

Chapter 5

Shepherds: Our Father's Concern for His People

Scripture abounds with references to an occupation about which most of us today have very little personal knowledge: tending sheep.

Tending sheep was not an esteemed position. In fact, it usually fell to the youngest child in the family who was capable of protecting the animals. Unless you have personally been involved in the care and nurture of these woolly creatures, you cannot fully understand the implications of people as sheep or of shepherds as their leaders.

Having spent ten years raising them at a retreat center, the writers know firsthand that sheep require tremendous care. We had no prior farming experience, but Mike had been asked to counsel pastors who were under strain in their ministries. Since the Bible refers so often to the relationship between shepherds and sheep, what better way to understand them than through firsthand experience!

When you are around sheep for any length of time, you become identified with them by their odor and by their timetable of needs. Sheep have a flock identification gland in their front hooves. When they rub against each other, this gland gives the flock members a common odor. Their strong olfactory system compels them to be close to one another—they find security in their mutual identifying odor. This is why sheep flock together.

So many potential dangers and disadvantages confront sheep. They are subject to internal parasites if they are not led to different pastures regularly. They are practically defenseless, and with their short legs and hefty bodies, are much slower than most predators. When confronted by danger, they will often stand paralyzed in a huddle, allowing the enemy to pick them off at will. The ewes frequently need manual assistance in giving birth. Can you see how important the shepherd is to the well-being of the flock? Goats, which we also raised, are independent, intelligent, and quite capable of surviving without constant care, but *sheep would die without a shepherd*.

Human beings require that same loving concern by mature men who represent the Father's heart. Without diligent care, people are bent on their own destruction. Our Father intimately understands the frailty of His creation. Both testaments depict His appraisal of mankind: "*The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time*" (Genesis 6:5); and, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Yet God's love is steadfast.

Similarities between the needs of humans and of sheep abound in Scripture. The classic Twenty-third Psalm indicates all that God's people need to prosper in spirit: a faithful, loving shepherd who cares for us; a place of rest where we can feel accepted; restoration and refreshment in his presence; direction and protection; confidence in trials; tender mercy and care; and hope for a wonderful future.

That mankind as well as sheep need the personal care of a shepherd comes as no surprise. Our Father knows that without someone to point the way we will either drive ourselves in frantic pursuit of success or fall back into lethargy and inactivity. Both result in destruction. In order to bear much spiritual fruit we need the role modeling and guidance of men more mature in their pilgrimage with Him. That maturity is hallmarked by diligent and sacrificial care: "*He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young*" (Isaiah 40:11).

Moses spent forty years of his prime tending his father-in-law's sheep, and another forty years leading a stubborn band of wanderers through the desert. This preparation opened his heart to the desperate need of his people for an equally attentive leader who

could be trained up to replace him: *“May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd”* (Numbers 27:16,17).

The shepherd must lead the way with courage and conviction, identifying and confirming the path of safety and righteousness. Paul stresses *wholehearted* participation: *“If it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully”* (Romans 12:8).

What can we learn about godly leadership from the most famous shepherd in the Hebrew Scriptures? David spent most of his youth learning that shepherding involves intense self-sacrifice, intrusion, and personal discomfort. Time and again he got into situations that endangered his own well-being in order to protect his father’s sheep. Such was God’s training ground to develop Israel’s mightiest warrior. Note David’s honest, forthright response to King Saul about his ability to fight Goliath:

Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:34-37).

When you are accustomed to disregarding your personal safety for a cause higher than yourself, “self” does not enter into the picture. This is a vital point to remember for elders who would shepherd the Father’s flock.

Our Father evaluates the inner motives of a man: *“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’”* (1 Samuel 16:7). Human achievement will never be our Father’s criterion for selecting His shepherds. Men who trust in the strength of their own hands—their ability to succeed at all cost—will fail to reflect Him to His flock.

Intimate Contact and Personal Understanding

Sheep are not driven along as are cattle or horses. They need to be led. Our flock knew that when they saw us approach, something interesting was about to happen in their midst: some grain to be dispersed, a move to another pasture, a gathering of the flock to the barn. So they would follow, waiting to see what their shepherd had in store for them. Somehow they knew that we *understood their needs and consistently filled them*.

Jeremiah put it this way: *“Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding”* (Jeremiah 3:15). Shepherd elders lead their people in righteousness with knowledge and understanding of what is *good*: to instruction that will prosper their souls and encourage them to bear fruit; to comforting pens for nurture and guidance; and to admonition and correction for attitudes or behaviors that are harmful to both the individual and the rest of the watching flock. A shepherd whose heart is truly after the Father’s own heart, as was David’s, will pour himself out on behalf of those in his care. He will constantly ask his Father for righteous understanding of each situation.

Since each believer is at a different point along his or her pilgrimage, shepherds need intimate knowledge of each one: *“Be sure you know the **condition** of your flocks, give **careful attention** to your herds”* (Proverbs 27:23). One thing you learn from tending a flock: You cannot move them faster than the weakest one can travel. To do so creates a lot of tension for a ewe with lambs; her flocking and mothering instincts collide. Every sheep needs careful attention.

A flock that congregates together is more easily managed. Once the sheep are scattered due to carelessness or laziness on the shepherd’s part, it’s much harder to lead them and they are susceptible to attack. Lack of diligent leadership can bring disastrous results: *“So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals”* (Ezekiel 34:5).

Human sheep, unlike their woolly counterparts, can hide their pain and needs behind a facade. It takes close contact and mutual trust for some people to open up. Individuals who have no mature believers to come alongside them or who have no access to brothers or sisters for “family” relationship are like the lost sheep of whom Jesus spoke: *“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were **harassed and helpless**, like sheep without a shepherd”* (Matthew 9:36). Every follower of Jesus needs attentive shepherding as well as close spiritual companions to “one-another” with!

The sheep/shepherd analogy that Jesus paints in John 10 is a poignant model for elders to emulate: *“I am the good shepherd; I **know** my sheep and my sheep **know** me”* (v. 14). Because the sheep have experienced such high commitment from their shepherd, they eagerly respond to his voice: *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out”* (John 10:3). In fact, he is intimately aware of the character and quirks of each one, for he knows each *by name*.

Most visitors to our sheep flock were mystified that we were readily able to identify each ewe, even at a distance! To the casual observer they all looked alike. But we, the shepherds, knew which was the outgoing, bold one, which had a favorite post to rub against, and which one loved to have her ears rubbed. And yes, each one indeed had a name!

Although opportunistic to snag a treat even from a stranger, our sheep did not allow outsiders to get too close. But when they heard the familiar “Sheep, sheep!” from their devoted caretakers, their heads would jerk up and their pace quicken. Even if no goodies were at hand, they’d linger to be scratched or to follow us. Maybe we thought they especially enjoyed our company, but more likely they just felt secure when their shepherds were accessible.

How sad it is that so many congregations have only one individual to look to for leadership. This is generally the “pastor,” the hired position found neither by scriptural precedent nor by command. Such a singular elevation of one person involves incredible stress and responsibility. Little wonder that an article in *Leadership* magazine revealed, “Ministers had the third highest divorce rate, exceeded only by that of medical doctors and policemen.”¹

One leader of a major denomination shared with Mike that the adultery rate among their clergy was approximately 50%. Another denomination has spent in excess of \$400 million in out-of-court settlements due to clergy sexual misconduct. The overwhelming burden hefted onto these individuals is crushing their spirits, their marriages, their very integrity.

The number of believers in a home fellowship cannot get so large that the necessary intimacy and attention that are defined in the Word are impossible. Satan himself delights in helping a faith community grow larger than the shepherds can personally render

account for to God. Regrettably, some congregations led by elders tend toward rule by *oligarchy*, or absolute rule by a few. This impersonal system offers control with minimum personal sacrifice. Through this type of closed leadership a small group of men can direct the affairs of a faith community despite inadequate personal knowledge of each individual in the flock. Yet God is looking for more than well-run church corporations. He is judging the so-called “shepherds” whose hearts are not folded with their sheep.

Leadership Through Example

Anyone can be taught information that will add to his knowledge. But a man is *changed* by what he observes by interaction with role models and through personal confrontation.

Hebraic teaching can be summed up by this: “*Do as I do.*” The converted Greek philosophers introduced into the Church the concept of education based on disseminating content. The character and experience of the teacher were unimportant, an intimate teacher-student relationship unnecessary. What a fallacy to believe that a biblically knowledgeable society would become morally upright! You have only to look at the Germans of the first half of this century, a culture full of Bible knowledge. But that knowledge did not stop them from the Holocaust atrocities, nor did it motivate many to halt Nazi inhumanity.

How important the criterion of intimate care was in determining leadership in the early Church! The way a man lived reflected his true measure. The writer to the Hebrews reaffirmed this understanding: “*Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the **outcome** of their **way of life** and **imitate their faith**. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:7,8). Leaders lead by example. What they want to produce in others must be seen in their own lives. In current vernacular: “Does he walk the talk?” Since elders are the undershepherds of Jesus (see 1 Peter 5:4), and Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, the same qualities of caring and attentive leadership should be expected in any era or culture.

The relevance of leaders as godly examples whose lives matched their teachings was reinforced by Paul: “*Therefore I urge you to **imitate me**. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my **way of life** in Christ Jesus, which **agrees** with what I teach everywhere in every church*” (1 Corinthians 4:16,17). And Paul elevates Jesus as the model Shepherd in any age when he writes, “*Follow my example, as I follow the **example of Christ***” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Our Father loves us too much to allow us to remain unchallenged in our own sin. So too are biblical elders compelled by the Spirit to confront those in the fold who are straying from the Lord. Confrontation can run a gamut from mild chiding to a strong rebuke. Appropriate confrontation by an older man who has intimate knowledge of his disciple is vital because it can incite a younger man to change his course: “*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who are working hard among you, those who are **guiding you** in the Lord and **confronting you in order to help you change**. Treat them with the highest regard and love because of the work they are doing. Live at peace among yourselves*” (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13, JNT)² Some might call confrontation “tough love”; others recognize it as fatherly concern that clearly exposes evil and points the way to righteousness.

For a number of years at the retreat center we administered, a singles group from another state came two or three times annually. Although the average age of the group was late 20s, they were led by two young men, ages 21 and 20. Their loving devotion for God and for their brothers and sisters was evident in both these guys. Also in the group was Bill, a man in his mid 30s. who was mainly interested in scoping out the women for dates.

During one of the summer retreats Mike privately asked Bill to walk with him in the pasture, downhill from the lodge. Addressing him in a *very fatherly manner*, Mike said, “Bill, what you’re doing in this group is *wrong*. As one of the older men, you’re setting a bad example for the younger guys. Your actions are hindering what those two young leaders are trying to accomplish. I don’t want to see you back here again unless you’re leading this group—and leading them in the path of Jesus!”

Several months later the group returned, with Bill leading them. Several of the singles took Mike aside and told him how, after the last retreat, Bill had asked if he could lead. He had been changed, no longer obsessed with women. Later, when Bill suggested another retreat at our center, some spoke up. “Bill, why would you want to go back there? We heard how tough Mike was on you!”

The singles told Mike Bill’s response: “No one has ever loved me like Mike did. It took love to tell me what I needed to hear.” This was a man who had chosen the path of wisdom: “*He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding*” (Proverbs 15:31,32). (See our book *Growing Relationships Through Confrontation* for more on biblical confrontation.)

The Cooperative Leadership of the Jewish Elders

Let’s look at the development of the pattern of cooperative leadership in Jewish history. From Moses onward we see a certain trend: Those who were anointed by God for leadership *sought out the elders* for guidance and affirmation.

For example, Moses recognized that the Israelites needed more enforcement to follow God than he himself could muster. So he called together the elders whose leadership would reinforce his authority: “*Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: ‘Keep all these commands that I give you today’*” (Deuteronomy 27:1).

Following the defeat of the Israelites at the city of Ai, “*Joshua tore his clothes and fell face-down to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads*” (Joshua 7:6). The elders understood the communal responsibility they carried before the Lord in regard to the entire nation. Joshua, who had been mentored by Moses, was their role model for humility and dependence on God. Later, near the end of his life, Joshua would entrust to the elders their primary assignment: to lead the people in obedience to love the Lord their God (see Joshua 23:6-11).

David, too, was mindful of God’s design for the powerful influence of those who were wise and experienced. Although chosen earlier by God to be king and anointed by the prophet Samuel, it was not until he was anointed by the *elders* that David began to reign: “*When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a compact with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel*” (2 Samuel 5:3). David understood, as did Moses, that the rule of an entire nation was beyond the capability of any one man. By making an alliance of loyalty with them, he could be assured that his authority would be recognized in every city and town represented by those elders who were present.

David’s successful alliance with the elders of the people continued through his son Solomon. God’s favor rested on the young man, for his heart’s desire was to represent his nation justly: “*When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice*” (1 Kings 3:28).

Unfortunately for Israel, however, Solomon’s wisdom and willingness to receive counsel from those who also were wise did not pass on to his son: “*Then King Rehoboam consult-*

ed the **elders** who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. ‘How would you advise me to answer these people?’ he asked. . .But Rehoboam **rejected the advice** the elders gave him and **consulted the young men** who had grown up with him and were serving him” (1 Kings 12:6,8). From that point on, the kingdom would be divided and ultimately fall.

God had set into place in every Israelite community accessible elders who could be accountable to one another through plurality. No single elder could dictate to others the course of direction for either an individual or for the collective community. Therefore the sheep could find a measure of security in the care of their local shepherds even if the ruler of the nation proved unreliable.

This practice of relational accountability is especially needed today. One of the safeguards that comes from a plurality of elders who serve a congregation is the variety of spiritual gifting that will be present in their midst. It is the *combination* of all the gifts in synchrony that completely equips the saints for service. Believers need the interplay of individual gifting so that no one individual burns out or races ahead of the rest because of pride or impatience. A far wider breadth of perspective on a given situation comes forth when the collective input of much varying experience, wisdom, and gifting is meshed. No one individual is called to meet all the needs of a faith community. Elders must work as a team.

The “*council of the elders*” referred to in Psalm 107:32 sensed heavily the responsibility to protect those under their care from insidious influences that could destroy them all. Therefore they stood steadfast on their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and their determination to trust God even in unpopular decisions. Study, for example, what appears to be a harsh dictum from God regarding a rebellious adult son:

*If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the **elders at the gate** of his town. They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a **profligate** and a **drunkard**.” Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must **purge the evil** from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid* (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

God’s reputation was at stake among the nations. Fear of Him had to far surpass any reluctance of His people to obey His commands. The council of elders shouldered that responsibility, even to the extent of determining who needed to be excluded for the good of the nation.

Any good shepherd must know which sheep to eliminate from the flock. When we first started our sheep flock, we were given sixteen ewes. Two of the ewes would prowl the fence line to look for weaknesses. They would push against it until the fence fell down. Then all the sheep would exit the pasture with these two to eat the grass on the other side. We tried all sorts of methods to stop this behavior but none worked. Finally a wise farmer counseled us to *cull* these two from the flock. They were, in effect, training the others to be rebellious. They were fostering habits that were detrimental to the safety of the rest.

As we gained wisdom through the helpful advice of other knowledgeable shepherds, we realized how important culling was for the health and overall purposes of the flock. In order for the flock to pay for itself we needed each ewe to produce two lambs a year. If, after several tries, we didn’t get twins, we’d sell the ewe.

We also looked for lambs who weren’t overly afraid of people since we had so many guests who enjoyed visiting the flock. Unlike goats, sheep are not normally “people friendly.” We kept the lambs that showed a predisposition toward people, and the others we sold.

Some people may think our methods were severe or unkind. But consider John the Baptist's meaning when he tells the people, "**Produce fruit in keeping with repentance**" (Matthew 3:8).

Jesus looked for fruit as a parameter to identify who really belonged to Him. False prophets would bear bad fruit, and like a bad tree, be cut down and thrown into the fire (see Matthew 7:15-20). He commanded His disciples to "*go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name*" (John 15:16). Ask yourself, was the discussion between Jesus and the rich ruler (see Luke 18:18-23) a culling process by which the man himself chose to be culled? Look through the New Testament and see *who* and *how* God culls. Not everyone who cries "*Lord, Lord,*" will be welcomed by Him. God's criterion? "*He who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 7:21).

1. Richards, Larry and Gene Getz. "A Biblical Style of Leadership?", *Leadership* (Fall, 1981), p. 119.
2. *Jewish New Testament* by Dr. David H. Stern, p. 277.