

Shepherding 101

Session Two

New Testament Models for Elders

Life Groups - January, 2005

During this Session we will be exploring the teaching in the New Testament concerning elders in the church. The example of Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" will be examined. Words used in the New Testament to describe elders and their functions will be considered.

Talking Points:

1. We noticed last week that the exemplar for leaders in the church is God and that the prevailing image used in connection with God's leadership over his people is that of a shepherd with his sheep. There is a continuation of that theme in the New Testament, this time with Jesus describing himself as a shepherd.
2. Unlike men hired to take care of sheep, Jesus leads with selfless, sacrificial care. He knows the sheep intimately and he is so invested in the life of the sheep that he is willing to lay down his life for them.
3. In Jesus' parables the imagery of the shepherd is powerfully demonstrated, especially in the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7. The deep compassionate concern of the shepherd is described in endearing terms. It is reminiscent of Isaiah 40:11 using the same kind of compassionate language. The good shepherd leaves the rest of the sheep to find the one sheep who has strayed.
4. When Peter writes to the shepherds in the church about their tasks, he directs their attention to the "chief shepherd." (I Peter 5:4) Just as the Father was the model for leaders in the Old Testament, so Jesus is the model for leaders in the church by virtue of the way he shepherds. Jesus as part of the loving God-community is the blueprint for all leadership in the church.
5. The work of shepherds is to look after their sheep — protecting them, leading them to water and pasture, taking care of their injuries, and seeking them out when they are lost. This imagery was used widely in the Near East to describe political and spiritual leaders and is prominent in the Old Testament. This style of leadership was grounded in Peter before the Lord's ascension. Three times in close succession Peter is instructed on how he should lead in the Kingdom — "feed my lambs," "take care of my sheep," and "feed my sheep." (John 21:15-18)
6. When Peter and Paul instruct elders in the church, they instruct them to be shepherds. (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-4) This involves compassionate care, sacrifice, concern, all of which are clothed in a mantle of determined, irrepressible love. Shepherding is relational. Good shepherds provide for their sheep and they protect them from harm. They intimately know their sheep because they are continually involved in their lives.
7. There are three words that describe elders in the New Testament. All three are found in Acts 20 in Paul's discussion with the Ephesian elders. The word "elder" denotes maturity — both in age and in spirituality. "Overseer" describes a person who watches over others, who is aware of their needs and struggles and makes mature decisions concerning them. But all the descriptive titles simply demonstrate

how shepherds shepherd the flock. The overarching main occupation of these leaders is shepherding — oversight and other tasks a shepherd performs are the ways in which a person might shepherd.

8. Shepherding is a compelling image, rooted in God's love. The lost will never be ignored because they are precious. The injured will be cared for. Hungry sheep will be fed. Careful leadership will guide the flock to good pasture and still waters. The right paths will be chosen and the sheep will be carefully led or even carried home.

9. The predominate vision of leadership in the church is not one of decisions being made in a board room where sheep are only one of many line items of discussion, but it is a vision of pastures and hungry sheep. It is a vision of the lost and the injured and those who are at risk. The vision cries out for shepherds.

Session Two Group Questions

1. Read John 10:1-15. List all the descriptions of a good shepherd in this passage. Which of these descriptions relate to elders in the church and which do not?
2. In what ways can shepherds in the church "abandon" the sheep (see verse 12)?
3. What does it mean to know the sheep (see verse 14, 3-4)?
4. In what ways can a shepherd in the church lay down his life for the sheep (see verse 15).
5. Read I Peter 5:2-4. Describe the difference between "lording over" and "being examples."