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Pastor To Pastor

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In at least five passages of the New Testament (John 21:15-17; I Pet 5:2-3; Eph 4:11; I Cor 9:7; and Acts 20:8-29) a figurative comparison is employed by God to identify the Lord Jesus Christ as Chief Shepherd or owner of the flock and local elders as the undershepherds, herding a small flock. Study of these passages reveals a stress on the continuing ownership ("feed My sheep") and the future accounting each pastor must give to the Lord for that local responsibility to which he has been assigned (cf I Pet 5:2-3; Acts 20:28-29; Heb 13:17). Christ is the good shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11, 15). There is also considerable in these passages concerning the shepherding task of the pastor as he guides the local flock. Based on common practices in the Near East, though not directly suggested in Scripture, there seems also to be profitable study concerning the relation of one undershepherd to other undershepherds serving the same Chief Shepherd. Such is the purpose of this study.

Tending sheep was perhaps the most common and one of the most respected occupations of the land of Palestine. All familiar with the relationship of fellow shepherds would tend to realize the applications to pastoral work suggested here. Those not acquainted with practices among shepherds of Palestine might tend toward a different attitude regarding fellow pastors. Just as there is a fellowship of the faith (I John 1:3 and many others), so there is and should be a fellowship among pastors of like faith and practice.

"Pastor To Pastor" is a reprint of a message from Central Bible Quarterly (Fall 1968) at which time Dr. Vanhetloo served as Dean of Central Baptist Seminary.

The sections to follow have, first, special bearing on practices of Near Eastern shepherds, and then, second, emphasis on applications of these practices of benefit and importance to ministers today.

The Shepherds in the Ancient Near East

As related to his chief shepherd. A shepherd might own his entire flock, or he might be a chief shepherd over several other shepherds. Neither figure is used of a pastor in Scripture. The Lord Jesus Christ is both owner and Chief Shepherd; the pastor is consistently viewed as undershepherd. Thus, toward his superior, the Chief, he must have certain attitudes and relationships. He gets daily orders from his head shepherd. He knows the sheep are not his own but belong to the one under whom or for whom he serves. He knows he must give account of his work tending the flock when he appears before the Chief Shepherd (I Pet 5:4). The attitude of one pastor toward another pastor, then, should be that of a fellow worker serving the same Lord, each assisting other to perform in the best way possible in order to give the best account possible (Heb 13:17).

As related to the flock. The shepherd is appointed to tend a flock of approximately one hundred sheep (cf Luke 15:4). This one flock is his exclusive responsibility. There may be four or five flocks intermingling around a pool of water. When they prepare to leave, each shepherd goes off in a different direction, and the sheep follow their own shepherd. As each flock assembles, the shepherd quickly "tells" his own, that is, he counts to be sure every sheep is present. He may so tell his flock several times during the day. As he leads them into a fold at night, he carefully accounts for each one. So, when Christ commissions, "Tend My sheep," He expects the undershepherd of the local congregation to maintain careful watch over each member of the flock as well as over the flock as a whole. The undershepherd is to maintain a loving, sympathetic watch-care over these that are precious to the Lord Jesus Christ, for they belong to Him.

A sheep should belong to a flock. A single, separated sheep is a "lost" sheep and must be located and brought to walk with the flock. A true undershepherd, thus, cannot encourage people to try to serve the Lord without joining a local church, but must teach them the importance of being an active part of a flock, whether his own or another. That they belong to the True Shepherd is no excuse for failing to join a local flock, but if properly understood should direct the single sheep into a true flock where other sheep and undershepherd all recognize the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

Just as the New Testament does not encourage a sheep to remain separate from a flock, so does it also stress that each local flock needs a local shepherd. A shepherd might die, or be assigned to a different flock (but not where his former sheep would hear his voice), but the flock is not left without a guide. One assigned temporarily would correspond to the practice today of having an interim pastor (there is no parallel for just a pulpit supply). The sheep needs the flock; the flock needs a shepherd. Having another sheep attempt to lead the flock brings disruption (Acts 20:30).

As related to fellow undershepherds. The primary interest, now, in bringing these things to your attention as pastors -- you are aware of your relation to the Chief Shepherd and of your relation to your own flock as He has placed you in the position of leadership there, but the purpose of this presentation is to impress upon you your relation to your fellow alumni and fellow pastors in the work. From practices of shepherds in the ancient Near East, certain patterns of conduct will be noted first, and then applications which follow.

It was perhaps unexpected to discover that shepherds enjoyed their work and had a good time together. As any believer might be "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Eph 5:19), a shepherd would frequently sing aloud, play a small pipe he carried in his pouch, engage in simple games with his sheep. When several undershepherds gathered in one place, there would be exchange of stories, and sometimes contests of skill, the most frequent being with the sling. There was a joyous camaraderie among them. There is, and there ought to be such among you pastors today, when you gather for camp, for association meetings, for the pastors' retreat.

Next there was helpful cooperation. Two places demonstrate this. One occasion was the gathering at night. Possibly five or six flocks would gather in one fold, a cave, or an open corral, and would arrange to share the watch during the night. One shepherd would stand guard while the others slept.

The other occasion was the watering well. Water does not often flow in the streams of Palestine, and thus much of the water for the flocks had to be obtained from wells, such as Jacob dug (John 4:6). Out in wilderness areas these were covered over with a large stone, to prevent debris from falling in and to prevent needless evaporation. The stone was often too large for one shepherd to move; he must needs wait until several have gathered at the watering well that jointly they might remove the stone and thus all have access to the water. Such common tasks are often today termed "projects" as several work together to accomplish what no one could do along.

Another quality to note in their relationships with each other was that of mutual agreement. This was evident in the sharing of the available pasture land. At different times of the year they would lead their flocks off to available areas of vegetation, but by common agreement among them no one flock would always get to the greenest grass, no flock would be led into an area where another had already gone for the day. Perhaps it would correspond to say that no man works another man's field. There is full respect for the needs of nearby flocks.

Cooperation among shepherds was most prominent in time of serious need or special danger. When one flock was attacked by animals or robbers, others rendered all the aid possible. When the flock had been scattered, all would help to round them up. If a sheep had been lost, several would assist in the search, and if it took several days, others would guide the "ninety and nine" while the shepherd continued the search. And then when the lost was found, all would join in the rejoicing (Luke 15:6). A true undershepherd will be concerned and render assistance when another flock suffers doctrinal disruption or legal difficulties. Help other pastors in their work of keeping the flock.

Among the Churches Today

Applications seem numerous and obvious; many have been suggested in relating the practices familiar to those to whom Jesus spoke. A list now may be of greatest help.

1. **Concentrate on the work of the flock.** As related to Christ and to the congregation, your consuming task must ever be to shepherd that unit over which God has placed you. Home responsibilities, civic activities, recreation, even committee meetings must be subservient to that one task to which Christ has assigned you, to shepherd His sheep.

2. **Magnify the office (Rom 11:13).** Your speech, your conduct, your attitudes should consistently and genuinely proclaim to the world that being chosen of Jesus (John 15:16) is the most exalted assignment in all the world. It is a poor preacher whose people think he would rather be a pharmacist or a farmer than the pastor of this church where Christ has placed him.

3. **Cooperate in inter-church activities.** Promote associational activities. Further the work of the state organization of the churches. Do not be misled by the pietistic emphasis on isolationism. A proper emphasis on the local church will further the interest of your

congregation in the cooperative efforts of other churches of like faith and practice.

4. Promote mutual programs. There are many things one church alone cannot conduct but several working together can accomplish, such as summer camps, state youth meetings, schools, retirement homes, missionary expansion.

5. Gather with other pastors. Some associations have monthly fellowship meetings where the pastors and wives assemble for relaxation and mutual encouragement. Pastors located miles from another of like faith and practice realize the need for such times of fellowship. You and your ministry will suffer if you fail to avail yourselves of such gatherings.

6. Pray with fellow pastors. No one in your congregation can sympathetically comprehend your problems. Many of your heart burdens you cannot reveal to them, but where pastors can gather the burdens can be shared. There still is no need to include names or identifying details, but another pastor will comprehend the nature of the work as no other one can.

7. Share information. Can you imagine a shepherd who has discovered a way to help heal a broken leg who is reluctant to tell others about it? Sunday School methods, youth activities, ways to deal with cults, all such information common to the work of the churches needs to be shared.

8. Join forces against enemies. Most enemies of the church are greater than any one pastor can handle. As New Evangelicalism began to take its toll in the churches, combined efforts were necessary to make clear the position of Scripture to identify characteristics of the disruption, to share information. No man is an island.

Occasionally attend a meeting where the heretics of the day are being exposed in the light of Scripture. Learn to recognize the beasts that would tear and devour your flock for their own gain.

9. So act that you will merit "Well done" (Matt 25:21). In all your dealings with your own flock (which belongs to the Lord) and other true flocks (which belong to the same Lord) so conduct yourselves that when you appear to give account before the Chief Shepherd of that assignment He made in putting you in charge of a local flock, you will not be ashamed. You will not be commended for your work if you have been a trouble-maker among flocks of others responsible to the same Chief Shepherd. You will not be commended if your ministry has been that of a "loner." In all your relationships with fellow pastors and other flocks, so serve that "when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (I Pet 5:4).