

## **Caring For The Flock\***

There is a great deal of misunderstanding of what shepherding means, since we have so little contact with shepherds. A modern analogy would be that of an athletic coach. There is much in common between coaching an athletic team and pastoring a church.

The coach cares for his charges in such a way as to achieve a goal; namely, winning the game. This care is exercised in two ways. The first is instruction. He teaches what the team and each individual player need to know by having chalkboard sessions in a classroom setting. Then he oversees what actually goes on in the field as he puts his charges through drills designed to enable them to carry out their appointed tasks. He will often first demonstrate these himself and then coach them as they go through the particular motions. Both instruction and oversight need to be given to accomplish the goal.

The same is true in the church. In most cases we tend to err on one side or the other, giving much instruction and little oversight, or much oversight and little instruction. A careful balance must be maintained. We will see these two elements as we look at the various types of people who need shepherding in the church.

### FOUR TYPES OF PEOPLE

To help prioritize the needs of the sheep, our experience has shown it helpful to distinguish between four categories of believers: *growing* believers, *new* believers, *dead-in-the-water* believers, and *troubled* believers.

The most critical person to be shepherded to maintain the health of the church is the *growing* believer. Acts 20:28 makes this clear where Paul says "be on guard for yourselves," meaning the other elders. Elders should be exemplary growing believers. They will be bearing fruit and thus will sooner or later become a focus of spiritual attack. If not carefully shepherded, elders are likely to become casualties of the war. Properly shepherded, they can be strengthened through the attacks, thus learning how to prepare others for leadership.

But shepherding *growing* believers often, in practice, receives lowest priority. Shepherds spend most of their time shepherding *troubled* believers. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease". This is short-sighted and destructive. Unless the shepherds of the church are growing, the church will begin to struggle and eventually stagnate. Elders, deacons, and other growing believers must receive top priority for shepherding.

### HOW DO WE SHEPHERD GROWING BELIEVERS?

#### 1. The best way is simply to spend time with them.

Jesus spent most of his time with growing believers (His disciples) and He called them to "be with him". It is important to have a developing relationship with growing believers so that you can be there in good times as well as in bad times. Growing believers often withdraw during times of struggle and too often we let them go. When they fail, they go completely underground and often, because we respect their privacy, we will not go after them. Privacy does not have as high a value biblically as we place on it in our Western culture. We need to go after them when they fail and encourage them, so that more can be learned from failure than from success.

2. Help them learn how to study the Bible on their own.

Most new believers rely on a survey method. They simply read or passage then wait for God to "speak to them". But what happens once a person has surveyed the Bible four or five times? Growing believers need to determine what God is trying to teach them in their life and then study a book of the Bible with that particular theme, or use a concordance, Bible dictionary or topical index (eg. Nave's), and dig out relevant verses for a topical study. This greatly enhances their hunger for the Word, and encourages direct application to their lives.

3. Focus their prayer life.

I don't think we are ever really comfortable with our level of praying. We ought to keep growing in our prayer life. We ought to be praying regularly with another growing Christian and in this way learn from them as well as instruct them how to pray. We must be careful that prayer does not become routine and ceremonial but is an actual meeting with God in daily communion. We need to show a person how his prayer life reflects how he views God. Some of the best growth in my walk with the Lord has come as other Christians have been willing to point out how my prayer life reveals flaws in my view of God. It is especially important to teach people how to resist the evil one through prayer.

4. Involve them in ongoing discipleship.

Growing Christians need to be involved in on-going discipleship, facing barriers to spiritual progress as they arise, evaluating them, and learning how to overcome them. Elders need to think of what caused them to grow and evaluate their spiritual growth, and share this with growing believers in the congregation. They should also keep a list of helpful books.

5. Growing believers need "coaching" in working with newer believers.

Leaders should be taking growing believers with them as they minister to others. Jesus took his disciples with Him so that they would learn by His example how to minister. We need to take growing believers with us on evangelistic visitation, hospital visits, shepherding visits, counseling appointments, group Bible studies, etc. A good rule of thumb is for leaders to do as little as possible by themselves.

As opportunities develop, growing believers ought to be encouraged to take the lead in some of these ministries. The leader can then critique the growing believer afterwards and shore up his methods. This will uncover destructive priorities in the growing believer's life. Many growing Christians are stunted in their growth because of "busy-ness", coupled with an inability to prioritize to do those things that are the most important. Both the leader and the growing Christian will be required to make good use of their time. Jesus called busy people to follow Him. It requires more than just a few adjustments to their schedule.

## SHEPHERDING NEW BELIEVERS

The second kind of believer to shepherd is the *new* believer. New believers, like babies, often grow without being told to or without quite knowing how. Therefore, much of what was said above for growing believers can be applied to new believers. But we must add the following.

A good plan is to take one of the growing Christians you are working with and get them to shepherd new believers using the above concepts. This will keep you from getting over-extended.

It will also lead to the establishment of discipleship chains (See Stage 3, chapter 2).

1. Never assume anything about the new believers progress or knowledge.  
Remember how it was for you when you were a new believer. Avoid spiritual lingo which is not clearly understood by the *new* believer (and maybe not even by you!). Be careful that you clearly define any spiritual terms that you use.
2. Get them started immediately in the Word.  
Remember that the Holy Spirit can teach them during the hours when you are not around. If they are good readers, get them to start surveying the entire Bible. Many Christians have not even read through the Bible. Encourage new believers to read through it as quickly as possible.  
  
New believers may find certain parts of the Bible boring. Even though you may be fascinated by Chronicles, they may not be. Therefore surveying the Bible does not mean one reads it cover to cover. A better way to survey the Bible is to break it up into sections. (Usually we recommend 5 sections) They read one cluster from each section each day (or five chapters a day, which, for an average reader, takes 20 to 25 minutes). The Old Testament can be broken up into three sections: History (Genesis to Esther), the poets (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon) and the prophets (Isaiah to Malachi). The New Testament can conveniently be broken up into two sections: the Histories (the Gospels plus Acts) and the Writings (Romans through Revelation). Reading one chapter a day from each of these sections will enable a person to read through the Bible in a year. If a person finishes one section ahead of the others, he may start that section over again.
3. Have the new believer incorporate prayer with his reading.  
I often encourage them to use the five sections and employ a book marker with prayer requests on each one. This enables him to pray after each section of reading and keeps the prayer times short. Long prayer times for new believers often become discouraging because it is hard to keep their minds focused for long periods of time.
4. Encourage regular fellowship.  
New believers need to know why the church is relevant to their well being. Don't assume that they understand the importance of the church in God's plan. Our society values independence, not corporate inter-dependence. As they get involved in a house church they will recognize that the church is a home base where they experience fellowship, developing shared values, shared goals, and a shared sense of purpose. New believers soon enough find out how out of step they are with the world, and may begin to wonder if they themselves are crazy. Without a good home base, they will soon be led to compromise their faith with the world.
5. Encourage service.  
New Testament believers were not encouraged to sit and soak in the Word for a few years before serving, but rather were expected to utilize their spiritual gifts immediately. Certainly we all are growing. However, we should not wait until we are grown before we serve. Much growth comes through service as we learn of the power of Jesus "on the job". Encourage new believers to serve others in the assembly as well as unbelievers, as God burdens them. Do not get too caught up in spiritual gifts, since this often becomes self-centered. Rather, get them to focus on the ministry of the body.

## THE DEAD-IN-THE-WATER CHRISTIAN

The third kind of person to shepherd is the *dead-in-the-water* Christian. He is the one who is bearing no fruit, even though he may be faithful in attendance, and often takes up his shepherds time and energy.

1. The first thing the dead-in-the-water Christian may need is time.

That is, time being exposed to a growing Christian. The enthusiasm and excitement of a growing Christian walking a supernatural walk is often enough to motivate a dead-in-the-water Christian to break the cycle of passivity. I have often found in talking to dead-in-the-water Christians, all they need is the encouragement of a growing Christian spending a little time with them.

2. Try to find out what is keeping them from bearing fruit.

Often it is ignorance that they ought to be bearing fruit. John 15:8 shows that fruit-bearing is the proof of discipleship. One who is not bearing fruit, and doesn't see any need for it after he has been made aware of it, ought to be challenged as to whether or not he is saved.

3. John 15:7 reveals that the problem may be lack of prayer or abiding in the Word.

4. What went wrong?

Often a dead-in-the-water Christian was bearing fruit at one time but somewhere along the line got discouraged or had a failure and withdrew. Success is a very high value in our society and we don't accept failure easily. We need to teach people that God values our conformation to the image of Christ and this often involves apparent failures. We need to teach these believers to be God-centered rather than self-centered.

5. Often hidden rebellion is the problem.

The passive, dead-in-the-water believer has learned to cover up his rebellion in a way that makes it inoffensive. When rebellion is exposed it needs to be pointed out that God looks on the heart and is deeply offended by his rebellious children.

Some questions you might ask to dead-in-the-water Christians are:

- Have you ever been fruitful?
- If so, in what areas?
- What caused you to cease bearing fruit?
- What burdens do you have?
- What needs do you see in the church?
- What is your prayer life like?
- What specifically do you pray for?

We will take our solution to caring for dead-in-the-water Christians from I Thessalonians 5:14. We need to be very careful to determine what kind of person we are dealing with.

1. If he is *ignorant*, we might use John 15:1-8, I Peter 4:10, I Corinthians 12:4-11. Also, encourage a growing believer to spend time with a comatose one, actually taking him out in ministry with him
2. If he *does not pray*, encourage him to find a prayer partner. Share practical ways God has dealt with you in your times of prayerlessness.

3. If he is *rebellious* or unwilling to serve. Use Galatians 5:13,14 to show them that self-centeredness keeps them from serving the Lord. If necessary, an unruly brother may need to be admonished. Passivity cannot be tolerated any more than active rebellion. Both are equally sinful, even though passivity is more often tolerated in our churches. You might study Galatians 5:13-17.
4. If he is *fatigued*. Encourage the one that is tired out from ministry and perhaps has taken time off and is now finding it difficult to get back into things. Give lots of encouragement but also give practical help and training. The reason for burn-out is often that a person is in over his head and relies on fleshly methods rather than spiritual ones. Especially encourage him to recruit others to minister with him. Often a prideful independence leads to burn-out. Encourage him to get back into ministry with another growing believer you recommend. You might think of others in the church who have similar or complementary gifts and who can give further training and encouragement to the burned out brother. Encourage interaction and then follow up on it.

### THE TROUBLED BELIEVER

The fourth kind of person who needs shepherding is the *spiritually troubled* believer. This person is in deep waters because of sin either in his actions or in his attitudes. I encourage a careful study of Ephesians 4:20-24. Sometimes new believers may fall into this category but often it is older believers, including ones who were at one time growing.

A careful study of Ephesians 4:20-24 and Romans 12:2 helps our work with these people. A critical point in both of these passages is that the troubled believer needs a renewed mind. Whenever a person is spiritually troubled, it is because of sin in his life. It may be active sin (wrong actions) or it may be sin that is hidden in wrong attitudes. Often there is a wrong view of God (especially who He is and what He has done in His atoning work) and a wrong view of man. Man is oftentimes elevated and it is thought that God deals very unfairly with us.

When shepherding a troubled believer, we must keep two things in mind about God. First, God is God (Psalm 100:3). He is sovereign. He has absolute power. He can do all things and all things are working according to His plan. We are accountable to Him; He is not accountable to us. Secondly, God is good (Psalm 100:5). God's Word restores reality, perspective and truth. Perspective of God can be restored as we pray God's Word back to Him.

A troubled believer's perspective about himself also needs to be restored. He is sinful, deceitful, evil and helpless. He is not weak but wretched (Romans 7). A man walking after the flesh often blames everyone else, including God, for his problems. A mind must be undeceived. We need to turn on the lights. A person is accountable to God not only for his actions but also his reactions. His reactions often expose sinful, hidden attitudes. Many times we are sinned against but we are responsible to live righteously and not to sin in return (I Peter 2:18-23).

Healing for spiritually troubled believers begins with repentance. He must have a change of mind and heart about self, about God and about others. He needs to humbly accept the grace of God who forgives his sin and then walk in accordance with God's revealed will in His word. Usually some form of follow-up will be necessary. Once again, you might use a growing Christian to shepherd a troubled one out of the shadows and into the glorious light.

The shepherding that ought to be taking place in the church is extensive. But without it, the church will cease to become an organism and shortly become an organization. The shepherding of growing Christians is most critical. Without them, there will be far too much work for the elders of the church.

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\* *Planting House Churches in Networks* (Warwick, RI: The Fellowship of Church Planters, n.d.), 219-224.