

A Few Good Shepherds

Scripture: Matthew 20:20–28; Mark 9:33–37; Luke 22:24–30; 1 Timothy 2:1–24; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; James 3:1; 1 Peter 5:1–4

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Some modern church leaders fancy themselves businessmen, media figures, entertainers, psychologists, philosophers, or lawyers. Those notions contrast sharply with the way Scripture portrays spiritual leaders.

In 2 Timothy 2, for example, Paul uses seven different metaphors to describe the rigors of leadership. He pictures the minister as a teacher (v. 2), a soldier (v. 3), an athlete (v. 5), a farmer (v. 6), a workman (v. 15), a vessel (vv. 20–21), and a slave (v. 24). All those images evoke ideas of sacrifice, labor, service, and hardship. They speak eloquently of the complex and varied responsibilities of spiritual leadership. Not one of them makes leadership out to be glamorous.

That's because it is not supposed to be glamorous. Leadership in the church—and I'm speaking of every facet of spiritual leadership, not just the pastor's role—is not a mantle of status to be conferred on the church's aristocracy. It isn't earned by seniority, purchased with money, or inherited through family ties. It doesn't necessarily fall to those who are successful in business or finance. It isn't doled out on the basis of intelligence or talent. Its requirements are blameless character, spiritual maturity, and above all, a willingness to serve humbly.

Our Lord's favorite metaphor for spiritual leadership, a figure He often used to describe Himself, was that of a shepherd—one who tends God's flock. Every church leader is a shepherd. The word *pastor* itself means "shepherd." It is appropriate imagery. A shepherd leads, feeds, nurtures, comforts, corrects, and protects. Those are responsibilities of every churchman.

Shepherds are without status. In most cultures, shepherds occupy the lower rungs of society's ladder. That is fitting, for our Lord said, "Let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant" (Luke 22:26).

Under the plan God has ordained for the church, leadership is a position of humble, loving service. Church leadership is ministry, not management. Those whom God designates as leaders are called not to be governing monarchs, but humble slaves; not slick celebrities, but laboring servants. Those who would lead God's people must above all exemplify sacrifice, devotion, submission, and lowliness.

Jesus Himself gave us the pattern when He stooped to wash His disciples' feet, a task that was customarily done by the lowest of slaves (John 13). If the Lord of the universe would do that, no church leader has a right to think of himself as a bigwig.

Shepherding animals is semi-skilled labor. There are no colleges that offer graduate degrees in shepherding. It isn't that difficult a job. Even a dog can be trained to guard a flock of sheep. In biblical times, young boys—David, for example—herded sheep while the older men did tasks that required

more skill and maturity.

Shepherding a spiritual flock is not so simple. It takes more than an unskilled laborer to be a spiritual shepherd. The standards are high, the requirements hard to satisfy (1 Timothy 3:1- 7). Not everyone can meet the qualifications, and of those who do, few seem to excel at the task. Spiritual shepherdology demands a godly, gifted, multi-skilled man of integrity. Yet he must maintain the humble perspective and demeanor of a boy shepherd.

With the tremendous responsibility of leading God's flock comes the potential for either great blessing or great judgment. Good leaders are doubly blessed (1 Timothy 5:17), and poor leaders are doubly chastened (1 Timothy 5:20), for "from everyone who has been given much, much will be required" (Luke 12:48). James 3:1 says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment."

People often ask me what I think is the secret to Grace Community Church's phenomenal development over the past decades. I always point out first of all that God sovereignly determines the membership of a church, and numbers alone are no gauge of spiritual success. In the midst of tremendous numerical growth, however, the spiritual vitality of our church has been remarkable. I'm convinced God's blessing has been on us primarily because our people have shown a strong commitment to biblical leadership. By affirming and emulating the godly example of our elders, the church has opened the door to extraordinary blessings from the hand of God.

The leaders of Grace Church have endeavored to withstand the preoccupation some churches seem to have with self-esteem and the selfishness of our contemporary society. Our elders both model and proclaim Jesus' call to discipleship: "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38-39). And a commitment to self-sacrificial discipleship produces an attitude that is antithetical to selfishness—humility.

Here is the prescription for a healthy church: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). How are God's people to minister to each other? By seeking to honor other people and meet their needs. If the people of a church are fighting for positions of authority, there will be the same kind of chaos as among the disciples when they were arguing over who would be the greatest (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 22:24-30).

As elders, we must lead our people humbly. The shepherd determines the direction of the flock. No church can be successful if its leaders fail in their task. And no flock can survive and prosper if its shepherds try to trade their staffs for thrones.

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