On God's Sheep and Their Needs

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July 11, 1954

Reading the opening verses of the 5th chapter of 1 Peter, down to verse 4, the elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed. Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly, not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. Neither is being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Now, he addresses these remarks to the ones he calls the elders among you. Let me say a word about the idea of elders in the New Testament. The elders were men who, by reason of years and experience, were wiser than the average member of the church, and by reason of superior sanctity, were worthy of every honor. So, they were put in the place of authority and leadership in the church.

Now, this system is the scriptural one, and it is followed more or less loosely by almost all Christian churches. And even where it is not officially followed, even in those churches, non-denominational or independent churches, where they shrug off the idea of organization and leadership, particularly the leadership of elders. Without meaning to do it, and without knowing they'd do it, they nevertheless arrive at something like this by a sort of spiritual gravitation.

Even in those churches where there is no one officially designated as an elder, there is bound to be certain ones who, by virtue of sanctity and greater wisdom, are looked to by the others, and they therefore assume an unofficial kind of leadership, which may not be the best, but which certainly shows that when Peter and Paul, under the direction of our Lord, laid out the idea of leadership in the Church by means of wise and experience and good men, they laid down a rule which was perfectly right and good and natural, which is approved even by those who do not approve of the theory of it.

It is regrettable that to some extent the leadership of the elders has passed to the leadership of the youngers in some sections, which of course is not good. Not that the younger are not worthy, but that they do not have the experience, nor the years, nor mostly they do not have the spiritual sanctity which makes them to be revered.

Now, Paul said he was addressing his remarks in this fifth chapter to the elders among you, and he said, I address you, I also am an elder, I exhort.

Now Peter here had that rare combination, authority with humility. He was an apostle, he was one of the twelve, and he had the authority to command them. And this is a command, of course. He knew his calling and his commission. He knew that he had been called of the Lord to be the great apostle to the circumcised, as Paul was to the Gentiles. He knew that. He knew that he was among the twelve, the great twelve apostles. But he only thought of himself as an elder. He calls himself elsewhere a servant.

And thus, he had authority with humility. And he identifies himself with the other elders, though he certainly was above them in authority. And thus, he exhorts instead of commands. He said, I, an elder, exhort you other elders to feed the flock of God which is among you.

Now, the idea of a church as being composed of sheep, that is, spiritual sheep, is a favorite figure both of the Old Testament and of the New. There are a good many points of likeness between a sheep in the natural and a redeemed Christian in the spiritual.

The sheep, for instance, was a clean animal. It could be offered in sacrifice, or it could be eaten, so that it stood ceremonially before God as being a clean animal. God could not have likened his people to the unclean beast that could not be offered on the altar. He could not call them dogs. He called them sheep. He could not call them camels. He called them sheep. The camel was a beast of burden, but not clean ceremonially. So he said the people of God are His sheep.

Then the sheep is harmless. About the most harmless creature on any farm would be, among the most harmless, would be the sheep. Nobody, a woman ever ran out of a farmhouse screaming, hurry, hurry, get our child, little Junior is out among the sheep. Because Junior could lie down there among the sheep and go to sleep and they wouldn't bother him. But certainly, many a farm woman has screamed, rush out, hurry, get out there. Little Junior is among the horses or cattle or pigs. They're dangerous, even though mildly so, still they're dangerous, but not sheep.

And the sheep are productive and they are meek, and they're one-man creatures. They can form, even more than a dog, they can form attachment to the shepherd. And they're gregarious. And no sheep likes to be alone. A wolf can be alone, and many other animals can wander off alone. But the sheep like to be together, always together.

And then shall I say this also about the sheep, and I speak out of personal experience when I say this, both in the church and on the farm, that the sheep are known as being rather stupid animals. They haven't the mentality of the others, they haven't room for it, and there's not many brains there. They're simply lovable pets, but they're certainly not very bright. They're dumb in a nice way.

Nobody ever trained his sheep. You can go among all the farmers, and you'll find them who have trained almost all the animals on the farm, even chickens sometimes. But nobody ever said, I want you to come down, I want to show off my trained sheep. They don't try to train sheep, at least I never heard of them. There might be a rare man with an unusual amount of patience who might sometime have taken on the difficult, almost impossible job of training a sheep to do tricks, but mostly they don't try it. Sheep are simply lovable pets. They hang around you, lie down at your feet, follow you around, but they don't take well to complicated training.

Now why did the Lord say that we were sheep? I've given you some reasons, I think also I have fairly given you the last one. That we don't learn very fast, we Christians.

In the first place, we are learning the most difficult of all possible lessons, spiritual lessons. We are learning how to live in heaven while we are on earth, and that is a most difficult job. We're learning something that does not go along with our natures.

You do not make a Christian by training a sinner. You do not take a sinner and begin to work on him and introduce him into the realm of moral things and slowly establish a moral reflex so that he begins to live right. And instead of living wrongly, he lives rightly. Instead of lying, he's truthful. Instead of being dishonest, he's honest. Instead of being lazy, he's industrious. That's not the way Christians are made.

Christians are being taught those things which they never can be trained as sinners to do, or to understand. So that the lessons the Lord are teaching us are most difficult lessons for the natural man to learn. And because the natural man is in the way, a good deal of the time, we find ourselves very slow to learn.

The most humiliating thing in my spiritual experience has been how quickly I've grabbed some new spiritual idea, preached about it for a while, and prayed over it, and talked about it enthusiastically with people, and then slowly it dissolved and evaporated. And months later I found that I had forgotten it and had to learn all over again the thing that I was so delighted with five or ten months before. That's been humiliating to me, and it still is. But I'm not going to lash myself on the back too industriously, because I am being taught spiritual things and I'm still far from being a wholly spiritual man.

So, there's an awful lot of stupidity in me. And if you won't feel badly, I would say that you too, we together, as the sheep of His flock, are very far from being grade A students.

Now I say, that's the reason perhaps that this figure of the sheep is one of the favorite figures in the Bible. And a flock of sheep will need the following things, many more perhaps, but I'll mention, I think it's four.

A flock of sheep will need leadership. He leadeth me, it says. We are His sheep and He leadeth us. And He says when He put it forth His sheep, He goes before them. That is clear, ringing thought, that the sheep needs leadership.

Now, God's way is always to raise up a leader and impart His vision to the leader, and the leader imparts his vision to the flock. God has never been able, in so far as I know in Bible history or since Bible times, God has never been able to get the ear of a flock. He can only get the ear of the leaders of the flock, and then the leaders of the flock impart the information on to the flock, and thus the flock gets the Lord's Word. Democracy is not the Bible way.

Now if I were in some churches, particularly in some Baptist churches, I probably would be led to the door and given the one-way ticket somewhere, because they make a great deal of democracy in the church. But the simple fact is that democracy is not God's way in the church and never has been.

And it's never in Old Testament or New that the Lord ever imposed democracy as a way of life. Always there is a spiritual aristocracy which leads the flock, and God imparts to His leaders His will, and His leaders impart it to the flock.

Now God couldn't get a hold of the world at the time of Noah. He couldn't make the world hear, so He called one man aside, and He said, Noah you have found favor in My sight. And then He laid the plans for the ark and the redemption through the floodwaters on the heart of Noah. And the eighth person, the seven others, were saved and the race was preserved by God's intimate revelation to one man who became the voice to the rest.

When God would lead the children of Israel a million strong out of bondage in Egypt, He did not appear to the Jews, a million of them. He did not appear through the democratic processes to the people of Israel. He led one man to the backside of the desert and kept him 40 years in spiritual training and then appeared to him in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush.

And lo, God spake to him out of the midst of the bush and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. He said, I am the Lord God of thy fathers, the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And I have come to send you to My people to say, let My people go, that they may be delivered from bondage in Egypt.

So, Moses went to the Jews and had a hard time persuading them, but finally did, and led them out a million strong from 400 years of slavery. And when God would take the children of Israel, that same flock with a few minus, who had died in the wilderness, when He would take them across the river Jordan into the new land of promise, He did not take them by announcing to all the flock, now come on. He told Joshua, and Joshua notified his staff, and they notified the public, and soon they were going across the turbulent Jordan.

So, with Samuel, and so with John the Baptist, and with the apostles, and with the church fathers, when God would redeem Christendom from the slavery of popery, He did not appear to the people of God all over Europe.

He appeared to one thick-necked German climbing up a pair of stairs on his knees, Martin Luther. And thus he imparted to Martin Luther the magic words, the just shall live by his faith. And the Reformation was born, and when that Reformation declined, and the preachers stood in the pulpit drunk so the altar boys had to hold them up while they recited their litanies, and dense darkness had fallen upon Europe again.

And especially upon England, God didn't appear to all the Anglican churches and say, come on, lead my people out. He appeared to six men. One man particularly took the leadership, and those six men prayed in the haystack.

And out of it was born the great Wesleyan revival, when God would lead a people to give three million dollars a year to missions, and send out seven hundred and thirty missionaries to twenty-two fields of the world. He didn't appear to the people. He appeared to one lonely man who walked on the pebbly shores of New England with the

soles out of his shoes. And out of it was born the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and so it's all been down the years.

Now, I call attention to something else, that every time the flock proposed an idea, they went wrong. Every time the flock rose and said, I've been reading in my private day-by-day reading, I've been reading about Dathan and Abiram, and the rest of them. And when they rose against Moses and said, how come you take the authority on you? Hasn't God spoken to all of us? Moses threw himself on his face and said, God don't hear him. Don't hear him, God. Said he'll lead us astray. Don't hear him, this mixed multitude don't know which way to go. And you know, God's judgment fell upon them, and God put the leadership back in the hand of Moses.

So, a flock needs leadership and a flock needs food. He leadeth me in green pastures. Why did He take him into green pastures? So, it would be a soft place to lie down? No. Green pastures were food; they were the nourishment.

Now, theoretically, the sheep should have been able to discover the food for themselves. And there are those who say, I don't need to go to church, I have my own Bible. I don't need to hear a preacher or a Bible teacher because I have my own Bible. Theoretically, that is all very good. But the simple fact is, God has set in the church, pastors and teachers, and apostles and leaders and helpers and governors, that the church might come unto a perfect man, the stature of the fullness in Christ Jesus. So, we need the teachers, because they will give us food.

And then, of course, protection. Now the enemies of the flock are many. We don't know how many. He prepared the table before me in the presence of mine enemies. So, the enemies of the flock are many. There were beasts of various kinds, wolves, lions, and there were the serpents. And they were always dangerous. And they prepared a table, that is, they found a green pasture in the middle of all those enemies. The enemies were not afraid of the sheep, but they were afraid of the shepherd, because he had his staff there, his rod, his club.

Now, a wise pastor will protect the flock from a hundred things that they'll never know that they're being protected from, from false teachers and false brethren. You read the writings of Paul and of Peter and of Jude, you will find how very meticulously and sharply they were warned against false teachers and false brethren. They were protected.

And also, the sheep needed healing. When a flock of sheep had been out all day, in spite of their best protection of the shepherd, sometimes they got their heads into places where they knocked skin off their noses and off their tough heads. And I've seen them split ears, cut into a barbed wire fence somewhere, split an ear. Or in spite of the best care of the shepherd, some beast got a little chunk out of them.

Then just before the shepherd retired, he led his sheep through, let them come in one by one into the sheepfold. And as they entered the sheepfold one by one, he examined their heads and their legs. The rest of them were protected by wool, but their heads and their legs were relatively naked and they needed care.

And if there were any scars or any evidence of recent injuries, he put oil on them, mollifying oil to heal it up. He anointed my head with oil. And if they were thirsty, he fed them, or he gave them water, and my cup runneth over. That was the last thing the shepherd did at night. And a shepherd, an elder, should also be one who is prepared, at least, to give some kind of healing to the flock.

Now, let us look at the character of the shepherd's ministry. A shepherd can be the ruin of a flock if the flock is unfortunate enough to get the wrong shepherd. This is one of the perils of the flock-shepherd idea in the Bible. And that's why the shepherd is admonished so sharply to be the right kind of man. Christ spoke of the hireling shepherd, who did what he did for pay and had no heart in it.

Back in Ezekiel, the 34th chapter, I have a passage there that I want to read. That's in the Old Testament. And here, the man of God, Ezekiel, deliberately laid the backsliding of Israel upon the shepherds, the leaders of Israel, the priests, and those who were supposed to lead them right.

The word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say unto them, thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds, Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves, should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, and ye kill them that are fed, but ye feed not the flock. They're diseased, have ye not strengthened? Neither have ye healed that which was sick. Neither have you bound up that which was broken.

Occasionally, you know, they'd get caught and get a broken leg, and the business of the shepherd was to bind them up. Neither have you brought again that which was driven away. Neither have you sought that which was lost, but with force and with cruelty have you ruled them. And they were scattered, and because there is no shepherd, and they became meat to all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill, yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them.

Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. As I live, said the Lord God, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock. But the shepherds fed themselves and fed not the flock.

Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. Thus said the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock. Neither shall the shepherds feed themselves anymore, for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them.

That was Old Testament. That ideal was carried over into the New Testament. And the shepherd should be himself a man dedicated to his flock. He, the good shepherd, will be one who does his work willingly, and unselfishly, and humbly. And above all, he will be himself an example of godliness.

Then he says, when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, he shall receive a crown of glory. Now, that shepherd is over all shepherds. If any shepherd finds himself in disagreement with the Chief Shepherd, then I will instantly take the part of the chief shepherd against the shepherd.

So, I am not saying that you should blindly follow any pastor or any teacher, whether he be over the radio or in person. I recommend that you do not thus follow blindly any man. Check with the chief shepherd. Appreciate and value the ministry of the under-shepherd.

But the Chief Shepherd is over all shepherds, and they are responsible to him. And if they fail, God says, lo, I am against you, O shepherds of the flock. But if they live and serve as true men, then they'll receive a crown of glory that faded not away in that day, when the Chief Shepherd shall appear.

And that closes with the direction of our gaze, when the Chief Shepherd shall appear. There never ought to be a shepherd in all of Christendom who didn't do his work with expectation in the back of his head. While his hands were busy and his mouth and his mind with practical care and feeding and leadership of the flock, always there ought to be at least a subconscious expectation that the Chief Shepherd will appear.

I said to a preacher this last week, that I just can't for the life of me get much interested in things of earth. Outboard motors, and Chris Craft, and all this kind of thing, and riding one, somebody else runs it. But I couldn't get proud of it.

Here's a fellow with a Cadillac here, a Buick here, a powerboat here, and a cabin cruiser somewhere else. As one boy from the back side of the tracks said, the guy's loaded. And he was loaded. And he may be a good man, and I hope he is, but I just can't get interested. I can't get interested in things that I'm going to have suddenly leave behind me. I let them serve me, but I'm not going to serve them.

I'm not going to feel good from having them, and I'm not going to feel dejected from not having them. Because in the back of my head there is eternity, and the thought, the Chief Shepherd is going to appear. And all I'll have then will be what I have done for the Chief Shepherd.

I'll leave my Chris Craft and all the rest behind me. I'll leave everything, and you will, and only what we've done for God will last. Thank God for the haunting dissatisfaction that's a part of a Christian's heart in life.

Thank God that he looks around and says, this is not my home. This is not it. Thank God I wouldn't part with it; it keeps me blessedly miserable most of the time. But I wouldn't part with it for the world.

To be a stocky extrovert, happy in this life, a religious Esau, with my feet sticky with red earth, to call myself a Christian? No. Thank God for the haunting dissatisfaction that tells me this is not the place of thy rest. Take no comfort here, seek no repose there, get no joy out of that possession. This is not the place of your rest.

When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, then you can relax, then you can rest, then you can get hold of something and say, by the grace of God, this is mine forever. But now nothing's yours forever, except what you've got inside. When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, He's coming. And in the Lord's Supper, we do celebrate His death till He comes.

Now we're going on into the communion service, which we celebrate one week late. And Brother McAfee and I have been talking and praying this week since I came home, a lot. Somehow or other with a new feeling about it, and I've been so burdened with it this morning, blessedly burdened, that I'd like to have God move in on us until we don't know who's beside us. Until actually we're beside ourselves with the delight of His presence.

I want to read before the brethren gather a hymn written by the saintly silk weaver Gerhard Terstegen, translated from the German by John Wesley. Pay no attention to the metrical structure or the language, even beautiful and scholarly as it is, but think of what the man is saying. This simple-hearted brother, kind of a half Quaker and half Baptist, half Presbyterian, half mystic, all saints.

He said, Lo, God is here. Let us adore and own how dreadful is this place. Let all within us feel his power and humbly bow before His face. Who know his power, his grace who proves, serve him with awe, with reverence love. Lo, God is here.

Hymn day and night, united choirs of angels sing. To him enthroned above all height, heavens host their noblest praises bring. This day not Lord our meaner song, who praise thee with a stammering tongue.

Being of beings, may our praise thy courts with grateful fragrance fill. Still may we stand before thy face, still hear and do thy sovereign will. To thee may all our thoughts arise, ceaseless accepted sacrifice.