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Shepherding and Feeding The Sheep

The New Testament ministry of an elder, both five-fold and supportive, is primarily a shepherding ministry. In John 21:15-17, Jesus told Simon Peter three times that if he loved Him, to feed and tend His sheep.

15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”
He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”
He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”
16 He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?”
He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”
He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”
17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”
And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”
Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.”

In this passage there are two different words used for “feed.” The first one is “bosko” (vv. 15, 17). Bosko means “to feed, nourish, provide food.” This speaks of the need for teaching the Word of God. The
pastor’s (shepherd’s) primary role is to feed the sheep. The authority to lead is predicated on the ability to feed. If no one is feeding then no one is leading. Five-fold elders, not supportive elders, perform this function.

The second word is "poimaino" (v. 16). Poimaino means "to tend, to watch over, to care for." While bosko is the primary task of five-fold elders, poimaino is secondary, though just as important (see Acts 6:4). Poimaino is the primary function of supportive elders. There needs to be in each local church a team of supportive elders that tend to, watch over and care for the sheep. This is not to say that a pastor shouldn't carry out this function also, but there's only so much that one or two pastors can accomplish. Poimaino shepherding is the primary ministry of supportive elders. Their function is not to tell the shepherd/pastor how to do his job. Their role in the pasture is that of a sheepdog.

To carry out this "poimaino ministry" it is imperative for elders, both five-fold and supportive, to have a solid understanding of the pasture. A knowledge of sheep is required, but also knowledge of goats and wolves as well.

The following is a general description of sheep, goats, wolves and sheepdogs.
Sheep

When God refers to His people as sheep, it is not necessarily a compliment. Though there are many fine qualities about a sheep, it is perhaps best to begin with the negative characteristics:

a. Sheep have no defense system to protect themselves; no sharp teeth or claws.
b. Sheep have no sense of direction; they cannot find their way home if lost.
c. If sheep fall on their backs, they cannot turn themselves upright.
d. Sheep by nature are easily given to rivalry and competition.

There are also many positive qualities about sheep. Though they seem so weak and helpless, this only causes a deep reliance to develop towards the shepherd. Self-reliance is a drawback to working in God's kingdom. God needs submissive, obedient sheep that will follow Him.

The twenty-third Psalm reveals several wonderful qualities about spiritual sheep:

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's sake.
4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

From this magnificent psalm, we can glean the following:

a. Sheep trust God to meet their needs: spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically, and financially (v. 1)
b. Sheep like to lie down in green pastures (v. 2). Green pastures represent God's Word. Sheep love to be fed the true Word of God.
c. True sheep are led by the Spirit (e.g., "He leads me" v. 2). There is longevity and quality to their decisions.
d. God’s sheep love still waters (v. 2), not troubled or agitated waters, but still waters. Spiritual sheep shun dissention and strife.
e. Sheep love a righteous standard (e.g., "paths of righteousness" v. 3b). Sheep love the truth, even when it hurts. Goats call it legalism.
f. Sheep respond positively to the rod (correction) and staff (protection) (v. 4).
g. Sheep stay in the fold in the presence of enemies (v. 5). Troubles and attacks won't drive them away from the church.
h. Sheep constantly need fresh oil (v. 5b). They want the anointing of God; sheep won't settle for less.
i. True sheep display contentment for the house (singular) of God (v. 6). There is no compulsion to roam (church hop).
j. Goodness and mercy follow sheep (v. 6b), not the other way around.

In summary, sheep need a lot of care and attention. But their desire is to be faithful, loyal and submissive. They are a joy to the shepherd, as the writer to the Hebrews expressed:
Hebrews 13:17
*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*

Next, we will look at goats.
Jesus discussed the opposite characteristics of sheep and goats in Matthew chapter 25 in the context of the final judgment. We will not base our review of goats in this same context, as only Jesus is qualified to make the final judgment, and that on the last day. However, Jesus does make a point that is relevant to our discussion in verse 32: “a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.”

Matthew 25:31-33
31 “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy[a] angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

Within the church, it is not so much a physical separation, but a spiritual one. A good shepherd will know his sheep from his goats and pastor them accordingly. For along with sheep, goats are part of every shepherd’s fold. As mentioned, goats display many of the opposite characteristics of sheep:

a. Sheep like to be led; Goats like to roam. They have the "grass is greener somewhere else" syndrome.
b. Sheep like still waters; Goats thrive in turmoil and strife.
c. Sheep are easily corrected; Goats are stubborn or "butting" in nature.
d. Sheep like to get along; Goats are always agitating others with their words and ways.
e. Sheep like to lie in rest, trusting their shepherds; Goats are always suspicious of their leaders. Goats profess to have the "gift of discernment." What they have is the "gift" of suspicion.

In summary, goats are not easy to pastor, but they still need a shepherd. Their threat is to the pasture, not the flock itself, as they are not carnivorous. A goat can change its ways and become sheepish. However, the biggest hindrance to this occurring is the goat’s propensity to roam. Goats won’t stay anywhere long enough to let the Word change them. When something on the “menu” is to their personal distaste, they’re off again to another pasture.

Going back to the message of Jesus in Matthew chapter 25, we can draw one other conclusion about the nature of goats: they like to talk the talk, but not walk the walk. They will be there for all that brings recognition in the eyes of man, but when true ministry in the trenches is being done, they are elsewhere.

Matthew 25:
44 “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ 45 Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’

One word of caution to pastors: Jesus said to leave the ninety-nine sheep to go search for the one lost sheep. You don’t leave the sheep to go retrieve the goat. They are roamers; while they were there you did as much as you could with them; now they are gone. They will be in a new sheepfold next Sunday, saying the same wonderful things about their new church that they use to say about yours.
Luke 15:4
4 “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’

One sign that a pastor has lost his spiritual sight is the heavy reliance upon goats within his circle of influence. Goats often have financial resources or musical talents that can be used to manipulate leadership. When the power play comes, i.e., “I’m pulling out if I don’t get my way,” and the pastor compromises, it is an open door for sin and chaos to run rampant within the flock.

Our study next takes us to wolves.
Unlike sheep and goats, wolves are carnivorous, flesh-eating animals. They don't feed on the pasture, but on the flock. Jesus said that they would often come disguised in sheep's clothing.

Matthew 7:15
_Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves._

Every pastor and elder needs discernment against the operation of wolves. The Apostle Paul warned the elders of Ephesus about wolves in his farewell speech to them:

Acts 20:29-30
_For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves, men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves._

The sole desire of wolves is to devour the flock. Notice that Paul said "after my departure." Wolves know when the pastors are in authority and when they're not. Wolves aren't looking for a fight; they're looking for easy prey. Also notice that Paul warned that men would rise up among them and display wolfish characteristics. Pastors need an early detection system to alert them when this type of rebellion is occurring. This early detection
system is the Holy Spirit, coupled with elders/sheepdogs who walk in the Spirit. An isolated, solitaire sheep will easily be devoured; he is no match for a wolf. As mentioned, sheep have no defense system to fight off enemy attacks. The only defense a sheep has against a wolf is to stay in the fold, and stay submitted to the shepherd. When a wolf enters a sheepfold, sheep will press up tight against one another. The wolf will jump up on top of the sheep and pounce up and down, trying to separate them. Individually, the wolf will devour them. If the sheep stay in unity, the wolf has no penetration. It is imperative for sheep to stay in the fold!

It is also important that sheep be in a fold where there are true shepherds, not hirelings. Jesus warned us that the hireling will see the wolf coming and flee for his own safety, leaving the sheep as open prey.

John 10:11-13

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. 12 But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. 13 The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.

A shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep. Elders must also fall into this category. This was the emphasis of what Paul was saying to the Ephesian elders.

The following are some of the traits of wolves:

a. Wolves, run in packs, but have little respect for one another and will easily turn against one another.
b. Wolves do their best to stay away from the shepherds and cling to the sheep. However, the ones in sheep's clothing often try to seduce the pastors.
c. Wolves are easily exposed when flesh and carnality crop up. They will be all over it.
d. Wolves have problems with church leadership wherever they go. They have common denominators of being "hurt" by their previous pastors and "not having their gift
received" in their last church. Beware!
e. Wolves often display a deceptive charismatic charm.
f. Wolves are sent by the devil to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). They are Satan's agents of destruction.

As seen in Acts 20:30, some people can turn wolfish without being properly submitted to the pastors. They will "draw away" other members of the congregation with their deceit. The chief aim of a wolf is to draw sheep away from the flock which God placed them. They will speak smooth words of how the pastors have "hurt" them, or how the Holy Spirit has “shown them” that the pastors are in error. This is designed to inject distrust for the leadership and instill confusion about where they’re supposed to be.

In summary, wolves must be kept out of the flock at all costs! There are no exceptions. Compromising to entertain a wolf will always result in the loss of one or more sheep.

Part of the protection against wolves in the sheepfold is the ministry of sheepdogs. That will be our next discussion.
Sheepdogs are an aid to the shepherd in keeping the sheep in and keeping the wolves out. The shepherd cannot be everywhere at the same time. Wolves are looking for vulnerable areas, places of weakness. As mentioned, wolves are not looking for a fight, but easy prey. Sheepdogs keep the sheep from being easy prey. While the shepherd is leading the flock (the role of pastors), sheepdogs stay along the perimeters of the fold to keep the sheep in and the wolves out.

What are some of the functions of a sheepdog?

a. Sheepdogs warn and protect the sheep of danger by barking or even a nip on the leg. Sheepdogs must be able to lovingly correct the sheep.

b. Sheepdogs will square off against a wolf to preserve the well-being of the sheepfold. Confrontation is part of their function.

c. Sheepdogs will inform the shepherds of problems and potential problems. Shepherds cannot be everywhere at the same time. Sheepdogs are on more of a peer level with the sheep and consequently see problems in the root stage. Often, pastors don't see the problem until it has
come to fruition, which sometimes is too late to correct.

What are some of the qualities one needs to be a good sheepdog?

a. A consistent prayer life.
b. Spiritual discernment
c. A love for the sheep.
d. Loyalty to the pastors.
e. A disdain for the flesh/carnality.

In summary, sheepdogs are invaluable to the well-being of the flock. They provide the *poimaino* type of shepherding that is necessary for the fold to grow.

One caution: Sheepdogs are carnivorous, but they don't eat sheep; they eat meat prepared from the shepherd's hand. If for some reason a sheepdog gets a taste for the sheep, he must be removed. Church splits often occur through a sheepdog's disloyalty. It is a shepherd's responsibility to monitor the activities of the sheepdog. If a sheepdog regularly doesn't show up to be fed by the shepherd (submission), there's a good chance that it is dipping into the sheep. However, if properly trained and monitored, a sheepdog is the shepherd's best friend.