

The Shepherd Leader

1 Peter 5:1-5

4/22/2012

Have you ever known what it is like to experience discipline from someone, and you don't know if that person really loves you or not? Maybe some of you have experienced this with your parents in the past. Maybe some of your parents didn't know how to express love in any way that you could understand it. In those cases, when they disciplined you, it felt like hatred, didn't it? The exact same thing is going on in the church today. It is a massive crisis of discipline. Most churches don't discipline at all, because they are afraid of being sued any time they attempt to do biblical discipline. And in our age, that is a definite concern. So, how do we get around this problem? Just expect our members to uphold their membership vows, and submit to the government and discipline of the church? Well, on the one hand, it would certainly be good if people remembered their membership vows that they took before God. They vowed to support the worship and work of the church to the very best of their ability. There are no hidden disclaimers on that vow. The vow does not read, "I will support the worship and work of the church to the best of my ability, as long as no one ever offends me, or sins against me in any way. Also, I only have to support the worship and work of the church if I feel like it." No, these vows are absolute. All too often, people make these vows with their fingers crossed behind their backs. However, as true as all that is, we've got a bigger problem: most members of a church are not mature enough in the faith to take their vows seriously. They don't see the absolute nature of their vows. They might see that church discipline is necessary (at least for other people!), but if that discipline is directed towards them, then all of a sudden it becomes terribly unloving and judgmental. So again, we could just say to people, "Remember your vows!" But there is another, much better solution to the problem. What we need is a shepherding plan whereby the love, support, prayer, and encouragement that everyone in the church needs can be given to them in a very regular way. If you know that the leadership in your church loves you, because you've seen them give you time, effort, prayer, and instruction, wouldn't you be much more likely to receive discipline *as part of that love*? The Bible tells us that God disciplines those He loves. We discipline our children not because we hate them, but because we love them. Similarly, if a church desires to do pure and loving church discipline, it must show the gentler side of love before it shows the sterner side of love. Make no mistake: discipline is part of love. But it is not all of love, by any means. Before we describe what that loving plan will look like, however, we must address one more thing.

The church today has another sickness: that of extreme individualism. The generally prevailing attitude is this: Christianity consists of me and my Bible and Jesus, and woe to anyone who tries to get too close to me. I will put up walls to defend myself, lest anyone else see my faults, because I just know, for a fact, that if anyone else found out about my sin, they would automatically kick me out of the church, or reject me in some other way. Folks, that is not the Bible talking, that is Satan talking. Satan knows that if he can cut you off from the rest of the body of Christ, then it's just you by yourself. You'll then be a lagging sheep, vulnerable, alone, and unprotected. As Paul might say, that is just about as logical as saying that a finger works much better once it is cut off from the rest of the hand. The fact is, we are just not as strong as we think we are. We are not as mature as we think we are. We are not as smart as we think we are. It is not a compliment to us when the Bible calls us sheep! In Isaiah, it is remarkably a self-aware sheep that says "We all like sheep have gone astray." Even to know that is a step in the right direction. The point is this: we need shepherds. It is not so much that the church needs its members, as obvious and true as that is. It is far more significant that we so desperately need the

church. We need everything about the church, because the church is where God gives us grace. The church is where we hear the Word of God preached, the sacraments faithfully administered, and yes, church discipline faithfully carried out by faithful and loving shepherds. And what we need is not some kind of shepherd who stands afar off, and gives us pious advice every now and then from a comfortable distance. No, we need shepherds who will lovingly and graciously, but firmly enter into our lives and love us, both gently (this will be the majority of the time), and sternly, when necessary, which will be rarely, Lord-willing. We all need that kind of love, the leadership of the church included. What does such a plan look like? How would it proceed?

To understand this, we will examine four main areas of shepherding. These are the four things that church leaders need to do for their sheep. And each of these four things has general and specific things attached to it. Or, we could call it macro and micro levels of shepherding. After we look at these four things, we will explain what our shepherding plan is going to look like, and what you can expect.

The first main area of shepherding is that shepherds need to know their sheep. Jesus says in John, "I know My sheep, and my sheep know me." As Jesus, the Great Shepherd, knows His sheep, so He has commanded His under-shepherds to know their sheep. On the broad level, that means that they need to know who is part of their flock, and therefore have accurate and up to date membership roles. Why is that important? Remember that elders must one day stand before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and give an account of how they shepherded the sheep. How can they give an account of their shepherding if they don't even know who those sheep are? Therefore, membership roles are critical to proper shepherding. And if, as we are planning on doing, each elder has his own mini-flock, then the membership roles are critical for making sure that *every* member of the church is part of a shepherding group. That means more than having one's name on a roll, of course, but it doesn't mean less than that, either! Shepherds know who their sheep are.

However, it is not just this larger, macro level on which shepherds know their sheep. They also need to know their sheep on an individual level. The shepherds need to be involved in their sheep's lives. It cannot be a hands-off type of ministry. There needs to be personal contact, personal instruction, personal encouragement, and prayer for every member in that shepherd's flock. That is why it is necessary for every shepherd to have their own particular flock. We need to know which elders are responsible for caring for which sheep. That is why, when we divided the members up into various shepherding groups, we capitalized on friendships that already existed. We went through the whole roll, and asked the elders which elder desired to have this member in their shepherding group. We avoided family ties, in general, but capitalized on friendship ties. Furthermore, we are working on a strategy for regular personal contact, so that you will know that you are loved, and that you are therefore receiving the care that you need.

The second main area of shepherding is feeding. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Jesus, and Peter said yes, Jesus' response was the same in all three cases: "Feed my lambs." The food by which we feed the people of God is the Word of God. In my opinion, this area is the one that Lebanon Presbyterian Church is doing very well, both on the macro and the micro levels. We are extremely concerned about educating our people in the truths of the Christian faith. We are seeking to insure that our pulpit is expounding the Word of God. We have Bible studies, of which every person in this church can be a part. We have catechism and Sunday School classes. We can still do more in the way of personal discipleship and mentoring, but people are getting the Word of God here.

The third main area of shepherding is leadership. Psalm 23 is very clear that the Good Shepherd leads the sheep into quiet waters, and rich pastures. This is obviously a thing that every church needs, both on the macro level, and the micro level. On the macro level, we need a vision for what we want to

do, and a mission and purpose that are one hundred percent faithful to what the Bible calls the church to do. We need to know what our goals are, and what we plan on doing to reach those goals. And they need to be biblical goals. The ultimate goal of the church is always the Great Commission, to teach, disciple, baptize the elect of God in the whole world. We have a slice of that world here in Fairfield County, and so whatever our goal is, in terms of how we phrase it, it needs to match up with the Great Commission.

But leadership is not merely of the church as a whole. It is also important that we lead the people of the church individually. We do that in two main ways. The first is by example. Here is where issues of character come to the forefront. Your leaders need to lead by example. Whatever we would expect of our congregation, we need to be willing to do and model. We have some growing to do here, although we've got a good start. Some specific areas of concern are family worship and family leadership, commitment to the worship and work of the church, and growth in personal holiness. Those are key areas where the church leaders need to lead by example. The second way that church shepherds lead by example individually is by counseling. This may not be formal counseling. It may simply be giving advice or encouragement. We will be going through a basic book on counseling, Lord-willing, in elder training class, so that our shepherd leaders will have some basic skills in how to talk to people who ask for help, or who need help even when they don't ask for it, which is probably more common.

The fourth area of shepherding is protection. David protected his sheep from the lion and the bear. Sheep are vulnerable to attack from predators, and are also vulnerable to their own tendency to wander from safety into danger. The two main areas are public instruction and warning against the wolves that will always seek to devour the flock. This corresponds to the macro level of protection. The shepherds need to be on their guard against false teaching, and false morality. Culture, in particular, presents a myriad of dangers in this respect, and the shepherds of the church need to be on their guard against the wolfish tendencies of our culture. On the micro level, shepherds need to protect the sheep against themselves. As we have said, it is not a compliment when the Bible tells us that we are sheep. Sheep tend to wander into dangerous waters. It is the duty of shepherds to pull back the sheep from the cliff for their own good, just as we keep our children from going out onto a dangerous road.

These four areas of shepherding are knowing, feeding, leading, and protecting. These are the areas on which we as your shepherds have decided to focus our attention. We plan to do this by instituting a shepherding plan, in which every member of the church (including the leaders!) is part of a shepherding group. That group will have one elder and one deacon as the shepherding team. The elder will be contacting every member of his group, whether by phone or in person once a month. This purpose for this will be to get to know the sheep under his care, seek to love, encourage, and pray for every member under his care, and thus exercise loving church discipline. We will be sending out a letter to every member on the roll, informing them of this plan, what it means, and what you can expect. You can expect a monthly shepherding call that will become a rhythm in your life. You can expect us to pray for you, and help you in every way we can. You can expect us to be available for you. You can expect us not only to pray with you, but also to pray for you in our monthly meetings. You can expect us to seek to fulfill our calling as biblical elders.

One last note: many of you are aware, no doubt, that such plans have been attempted twice before in this church's history. You will probably wonder, then, why this shepherding plan will work, or at least, why your leaders think this will work, when the past plans did not work. I asked the elders this question. They responded by saying that they had not been convinced that this kind of a plan was the biblical model for shepherding. Maybe they hadn't systematically studied the biblical passages on what being a shepherd really is in the church. We did so through Tim Witmer's book *The Shepherd Leader*.

Through the study of that book, every elder who has a shepherding group in his care came to be convinced that this was biblically mandated by God. As a result, they are committed to making this plan work. Furthermore, they each have something to say to the congregation. Let me hasten to add here that this was completely their idea. It did not come from me. It came from them. I did not put them up to this. But they would like to say some things to this congregation.

Sermon Outline:

I. A Crisis in the Church

II. Extreme Individualism

III. Shepherding

A. Knowing the Sheep: Corporately and Individually

B. Feeding the Sheep: Corporately and Individually

C. Leading the Sheep: Corporately and Individually

D. Protecting the Sheep: Corporately and Individually

IV. Our New Shepherding Plan