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Feed the Flock of God

by David Dunlap

The Lord has designed godly elders, or shepherds, to lead in the local assembly because a leaderless people is destined for spiritual ruin. As illustrated in the book of the Judges, when Israel had no leader, “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). Paul counsels the Ephesian elders to “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28, *NASB*). Peter likewise counsels the elders to “shepherd the flock of God among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). Yet God knew that no people will rise higher than the spiritual level of its leaders. Therefore, He established high spiritual and moral standards for those who lead. God also knew that when the leadership turned away from God, sadly, the people would soon follow. As the shepherds go, so go the sheep.

Early Leaders: “Elders of Israel”

When Israel began to grow as a nation during the Egyptian captivity, God raised up a body of leaders called “the elders of Israel.” The first reference to these leaders is in Exodus when God spoke to Moses at the “burning bush.” God tells Moses that He had raised up a body of godly men who, together with Moses, would lead the children of Israel. We read:

Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, “The LORD God of your fathers,...appeared unto me, saying, ‘I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt...thou shalt come, thou and the elders of Israel, unto the king of Egypt...” (Ex. 3:16-18).

Later, we find these men applying blood on the doorposts of all the Israelite homes to protect against the death of the firstborn males (Ex. 12:21-22). Later, God instructs Moses to choose seventy faithful men from among them to bear the burden of the people, so that Moses would not bear it alone (Num. 11:16-17). God anointed these men with the Spirit of God that they might speak forth the Word of God and minister to the people (Num. 11:24-25).

God raised up these men to be godly shepherds among the people, to care for their spiritual needs, to proclaim the Word of the Lord, and to seek after those who might go astray. God required these elders to be faithful, to know the Word of the Lord, to love Him and His people, and, most of all, to “spend and be spent” for the people of God.

***“Remember you
are God’s sword—
His instrument—I
trust a chosen
vessel unto Him to
bear His name. In
great measure,
according to the
purity and
perfections of the
instrument, will
be the success. It
is not great
talents God
blesses so much as
great likeness to
Christ.”***

**Robert Murray
M’Cheyne
(1813-1843)**

Lessons from Ezekiel 34

Throughout the Old Testament God raises up prophets, priests, and kings to lead Israel. But He expects the “shepherds” of Israel to care for the spiritual needs of the flock of Israel. Perhaps more than any figure in the Old Testament, the prophet Ezekiel captures the importance of the work of spiritual shepherds. Ezekiel chapter 34 contains lessons for leaders today.

1. Teach the Word of God—Ezekiel 34:2

“Thus, says the Lord GOD, ‘Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?’” (v.2)

In this passage, the most significant failure of the shepherds is that instead of feeding the sheep, they are enriching themselves. They neglected to teach God’s holiness to the people and model that holiness in their own lives. They act as if they own the sheep and can treat them as they please. Feeding the flock with the “finest of the wheat” is the greatest need in the local church today. God’s sheep are crying out to be fed with in-depth teaching of the Word of God. Where is the consecutive, expository teaching from the Word of God? Where is the teaching on weighty and important doctrinal sections of Scripture? Sadly, devotional messages on love and grace are the usual fare today in contemporary churches. Certainly, these have their place, but not at the expense of the faithful preaching of the whole counsel of God. Martin Luther reportedly said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.” Respected preacher of the Word of God, Harry Ironside (1876-1951) reminds us:

“He [God] had taken note of their [shepherds] evil ways: He saw how they fed themselves and left the people to starve; therefore, He declared He was against these evil shepherds, and would require the sheep at their hand. What a solemn accounting it would be when they would have to answer before His judgment bar for failing to fulfill the responsibilities He had laid upon them! Surely such words as these may be well taken to heart by any who today are in the position of leadership among God’s people and yet fail to feed the flock committed to them, or to seek after those who have gone astray.”¹

No ministry or work of God can succeed apart from the effective proclamation of the Word of God.

2. Ministering to the Broken and Diseased—Ezekiel 34:4

“Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up...” (34:4).

Many in our local assemblies are suffering from broken lives and are seeking the balm of the ministry of Christ to encourage them. They desire to be loved, to be shown mercy, to be lifted up, and to know the unconditional love of Christ. However, God’s way of healing and strengthening is through faith, grace, the Word of God, and the power of prayer. To bind up the broken, a lamb must want to walk again. The godly shepherd applies the mending cloths to the fractured limb by pointing the lamb to Christ and counseling him to forget that which is behind. For every look at themselves, the wounded should take ten looks at Christ. They need to learn to be more

“Learn to grapple with souls. Aim at the conscience. Exalt Christ. Use a sharp knife with yourself. Say little, serve all, pass on. This is true greatness, to serve unnoticed and work unseen. Oh, the joy of having nothing and being nothing, seeing nothing but a living Christ in glory, and being careful for nothing but His interests down here.”

J. N. Darby
(1800-1882)

occupied with the finished work of Christ than with the sin and failure in their past. Psalm 147:3 tells us that “He (the Lord) heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” It is through the ministry of Christ in our lives that we are healed. Scars remind us of where we have been. They do not have to dictate where we are going. Healing of limbs can take time: and a shepherd will need to have patience with the flock. Shepherds must not be discouraged that some of the mended sheep may walk with a limp the rest of their lives. But shepherds must remember that they do walk and live for Christ.

3. Seeking the Scattered—Ezekiel 34:4-6

“The scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost...They were scattered for lack of a shepherd” (34:4, 5)

Faithful shepherds seek sheep that have been scattered. This scattering happens when there is no shepherd. God reminds us, “My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill...and there was no one to search or seek for them” (v. 6). As a result, the sheep were exposed to the danger of wild animals who would devour them. Today, there are many sheep that are scattered not for lack of a shepherd but for a lack of those who will *do the work of a shepherd*. The shepherds’ work begins before the sheep wander. It is much easier to bring a wandering sheep back when he knows the love and care of a faithful shepherd.

4. Lead with Tenderness and Compassion —Ezekiel 34:4

“But with force and with severity you have dominated them...” (v. 4)

Far too often the misuse of authority has done untold harm to the church of God. Rather than using Christ’s principles of humility and sacrificial love to build up the church, pride, selfishness, and domineering spirits have brought ruin to the work of God. For those who are leaders and elders of God’s people, Jesus Christ insisted that they first be humble, not striving for prominence of position or reputation. He calls leaders to sacrificially serve others, to forgive those who hurt them, and treat those they serve as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

A shepherd should always remember that those who minister *for Christ* should minister *like Christ*. Christ washed the feet of twelve men who were unworthy of His presence, let alone His service. He received and helped multitudes of people, many of whom never accepted His message. He died for a world which didn’t want Him. Why did He do it? Because it was the Father’s will, and Jesus delighted in doing the Father’s will. Remember that when we are serving others, we are doing the Father’s will. No matter how disappointing or painful your service to others may seem to be, it is not wasted time, because it is time and effort given in the service of God.

A Holy and Godly Life

God wants to use our talents and abilities in His service. After all, He gave them to us. But along with developing our talents and spiritual gifts, God is interested in developing our character. We are God’s weapons; and for a weapon to be effective, it must be sharp and polished. Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813-1843) often said, “A holy minister (shepherd) is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.” M’Cheyne was the godly minister of St. Peter’s Church in Dundee, Scotland. Andrew A. Bonar honored him

***“Spiritual ends
can be achieved
only by spiritual
men who employ
spiritual
methods. The
main issue in
shepherding is
not how clever
you are or how
well you preach;
it is whether you
know the Word of
God and are
leading a godly
life.”***

J. Oswald Sanders
from *Spiritual Leadership*,
Moody Press, 1981



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Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 996-1053

e-mail
daviddunlap100@gmail.com

web site
www.bibleandlife.org

f Facebook
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bible-Life/139555992799868>

by compiling the *Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*. This Christian classic has been an inspiration to many a devoted Christian servant. The book contains a letter M'Cheyne wrote in 1840 to his friend Daniel Edwards, who planned to enter full-time Christian service:

Remember you are God's sword—His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Christ. A holy minister is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.”²

Christian service means invading a battleground, not a playground; you and I are weapons God uses to attack and defeat the enemy. When God used Moses' rod, He needed Moses' hand to lift it. When God used David's sling, He needed David's skillful hand to propel it. For God to feed and shepherd a flock, He needs someone completely surrendered to Him to accomplish the task. There is no substitute for Christian character and maturity. No matter how much talent and training you may have, God cannot use you as He desires if you do not have character, devotion, and godliness. To quote M'Cheyne again: "But, oh, study universal holiness of life! Your whole usefulness depends on this. Your sermon lasts but an hour or two—your life preaches all the week long.”³

Conclusion

May the Lord raise up shepherds who will care for the flock with tenderness, feed them with the whole counsel of God, and bind up those that are broken. These are the kind of shepherds God wants; these are the kind of shepherds we need.

Endnotes

1. Harry Ironside, *Ezekiel*, (New York, NY: Loizeaux, 1977), pp. 236-237
2. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 282
3. Bonar, *Memoirs of M'Cheyne*, p. 406