

ELDERS AND THE CHURCH = SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP

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The work of a shepherd was very important, especially to the sheep he was overseeing. The Bible uses the figure of a shepherd and his flock to illustrate the concepts of leadership, servitude, submission, and obedience. These concepts are vital to the proper function of the local church today.

FAITHFUL SHEPHERDS

Why should we try to understand the work of a shepherd? Because God Himself is our shepherd, we are the sheep of His flock (Psalm 23; 95:7; John 10:1-30), and one who fills the office and work of the elder, pastor, bishop in a local congregation is described as doing the work of a shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28). The shepherds (elders) need to know the nature of the work entrusted to them, and the flock (local congregation) needs to know its proper role and why it has divinely authorized shepherds.

In *Ezekiel 34* we read God's condemnation of the "shepherds" of the nation of Israel. These shepherds were the rulers and leaders of the people of God. We can learn what God expects of a faithful "shepherd" of His people by observing what He condemned those shepherds for not doing. Faithful shepherds are to:

FEED – *"Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"* (v. 2b). A basic task expected of the shepherd is to provide the food and water necessary for life. Sheep were entirely dependent on the shepherd to find green pastures and still waters. God provides these things for us as the true, chief Shepherd (Psalm 23:1-2; John 10:9). Those who would shepherd the flock of God among them must see that the necessary food is provided to every saint according to his need and ability.

HELP THE AILING – The work of the shepherd also included strengthening the weak, healing the broken, and binding up the broken. The shepherd was always available and willing to render whatever assistance may have been needed (Ezekiel 34:4,16). Shepherds would need to know who was ailing and why. This made it necessary for the shepherd to maintain close contact with the sheep, mingling among them to stay abreast of their condition.

LEAD – Without the oversight and guidance of competent leadership, the sheep will be *"scattered because there was no shepherd"* and left *"wandering through all the mountains, and every high hill"* (Ezekiel 34:5,6). Sheep left to themselves can wander in a variety of directions for a variety of reasons. Good shepherds lead the sheep where they need to go and keep them united together in their journey. God leads each of us in the paths of righteousness that keep us safe even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:3-4). Elders of the local church must lead the flock as shepherds, *"being examples to the flock"* (1 Peter 5:3), guiding them in the paths of truth and maintaining unity and peace.

PROTECT – A good shepherd will be on the lookout for any and all dangers that would threaten the welfare of the sheep. Without protection, sheep are easy prey for the beasts of the field (Ezekiel 34:5). Shepherds will expose the dangers and seek to destroy them (1 Samuel 17:34-35). Elders of the church must watch for dangers both inside and outside the flock (Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:9-11).

SEEK – If a sheep should wander away from the flock, the shepherd must care enough to seek for it in order to return it to the fold (Ezekiel 34:6, 11). Each sheep is of upmost importance to the shepherd, and each deserves the same attention. Jesus seeks for His sheep gone astray (Luke 15:4-7; 1 Peter 2:25). Those who shepherd the church must seek those who wander away from the truth.

The elders of a local congregation are not a kind of board of directors or business managers who are only concerned with the financial statements and carpet color. They are shepherds who oversee the flock itself, watching the soul of each sheep, so that they might provide whatever is needed for the health, protection, leadership, and rebuking of the sheep. Thanks be to our Lord, the Chief Shepherd, for His infinite wisdom!

Having considered the need for elders to be good shepherds to fulfill the work that needs to be done in overseeing the local flock of God's sheep, those who are sheep under their oversight need to make sure that their attitudes and actions toward the shepherds are what they should be. Elders are not described as cowboys, but shepherds; likewise the flock is made up of sheep, not wild horses. Sheep are entirely dependent on the shepherd, without whom they are leaderless and vulnerable to attack. The sheep in God's flock need to heed the Chief Shepherd and those He set as shepherds in the local church:

FOLLOW – If the shepherd provides the necessary guidance and leadership, the sheep should be expected to follow. *“Remember those who rule over you, who have*

spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (Hebrews 13:7). The flock is to be submissive and trusting of those they follow, knowing that these men were placed in this position because of their excellent qualities (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The sheep are not in a position to decide for themselves what they want to do. God's word is the authority, and faithful shepherds lead the flock of God in the paths of righteousness (Acts 20:28; Psalms 23:3).

LISTEN AND LEARN – The shepherds see that the proper food and water is provided to the sheep. Healthy sheep will hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matthew 5:6). We need to be thankful for shepherds that are mindful of our spiritual needs and who provide the teaching that will help us grow. With the Word of God as our sole authority, let us listen and learn from those who would teach us the godly way to live.

WELCOME ASSISTANCE – Shepherds have the responsibility to heal the sick, bind up the broken, and strengthen the weak. We should welcome whatever assistance they can render to us. They are on the lookout for such problems, especially since we often fail to assess our own needs as we should (Revelation 3:17). If a shepherd should kindly suggest that we give attention to a weakness that is threatening our soul, we should not be offended. If a shepherd should offer encouragement to our discouraged soul, why would we shrink away? They are not invading our “private space,” but watching out for our souls, as faithful shepherds are commanded to do (Hebrews 13:17). We should appreciate the fact that God, in His infinite wisdom, placed these shepherds in the church to oversee our souls. Welcome their assistance and accept their wise guidance in spiritual growth. They are striving to help save your soul and their own.

SEEK ASSISTANCE – When we know we are weak in our faith and buffeted about by temptation, or when we are dealing with matters of life that are difficult, the elders are there to assist us in our spiritual lives. *“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”* (James 5:14). Whether this has reference to physical or spiritual sickness, the point is that the elders are to be called upon for assistance. They desire to dwell among the flock as shepherds, but the flock must desire their presence. Sheep should always want the shepherds near.

REMAIN FAITHFUL – The shepherd has the responsibility to seek for the sheep that go astray, but the sheep need to be careful to stay with the flock where is provided the leadership and protection that is so desperately needed. To stray away from the Lord is a serious matter because this world is full of deception and danger (Acts 20:28-31; Ephesians 4:14; Titus 1:9-11). Give heed to your attitude that they may oversee your soul *“with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you”* (Hebrews 13:7).

The wisdom of God is indeed apparent in His use of the shepherd and sheep analogy to describe elders and the members of the local congregation of God's people. May the shepherd and the sheep work together in order that the church may be what God desires.