



Editor's Note

The end-of-summer full moon is September 5 this year, and is commonly referred to as the "Harvest Moon." In many lands, harvest season has traditionally been a time of joy and festivities, as people celebrate the bounty of the earth. Among other things, it should remind us of the great spiritual harvest of souls that our Lord referred to in John 4, likely referring to the white clad villagers coming out from the town to see Him.

This is a good time to remind ourselves that the primary purpose of even this small ministry is to encourage and edify church elders, so that they in turn can lead well in the church, equipping the saints to participate in the harvest of souls. Surely no temporal harvest could be as important. The Lord said that there is joy "in the presence of the angels of God" when even a single soul comes to repentance, Luke 15:10. May He bless the articles in this issue to that end!



Biblical Teaching

Lessons on Leadership from Ezekiel 34 by David Dunlap

God has designed godly elders, or shepherds, to lead in the local assembly because a leaderless people is destined for spiritual ruin. Paul counsels the Ephesian elders to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28, NASB). Peter likewise counsels the elders to "shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). Yet God knows that no people will rise higher than the spiritual level of its leaders. Therefore, He established a high spiritual and moral standard for those who lead. God also knows that when the leadership turns away from God, sadly, the people will soon follow. As the shepherds go, so go the sheep.

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from among them to bear the burden of the people, so that Moses would not bear it alone (Num. 11:16-17). God anointed these men with the Spirit of God that they might speak forth the Word of God and minister to the people (Num. 11:24-25).

God raised up these men to be godly shepherds among the people, to care for their spiritual needs, to proclaim the Word of the Lord, and to seek after those who might go astray. God required these elders to be faithful, to know the Word of the Lord, to love Him, and to love His people,

and, most of all, to "spend and be spent" for the people of God.

Lessons from Ezekiel 34

Throughout the Old Testament, God raised up prophets, priests, and kings to lead Israel. But He expects the "shepherds" of Israel to care for the spiritual needs of the flock of Israel. Perhaps more than any figure in the Old Testament, the prophet Ezekiel captures the importance of the work of spiritual shepherds. Ezekiel chapter 34 contains lessons for leaders today.

1. Teach the Word of God – Ezekiel 34:2

"Thus, says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?" (v.2)

In this passage, the most significant failure of the shepherds is that instead of feeding the sheep, they are enriching themselves. They neglected to teach God's holiness to the people and model that holiness in their own lives. They acted as if they owned

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In the last issue, we looked at the content of fellowship. In this article, we want to think about useful structures and a healthy climate for fellowship.

Structure, as we have seen, is the physical setting in which fellowship takes place. It's important, and elders must be more concerned with questions like: "What settings are conducive for fellowship to blossom, for relationships to become strengthened, and spiritual gifts to develop?" than "How much will it cost?" or, "Does this fit in with our traditions?" The temporal outworking of any plans can, of course, then be taken up by the deacons. This is the principle clearly taught in Acts 6.

The apostles might have said, "The kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink," (Rom. 14:17); let the families of the widows care for them, not the people of the church." Rather they understood that temporal things are the setting in which the work of the Lord takes place, and have an enormous impact upon it. Thus they wisely set forth a plan and then handed it over to godly younger believers to implement. Blessing followed as seen in Acts 6:7: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."

An Area for Clear Thinking Overseers

Thus, church elders must be sensitive to every aspect of assembly life to identify and correct impediments to fellowship. So, what sort of structures encourage fellowship? Informal ones! Warm ones! Is the meeting place as warm and inviting as possible? Are rest rooms and nursery areas clean and cared for? Is the kitchen well furnished? If food is planned, make sure it is done well. I didn't say lavish or expensive, I said done well. In a new work, one sees plates of homemade

cookies; as the years pass, they are replaced by store bought ones. Buffet or "pot luck" meals can become sloppy. Establish the saying among the workers: "This is for the Lord!"

Is the sound system sharp and clear? Row seating may work for listening to a speaker, but moveable seating which allows sitting in a circle is much more conducive for fellowship. If homes are employed, other questions must be asked. I have seen fellowship groups suffer because pets (or children!) could not be controlled.

Inevitably, some of the things that will raise questions are the cost. Two questions are relevant. If something will better the work of God, will He not make provision if we ask? And secondly, do we want the blessings of alive-ness in fellowship enough to make personal sacrifice for it?

David's Example

Consider David's desire to build a dwelling for the Lord. David knew that such a center for worship would also be a center for fellowship, and that it would be very expensive. Now he might have reasoned, "When the Lord wanted Moses to build the tabernacle in the wilderness, He commanded Moses to begin by setting the responsibility before the people, (Ex. 25:1). Why should it be any different this time? Let the people sacrifice."

If we wonder how strongly David wanted this vision to become a reality, the answer is found in his testimony: "Now I have prepared with all my might for the house of my God..." (I Chron 29:2). Then follows a detailed list of his "own proper goods" which

he gave to the work (vs. 4) Only then does he ask, "And who then is willing to consecrate his service this day unto the LORD?" (vs. 5). Then we have the record of other leaders in the nation who "offered willingly" (vs. 6), and finally this

heartwarming statement: "Then the people rejoiced, for that they offered

willingly, because with perfect heart they offered willingly to the LORD." (vs. 9). The key to it all is David's statement in verse 5, "because I have set my affection upon the house of my God . . ." The sacrifice of the leaders set the pace for the people.

Some church elders have become prosperous men in the business world. It would not be out of place to ask again: How badly do you want to see the local assembly in which you labor blessed with a renewed sense of alive-ness? No, it cannot be "bought," but like David, provisions can be made for it, even when it is costly.

The Climate for Fellowship

We now come to the heart of the whole matter. If the content provided and the physical settings are superb but there is a toxic spiritual atmosphere,

If there is a toxic spiritual atmosphere, fellowship will wither and die.

fellowship will wither and die, as it cannot flourish where there is harshness, a critical spirit, or legalism.

People are sheep. They need to be loved and cared for. Often they come into the assembly with baggage from the world. We cannot accept the people but reject their weaknesses and immaturity; they come to us as a package. Yes, they will grow, and we will see these things drop away, but good Bible teaching will bear fruit more quickly if it is accompanied by the genuine love and acceptance which fellowship provides. Many neglect this, hoping by outreach efforts to reach more "suitable" people.

Little things mean a lot to first time visitors. Smile, go to them and meet them, show them around, learn their names and where they live, introduce them to others, take them home (or out) for lunch, explain special distinctives of your group, and what is available mid-week. Now here is the important part. Make sure these simple things are not

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the sheep and could treat them as they pleased. Feeding the flock with the "finest of the wheat" is the greatest need in the local church today. God's sheep are crying out to be fed with in-depth teaching of the Word of God. Where is the consecutive expository teaching from the Word of God? Where is the teaching on weighty and important doctrinal sections of Scripture? Sadly, devotional messages on love and grace are the usual fare today in contemporary churches. Certainly, these have their place, but not at the expense of the faithful preaching of the whole counsel of God. Martin Luther reportedly said, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me." No ministry or work of God can succeed apart from the effective proclamation of the Word of God.

2. Ministering to the Broken and Diseased – Ezekiel 34:3

"Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up..." (34:3).

Many in our local churches are suffering from broken lives and are seeking the balm of the ministry of Christ to encourage them. They desire to be loved, to be shown mercy, to be lifted up, and to know the unconditional love of Christ. However, God's way of healing and strengthening is through faith, grace, the Word of God, and the power of prayer. To

bind up the broken, a lamb must want to walk again. The godly shepherd applies the mending cloths to the fractured limb by pointing to Christ and forgetting that which is behind. For every look at themselves, the wounded should take ten looks at Christ. They need to learn to be more occupied with the finished work of Christ than their past, their sin, and their failure. Healing of limbs can take time, and a shepherd will need to have patience with the flock. Shepherds must not be discouraged that some of the mended sheep will walk with a limp the rest of their lives. But they must remember they do walk and live for Christ.

3. Seeking the Scattered – Ezekiel 34:3, 5-6

"The scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost... They were scattered for lack of a shepherd" (Ezek. 34:3,5)

Faithful shepherds seek sheep that have been scattered. This scattering happens when there is no shepherd. God reminds us, "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill... and there was no one to search or seek for them" (v. 6). As a result, the sheep were exposed to the danger of wild animals who would devour them. Today, there are many sheep that are scattered, not for lack of a shepherd but for a lack of those who will do the work of a shepherd. The shepherds'

work begins before they wander. It is much easier to bring a wandering sheep back when the sheep knows the love and care of a faithful shepherd.

4. Lead with Tenderness and Compassion – Ezekiel 34:4

"But with force and with severity you have dominated them..." (v. 4)

Far too often the misuse of authority has done untold harm to the church of God. Rather than using Christ's principles of humility and sacrificial love to build up the church, pride and selfishness, and domineering spirits have brought ruin to the work of God. For those who are leaders and elders of God's people, Jesus Christ insisted that they first be humble, that they not strive for prominence of position or reputation. He calls leaders to sacrificially serve one another, to forgive those who hurt them, and treat each other as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

CONCLUSION

How does God then react to such negligence? He says that He is against those shepherds, and He holds them accountable. May the Lord raise up shepherds who will care for the flock with tenderness, feed them with the whole counsel of God, and bind up and heal those that are broken.



Thoughts on Local Church "Alive-ness" (part 5)

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the practice of a few friendly folks or the elders only. These things are not spiritual gifts, they are common courtesy, and part of the equipping of the saints is training them to think of others before themselves.

But true fellowship is not just a way to get people in the door. It's an integral part of ongoing Christian life. Remember Acts 2:42, and our discussions in the previous article about "satisfying, productive relationships"? If newcomers are quickly involved in friendship relationships with others, ones that reach beyond the church and into private lives midweek, and if, along with good spiritual food they sense that they are valued and being equipped to be productive, they will

be satisfied, and they will usually settle in.

This whole process will be easier if those who lead understand that Bible teaching always produces questions, and questions and discussion take place best in an informal, non-threatening atmosphere. It's easier to grow in a climate where people can be real without being judged.

Conclusion

Here's a good exercise for discussion. Following the conversion of 3000 people on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and up to the death of Stephen (Acts 7), there are about a dozen examples of fellowship taking place in the early church. Think about them, and ask what attitudes (climate)

must have prevailed in the early church to make things work as they did, and how do these compare with the attitudes (climate) that might be found in the church of which we are part? It's not a matter of finding the "right answer," but of drawing out the perspectives of those participating. You can learn a lot about people by what they observe and share in an exercise like this, because people tend to focus on what's important to them. And, you can learn a lot about your leadership team too, by noting who listens with the heart to what is said by whom, rather than being consumed by a desire to get the "right" answer!



I remember hearing a song when I first accepted the Lord, "Trust His Heart". It's about trusting God in the storms of life and believing in His goodness even when all evidence would suggest otherwise. Stay with me while I suggest an application of this concept.

There is a group of Christian coworkers in a Christian School, the best of friends. One supervisor sang at the other's wedding, one was like a son to the eldest as he lived with her family for a year, one spent many of her days as a single at the others' houses, one came into the fold and met her hubby, and one did all the ladies' hair for years...for free! This school staff was a real family.

I don't know how your family operates, but my family is a lot like the staff at this school. We absolutely love each other...but, alas, we can really get under each other's skin. Between lack of communication, over stepping each other's roles, being over worked and underappreciated, and just plain fatigue, leaders and/or ordinary saints' emotions can trump the best of intentions and good will. Does this happen in your assembly?

I see it more and more in different ministries. No one wants or expects power struggles, but they happen. No one intends to be "the voice of the Lord" when planning disputes arise, but

someone inevitably will assume that role. No one plans to defer just to keep peace when they don't agree with a bad decision, but they do. In essence, I submit...no one is perfect. Can I hear an "AMEN"?

I'm not sure this article will offer a solution...only Solomon had that kind of wisdom. But I would like to make a suggestion. The song mentioned above says, "When you can't trace His hand, trust His heart." Can the co-workers at the Christian school, elders' wives, food committee coordinators, and ladies' small group leaders do this? I mean, can we all do better than just try to get along? After years of relationship building, can we simply trust each other's hearts?

There are a few verses that come to mind.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:7). "I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (Romans 15:14). "Admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). Look how Paul ends that verse- "so that we might present everyone... fully mature". According to Scripture, that's

our job. To present one another to God in the most positive light possible. In today's vernacular, we could say, "Have one another's back". If our Lord does this for us, should we not do it for one another?

I am the first to admit, between personal trials, a bum knee, and menopause, I have not been the most edifying elder's wife all the time. I can be crabby, bossy, negative, critical, etc. This is why I am SO thankful for friends who have overlooked my faults, understood my frailties, and responded to my over reactions with love and a sense of humor, truly personifying, "Love covers a multitude of sins..." (1 Peter 4:8). Through the years, they have had my back, and I have tried, although there are days that I fail, to have theirs. When you can't trust my words, scowls, or decisions, can you please try to trust my heart?



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Contact Info: *Elders' ShopNotes*, c/o 112 Doolittle Dr. Bethany, CT. 06524 USA; email: alan7s@yahoo.com Phone: 203-393-0078.

Publisher/Editor: Jack Spender
Editorial assistance: Ruth Rodger
Layout, Deborah Kichar

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