



"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

—Abraham Lincoln

19-Oct-07

## Sheep Rustling

In days gone by, sheep were a common symbol of wealth. Whether they were raised for their wool or for their meat—or both—or traded for other items of value, raising sheep used to be a tried-and-true way to make a living. As a man's flocks grew in size, so did his financial security, as well as his status and influence in the community. Sheep used to be a valued resource, one that over time provided great dividends without a lot of expense (except time and energy).

Not much has changed.

Today, physical shepherds are far more rare than spiritual shepherds, making shepherding a booming industry. [Mega-churches](#) are springing up in every major city, and the shepherds of these massive flocks are becoming symbols of affluence, and in some cases, even extravagance. Among the various purposes for having such a large following, some shepherds may have a genuine desire to spread their "good news" to all [the world](#), but one cannot help but notice that, in the process, they are pulling down million-dollar salaries and creating personal empires. All the while, they are serving up McSermons that may satiate but do little to urge the people toward *real* [holiness](#) or point them back to [God](#) in a truly meaningful way.

Disturbing as this is, the businesslike approach of valuing of large flocks over healthy sheep has also infiltrated parts of the church of God. We see sheep being enticed to ditch their current shepherd to follow a new one, and the reasons given for doing this reveal the carnal focus. Sheep are being lured, not with good food, clean water, [peace](#), and protection against pestilence, but with promises of being a part of something big and of protection from the Tribulation, along with the "privilege" of being able to support an especially qualified shepherd.

The biblical warnings to shepherds about their priorities are numerous and clear. [Job 24:2](#) speaks of some who "remove landmarks [delineating boundaries of grazing areas]; they seize flocks violently and feed on them." Ezekiel 34—the "Irresponsible Shepherds" chapter—gives a withering indictment of

. . . shepherds . . . who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. 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. ([Ezekiel 34:2-4](#))

Such leaders see the sheep as mere personnel to serve them, their interests, and their projects, rather than accepting the gravity of their responsibility to care for their health and to dedicate themselves to "equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the [faith](#) and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" ([Ephesians 4:12-13](#)).

As these verses show, God's emphasis is on spiritual health—quality, not quantity. While this priority may contradict the designs of some to build a personal empire, the fact remains that the quantity of true sheep during this time of judgment is a limited number. Because God is only calling a certain number of people right now, only so many true sheep are available for the various shepherds to care for. The question becomes, then, who determines which sheep will be overseen by which shepherd? Considering the great care God has for His physical creation, is it logical to believe that He leaves His far more important *spiritual* creation to happenstance or the whims of mere men—converted though they may be?

Do the individual shepherds determine this, or is this the responsibility of the Chief Shepherd—the One who can truthfully say, "Of those *whom You gave Me* I have lost none" ([John 18:9](#); compare [John 17:12](#)). Clearly, *all* of the sheep belong to the Chief Shepherd, and those who hear His voice follow Him ([John 10:27](#))—including following Him to whatever human shepherd He knows will be best for what the individual sheep needs. For a shepherd to lose sight of this fact and lure away sheep that have not been given—and if they have been given, they need not be lured—is to be guilty of sheep rustling. During the days of the Old West, rustling was a hanging [offense](#)!

Consider the example of Abraham—the great patriarch, the father of the faithful, perhaps our best example of one to follow after [Jesus Christ](#). Abraham and his nephew Lot both kept herds, yet even with the impressive title and standing before God—actually *because* of it—he did not try to rustle Lot's sheep. He did not assume that all the sheep should be his. He did not try to entice Lot's sheep to come join his flocks. Rather, when there was strife between Abraham's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen, he proposed they each choose his own land, so there would be no confusion or discord. He even deferred—for the sake of peace—to his nephew and gave him first pick!

Abraham knew that God governs in the affairs of men, and that he was not going to lack any good thing if he put His trust in the Most High. Abraham "believed in the LORD"—believed in His ability to manage His creation; in His sovereignty; in His leadership of His people; and in His promise to supply every need. He believed in all of this rather than try to further enrich himself with more sheep or better land—"and it was counted to him as righteousness" ([Genesis 15:6](#); [Galatians 3:6](#)).

- David C. Grabbe

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**From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

**[The Handwriting Is On the Wall \(Part Two\) \(2007\)](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh reiterates that we are to follow Abraham and Sarah's example of relying on God's guidance, learning to trust in the wisdom of Almighty God rather than the world. In order to avoid strife, Abraham allowed his forward nephew Lot first choice. Likewise, the apostle Paul admonished the New Testament church to refrain bringing law suits before the public. Abraham and Sarah were willing to suffer loss in order to achieve peace. Regarding the current scattered flocks, any spirit of competition is the way of enmity and strife. The sheep do not belong to any man or any one group, but they belong to Christ, given to Him by the Father. It is Christ's, not the minister's responsibility to get the sheep into the Kingdom of God. The Church of the Great God sees the other splinter groups as brethren in the greater church of God rather than competitors. Unlike certain understandings in our previous fellowship, each person is directly and individually responsible for his own submission to God's government. No external coercion will develop character or submission to God. Throughout history, the large congregation has been the anomaly rather than the norm. The scattering of the flock has been a blessing, forcing people to take individual responsibility to develop godly character, responding to a still small voice rather than to brazenly get out in front of God. The Bible is replete with examples of great leaders, with hubris, presumptuousness, or pride who got out in front of God (Satan, Abraham, Sarah, Korah, and Josiah) causing irreparable consequences for their descendents. The antidote to presumptuousness involves patiently waiting on the Lord, following God's lead, resisting any impulse to get out in front of God.

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**From the Archives: Featured Article**

**[Goats on the Left](#)**

by Mike Ford

Goats are intelligent creatures, but they are also loners and devious. Mike Ford illustrates their characteristics and shows how we can apply this understanding to our spiritual lives. Spiritually, we don't want to be goats!

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