

The Shepherd's Job Is Caring for His Sheep

By Bob Young

We have given lip-service to the nature of spiritual leadership as described in the Bible. Correctly, we have noted that there was only one group of leaders in the churches of the New Testament—the elders/bishops/pastors. In two New Testament passages, all three concepts are used to describe one group of leaders (Acts 20:17-32; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

In practice, we have been less diligent in combining the three descriptive words into one role in the church. As a result, some churches have elders who have little involvement in shepherding the flock, others have pastor-teachers who are little involved in training and mentoring (Eph. 4:11-12), and others have overseers who run things but devote little time to spiritual development and personally guiding with the flock.

Where is the model that integrates sharing the wisdom of experience and years in spiritual decision-making and the application of God's Word, oversight that equips and trains by personal mentoring, and shepherding that cares for the flock by constantly touching, feeding, and nourishing every member of the flock personally? How often have you seen elders (since that is our word, almost exclusively, in churches or Christ) who are also excellent shepherds, training and encouraging in the work of ministry? Since many (most?) elderships are self-perpetuating, any model of training for elders tends to further the same limited role.

Perhaps your church is different, but in my consultations and observations, the role of elders in training, preparing members for service, capacitating, and facilitating is almost absent. In some churches, the shepherding role is limited to helping those with problems, with little concept of proactively encouraging and helping members prepare for difficult days.

In his teaching about the Good Shepherd (John 10), Jesus described the difference between the Good Shepherd and the stranger (salaried employee). The Good Shepherd loves his sheep so much that he willingly gives his life for them. The salaried employee does not love the sheep; he is interested in receiving his pay. In this illustration Jesus showed us the fundamental characteristic that makes a shepherd a good shepherd. He showed us the fundamental characteristic that makes a pastor a good pastor: love.

In the first century, the Bible makes clear that there was only one group of church leaders in each church. Sometimes the leaders were described as elders (presbyters), at times overseers (bishops, administrators), and at times shepherds (pastors). Some have said that these three descriptions reflect three responsibilities. I believe it is more accurate biblically to say that the descriptions reflect three essential tasks that help the leader do his one job. The one job of the leader is caring for the flock. The leader is charged with the well-being of each member of the church. This care is exercised by guiding (making decisions about the application of God's Word), training (administration in the sense of helping others toward ministry, administer), and teaching (the primary concept of shepherding or pastoring is feeding).

The primary function of the leader is the care, training and teaching of the members. The task can be done correctly only when people are loved. The shepherd must love his sheep. Biblical love supplies the needs of people. Biblical love makes the sheep feel valued, safe, and taken care of. It gives them the courage to accept new challenges. The Good Shepherd loves his sheep, knows them, calls them by name, feeds them, and protects them from danger.