



"The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change.
The leader adjusts the sails."
—John Maxwell

13-Dec-13

The Shepherd's Guidance (Part Three)

Sometimes, circumstances conspire to scatter Christians into small groups or even from all contact with other believers and from the ministry that [Jesus Christ](#) gives to the church to equip them and encourage their growth ([Ephesians 4:11-16](#))—in the biblical metaphor, leaving the sheep without a shepherd. However, if sheep should *choose* to become "without a shepherd," they are rejecting one of the Chief Shepherd's major gifts to His flock, willfully taking themselves outside of His established order.

Sheep may choose to do this, reasoning that Christ is their Shepherd, which is certainly true. It is likewise true that our relationship with [God](#) is individual, without a man in the middle. Nevertheless, none of this nullifies the fact that Christ has gifted human shepherds to aid in bringing all the sheep "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 4:13](#)). By implication, the only time a sheep of His pasture does not need an under-shepherd is when he has grown *completely* into the image of the Lamb of God.

Our Savior oversees the under-shepherds, holding them accountable for failures in their responsibilities—which there will be simply because they are human. However, to purposefully become a "sheep without a shepherd" is to put oneself in serious danger, for the Christian is then likely to turn to his own way, develop bad spiritual habits, become stuck in a rut, make himself a prey for [Satan](#), and ultimately become

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malnourished and spiritually diseased. He may not even realize his life is in danger—until it is too late.

Christ clearly establishes that, rather than wandering away from God's shepherds, the sheep have the responsibility to submit to the godly shepherds—not considering them infallible, by any means, but comparing their instruction with what God has already established in His Word. As [1 Corinthians 11:1](#) teaches, sheep are to follow a shepherd's faith only as it complements and corresponds with the [teachings of Jesus](#). As [Acts 5:29](#) points out, "[W]e ought to obey God rather than men," whenever the two are not in alignment.

Assuming that sheep have a genuine shepherd who is emulating Christ, notice Paul's teaching:

- And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. ([1 Thessalonians 5:12-13](#))
- Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. ([Hebrews 13:7](#))
- Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with [joy](#) and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. ([Hebrews 13:17](#))

Because of the unraveling of the church of God in recent decades, the overall flock has experienced a great deal of agitation. In some cases, sheep are distrustful or disdainful of sheep in other legitimate folds. What seems to happen more often, though, is that shepherds are suspicious—and even contemptuous—of other shepherds, and may even engage in turf-wars and sheep-rustling, inciting further unrest among the sheep. If sheep have suffered abuse or neglect at the hand of a hireling or derelict shepherd, they will be less inclined to trust other shepherds, and [peace](#) is the casualty.

God says through Ezekiel that some dominant sheep will push other sheep around, "butt[ing] all the weak ones with your horns, and scatter[ing] them abroad" ([Ezekiel 34:21](#)), all the while using up the pasture and then defiling it (verses 18-19). Some shepherds, in letting their attention slip away from the Good Shepherd, have filled the void by elevating themselves. When this happens, there arises a tendency to use and abuse the sheep rather than tending and feeding them. Because of the pressures of the

times, both sheep and shepherd risk becoming bogged down in the quicksand of [the world](#).

These symptoms can all be understood in light of [Jeremiah 18:15-17](#), where God says that He scatters His people because they have forgotten Him. If He is not the top priority in our lives, He will change our circumstances—our "pasture," which could have many different applications—until we remember and seek Him once again. Thus, the ongoing unrest in the church of God is partly attributable to the carnality that remains within it and partly to the Good Shepherd's skillful management in guiding His sheep into circumstances ideal for growth, which can seem quite disruptive.

It is crucial to understand that, despite the chaos and confusion in the greater church of God, none of it is out of the Shepherd's control. He knew what He was doing when He scattered Israel and Judah, when He scattered the first-century church from Jerusalem, and when He scattered the church in our time. His thoughts and ways are infinitely above ours ([Isaiah 55:9](#)), but His acts always accomplish a good purpose. He limits the harm the hirelings can cause, even using their harm for ultimate good, if the sheep continue to look to Him. He oversees the under-shepherds, working in their lives to ensure that His will is fulfilled. He has already literally laid down His life for His sheep; not one who is looking to Him will be lost ([John 6:39](#); [10:27-28](#)).

If we are intent on following the Shepherd's guidance, continually looking to Him for direction, He will lead us to the best pastures. His guidance typically requires us to look to Him for everything. Part of the cost of discipleship is renouncing control of the direction and contents of our lives and submitting to His guidance when our circumstances undergo changes out of our control. When He moves us, it may be uncomfortable, but what it produces is invaluable: a singular focus on Him and a faith—trust—that will carry us into the Kingdom. It is comforting to remember that the Good Shepherd assures us, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" ([Luke 12:32](#)).

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Self-Government and Responsibility \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

A major distinguishing characteristic of mankind is his free moral agency, presenting

him with choices and the right to make decisions. We need free moral agency to be transformed into God's image. The volition to do right has to come from the core of our character or nature. Paradoxically, the way to maximum freedom is to yield to God's way of doing things. Unless one has the Spirit of God, he cannot exercise the necessary internal control to be subject to the government of God. Even though the church is not the government of God (John 18:36; I Corinthians 15:50), we need to respect the ministry as well as lay members, being subject to one another (I Corinthians 11:1). The operation of God's government absolutely depends upon each person governing himself, never going beyond the parameters of the authority God has given him.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[From Sheriff to Shepherd: Are We Willing to Be Defrauded?](#)

by David F. Maas

Which leadership style do you follow: Andy Griffith's or Barney Fife's? Using experiences from his own life, David Maas explains that the desire to be in control and to win takes a toll on both one's relationships and one's health.

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