

SHEPHERDING AN UNRULY FLOCK

TODAY'S Text: Ezekiel Chap. 34

Extracts:

And the word of the Lord came to (Ezekiel), saying, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel... and say to them, ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! ... The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.’” “...And as for you, O My flock, thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture- and to have drunk the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet?’” [Ezek. 34: 1, 2, 4-5, 17-18]

The Vatican has just released a 58-page document entitled, “Guidelines for Pastoral Care of the Road.”¹ Popularly dubbed the Pope’s ten motoring commandments, the document is aimed at contributing to the reduction in bad driving habits of motorists. For example, the 5th ‘commandment’ states, “Cars shall not be for you an expression of power and domination or an occasion for sin,” and the 8th says, “Bring guilty motorists and their victims together so they can experience forgiveness.” The document also urges Catholic dioceses to set up chapels along motorways to provide spiritual comfort at service stations.

Some people have questioned the Pope’s interest in such matters. However, when you realize that he is the head of the Roman Catholic Church with a membership of one- sixth the world’s population, you can be sure that a great bulk of road users are members of his flock. Therefore, he is looking for more effective ways to play the role of the good shepherd. That is a challenge for all pastors and church leaders in all Christian denominations. There are indications that, possibly in reaction to irresponsible conduct by priests, flocks are turning unruly or deserting the flock. That is an undesirable trend as we approach end-times, when Jesus is returning to judge the world. What challenges do you face in your place of worship? What does it take to be a good shepherd? Those are some of the issues that we shall examine in today’s lesson.

¹ Based on Richard Owen, “The Pope’s ten motoring commandments,” June 20, 2007, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article1957448.ece

1. Shepherding at a glance

For the purpose of this study, we shall regard as shepherds all those that are placed in a position to minister to the needs of their flock, that is, members of their congregation. In general, members of the clergy constitute the shepherds while the laity constitutes the flock. For example, in Paul's farewell speech to the elders of the Ephesian church, he said, "Take heed to yourselves and to all *the flock*, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers, to shepherd the church of God* which He purchased with His own blood" [Acts 20: 28].

With special reference to Israel, "the congregation in the wilderness" [Acts 7: 38], the word, shepherd, is used to also apply to rulers. For example, at his coronation as king of Israel, the leaders reminded David that God had anointed him to "shepherd (His) people Israel and be ruler over them" [2 Sam. 5: 2]. When God stirred the heart of a Persian king, Cyrus, to empower Ezra and Nehemiah (Jewish exiles in Babylon) to rebuild Jerusalem, He said of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd" to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple [Is. 44: 28].

Since Christ is the head of the church and God is the head of Christ [Eph. 5:23; 1 Cor. 11: 3], it follows that the flock belongs to God Himself [1 Pet. 5: 2] *in all cases*. That is why Christ is the Good Shepherd [Jn 10: 14], the Great Shepherd [Heb. 13: 20] and the Chief Shepherd [1 Pet. 5: 4] of the flock of God. It follows that human shepherds are representatives of Christ to lead the sheepfold to safety at all times. That was why He commissioned Peter (and in deed every other shepherd) to feed His sheep and His lambs [Jn 21: 15-17].

Interestingly, *Christ the Good Shepherd is also the Lamb of God [Jn 1: 29]!* A lamb is a member of the sheepfold. As the Lamb of God, Christ has taken away the *sin* of the world. With His blood, He has purchased freedom and safety for the flock of God. Therefore, whatever any human shepherd does to the least of the flock under his control, he has done to Christ Himself! Now, you can see the dangers and challenges of shepherding the flock of God.

2. Like shepherds like flocks?

In today's study, based on the 34th chapter of the book of Ezekiel, God came down hard on both the shepherds of Israel and the flock, that is, the people. The bigger picture was looking at the nation of Israel in exile and God's long-term plans to restore it to greater glory [vv. 23-31]. However, for our study, we shall concentrate on the key issues and principles which we can use to deal with the challenges of shepherding a modern congregation.

With respect to the shepherds, God saw their weaknesses as follows:

- They fed themselves instead of feeding their flock [v. 2]

- They fed on the flock by eating “the fat” and clothing themselves “with the wool” [v. 3]
- They did not strengthen the weak, “nor have (they) healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost” [v.4]
- They ruled the flock “with force and cruelty” [v. 4]. As a result, the sheep “were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered” [v. 5]
- Even when the flock “was scattered over the whole face of the earth, ... no one was seeking or searching for them” [v. 6].

What did the scattered flock do on its own? Left to themselves without shepherds:

- The stronger sheep ate up the good pasture while treading down with their feet the residue of the pasture; and polluted the water after they had drunk clear water [v. 18]
- The weaker sheep were then forced to eat trampled pasture and drink polluted water [v. 19].
- Having been “pushed with side and shoulder (and) butted all the weak ones with (their) horns,” the weaker sheep had been scattered abroad [v. 21].

Are those issues different from what we would find in a modern congregation?. In Nigeria, a pastor has been sentenced to death for the murder of a member of his flock who had been tortured to death in the name of exorcising evil spirits. We also know that the Anglican Communion is torn into camps over the ordination of gay priests. In both cases, the shepherds have had the active support of their flocks in perpetuating their criminal or immoral activities. Therefore, successful shepherding in an increasingly promiscuous world is a major challenge.

3. Analysis: different strokes for different folks?

We may not all face similar circumstances. Nevertheless, like the seven churches in the book of Revelation (Chapters 2 and 3), there is *no single congregation without shepherding challenges*. Some congregations may face more crises than others, depending on the ability of the church hierarchy to expose or cover up their internal problems. In the end, no evil can be covered up! Therefore, the best approach is to confront the challenges.

As we have shown earlier, the flock belongs to God and human shepherds hold each flock *in trust* for Him. We do know that some sheep may hear the voice of the shepherd and obey while some will not. We also know that human shepherds have different *proprietary* interests in their flock. In other words, some shepherds may behave like hirelings (employees) while some others may behave as owners. Within that framework, we can see the following examples of flocks, among so many others:

a) *The Reprobate*

This consists of believers who have gone too far in error to return to the fold. They may still be physically present in your meetings and worship but they actually do not belong there. They have been spiritually scattered abroad but they still hang around either to pollute the spiritual atmosphere of the church or to seize administrative control to enable them to impose their values. They are beyond hearing the truth and you cannot convince them to return to it.

Writing about such people, Paul wrote to the brethren to “note those who cause divisions and offenses, *contrary to the doctrine* which you learned, and avoid them. *For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple*” [Rom. 16: 17-18].

Characteristically, a congregation of reprobate minds tends to have shepherds with the mind of a hireling, out to make material gains out of their work. They will join such worshippers to depart from the faith, “giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron” [1 Tim. 4: 1-2]. For example, the congregation of a gay bishop consists largely (if not completely) of gay worshippers. Can you imagine the bible they read in their worship? Therefore, a shepherd with the missionary zeal to bring that flock back to Christ will have to ask for a major miracle!

b) *The Prey*

The flock here consists of those who are desirous to obey the word of God but they want to do so in a user-friendly way. It is a good example of a lukewarm church [Rev. 3: 14-19]. Church growth is defined by growth in numbers, not in Christ-likeness. Immoral conduct from high tithe payers should be tolerated because they are “the pillars” of the church. Emphasis is placed on outward show of piety and bible knowledge. Therefore, promotion to higher positions in the church is influenced largely by participation in church activities, not proper Christian conduct. At the same time, there may be a core of faithful believers who will want true worship but they are usually perceived as trouble makers who should be frustrated to leave. A flock in this state is very susceptible to the manipulations of evil-minded shepherds. While stirring up divisions and strife among the flock, such shepherds can easily fleece the flock for their personal gains. For example, a recent CNN news report from Florida, USA, drew attention to the arrest of a 79-year-old priest who (with his successor) had stolen \$8.6 million in offerings and gifts made to their

parish over a period of 40 years.² Investigators found out that they had used the stolen funds to buy property and other assets and to make gambling trips to Las Vegas and the Bahamas. Until the police received an anonymous tip in June 2005, these rogues in clergy outfits had had a field day. Where were the supervisory committee and accounting officers all those years? They had turned a blind eye!

If you as a God-fearing shepherd find yourself in such a church, align yourself with the truth and trust God to grow your church because when a church is edified and walks in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it will be multiplied [**Acts 9: 31**]. To correct error within your congregation is not judging. So, be prepared to “put away from (your flock) the evil person” [**1 Cor. 5: 9-13**].

c) *The Lost Sheep*

Some people have left the church to protest against evil practices which have not been corrected but have instead been covered up, and since fermented. For example, many altar boys who had been sodomised by their priests have left the church that refused to act on their reports. In the West, it is such persons who have gone to civil court to seek redress. In some other cases, as a result of leadership tussles, some fervent believers have been forced to stay at home. Then, there are also people who have not given their lives to Christ largely out of ignorance or lack of opportunity to do so. They may currently be into transcendental meditation or idol worship. They may call themselves atheists or even be radical Moslems. These are the lost sheep that may need to be brought back to the fold.

Take the example of Paul during his first missionary journey with Barnabas as his companion. Following the opposition of the Jews to the message of Christ, they then went to the Gentiles, and “when the Gentiles heard this (message), they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord; *and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed*” [**Acts 13: 44-52**]. That was the beginning of the spread of the Gospel of Christ to all parts of the world.

There can *never* be a good flock because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There may be good human shepherds but only God can so make them, for as Paul would later confirm of his ministry, “I planted, Apollos watered, *but God gave the increase*” [**1 Cor. 3: 6**]. In today’s study verses, God said, “In deed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out... I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down” [**Ezek. 34: 11, 15**]. That is why the Psalmist says, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want” [**Ps. 23: 1**].

² “Cops: Priests fleeced Florida flock of millions,”
www.cnn.com/2006/LAW/09/28/priests.charged.ap/index.html

4. Conclusion: Christ is the only Good Shepherd!

Speaking of the future restoration of Israel, God said through the prophet Ezekiel, “I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them- My servant David” [Ezek. 34: 23]. Through David, the shepherd of God’s people [2 Sam. 5:2], God has established an everlasting throne. When the only begotten Son of God, Jesus, was about to come to the world, Angel Gabriel came to the young virgin Mary, and told her among other things, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and *the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and, ... of His kingdom there will be no end*” [Lk 1: 30-33]. Therefore, Christ is the promised shepherd in Ezekiel. When Jesus came of age, He Himself told us, “I am the good shepherd” [Jn 10: 14].

Clearly, any minister of God who aspires to successfully shepherd his congregation has to look up to Jesus, the only Good Shepherd, for inspiration. Here are the key principles from His teachings [Jn 10]:

- You must enter by the door of the sheepfold [vv. 1-2]. That is, *you must be transparent because by your fruits, you shall be known.*
- You must *lead by example* from the front and the sheep will follow you because they know your voice and trust you [vv. 3-4]
- You must *know your sheep* so that they can trust you and use you as the door to come in and go out for pasture [vv. 9-14]
- You must *love your flock* even if it entails giving up your life for it [vv. 15-16].
- *Your reward will come from God* who loves you because you love His flock [v. 17]
- Finally, your work is never done because there are always other sheep that have not yet come into Christ’s fold. You must *join in seeking them and bringing them to Christ so that there will be one fold and one shepherd* [v. 16].

It is not easy but is there any good thing that is easy?