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NATHAN H. GUNTER
**FOR THE FLOCK: IMPETUS FOR
SHEPHERD LEADERSHIP IN JOHN 10**

Introduction

Laniak (2007) tells the story of a Bedouin Arab and an American scholar sitting under a tent discussing what it takes to be a true shepherd. The Jordanian shepherd insisted that the heart is the most important thing. He lamented, “My sons don’t have the heart for this work, so they don’t deserve the business. I’ll sell the flocks to someone else before I let my sheep go to those who don’t care for them” (p. 30). The passion and force behind this shepherd’s words reveal the depth of his genuine concern for the animals in his care. Such commitment to the well-being of a flock is the mark of a true shepherd, both in 21st-century Jordan and in the pages of Scripture. Long before this Jordanian man questioned his sons’ heart to care for his sheep, God Himself lamented the heartless actions of the shepherds leading His people:

Thus says the Lord: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they became scattered, because there was no shepherd. . . . My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. (Ezek. 34:2-6)¹

These words set a tone consistent with the messages of other prophets of Israel (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah), criticizing the careless actions of God’s appointed leaders and promising that God Himself will send One who will model faithful, loving leadership for the Lord’s flock. In his book *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, Laniak (2006) thoroughly develops the shepherd motif in the Old Testament prophets’ messages.

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¹Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Following the prophets' declarations concerning the need for right-hearted shepherds, the four Gospels portray Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Shepherd to save Israel (Ezek. 34:23). John's Gospel extends the pastoral imagery of the Old Testament, most notably in the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10:1-21). John's development of the shepherd motif presents Jesus both as the Good Shepherd who will lay down His life for His sheep and as the model after whom other shepherds ought to pattern their leadership. Contrary to contemporary conversations concerning Christian leadership, though, John's gospel places greater emphasis on the shepherd's heart motivation than it does on the practical tactics of his leadership. In the Good Shepherd discourse, Jesus demonstrates that genuine shepherd leadership is indicated primarily by a singular concern for the sheep entrusted to the leader's care. This article demonstrates that emphasis by examining the shepherd imagery portrayed in John 10. Subsequent sections trace the shepherd-heart theme through the remainder of John's Gospel and draw out implications of this theme for Christian leadership today. Though the principle of affective priority in shepherd leadership relates most directly to those serving in local church ministry, its implications extend to Christians entrusted with the care and guidance of others in multiple realms of leadership.

A Call for Clarity in the Leadership Conversation

There is no shortage of books, articles, and blogs discussing the need of and best methods for practicing pastoral leadership. Carroll (2006) notes that the avalanche of resources and opinions concerning the nature of leadership in general, and Christian leadership in particular, has produced significant stress among American pastors striving to understand their roles and responsibilities in ministry. Among other factors, Carroll highlights the significant redefining of the roles of clergy and lay people since the 1960s as a significant challenge to pastoral leadership in local churches. Within Protestant congregations, he cites the increasing emphasis on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as a catalyst for increasingly mutual ministry responsibilities between lay and clergy, blurring the lines of responsibility between the two.

One emerging theme in these writings is to view the pastor as facilitator. Kinnison (2010), for example, de-emphasizes the distinction of the pastor's role as one called out to lead the congregation: "Pastoral leaders must be embedded participants in the congregation. These primarily lead by example. Shepherd elders are sheep in the flock helping others follow the Shepherd" (pp. 90-91). Ford and Brisco (2013) promote this idea further, arguing that the

church's deeper need is not for leaders of the flock but for individual mentors who will serve and "hang out" with younger believers (pp. 174-182). The cumulative effect of these arguments and others is to breed uncertainty in the minds and hearts of pastors concerning the nature of their roles as God-called leaders within the local church.

One commonality among multiple recent leadership works, especially within Protestant missional circles, is an emphasis on the practical development of leadership skills. In short, the conversation centers on the *how* of pastoral leadership, often giving only passing mention of the *why* that fuels a pastor's efforts. In contrast to the prevailing practical admonitions, Stott's (2002) concise work on Christian leadership emphasizes the character of the leader—humility, meekness, gentleness—as holding biblical primacy. Stott's tone and emphasis are a more accurate reflection of biblical teachings of spiritual leadership. The shepherd leadership described in John's Gospel places far greater significance on the affective motives that compel the shepherd's heart than on the practical skillset he hones. It is the author's conviction that Jesus' teaching in the Good Shepherd discourse ought to cause all Christian leaders to consider that their affections for the Lord's people are a truer indication of shepherd leadership than the ministry techniques they employ.

The Good Shepherd—Messiah and Model

Concerning the intent of the Good Shepherd discourse, an important preliminary question that has caught the attention of multiple scholars needs to be answered. Is the "Good Shepherd" merely a messianic designation, or does Jesus expect future shepherds to emulate His pattern of shepherd leadership? Jesus clearly identifies Himself with the Davidic shepherd predicted in Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23, and Zechariah 9-12 (Laniak, 2006). This self-identification is evident by the sharp contrast Jesus draws between His own goodness and the self-serving, cowardly shepherding of the hirelings (John 10:8, 13; Bruce, 1983).

Broad scholarly support exists for the assertion that Jesus fully intended that His description of the "Good Shepherd" should be understood as a template for future leadership among God's people. Much of this argument centers on John's use of the Greek word *kalos* (good) as the adjective before shepherd. Laniak (2006) explains:

Kalos implies an attractive quality, something noble or ideal. "Model" captures these connotations, but also implies a second nuance that is important in this context: Jesus should be emulated. John makes it clear elsewhere that Jesus is ultimately training his followers to be like him in his life and death (4:34-38; 14:12; 17:20; 20:21-23; 21:15-19). They will

eventually take care of his flock and risk their lives like their master (21:15-23). (p. 211)

Had John intended to communicate only that the “Good Shepherd” was supremely moral or righteous, the word *agathos* would have been a more common descriptor (Keener, 2003). Instead, the word *kalos* suggests a further intent, namely, that future shepherds are to follow the lead of the Good Shepherd.

An important clarification needs to be inserted at this point. Understanding that Jesus intended His model of shepherd leadership to be followed, the logical ensuing question becomes, In what ways are future leaders expected to imitate the Good Shepherd? Some, looking specifically at verses 11 and 14, have asserted that it is the self-sacrificing acts of the shepherd that make him good. Neyrey (2001), for example, links John’s use of the term *kalos* (which he prefers to translate ‘noble’) with the Greek concept of a noble, or honorable, death. Michaels (2010) echoes this sentiment: “What makes a shepherd ‘good’ is that he ‘lays down his life for the sheep,’ that is, he puts his very life on the line to protect his flock” (p. 586). In this notion, it is the self-sacrificial act which designates the shepherd as “good” or “noble.”

A fuller reading of the text suggests that the greater indicator of goodness is not self-sacrifice, but selfless love. The shepherd’s love precedes his service, and his sacrifice is a product of that love. Jesus does not state that the good shepherd merely lays down his life. Both times that phrase is used, Jesus adds an important qualifier. The good shepherd lays down his life *for the sheep*. Bruce (1983) clarifies: “The ‘good’ shepherd shows himself to be a good shepherd because the welfare of his sheep, not his own, is his primary care” (p. 226). This emphasis is evident throughout the chapter. The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name (10:3), leads them to pasture (10:3-4), knows His sheep and is known by them (10:14), lays down His life for the sheep (10:11, 14-15), and gathers His flock (10:16). All of these descriptions depict a deep, loving relationship between shepherd and sheep. In sharp contrast to the good shepherd’s loving posture toward his sheep, Jesus represents Israel’s current leaders as the “hireling” who “flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep” (10:13). Tidball (2008) summarizes the thrust of the passage:

The burden of John 10, however, is not so much on the task of the shepherd as *on the manner in which the shepherd undertakes his role* [emphasis added]. Unlike the “false shepherds,” the good shepherd has a close and caring relationship with the flock. (p. 81)

The overwhelming emphasis of the Good Shepherd discourse is the shepherd’s benevolent heart for his sheep. The skillful work of his hands is

implied, but the heart is the concentrated center. This contradicts the dominant contemporary focus on developing leadership skills and suggests that Christian leaders would be well-advised to invest greater time cultivating a loving heart for the sheep who are so treasured by “the great shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20).

The Good Shepherd Observed

John forthrightly declares that he has outlined his Gospel in a way that is intended to assist the reader to believe in Jesus (20:30-31). The second half of John’s Gospel gives evidence of this intentional structure as the narrative surrounds the Good Shepherd discourse with a series of illustrative events and teachings that give flesh to the shepherd leadership Jesus modeled in His earthly ministry. This section identifies those scenes as support for the thesis that a good shepherd’s love for his sheep is the primary mark of his leadership and the spur to his sacrificial ministry.

The Shepherd Protects (9:13-40)

Conflict between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders is a common occurrence in John’s Gospel (See 2:13-18; 5:18ff; 7:10-21; 7:32-36; 8:39-59). However, in Chapter 9, Jesus’ healing of the man born blind and that man’s consequent expulsion from the synagogue serves as a catalyst for the Good Shepherd discourse of Chapter 10. This conflict with religious leaders is unique in John’s Gospel due to the target of the leaders’ wrath. In previous incidents, the leaders had directly targeted Jesus for His words or actions. This time, however, Jesus is not the one persecuted. The man who was healed is cut off from worship and fellowship with God’s people as a direct result of his confession that Jesus had come from God (9:30-33). The blind man “sees” what the Pharisees could (or would) not. Keener (2008) notes that “the healed man thus becomes paradigmatic for Jesus’ sheep, who ‘know’ him, that is, are in relation to him” (p. 805).

Jesus tells the parable of the Good Shepherd to the Pharisees in response to their expulsion of the healed man. One of the chief functions of the Good Shepherd is to lovingly guard His sheep against the attacks of enemies; the Pharisees’ attack provoked Jesus to action (Laniak, 2006). The opening verses of John 10 clearly indicate who is targeted by this parable. The Pharisees would have immediately recognized the connection between Jesus’ use of “thieves and robbers” and the harsh language of condemnation God uses against Israel’s shepherds in Ezekiel. Bruce (1983) explains:

This parable should be read against the background of Ezekiel 34. There the God of Israel speaks as the chief shepherd of his people, who appoints under-shepherds to look after them. But those shepherds (like

the ‘worthless shepherds’ of Zech. 11:17) are denounced for being more concerned to feed themselves than to feed the sheep entrusted to their care. . . . Those unworthy shepherds will therefore be removed. . . . (p. 169)

Jesus’ implication is unmistakable. The Pharisees not only failed to rejoice at the healing of this sheep under their care, they immediately attacked his young faith. Jesus uses the Good Shepherd parable itself both to protect the man who had just come to know and trust Him and to shame the Pharisees.

The Shepherd Cares (11:17-44)

John 11 portrays a very different side of the Good Shepherd’s heart. The sickness and death of His friend, Lazarus, as well as Mary’s and Martha’s profound grief, elicit the tenderness of Jesus. Here, Jesus’ deep empathy for the women’s loss and His sheep-first love are on full display. When Jesus arrives in Bethany following Lazarus’ death, Martha quickly confesses her faith that Jesus has the power to intervene (11:21-22). Given the opportunity to affirm Martha’s words and pronounce His own identify as Messiah with power over death, Jesus instead speaks first to Martha’s pain: “Your brother will rise again.” Jesus did affirm Martha’s confession with the famous declaration, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), but not until after He had spoken to the grieving heart of the woman who came to Him.

This is the self-second heart of the Good Shepherd in action. “His own interests are secondary to those of the sheep and he does not run away when difficulty comes. The task calls for someone to be courageous as well as caring” (Tidball, 2008, p. 82). This tender interaction with Mary and Martha, coupled with the powerful resurrection of Lazarus in response to Jesus’ voice, evokes clear memories of Jesus’ words in the previous chapter: “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls them by name and leads them out. . . . I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (10:3, 14). Genuine care and compassion require a shepherd who knows the hearts of his sheep truly and deeply. Beasley-Murray (1987) provides a helpful explanation of the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew concepts of knowing:

In the Greek tradition, knowledge is thought of as analogous to *seeing*, with a view to grasping the nature of an object; for the Hebrew, knowledge means *experiencing* something. In the area of religion, therefore, knowledge of God for the Greek is primarily contemplation of the divine reality; for the Hebrew it means entering into a relationship with God. (p. 170)

Bruce’s (1983) concise words summarize well the picture of Jesus caring for hearts in John 11: “It is the mark of the true shepherd to know his sheep” (p. 227).

The Shepherd Stoops (John 13:3-17)

If John's readers have not yet grasped the counter-intuitive nature of shepherd leadership through Jesus' multiple actions and words, Chapter 13 magnifies the flock-centered mindset of the shepherd. A shepherd does not seek position or personal prestige, but instead embraces humility in order to promote those he leads. Jesus deliberately stepped away from the table and took on the task and indignity of the lowest servant. He then commanded His disciples to continue this practice of humility and service to one another (13:14-16). In the Good Shepherd discourse, after stating multiple times that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, Jesus explains the willing nature of his sacrifice—"I lay it down of my own accord" (10:18). In Chapters 10 and 13, Jesus is seen as a shepherd who willingly lowers Himself for the benefit of His sheep.

This self-imposed humility introduces another important paradox of shepherd leadership. The shepherd was a knowledgeable and skilled worker with a critical responsibility for feeding, guiding, and protecting his sheep (Laniak, 2006). At the same time, the shepherd's marginalized lifestyle caused him to endure great hardship in his labor to care for his flock. Tidball (2008) notes that the language of the Good Shepherd in John "merges with that of the suffering servant" (p. 182). The shepherd's work was humble and unheralded, but the good shepherd gladly chose to serve and to suffer because he cared deeply for the sheep. Jesus described this loving sacrifice in Chapter 10, then He modelled the shepherd's humility in Chapter 13 by washing His disciples' feet.

The Shepherd Unites the Flock (John 17:6-26)

The Good Shepherd's love for his sheep leads him to unite the flock for their protection and welfare. This concept is less explicit than those covered up to this point. However, the connection between the shepherd's heart and his act of uniting the flock becomes more apparent when John is considered in light of other motifs present in the fourth Gospel. Much has been written concerning the sending or mission motif woven throughout John. While full treatment of that motif is beyond the scope of this article, it is germane to note that Jesus ties the *missio Dei* to the work of the Good Shepherd. Kostenberger's (2002) exemplary work on the concurrent shepherd and sending motifs in 10:16 will assist the reader greatly in grasping the full scope of Jesus' intended meaning. He argues that "Jesus used a blend of scriptural motifs and applied them to himself in order to put present day controversy in perspective" (p. 69). Just as Jesus has exploded the concept of shepherding by declaring that the good shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep" (10:15), He

shatters previous understandings again here by declaring that He will seek out sheep who are not of His flock, creating a new united flock.

In John 10:16, Jesus says, “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” This statement is a peculiar departure from the commonly understood images of shepherding Jesus has referenced to this point in the passage, but the notion of bringing in new sheep fits with His previous statements that He has been sent to save the world (3:16-17) and to seek out those who will worship the Father in spirit and truth (4:23).

Laniak (2007) notes that the theme of a united flock is prevalent in the Old Testament shepherd prophecies and explains that Jesus is speaking of a united flock of Gentiles and Jews. This theme of the shepherd uniting the flock comes into view again in the high priestly prayer of John 17. This passage mimics the blending of motifs observed in 10:16, with Jesus employing shepherd language (“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one,” 17:16), sending language (“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world,” 17:18), and unity language (“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me,” 17:21). Through all the intricate mixing of motifs and metaphors Jesus employs in His prayer to the Father, He concludes His intercession with the sheep-loving tones heard in the voice of the Good Shepherd in John 10 and in the words of the Old Testament prophets: “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:26).

The Shepherd Restores (John 21:15-19)

The final appearance of shepherd imagery in John’s Gospel occurs on the shore beside the Sea of Tiberias. Here, Jesus draws again on the rich language of shepherding to restore Peter following his infamous three-fold denial in Chapter 18. Two important insights emerge from Jesus’ breakfast conversation with Peter that day. First, the Good Shepherd deals directly, firmly, and graciously with the errors of the strong in his flock. Jesus did not ignore Peter’s sins or gloss over their severity. He inquires of Peter’s love three times to match Peter’s three denials, asking even to the point of grieving Peter over his betrayal. Jesus’ insistence on treating the issue deeply again sets Him apart from the pattern of Israel’s poor shepherds who are chastised for treating wounds lightly and admitting no shame over sin (Jer. 8:11-12). His actions reveal that a shepherd takes the initiative to seek and restore a sheep who has strayed, even if the shepherd is hurt by the sheep in the process. (See

John 10:14-15 and Luke 15:4.)

Second, Jesus' recommissioning of Peter indicates that the Good Shepherd continues to provide for the care of his sheep through under-shepherds who are called to guide, feed, nurture, and protect the flock. Through the Good Shepherd discourse and its background Old Testament passage, Israel's shepherds are condemned for their self-serving hearts and careless actions toward God's people. At no point, however, do these passages suggest that God intends to remove shepherd leaders entirely or diminish their role in leading His people. Instead, He promises that He will give the people new shepherds "after [His] own heart" (Jer. 3:15). Peter is restored and commissioned as the first in a new line of shepherds whose hearts will beat in sync with the Good Shepherd in his care for the flock of God. In this intense exchange between Jesus and Peter, the Good Shepherd once again insists that the shepherds who serve him will be known by their committed love for the Lord's sheep.

The Good Shepherd Emulated

One critical implication from this study of the Good Shepherd's love-driven service to his sheep emerges. A careful examination of the role and expectations of Christian leaders is needed in light of this clear biblical emphasis on the shepherd's care and relationship with his sheep. It is a call for Christian leaders to align their ministry priorities with the revealed biblical emphasis for shepherd leaders. Rather than extending the current focus on leadership techniques and best practices, the greater need is for all Christian leaders, including pastors, to re-examine their motivation for serving as a leader over God's flock. A straightforward question must be asked: "Do I genuinely love the sheep God has entrusted to my care?" Several alternative motives exist that may compel one to continue in a leadership role with little care for the sheep: complacency in a position that has become familiar, the prestige or recognition associated with the leadership title (especially in a larger organization), a duty-bound determination to serve the Lord, or even a martyr mindset that camps on the phrase "lays down his life" but overlooks the qualifier "*for the sheep*." Jesus clearly indicates that He has no tolerance for under-shepherds who care nothing for the sheep. Christian leaders must be diligent to guard their hearts and continually cultivate their relationship with the Lord and with the people. This kind of love cannot be an unspoken assumption as Christian leaders pursue practical advice and leadership skill enhancement. Christian leaders' organizational leadership abilities or charismatic personalities will never be a sufficient substitute for hearts that beat passionately for the care and well-being of the people.

Christian leaders may object that the sheep in their care are often obstinate and unlovely. This may be true, but nowhere does John's Gospel suggest that a good shepherd's love and self-second service is conditional upon the sheep's reciprocation. In his first epistle, John explains that love for the Lord's people is a response to love received from the Lord, not the sheep (1 John 4:7-11). This point further emphasizes the need for those entrusted as Christ's shepherds to abide in the close care of the Good Shepherd, listening to His voice in order to best mimic His Shepherd's heart.

Conclusion

The conversation surrounding issues of Christian leadership is lively and robust, and significant contributions have developed in recent years to assist leaders, especially pastors, in fulfilling their roles more effectively. For all the practical leadership advice that has been dispensed, balancing voices are needed to remind Christian leaders that God's model for leadership emphasizes the shepherds' hearts before their hands—their characters before their competence. God's concern has always been for His people, and the shepherds He approves throughout Scripture are those shepherds whose heart is for the care of His sheep. In John's Gospel, the Good Shepherd discourse reveals that love is the motivation that drives the hearts of faithful shepherd-leaders, and the remainder of that Gospel illustrates the words of the Good Shepherd. God's true shepherds will always be known by their sacrificial love *for the flock*. May the Lord give us tender hearts, so that we may shepherd well the sheep He has given to our care.

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