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Shepherding: The Hallmark of a Christian Leader

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I begin with a confession. The word "shepherding" which I have chosen not only for this essay's title but also as its key concept makes me slightly uneasy. Why am I uneasy about such a seemingly innocent term? First, I am very concerned that Christian shepherding should not be allowed to take away the glory from the "Good Shepherd" (John 10). In the true sense shepherding of the flock of Christ is the responsibility of the Shepherd who laid down His life to procure their salvation and has sent His Holy Spirit to indwell and empower them. Christian leaders are therefore no more than "under-shepherds". Second, I am afraid the word "shepherding" in the past few years has acquired a bad connotation due to Christian leaders who are regarded as "Super-Christians" and wield tremendous authority over other less mature Christians - checking what they do every minute of the day, what they wear, who they associate with and retaining the final say in whom they are allowed to marry. A community of these questionable shepherds live in London-- "shepherding" other simple minded Christians who were content for others to do their thinking for them. The results of this master/slave relationship are often unpleasant.

I decided to retain the word "shepherding" because the alternative (my personal preference) "under-shepherding" like the word "under-done" can suggest something of "inferior kind". The shepherding I have in mind is of the same quality as that of the Good Shepherd because His Holy Spirit controls a Christian leader's life. Christian shepherding can therefore be defined as the caring, loving, accepting attitude of a Christian leader in his relationship with those entrusted to his or her charge - i.e. those who directly or indirectly report to him. Shepherding is the hallmark of responsible Christian leadership because people will be motivated to follow their leader if they feel loved, accepted and appreciated by him or her. It was said of our Lord "he loved his own to the end". No wonder his followers like C.T. Studd could say: "If Christ loves me so much as to die for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for him."

We in Africa who have been called to this crucial task should never tire of fresh reminders of the Biblical basis of, the contemporary diversions from and the central obstacles to this calling. We examine each of these facets in turn.

The Scriptural Basis for Shepherding

The New Testament writers following the example of the Lord Jesus knew that the welfare and well-being of the people of God should be the major concern of Christian leaders. Our Lord said: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:21). Paul's epistles conveyed the shepherd's heart-- a caring loving attitude towards those who looked up to him as their spiritual leader (Philippians 1:3-11).

Writing to the Thessalonian Christians Paul observed: "But we were gentle among you, like a nurse, taking care of her children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but our own selves because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:7-8). That's what shepherding is all about. Writing to Timothy, Paul said: "As I remember your tears, I long night and day to see you that I may be filled with joy" (2 Tim. 1:4). Paul's shepherding was not restricted to spiritual things for he reminded Timothy: "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your frequent ailments"(1 Tim. 5:23). For Paul, the care of the believers was always very dear to his heart (2 Cor. 11:28).

Peter was told by the risen Lord that as a leader in the early church shepherding of the flock was to be a top priority. He was told by Christ to "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15), "Take care of my sheep" (John 21:16), and "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17). Peter's original call was to be an evangelist - "a fisher of men". In this passage his call was modified because as the leader of the early church he needed a new quality of life altogether. He needed to be a shepherd to be able to:

a. Supply the need of the young flock of Jesus. He must learn to feed Christ's "lambs" (v.15). In feeding the lambs Peter will have the consolation of discovering that the lambs are ready to accept the assistance offered to them. This is true of newly converted people.

b. He will have to exercise general guidance over the flock of Christ (v.16): "Tend my sheep". Giving leadership to the mature members of the church is included in this.

c. The feeding of the mature members of the church in the church is the hardest task of all. Maybe that is why our Lord put it last (v. 17). This is because it is a lot more difficult to discern the real needs of the mature Christians. Also mature Christians can easily disguise their real needs by pretending to be what they are not.

Additionally, Peter was called to be not only a shepherd but to have a shepherd's heart - to love with "agape" love. For Peter knew (from his recollection of the three-fold denial of Christ) that he had to depend on the Lord by saying "yes Lord, you know I am your friend" (v. 15). Peter recognised that his response to Jesus' "agape" love (v. 15a) was the inferior "phileo" love-- a human love tainted with lust, possessiveness and self-will. Christian leaders must recognise the human limitation of their love for their followers and trust God for His supernatural unconditional, sacrificial love. The enormous responsibility of shepherding was not lost on Peter, for in his first epistle he declared: "You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25). The task of shepherding, clearly mirrored in the writings of Paul and Peter was not a temporary ministry but rather one whose Biblical mandate continues today.

Contemporary Diversions to Shepherding

In Africa the indigenisation of the church is being accomplished in some instances at the expense of shepherding of the flock of Christ. A number of African leaders seem to be too easily satisfied with wielding ecclesiastical authority without accepting the corresponding responsibility of making time to take care of the flock committed to their charge. They seem always to be either on the road or in the air, at this or that committee meeting, flying from one country to the other attending Christian conferences or raising funds to maintain some "white elephants" they had inherited from missionaries. It seems that the success of international church conferences are now being measured in terms of the percentage of Black faces attending or the total number from the Third World countries. To the outsider it will appear as if the higher you get on the "ecclesiastical ladder" the more your flock are supposed to get used to your being absent. To make a bishop or church secretary pay attention to you, one almost has to cause some trouble in one's local church so that the leader must come to "put out the fire". Because the African church has put insufficient emphasis on the need for shepherding the flock of Christ, the church in many ways remains undernourished, uncared for and lacking in energy for a real and lasting impact upon their communities. Traditionally African chiefs were accessible to the ordinary man in the village because they stayed long in one place - not so with many African church leaders.

Obstacles to Shepherding

Why has the concept of church leadership so typical in our African church frequently replaced shepherding with committee meetings, conference hopping and administrative wrangling? There are many undoubtedly complex reasons for this decline in pastoral vision. Let me present what I regard as the more glaring problems.

One obstacle is a lack of understanding of what is involved in shepherding. Shepherding is an essential aspect of making "disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). It involves spending sufficient time with those entrusted to the care of a Christian leader in order that he may get to know them, help them, encourage them and learn from them. It involves being available as a Christian leader to listen to what those who report to him have on their minds. In the African context, it means a leader should organise his programme in such a way that he has time to make spontaneous (and unexpected) visits to those in his spiritual care not to discuss business but to spend time with them as a friend and a brother in Christ. Care should be taken that these visits are not at inconvenient times nor should they be carried out perfunctorily-- by constantly looking at your wrist-watch. The Christian workers need to feel that they have the full attention of their leader and that he cares enough for them to listen to the little things around which their lives revolve. Leaders need to be trained in the principles of

discipleship to be able to provide effective shepherding for those who report to them.

Secondly, shepherding is often considered to be too time-consuming. In order to save time and energy it is very tempting for a Christian leader to assume that his followers will come to him when they need his help and advise. Not so. A leader needs to gain the confidence of his followers, not by compromising Biblical principles, but by demonstrating that he cares for them. A leader's life must constantly convey this message: "people matter more than things". Time spent in cultivating good relationships with your flock is an investment with good dividends in the future. When a leader pushes aside the paper work on his desk to attend to the personal need of one of his staff or congregation, he conveys an important message: he cares and is concerned about the welfare and spiritual well-being of his followers. Christian leaders should pray to be delivered from "the tyranny of the urgent" so that they can concentrate on what is really important.

A third obstacle can be an inferiority complex. A pastor may feel inferior to an influential member of his church and concludes that he is not able to minister to him spiritually. Paul's advise to young Timothy is relevant here: "Let no one despise your youth, but set believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. . . . Do not neglect the gift you have . . . for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, love and self control (1 Tim. 4:12-13, 2 Tim. 1:7)." People suffer from inferiority complex because they fail to realise that human nature is the same no matter what the colour of the skin, and that God's grace is always sufficient no matter in what circumstances a Christian finds himself. My personal observation is that many African leaders underrate the spiritual conflict and cultural tensions that most expatriate missionaries experience on the field. It is a wrong assumption to think that because a person is a missionary he or she ought to know how to cope with his tensions. To allow missionaries to work on the mission field without proper shepherding is almost like abandoning them to a "firing squad." I can understand the frustrations of many missionaries serving in Africa today. Not only do they feel used as a cheap labour force but they are often not "serviced" by their national leaders. My concern is for the "new missionaries" serving in Africa (professionally qualified people who are ashamed of the patronising attitude of former missionaries and the imposition of cultural baggage on their African brothers). These "new missionaries" desire to be led by competent African leaders who can serve as spiritual shepherds to them. Too often they are disappointed in this expectation. African Christian leaders must realise that it is not enough to see to the material well-being of missionaries in their various locations; they also must learn to minister to their spiritual and cultural needs as well to enable them to become fulfilled on the field.

Finally, shepherding has sometimes suffered because of a pre-occupation with finances and personal ambition. Christian leaders need to meditate often on 1 Timothy 6:6-10: "There is a great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing

into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world, world, but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation For the love of money is the root of all evils" In Africa, the desire to be rich is a great handicap for many Christian leaders especially leaders of para-church organizations. They move from one para-church organization to another in search of greater financial security. Pre-occupation with personal gain and too much dependence on foreign funds hinder shepherding of Christian workers. How can a man bite the hand that feeds him? Shepherding is sacrificed on the altar of ambition.

The story is told of an African politician whose supporters were involved in a car crash on their way to his campaign meeting. The politician agreed to pay for the treatment of ten badly injured people at a private hospital. When the time came for him to pay for their treatment he refused to pay for the one that died in the hospital-- and with good reason. Dead men don't vote. I sometimes feel that Christian leaders use the Christian workers that serve under them to advance their personal ambition rather than the kingdom of God. Their treatment of Christian workers under their authority (nationals and expatriates) is often based less on who they are in their various callings than on what they achieve. What results is a leader who seeks to be served rather than to serve.

Conclusion

In Southern Sudan a number of years ago arrangements were made to conduct one of the early confirmation services. There was however, one major problem to be overcome - a man eating lion was known to be around the path leading to the church and members of the local congregations were afraid to make the journey to attend the service. On the day of the confirmation service the vicar of the church rose early in the morning (no doubt after much prayer) to confront the lion. He was attacked by the lion and somehow he managed to kill the beast without sustaining any injury. When the people discovered that the lion had been killed they were full of praise for their pastor. The vicar modestly replied that he had only done his duty - to take care of his flock. Are you called to be a shepherd in your congregation, in your classroom, in your home or in your office? Then give over your time. Give over your ambitions. Give over your life. Feed his sheep.