



# The leader as a shepherd

## *Part 2: Practical application*

**A13** Articles series: Leadership

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**Much has been written about the leader as servant, but there are other biblical pictures of leadership of which shepherd is one. Two articles, A12 and A13, categorise the biblical references to this word and related terms in an attempt to understand what this image contributes to current thinking about church leadership.**

This is a continuation of Article A12 which investigates the biblical references for 'sheep' and 'shepherd' and associated words. If you have not already read A12, click [here](#) to take you to that.

This second part draws conclusions from the biblical material and applies them to church leadership today.

## Ten principles from the shepherd image

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Having investigated the biblical material, and the context in which it would have been understood in its original setting, we turn now to principles for Christian leadership today. It is all too easy to read too much into biblical metaphors, but the following ten points stand up to careful testing against the biblical evidence.

### 1: **People need leadership**

We live in an age when authority is questioned and when there are few leaders who command instant and lasting respect. In the Church people are confused about what leadership means, whether at local or national level.

Without any reference to other Bible teaching on being a leader, the picture of shepherd and

sheep is sufficient to justify a basic need for leadership. Through an impressive body of evidence comes the clear message that, whether we like it or not, the Bible sees sheep as being an apt metaphor to describe human beings. Sheep wander aimlessly when left to themselves, need pasture but have to be led to it, and are in danger from predators and need protection. That, says the Bible, is a fair description of us.

In biblical times the idea of a flock of sheep without a shepherd would have been a vivid picture of a hopeless situation. This loses its force today with the UK's modern farming methods and a rural landscape covered in lush grass and frequent field boundaries. The shepherd/sheep picture makes a strong case for the need for humans to be led. Examples of bad leadership (with which the Bible abounds) only strengthen the argument. Today's church must not scorn leadership.

## 2: Christian leadership is delegated from God

In any organisation the person at the top of the tree has ultimate responsibility for the people he or she leads. There may well be a structure with people who decide on overall policy, or who can question the leader and even remove them from office (eg. the shareholders of a company, the voters of a nation), but the buck of day-to-day office stops at the leader.

This is not the picture that the Bible uses. It is clear that the sheep that Christian leaders shepherd do not belong to them. All the sins of the shepherds who failed in their job can be focused back to a lack of any sense of accountability to a higher shepherd or owner.

Through all the passages investigated, there are frequent references to the fact that the human shepherd looks after sheep who are the Lord's people (eg. Numbers 27:17), or 'my' people (eg. Ezekiel 34:6,8,9,10,11,12,15 etc., John 21:15-17), or the sheep of his (my) pasture (eg. Psalm 100:3, Jeremiah 23:1 and many others), or God's flock (eg. Zechariah 10:3, 1 Peter 5:2), or the people he has 'bought with his blood' (Acts 20:28).

To add weight to this, Jesus himself is often described as a shepherd not only in the parable of the Good Shepherd but in verses such as Micah 5:4 and Hebrews 13:20. We have already seen that God is described as Shepherd in three Old Testament verses.

So it is no surprise to read in the first verses of 1 Peter 5 a natural progression of thought from being shepherds of God's flock (v2) to Christ being the Chief Shepherd (v4). Jesus' command to Peter immediately after telling him to feed his sheep had been to 'follow me' (John 21:19), a command all leaders do well to keep in view. A Christian leader is still directly accountable to a higher leader, to God himself. Not only this, but the sheep under the leader's care belong to God and so does the pasture.

There is more, for those who are leaders are themselves sheep too. It is not as if there are two types of Christian: sheep and shepherds. It

### Understanding 'pastor'

One dictionary definition of 'pastor' includes 'one who has care of a flock or of a congregation: a shepherd: a clergyman...'.

Some churches call their leader 'pastor', taking the shepherd picture, whereas others prefer 'minister' taking the servant picture instead. Some also use terms such as 'pastorate' and 'pastoral charge'. Much more common is the term 'pastoral care', referring to any form of looking after people, especially church members. Many users will forget that its meaning relates to the kind of care that a good shepherd would provide.

all depends on the context. Christian leaders are simply entrusted with this responsibility by God himself, the ultimate Leader. All are accountable. All need to accept such leadership humbly.

This picture can be applied more widely. People who are not yet Christ's need his leadership. Jesus came to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 15:24) and sent out his disciples likewise (Matthew 10:6). In Matthew 9:36-38 Jesus saw the crowds and 'had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'. He immediately goes on to talk in terms of the harvest being plentiful but the workers few (an interesting mixture of farming metaphors!). So Christians are not only to recognise that their ultimate leader is Christ, but that they are to bring others to this leader too.

## 3: Leadership carries a heavy responsibility

Sheep were such helpless creatures that their very life depended on the shepherd for both food and protection. A shepherd who failed in his job sacrificed the sheep to starvation or destruction by wild animals. It is therefore hardly surprising that this picture is used to drive home stinging attacks on human leaders who failed in their job.

The Old Testament passages on this theme (especially Jeremiah 22,23,25, Ezekiel 34, Zechariah 10,11) paint a picture of human leaders more interested in their own needs than those of the sheep. The shepherd's job was often hard, cold, dirty and dangerous. Even Jeremiah might have been tempted to run away from the responsibility (Jeremiah 17:16). Yet the task of the shepherds was to care for the sheep not for themselves.

God's condemnation is severe, summed up in the three Ws of Woe, Weep and Wail (eg. Jeremiah

23:1,2; 25:34-36). God's anger is described as burning (Zechariah 10:2,3). This is very much an Old Testament message, the hired hand of John 10 being the only point of condemnation in the New Testament references, although Paul warns the Ephesian elders to take care of themselves before the flock (Acts 20:28).

The picture, as already explained, is to secular rulers not to priests. But the picture is then taken on to apply to Christian leaders, so have they any reason to suppose that God's condemnation of them will be any lighter? Leadership has far less to do with privilege and much more to do with a heavy load of responsibility. 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Luke 12:48). Jesus, as the good shepherd, contrasts himself with the hired hand who runs away when the wolf appears (John 10:11-13). Here is an example for all leaders to heed.

Christian leadership should never be entered into lightly, should never be seen as a reward or promotion, but as a privilege and received only through God's call. Churches may need to revise their selection processes in the light of this. All Christians need to pray for their leaders who are as prone to temptation as they are.

#### 4: **Christian leadership means identifying with those being led**

The shepherd picture is in direct contrast to the traditional image of the secular ruler, and especially the selfish ruler. The ruler lived in a palace or special house; the shepherd slept across the door of the sheep-pen. The ruler was sheltered from hardship and poverty; the shepherd had to endure the elements and wild

##### **The use of the word 'shepherding'**

This term came to the fore a few years ago when it was applied to the method of oversight employed by some of the new independent church fellowships. Here the picture of the shepherd was sometimes taken too far with leaders having an over-authoritarian approach to their responsibilities. 'Heavy shepherding' is a questionable practice where church members are allowed little say over the way they run their lives, and many decisions can only be taken after advice from the leader.

Any picture can be over-applied. Sheep are animals, and senseless ones at that. But, as pointed out, human shepherds are themselves sheep too. A complete analysis of the shepherd analogy, shows the need for accountability and humility.

animals with his sheep. The ruler was protected from day to day contact with his people; the shepherd had the job of leading his wayward, frustrating animals at every moment.

The picture is a vivid one for absolute identity with the flock. The opposite is seen in Ezekiel 34:8 where the leaders care only for themselves. Leaders are to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). In John 10:11,15-18 Jesus takes the picture on to the further extreme of the shepherd giving up his life for the flock. Here is sacrifice for the sake of those being led.

So the church leader needs to identify with his or her church. This must have implications for pastors in terms of housing, salary and job security, whilst recognising that these are complex issues. Leaders who have had to suffer special hardship can more easily empathise with others going through similar trials. In addition, no minister should expect an easy ride. People, like sheep, can be immensely frustrating and liable to wander in all kinds of unexpected directions. The same principle would apply for cell and youth group leaders.

#### 5: **Christian leadership involves a personal relationship with those being led**

We have already noted that the Eastern shepherd would know each sheep in his flock by name, and that the sheep would recognise their own shepherd's call and follow him. So the idea of personal recognition both ways would be a widely known feature of the sheep-shepherd relationship. Two questions then follow. Is this a principle that should be applied to Christian leaders today and, if so, in what way should it be applied?

Certainly this aspect of the shepherd picture applies to God. The references to God as shepherd, or we as his sheep, frequently carry this feel of personal relationship (for example, see Psalm 23:1-4; 95:7, Isaiah 40:11, Ezekiel 34:11,12, Matthew 18:12-14, the parable of the lost sheep, and above all in John 10:3-5 where the sheep listen to and know the shepherd's voice and he knows the sheep). They will not follow a stranger. In John 10:14 Jesus says 'I know my sheep and my sheep know me'.

The leader's relationship with the flock is centred on all Christians' relationship with Christ through his death and resurrection. In John 21 Jesus' command to Peter to 'feed my lambs/sheep' is only given after a searching examination of whether Peter loves him. In Acts 20 the Ephesian elders are warned by Paul to shepherd a flock bought by Christ's own blood (v28). Christ himself is described as 'Shepherd of our souls' in

the context of his death and resurrection (see 1 Peter 2:25 and Hebrews 13:20) and in John 10 Jesus talks of himself as the good shepherd giving up his life so that we may have life and have it to the full (v10).

Each of these references on their own cannot be said to be conclusive, but taken together it seems that we would be correct to include this particular aspect of the shepherd image when we apply the picture to Christian leadership.

The picture would seem to mean that Christian leaders need to know each member of their flock and be known by them. The shepherd picture implies no distant, aloof leadership. It certainly does not rule out respect for leaders, but it does imply a different kind of leadership relationship from what the world around may assume to be normal.

See the box on page 6 for thoughts on what this means for a large church.

## 6: Christian leadership concerns service not status

Some of the fiercest criticisms in the passages relating to human shepherds who failed are on the point of using privileged positions for their own ends. Ezekiel 34 pours condemnation onto the shepherds of Israel who only took care of themselves and who exploited the people, taking the best of everything that was on offer and ruling harshly and brutally (v2-4). In Zechariah the woes are for the worthless shepherds who oppress the sheep and desert the flock (eg. 10:2 and 11:17).

In the New Testament, Christ's command to Peter is to take care of and feed the flock (John 21:15-17), and coming so soon after Our Lord's demonstration of service through washing Peter's feet and then going on to die for him, this must have been a powerful lesson for him to learn. Certainly he comes back to it later in his own letters when he urges his church leaders not to be greedy for money but eager to serve, not to lord it over the flock but to be examples to them (see 1 Peter 5:2-4), and goes on to urge them to clothe themselves with humility (v5,6).

But the very picture of a shepherd makes the point too: the shepherd not only identified with the flock (see above) but served them in the dirty and demanding work he had to do, especially in the way he cared for the sick and lame and brought the flock to pasture. This is a picture far removed from that of a tyrant leader.

Christian leaders need to learn this lesson today. Sadly, status affects Christian leadership at every point through the names and titles given to leadership positions and jobs, through salary

structures for paid ministers that are taken straight from the world's models, and through an innate belief that leadership in any form is all about status rather than a gift and a privilege.

For our final four points we turn to key roles of the Christian leader as pictured in the shepherd metaphor.

## 7: Four key roles of the leader: Teaching

It is clear that the issue of pasture is an important aspect of the Old Testament sheep/shepherd picture. In the semi-desert of the Middle East the sheep could not survive without food. The shepherd's main task was to lead the flock to pasture and then on to more pasture as they exhausted each sparse area of grass. The idea of pasture is central to many of the Psalms that use the sheep image (eg. Psalm 79:13; 95:7; 100:3) and also comes through the prophets (Jeremiah 23:1,3,4; Ezekiel 34:31; Micah 2:12). A powerful passage is Ezekiel 34:11-16 'I will pasture them .... I will tend them in a good pasture .... they will lie down in good grazing land .... they will feed in a rich pasture.'

Pasture of course means food. The image of the shepherd is one of care for the flock, but that is only a means to the end of ensuring that the flock are fed and watered so that the sheep can eventually be slaughtered for food or sacrifice or wool.

Moreover, the pasture is often mentioned as God's ('the sheep of my pasture'). It would therefore seem quite reasonable to relate the picture to the Christian leader providing food for the flock in terms of spiritual nourishment. In Ephesians 4:11 the thought is of one gift, the pastor/teacher, rather than two distinct gifts and the purpose, along with the other 'word' gifts mentioned there, is to build up the body of Christ.

In John 21:15-17 Peter is told to feed God's flock as well as to take care of them. Christ himself was sent to the lost sheep of Israel with the primary mission of a teacher (Matthew 10:6, 15:24). One of the activities of the wolves preying on the flock will be to 'distort the truth' (Acts 20:30). Above all, Christ's leadership was shown by his teaching (Mark 6:34 'he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things').

Even from this one picture of leadership alone, the church leader is to be a teacher of the flock, and this is supported by other parts of Scripture too. So teaching should be one of the main gifts sought in any selection process. It should be one of the leader's top priorities. He or she should be given adequate time to prepare. Finding

spiritual pasture should play a key part on any church's agenda. This is not to say that teaching has to be carried out just in traditional ways: what matters more is the sheep feeding or learning. Teaching is simply the means towards the flock being fed from God's pasture so they can grow and become strong. Any leader needs to ask whether he or she is leading the flock to the best pasture there is, God's pasture.

## 8: Four key roles of the leader: Protecting

If the picture of the shepherd speaks of leading to pasture it includes the protection of the flock too. In the Old Testament it was the lion and the bear that were the main predators, and in the New Testament the wolf. If the sheep were not looked after properly they would soon become prey to these wild animals. Their life was in constant danger. Ezekiel 34:8 sums it up: 'My flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals.' The picture is the same in John 10 when the hired hand abandons the sheep. 'The wolf then attacks the flock and scatters it' (v12).

To Ezekiel's hearers these wild animals would have been understood as foreign powers but, if we are justified in taking pasture in a spiritual sense, we can do so here too, especially in the light of Acts 20 (see below). And in 1 Peter 5 the picture of leaders shepherding the flock (v2) moves on to the warning of the devil prowling around 'like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (v8).

Any church is in danger of being eaten up by the forces of spiritual evil around it and one of the roles of the Christian leader must be to protect the flock. Teaching is of course part of this: a well nourished church will be better able to stand against doctrinal and moral error. But there are other means of protection too against both the spiritual dangers of the society in which we live and the demonic forces that would, sometimes very subtly, move the Christian off the path to righteousness. Prayer must be the chief of these, the setting of a good example, and constant study of the Word of God so that the leader's own teaching remains true to Scripture.

This can best be summed up in Paul's advice to the Ephesian elders. 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for

three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.' (Acts 20:28-31)

Christian leaders are to protect the flock from outside powers bent on destroying it – and to guard their own lives so they can guard others.

## 9: Four key roles of the leader: Uniting

Those for whom the Bible books were first written would have problems understanding Western individualism. In the Eastern culture of Bible times, people were dependent on each other, extended families lived all together (very much on top of each other), and the village community would have been a strong unit.

So it is natural for the Western mind to take the parable of the lost sheep and make this the primary image of the shepherd-sheep relationship. But this is selective and unfair. The parable is the only example of the shepherd caring for the lone sheep, whereas we make it the norm. The shepherd may well have known each sheep individually, but his responsibility was towards the whole flock.

One picture that comes in many of the biblical references is that of a flock that becomes scattered (eg. Jeremiah 23:1,2 as opposed to Micah 2:12). One of the chief jobs of the shepherd was to keep the flock together, not only when grazing but when moving on to find new pastures. The sheep that became separated were immediately vulnerable to wild animals. A flock is, by definition, together.

Christian leaders may find their flock very frustrating and the temptation is to discover those who are prepared to move forward fastest and take them on, to shepherd those who want to be led on ahead. A different situation arises when a small number demand almost all the leader's time for counselling. But both these cases are contrary to the shepherd picture where keeping the whole flock together is so vital and giving attention to every sheep must be kept in mind. Ultimately there is but one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16).

This picture has lessons for all pastors. They need to ensure they are caring for everyone in the church (*all* the flock – Acts 20:28), even if they are themselves delegating part of this to others. But if cell group leaders care for those in their groups, is the pastor caring for the group leaders adequately? The aim must be 'to prepare God's people for works of service .... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God' (Ephesians 4:12,13).

## 10: Four key roles of the leader: Tending the needy

We have noted that the leader has a responsibility to all the flock, not just those with more obvious needs. But at the same time he or she has a special responsibility to ensure that the walking wounded of this world can find tender loving care within the Church.

The Old Testament picture of the good shepherd is of someone who cared deeply for those in need, healing the sick, binding up the broken, gathering the lost. See Isaiah 40:11, Ezekiel 34:15,16 – and for the picture against the contrasting background, Ezekiel 34:4,5 and Zechariah 11:16. This is expressed most beautifully in Psalm 23, see for example the idea of lying down in safety (also Ezekiel 34:15). This is a picture that is fully in accord with what the prophets foretold of Christ's ministry.

Families no longer care for their own needy in the way they once had to do. It is in this environment that the Church should be showing the way. Leaders should not devote all their time to this, but they can ensure that it takes place. On the wider front the Church should be in the forefront of medical care, of citizens' advice, of social action. For her own members there should be special love and attention given to those who need it: the elderly, the lonely, the sick, the sad. This is the outworking of Ezekiel 34:4: the strengthening of the weak, the healing of the sick, the binding up of the injured and the bringing back of the strays.

The leader needs not only to display gifts of teaching and the concern for truth, but also the genuine pastor's heart for all who suffer. It is in

Jesus Christ himself that we see this combination perfectly expressed, and he is our leadership example as the ultimate Good Shepherd.

### Is the shepherd picture applicable to a large church?

Does the shepherd picture break down when the flock is very large? Of the ten principles listed only one, No. 5, is questionable in this respect (leaders knowing those they lead, as Christ said he knew his sheep).

It is legitimate to think here in terms of tiers of leadership. The picture of shepherds and under-shepherds is not quite right for, as noted above, you do not get to a particular cut-off point in the structure when all below are sheep and all above are shepherds. But the analogy holds if the leader shepherds a manageable number of others, who in turn each shepherd a similar number of others.

In fact it seems more important that senior shepherds should care properly for those they are responsible for, since if they try to shepherd everyone they will neglect the majority. This would then be untrue to the shepherding picture.

It is vital that the roles of teaching, protecting and uniting the flock are given due priority. It is also important that the senior leader ensures that the walking wounded are cared for in some appropriate way (see point 10 opposite). Acts 6:1-7 gives an interesting solution worth noting.

This article is available at [www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a13.pdf](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a13.pdf). It forms part 2 of two articles, with A12 being part 1. For notes on changing leadership styles in a church see TN28, *No two leaders are the same*. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services.

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