7; and Acts 20:28-29. In these there is a clear comparison based on the occupation of tending sheep, purposely used by the writers to instruct pastors of local churches concerning their relationship to the congregation and to the Lord and concerning the nature and importance of their work.

The task of tending sheep in the ancient Near East differs somewhat from that practiced in the United States. Even certain characteristics of the sheep are different.

Let it be said yet that the comparison based on tending sheep as applied to the function of the local church is not "by accident" in the sense of applying practices familiar in the day of writing; rather it seems that God had provided and directed such that sheep tending practices would be perfectly suited for His special instructions concerning the present dispensation.

John 21:15-17

This fascinating exchange between the Lord Jesus Christ and Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee following the resurrection clearly sets forth the claim that these are Christ's sheep Peter is being asked to shepherd. He tells Peter to "feed My lambs" (v 15), "tend My sheep"

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(v 16), and "feed My sheep" (v 17). Jesus entrusts those He loves to one who loves Him. It may be accepted that a primary reason for the three questions was related to the three times Peter had denied his Lord; further, however, it gave Jesus opportunity to stress different phases of the work ahead for Peter and for all ministers of the Gospel. Thus it is important not only to ascertain the major message but to note carefully each word in the inspired text.

For the major thrust, the Lord Jesus Christ is leaving this earth to return to heaven and is entrusting His own work as the good shepherd (John 10) to undershepherds. He is still the Arch-Shepherd (I Pet 5:4); it is still His flock. The active care will now be the responsibility of those He calls to be pastors. The direct relation of the question to the commission each time is significant. If you love Me, show that love by doing My work faithfully. Do not be negligent nor detracted by side activities; be a constant watchful tender of the sheep. Care for them because they are Mine and because you love Me.

The work. The imperatives are significant: feed (v 15), tend (v 16), and again feed (v 17). Regarding the first "feed" in verse fifteen, three things may be noticed. Food is necessary to life. The "food" of spiritual growth is the Word of God. The instruction, then, is to provide true food, wholesome spiritual food (John 6:33-58). Second, it must be appropriate food for lambs -- the milk of the Word (I Cor 3:2). Third, the attention is particularly on the tender care of the new born, to assure life and growth. Although the entire flock needs shepherd care, the first commission of the Great Shepherd to Peter was to feed the little lambs. These are not necessarily children, though they may include children, but are those new born into the flock, new converts to the faith, the most needy in the entire flock. Christ says to every pastor, as He did to Peter, "Carefully, tenderly feed My lambs."

The next instruction is to "shepherd" My sheep. This imperative, "tend," is more all-inclusive than just the verb "feed." Christ here commissions Peter to do all that is involved in taking the oversight of the flock. As the human undershepherd, he is to lead, to guide, to guard, to aid, to heal, to discipline, to protect, to seek the lost, even to lay down his life. The pastor is not just one who preaches on Sunday and calls on a few of the saints during the week; he is in charge of a divine unit, a "flock," which God expects to function under the leadership of a faithful undershepherd.

The last imperative returns to the major work of the pastor, seeing that the flock eats properly. All other tasks are important, but the major task is that of providing spiritual sustenance. Jesus here reiterates the command to feed, that Peter might understand that the

general government of the church should not hinder the pastor from occupying himself individually with each of the members of the flock. Special tasks of healing wounds or broken bones or seeking lost sheep are not to detract from the chief purpose of being a shepherd. The aim of leading and guarding the flock is that they might partake properly and peaceably of that which sustains life. Pastors of churches, even in a building program, have no more important work than studying the Word in proper preparation to feed the flock, young and old.

The "sheep." The objects of the three imperatives also need attention, "lambs" (v 15), "sheep" (v 16), and "sheep" (v 17). The use of diminutives here indicates a tenderness in the speaker's words, which might be rendered "lambkins" and "sheepings."

Lambs often must be carried on the shoulders of the shepherd; they easily get parted from their mother; and normally need more attention than the more mature. All the sheep need the flock relationship and the undershepherd's leadership. Above all, they need the regular and proper provision of the sustenance of life.

Peter, the object of your efforts is "My sheep," new-born or mature -- not freedom marches, not local politics, not relief, not a multitude of things which may be commendable in themselves, but are not nearly so important as pastoring a church. If God has called you to the ministry, do not stoop to be president.

Notice yet that Peter is not placed by the Lord Jesus Christ into any relationship of superior shepherd over other shepherds, nor to tend an invisible or universal church. Since the size of a flock of sheep over which an owner might assign a shepherd to tend his sheep was normally about a hundred, there would be no thought in the mind of Peter of any over-lordship. Surprisingly, Peter was not even pastor of the Jerusalem congregation, where James the brother of John and James the half-brother of Jesus Christ had the leadership according to the book of Acts. Christ does not in John 21:15-17 label the place of service, but does indicate the nature of the service to which he is called.

I Peter 5:2-3

Peter, who had received of the Lord Jesus Christ the exhortation to tend the flock, in turn gives similar admonition to the elders. In this task of undershepherding, Peter is himself a fellow-elder (v 1). Peter uses an imperative as the Lord had in speaking to him (John 21:15-17), "shepherd ye the flock." The whole duties of the Christian

eldership are included in shepherding the flock. Pastors are to lead their people into the green pastures of the Word of God and beside the quiet waters of eternal truth, to guard them against the poisonous weeds of error which spring up almost everywhere, to look after them that they do not wander from the fold and become the prey of the lion or the wolf, and to go before them, in every step setting them an example of obedience to the voice of the Chief Shepherd. To procure and administer food to the flock is an important part of the shepherd's duty, but it is not his only duty; he must strengthen the diseased, and heal the sick, and bind up the broken, and bring again that which was driven away, and seek that which was lost. He must go before them, and guide them, and govern them. Ministers who fail in any of these duties will be deemed unfaithful shepherds.

The work. Employing this beautiful comparison of shepherd and flock, Peter sets forth the work expected of pastors. First, they are to engage in this leadership with a willing spirit, that is, with voluntary eagerness, certain that it is the will of God and not just of constraint. Doing it with a ready mind is not mere willingness, but zeal. A man should enjoy his life work. One called to the ministry should enter enthusiastically into the service to which the Lord calls him.

Second, they are not to carry on their labors tending the flock as hirelings, doing it for the sake of remuneration (v 2). Note that Peter here implies that the pastor received remuneration, otherwise it would have been impossible for him to take the hireling's view. See John 10:12-13 for characterization of the hireling in contrast to a true shepherd. To state it differently, a hireling functions by expediency, a shepherd according to set principles.

Third, their service is not to be that of lording it over the charge assigned to them, but rather serving as an example to the flock. This third admonition regarding the manner of their service seems to go beyond the actual shepherd-sheep comparison just a bit. Sheep follow a shepherd or another leader, but are not capable of mimicking the shepherd; yet this is the picture. Pastors are to be "types" before the flocks, that is, examples they can copy. Timothy was to be such an example to the believers (I Tim 4:12), and Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, "Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ" (I Cor 11:1). The contrast is certainly clear enough; they are to rule by example, not by ordering. The limit of their example is so far as they follow Christ, who can be known only by the revelation in the Word. Pastors are to walk according to the teachings of the Bible and expect the people to do likewise.

Their position. The term "undershepherd" must be employed to identify the position of these fellow elders to whom Peter addresses this admonition. There was no separate word in ancient times for such, but there was a clear distinction, where it was actually different, between the owner (cf John 21:15-17), the chief shepherd (cf v 4), and the "undershepherd" who went forth with the flock. For instance, an owner might have some eight hundred sheep, employ a chief shepherd, and under him about eight shepherds, each assigned to a flock, and sometimes helpers to work with these undershepherds. This was an occupation, and for temporary help a "hireling" might be employed, one not having a shepherd heart or a shepherd call.

As used in Scripture, there is identification of the Lord Jesus Christ as owner and as Chief Shepherd. The undershepherd is to realize that he is not owner nor chief; his position is that of guiding the flock "in the stead" of Christ. "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (I Cor 11:1).

There are two splendid indications in I Peter 5:2-3 that the task is that of an undershepherd. First, in verse two, it is "the flock of God" which they are to tend. It is God's, not theirs. A church is always God's possession, not men's. So the sheep are not ours for us to use or misuse as we like. If we lose one, we lose another's property, not our own; and He is not indifferent to what becomes of his flock. No pastor should "fleece" a local church for his own gain.

Second, in verse four, their reward will come from the Chief Shepherd at His manifestation. Christ is not a shepherd among shepherds, but the Chief Shepherd from whom all others receive their authority, and to whom they are accountable (Heb 13:17). Elders are those called to the work of undershepherd, helpers of the Good Shepherd in the care of the flock. This pastoral responsibility of the undershepherds can only be rightly fulfilled in recognition of Christ's position as the Chief Shepherd.

Two further indications of the undershepherd assignment have to do with the area served by the elder. Tend the flock of God which is among you (v 2). The preposition here must be local. "The flock which is among you" may be taken to mean "the flock in your town or village." The flock is God's (cf Ezek 34:31; Ps 100:3) and it is distributed in the different localities where the presbyters live and work ("among you"). The phrase "which is among you" denotes that part of the flock committed to a particular elder's care. Whether it is small or large, the important thing is that a man should see it as the part of God's flock committed to his care as one of Christ's undershepherds.

Ephesians 4:11

This passage enumerates four gifts God has given to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. The fourth does not denote two offices but two functions of one office. These are the ordinary settled ministers of congregations, called pastors, because they watch over the flock, trying to lead all in right ways; and called teachers, because they communicate divine knowledge.

This is the only passage in the New Testament where the noun "pastor" is used of preachers; the verb form appears in John 21:16; I Peter 5:2; and Acts 20:28. It comes from a root meaning to protect. That the first three, apostles, prophets, and evangelists, served on an itinerant basis rather than being a stable part of the localized flock, whereas the last one was present in each congregation, further emphasizes the shepherding function. It is his and only his responsibility, among humans, to tend the local flock.

The combination of the two terms regarding the one office is an interesting relationship. Neither portion of the work is to be carried on to the exclusion of the other. Such pastors and guides rule as well as feed the flock, for the keeping or tending is essential to the successful feeding. The combined function of a pastor-teacher is to tend the flock and feed them upon spiritual food that they will grow in grace and knowledge unto the building up of the body of Christ.

The position of undershepherd is here emphasized in that the true source of these local flock tenders is not a recruiting station nor the choosing of the flock itself; these are given by God. Neither does any man take this upon himself. Such would correspond to the improper leading of a segment of a flock by a ram or a goat. Only God calls into pastoral work, and God guides these gifts to His several flocks.

I Corinthians 9:7

Paul, defending his apostleship and the work of the ministry in this section (I Cor 9:7-14) sets forth arguments to show that "they that proclaim the gospel should also live off the gospel" (v 14), even though he himself as a missionary did not do so among them (vv 12, 15). Three illustrations from three different areas of secular employment appear in verse seven. The soldier, the agriculturist, the shepherd, all live by their labors; why not the minister? The main point of Paul's argument is that everybody lives off the proceeds of his business. All

three figures are employed in Scripture regarding Christian work (cf Matt 20:1-7; I Cor 3:6; II Cor 10:3ff). The figure of the shepherd who tends the flock and himself eats of the milk of the flock is clearly applied to the pastor of the congregation, his spiritual work and his material remuneration (v 11). The figure is fitting. A part of the wages of the shepherd in the East is, even to this day, a portion of the milk.

For emphasis in the Greek, three terms of shepherding are employed, emphasizing the pastoral picture. Both the office and the activity of the pastor is involved, though obviously the function of feeding the flock is primary. Note that it is not suggested that the purpose or end of flock-feeding is self support or gain to the shepherd; he feeds "of" the milk of the flock. The flock really belongs to Another.

Acts 20:28-29

In his final exhortation to the Ephesian elders, Paul beautifully employs the figure of shepherd and flock as of the pastor leading the local congregation. He urges them to take constant heed both to themselves and also to the flock in which the Holy Spirit had set them as overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased through the blood of His Well-beloved (v 28). Surely all the work of the shepherd in relation to the flock is in mind, but Paul seems most concerned about their protection from enemies which might harm and destroy the flock (v 29), some such even from within the flock (v 30).

Paul uses cognate words, commanding to shepherd the sheep. To act as or do the duty of a shepherd includes not only feeding but protection, regulation, and the whole care of a shepherd for his flock. This care is to extend to all the sheep. Paul binds every sheep upon the hearts of these elders. Lenski emphasizes, "All -- not merely the pastor's friends, a faction he has allowed to form that clings to him, the well-to-do, neglecting the poor and the unassuming. The true shepherd knows no dividing line, no factions, loves every sheep, especially the weak and the needy. The lambs as well as the sheep."

Again it is evident that sheep need a shepherd; it is their very nature. Neither Paul nor Jesus know of a flock that leads and manages itself. The seriousness of this task of shepherding the church is stressed in verse twenty-eight in preparation for the special warnings regarding attacking enemies. First, it is the flock of God over which they are exercising this function. Second, they have been assigned the responsibility of oversight. Third, they were so assigned not by men but

by the Holy Spirit. Fourth, these have been purchased at great price, the shed blood of the True Shepherd, and are thus precious to God and to be guarded even unto death by faithful undershepherds.

The figure continues in the next verse with warning of grievous wolves which will come, not sparing the flock (v 29). Paul has already been greatly grieved seeing this happen after his departure from the church of Galatia. He knows that this is certain to happen at Ephesus as well. God has prepared for it by appointing "shepherds" to cope with the "wolves." Paul urges them to be watchful shepherds, alert to the approach of enemies of the flock, even though they might be "in sheep's clothing" (Matt 7:15). These wolves ready to invade the sheepfold are described as cruel and destructive, strong, dangerous, hard to repel.

Serious dangers without will be complicated by defections within the flock. Men from within will rise up uttering perverted things and will lead away disciples. These are not Holy-Spirit-appointed shepherds. They lead and they feed, but it is not for the good of the flock. Their teachings are not spiritually edifying. Their leading is away from the flock of God and unto themselves. From such, too, a good undershepherd must protect the sheep which should be kept for the Lord.

The aim of these non-shepherds within the flock is "to draw away disciples after them," a sin in that it opposes the appointed position of the pastor. The method of accomplishing this aim is that of "speaking perverse things," telling lies, misrepresentation, spreading gossip, causing discord among the brethren -- clearly sin.

There is no greater calling in the world than the call to be pastor of a local church. There is no greater honor than to be appointed to serve in Christ's stead, shepherding one of His local flocks. There is no more important responsibility than that of one who "must give account" (Heb 13:17) to the Chief Shepherd of all that has been done regarding His flock. There is no more worthy task in this world than shepherding, that is, feeding, guiding, watching over, protecting a local group of saints. God's exhortations to pastors and people, based on the shepherd-sheep relationship, are among the most important in Scripture.