

1-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

Cummins, Jack (1992) "Role of Shepherds," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss1/5>

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The Function of Shepherds

by Jack Cummins

Several years ago, in London, the Minister of Transportation received thousands of letters from people complaining about the public transportation system. It seems that many of the buses were running off and leaving many of the passengers stranded at the bus stops. Some were stopping just long enough for a few passengers to board the bus, and others were just passing the waiting passengers without even slowing down. The public demanded an explanation. The official answer given was, "If our drivers stopped at every stop where passengers were waiting to board the buses, they would run behind schedule."

As I have travelled around the world, and have observed the state of the church, I wonder at times if we need to re-examine the role of those who are called to shepherd God's flock, the church. It would benefit the church if every leader, and member of every congregation, studied and reviewed on

a regular basis the role and work of elders. The purpose of such a study would not be to criticize or condemn, but to protect the leaders of our churches from becoming like those bus drivers in London -- driving the routes, but forgetting the reasons why the routes exist in the first place.

A Lack of Understanding

In many areas there are churches doing a great job of selecting and training leaders to do what God has called them to do. Those churches are growing and doing what God has asked of them. However, that is not the case with the all churches. In other cases churches have selected individuals to lead the flock without the proper training, understanding, or guidance, and the results have been disastrous. I do not believe that in every case it is because those asked to lead are bad men. Rather, they have not been properly trained for the job they have been asked to do. As a result, they are asked to do a job they are not prepared to do, and the church suffers.

Let me give you a typical case of such a situation. It was my experience to be in a church one time that needed more elders. When the names of the those considered were mentioned two questions were usually asked about them; "How many chil-

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dren did they have,” and “How old were they?” I came to the conclusion long ago that it takes no leadership skill to have children or to grow old. So why were these questions so important to those asking them about the potential leaders of that

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church? It was because the congregation had looked at the “qualifications” of 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1, developed a check list, and were honestly concerned that those being selected as leaders be qualified. They wanted to be absolutely sure that those being considered were old enough for the job and had “children.” But one point must be made and understood about the qualifications listed; **the qualifications have no meaning apart from the job description.**

Those qualities listed in scripture are important. The inspired writers would not have listed them if they were not. But behind the qualifications stand a task and role in the church that give them meaning. There is a “why” connected to them. Perhaps many leaders and churches are just keeping the schedules without knowing why.

What does an Elder do?

If you were to ask a member of your congregation to list the functions of an elder, what would be the most typical answer? I asked this question once in the form of a survey for our congregation and the answers were most revealing. The answers I received can be summed up in the following typical statement: “Elders are to decide who the preacher will be, hire him and fire him, make all the decisions about spending the money for the congregation, and make all the decisions about what we as a congregation are to be involved in.” That answer tell me that some people have come to the conclusion that they expect their elders to be a board of directors, whose role is nothing more than making decisions.

What does the Bible say about the responsibilities and functions of shepherding? Does God give

an answer? Does it look like my definition? How do we normally select shepherds, and what are we to expect from them? How do we know a person is functioning as a shepherd?

To answer these questions, we must first look at the way some are trained to be elders. Basically, they are trained by observing those who have preceded them as elders. Whatever they observe elders doing they are likely to imitate when they are asked to serve as an elder. If those observed served as a board of directors, those following will likely follow the same pattern. If those observed are more autocratic, those who follow in succession will be autocratic. If those observed only served as a group making all the decisions about church finances, that is what those following will seek the same role. Many congregations train their leaders simply through observation, and in some cases the results are disastrous.

A Biblical Model

What does the Bible say about the responsibilities and functions of shepherds? Does God give an answer? Does it look like my definition? How do we normally select shepherds, and what are we to expect from them? How do we know if a person is functioning as a shepherd?

Has God ever given a job description for those who would shepherd his people? The answer is yes! You might be surprised to find such a description in Ezekiel 34:1-4.

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.’”

In the verses above, God brings an indictment against the incorrect behavior of Israel’s elders. Next, he turns to tell them what is the proper work of a shepherd, a work they have failed to do.

You have not **strengthened** the weak or **healed** the sick or **bound up** the injured. You have not **brought back** the strays or **searched** for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.” (NIV)

In these four verses, we find six things that

God expects of those who would be shepherds for his people.

First, He says that he expects them to **help the frail become mighty**. Notice the indictment, "You have not strengthened the weak." It is probably not news to many, but the church does have weak people. Who is ultimately responsible for the care of these weak members? To whom does God turn to and say, "Make them stronger?" It is the shepherds.

One of the first things a shepherd must do if he is going to be the kind of shepherd God desires is to know those in the flock who are weak. What is a weak member? How do you identify the weak? How do you help make the weak strong? These are tough questions. Yet, I believe some would not even begin to know the answer. Why? Maybe it is because they do not understand this aspect of shepherding and leadership. To lead the weak means that one must know the signs of weakness. Things like selfishness, gossip, resentfulness, and bitterness are not always at the top of the list when identifying a weak member. Most often we define the weak member by church attendance alone. I agree that church attendance is a sign of a greater problem, but is that the only sign to determine if a member is weak? By no means.

Second, God expects shepherds to **cure the unhealthy**. The prophet told the shepherds that they had failed to heal the sick. I do not believe the prophet is talking about miraculous healing in this context. In the Middle East, even to this day, shepherds take care of their flocks in a similiar manner as they did when this verse was written. A sick sheep is a vulnerable animal. The shepherd must provide all the medication, bandages, and care necessary to see that the sheep becomes whole again and is protected from further infection. This work may require great sacrifices by the shepherd. The main goal is not the comfort of the shepherd, but the healing and protection of the sheep. God expects the same from those who would shepherd his sheep in the church. Surely, it is an awesome responsibility to assume the role of a shepherd in God's kingdom.

Third, God requires his shepherds to **give first aid to the traumatized**. The shepherds in Ezekiel have failed to "bind up the wounded." There are many wounded sheep today in God's kingdom. They have been bruised, stoned, and blind-sided by Satan. His attack is relentless against God's people. Not even the children of church members, God's sheep, are immune from the threat of drugs, premarital sex, or any of the other dangers of the world. Marriages in the church are attacked, and the mental state of many of our members is at a breaking

point. Our sheep sometimes have desperate problems. They need more than the advice, "Go to church, that will cure your ills." They need someone who really cares. They need a shepherd offering healing. If the shepherds are too busy to help because they are making decisions about carpets in church buildings, then the wounded sheep will be neglected and die. It is just not enough to stand by and watch people in their destructive life-style and tell them not to live that way. People who have been wounded by Satan sometimes need more than sermons. They need shepherds offering healing through love and tender care. They need Jesus' incarnate presence seen in the acts of compassion and healing provided by faithful shepherds.

Fourth, God's shepherds **recover a wondering sheep**. Bring back the strays! It is interesting to me how many elderships expect the local minister to **bring back the strays**. But to whom does God give that responsibility? I do not believe

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that an eldership is wrong in using all means necessary to bring back the strays, including asking the minister to help. It is not, however, the minister's primary job or responsibility. That has been given to the elders. How many shepherds visit the homes of those who have dropped out? How many hours do they spend discussing the strays? How many even know who they are and where they are? Bringing back the strays demands that a shepherd know exactly how many sheep he has to care for, and when some turn up missing to go after them as if their life depended on it, because it does. On the day of judgment God is going to ask those same questions of his under-shepherds. He demanded that those shepherds under the law of Moses know how to shepherd. Will he expect any less from those living under the law of his son?

Fifth, God requires his shepherds to **hunt for the depraved**. In Ezekiel, God criticizes the

shepherds because they had not searched for the lost. One of the greatest ways a leader can teach servanthood is by mowing the yard of a widow. The best way he can teach his flock to search for the lost is by teaching the lost. God demands that his shepherds not only search for and try to bring back the ones who have left the flock, but that they search for those who have never been in the flock and bring them in. In doing so, they teach the rest of the flock a valuable lesson. Jesus' clear teaching was that leaders are to be servants of all. Servants love people, so they involve themselves with people, all kinds, both the lost and the saved. In doing so, they show by example what God means when he speaks of maturity in Christ. They set a goal that the flock can both see and obtain.

Finally, God demands that the sheep be **governed tenderly**. In his rebuke, God criticized the shepherds of Israel for treating the sheep harshly, not gently. Leaders should create such an atmosphere of openness and healing in the church that their absence would be noticeably felt -- more than even the absence of the preacher. It is sad to say, but unfortunately true for a few, that some allow the authority and leadership role of the shepherd to go to their heads and not their hearts. For them, leadership is being the boss. This attitude closes the doors on the sheep and keeps them at bay from their

shepherds. God tells us what will happen to his sheep when the shepherds rule harshly. Ezekiel 34:5-9 states that God's sheep will be scattered, they will wander off, become food for the enemy, and be destroyed.

I am concerned about our churches. God's sheep are being scattered, becoming devoured by all kinds of evil, and being food for the religious hustlers. They are becoming weak, wounded, and attacked from every angle. In the midst of all these problems God turns to those who are shepherds and asks, "What are you doing to solve this problem?"

Could it be that when God sees a church with serious problems he expects the shepherds to fix it? Could it be that when God even sees a church living peacefully beside the still waters, feeding in the green pastures, he still calls his shepherds, saying, "Stay alert, be on watch, never give up or in." In every case, the direction and tone of the church can be traced back to one point, how is the leadership doing? What they are doing or not doing will ultimately set the tone for the whole church.

It is my prayer that God will continue to bless the leaders of His flock, wherever they meet, and that God will give them wisdom and the strength to **strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, search for the lost, and rule them gently.**