

SHEPHERDING THE SHEEP

In this article, I would like to talk about the responsibility church leaders have as “*shepherds of the church of God*” (Acts 20:28).

A shepherd has full responsibility for his flock. He takes care of his sheep by leading them to good pasture and protecting them from dangers such as thieves and wolves. In the same way, a shepherd of God's church must feed believers with sound doctrine and guide them into a close relationship with Jesus who will protect them from sin and the false teachings of thieves and wolves. A Christian needs to know the Bible well and to walk closely with Jesus so that he can stand firm against the evils of this world. In our own strength, we are very weak and easy prey for the devil and that is why the disciples deserted Jesus when He was arrested.

Peter told Jesus that he would never desert Him but Jesus said that he would deny Him three times before the cock crowed and that is exactly what happened. The reason the apostles deserted Jesus was because they were depending upon their own strength but they soon found that the fear of death was more than they could stand. Jesus, of course, knew this would happen and it was a bitter but very necessary lesson for the Apostles to learn. They had to learn to rely upon God for their strength because mere men are no match for the devil and his demons. After the resurrection, in John 21:15-19, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him and said to Peter, “*feed my lambs ... take care of my sheep ... feed my sheep*”. In saying this, Jesus was telling Peter, a future shepherd of the church, to spiritually feed and take care of those who would later be in his care. In vs.18-19 Jesus told Peter about the death he would face and then said to Peter, “*Follow me*”. At this point in time, Peter knew very well how weak he was in himself and that his future strength would only come from following Jesus. Through this lesson, Peter, and the other apostles, understood that feeding and caring for the lambs and sheep would be teaching and leading believers, young and old, to follow Jesus.

How do church leaders and elders feed and care for their sheep?

A leader should often speak to his sheep as though there are goats among them. There are many people in the churches who are not saved and there is a good chance that these goats don't actually know how to be saved. Perhaps they have never heard the gospel preached clearly or have misunderstood it. Everyone needs to be told clearly that they must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. To be born again, they must repent of (turn their back on) ALL sin and receive Jesus as Lord of their life. When they do this, the Holy Spirit will come

into their life and then they will become spiritually born again, children of God. Unless they do this, all their singing, dancing, Bible study, church going, giving and even prayer will not save them because they are not born again.

The single most important thing a Christian needs to understand is the witness of the Spirit. When we are born again, the Holy Spirit comes to live within us to be our guide in all things and the Spirit controls our emotions to get our attention. Whenever we have no peace, He is telling us that we are off God's chosen path in some way or other. When we sin, the Spirit takes our peace away and this is God's witness for us to repent and, when we do repent, He returns our peace. It is the most simple process in the world and when we understand and follow this witness we come to know the Lord's voice very well and, because of our obedience, we enter into His peaceful rest.

Another very important job leaders have is to teach sound doctrine. They need to spend much time in study and prayer to be sure that they are not teaching false doctrine. Leaders need to be able to scripturally defend their beliefs and not just follow popular teaching. Regarding a leader, Titus 1:9 says, *“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it”*. A sure way to know if our beliefs are true is to listen for the Spirit's witness. If we are caught up in a false doctrine then we will not have peace when our beliefs are challenged and getting upset or angry when challenged is a sure sign that we need to look closer at what we believe.

I believe that teaching a believer to walk with Jesus and sound doctrine are the two most important jobs a leader has. Paul told Timothy, *“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers”*. The devil will attack our life to entice us to sin and try to draw us into false doctrine to lead us into error as both take us away from the Truth and can result in loss of salvation.

Believers who have been led well

- 1) Know how to live by the Spirit and lead a holy life, no longer slaves to sin (see Gal. 5:16).
- 2) Know the Bible well enough to recognise and refute false doctrine (see Titus 1:9).
- 3) Know that love is the fulfilment of the law (Rom. 13:10).
- 4) Know how to take their problems to the Lord rather than continually burdening their leaders. It is good to discuss problems with others but only Jesus can deliver us from sin, family problems, worldly worries etc. so we need

to learn to take our burdens to Him (Phil. 4:6-7).

5) Know how to call upon the Lord for strength when faced with persecution. Well fed believers stand firm in their faith and may well go on to be leaders themselves.

Believers who have been poorly led

- 1) May struggle enormously with sin.
- 2) Usually have poor Bible knowledge and can easily fall prey to false doctrines.
- 3) May be caught up in angry or even hateful relationships.
- 4) May feel hopelessly burdened with the worries of life.
- 5) Will probably fall away when faced with persecution.

Poorly fed believers have a fragile faith and can be easily led astray by false teachings and, as already stated, these things may result in their falling away and being lost (Matt. 24:10-11; 2 Cor. 11:3-4).

To finish off, James 3:1 warns that those who teach will be judged more strictly. A shepherd in God's church has a great responsibility to teach his sheep how to follow Jesus and to ground them in sound doctrine. In doing this, he will protect his flock from the many traps the devil has set to devour weak sheep.

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