A Countercultural Model for Leadership
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by John MacArthur

The secular first-century archetype of leadership was, of course, the Roman emperor. Every culture under Rome's influence was dominated by autocratic leaders and despotic leadership structures. Political rulers, military commanders, slave masters, heads of households, and even the priests and teachers of religion were all variations on the same theme. Authority was generally administered with an iron fist.

That domineering style ran through the chain of command from the emperor's office right down into the family unit. The typical Roman paterfamilias was a dictator in his own home, and family members were viewed as his chattel. If he chose to do so, he could sell *his own children* into slavery.

Israel in particular was oppressed by multiple layers of harsh and heavy-handed leadership. Some sixty-five years before the birth of Christ, Rome had conquered Judea. By the time of Christ's birth, the Roman Senate had named Herod the Great "King of the Jews," and for several generations after Christ the Herodian dynasty wielded power in Israel with efficient ruthlessness. The occupying Roman armies and Roman procurators (including Pontius Pilate) were likewise renowned for their brutal tyranny.

Even the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish religion, commonly employed force and intimidation as the main tools of its leadership. The council was ruled by the high priest and heavily weighted with members of a priestly aristocracy who lorded it over people with threats of excommunication (John 9:22) or stoning (John 8:59; 10:31–33; Acts 23:12–14).

So it was highly significant and profoundly countercultural for the early church to revere the figure of a shepherd as the chief model of spiritual leadership. The word pastor means "shepherd," and it is laden with implications about how leadership in the church is supposed to function—contrary to *all* worldly patterns.

In Jesus' own words, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. *It shall not be so among you*. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew

20:25–28, emphasis added).

Indeed, the shepherd's task was the extreme antithesis of the harsh, tyrannical top-down style of a political dictatorship. In that part of the world especially, shepherding involved constant hands-on care from shepherd to sheep. Middle Eastern flocks (even today) aren't generally herded by dogs as in most Western sheep ranching; they are *led* by the shepherd. "He goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (John 10:4). Sometimes they are *carried* by him (Isaiah 40:11; Luke 15:4–5).

In other words, he leads by *serving* them, not by *driving* them.

Leadership in the church is not about raw authority administered by force. The fruits of true, Christlike leadership are humility, tenderness, self-sacrifice, and affection for the sheep. A good shepherd embodies what every leader in the church should strive to be: personal, patient, gentle, hands-on, and sacrificial—leading and feeding the flock and watching out for the welfare of the sheep, even to the point of giving his life for them if necessary (John 10:11).

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