

Lessons From The Geese

by Mike Ford

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My office, perched high above my backyard, has a wall of windows looking east into a small wooded area. Many times I stop what I am doing to watch the wildlife, and the birds in particular fascinate me. The other day the largest hawk I have ever seen swooped down into my yard, just below the office. It was so big that I thought at first it might be an eagle. It sat for a minute, then lifted off towards me before veering off. Its wing span filled a window.

As I write these words, a squirrel plays on the woodpile and around the base of a camellia bursting with buds. Needless to say, I get little work done here. You may think I could be more productive at night without all these distractions, but have you ever seen a full moon rise through the Georgia pines? Who knows how many times my wife Carol has heard me yell, "Honey, come look at this!"

Just south of my house is a pond, home to several Canada geese. To the immediate north is a small lake. Several times a day the geese fly from one body of water to the other, passing over my house. When I hear them honking, I invariably stop what I am doing to watch them fly over. Sometimes the flock is only three geese, sometimes more, but they are always in formation.

A few weeks ago, my daughter Kelly brought home from work a handout entitled "Lessons from the Geese." It had obviously been copied and passed on several times. Someone up the corporate ladder at her firm had read it somewhere and added comments, drawing parallels to teamwork in the workplace. When I first read it, its spiritual applications immediately struck me. I set it aside, but over the next week it drew me back, causing me to re-read it several times.

Then, one day last week I had an important business meeting to attend. As I stood waiting in a newly decorated lobby, I noticed an expensively framed, numbered and signed print of a flock of geese in flight. Once I walked over to examine it, I saw text had been added across the bottom. It was the same "Lessons from the Geese," this time without editorial comment. The quiet eloquence of this painting gave volume to the power of the simple words.

"Lessons from the Geese" was written in 1972 by Dr. Robert McNeish of Baltimore, Maryland, for a sermon he gave in the church he attended. McNeish, a science teacher, had for many years been intrigued in his observation of geese. The resulting essay contains a wonderful metaphor of the church. The text neatly breaks down into five lessons with corresponding principles that can enhance our spiritual lives.

Lesson #1

As geese flap their wings, they create an uplift for the bird following. By flying in a V formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if any bird were to fly alone.

Cooperation. A flock of geese is like a team. Flying together creates an uplift, a surge that carries the whole farther than its individual parts could go by themselves. Solomon illustrates this principle in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

When a group or team cooperates, it can achieve great things. We saw this, years ago, when a relatively small group called the Worldwide Church of God supported Herbert Armstrong as he went around the world calling on heads of state. Millions upon millions of magazines and booklets went out each month. Radio and television broadcasts played on hundreds of stations.

We now find ourselves in even smaller organizations, yet the principle remains the same. God has called each of us to a different job within the body, as the apostle Paul spells out in I Corinthians 12:14, 18, 20: "For in fact the body is not one member, but many. . . . But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. . . . But now indeed there are many members, yet one body."

We are truly a flock. We might not be the lead goose - we might even be the one in the rear that always seems to be looking left when the flock turns right - but each of us has a role, even if it seems minimal. The forward movement of the group, its success, is dependent on the efforts of us all.

On my college basketball team my job as the team's center was to labor "in the paint," to grab rebounds and block shots. I was not the "shooter." Any points I provided, on tip-ins or put-backs, were bonus points. If I played my part, we could be successful. If, on the other hand, I felt as if it was my turn to shoot the ball, I could cause the team to fail. What Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians applies here: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ," yet "each one shall bear his own load" (Galatians 6:2, 5).

The same apostle tenders some wise advice in Romans 12:3-6 (Phillips translation):

As your spiritual teacher I, by the grace God gave me, give this advice to each one of you. Don't cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance, but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities by the light of the faith that God has given to you all. For just as you have many members in one physical body and those members differ in their functions, so we, though many in number, compose one body in Christ and are all members to one another. Through the grace of God we have different gifts.

By using those different gifts for the good of the whole flock, we will all be propelled toward the Kingdom of God (I Peter 4:10-11).

Lesson #2

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone, and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front.

Unity. This dovetails wonderfully with the first point. Going it alone - being independent of the flock - leads to falling behind. What happens when a goose falls out of formation and cannot or will not reform? If the flock can fly 71% farther as a group, then the lone goose is left behind.

Notice Ephesians 4:3-4, 14-16 (Phillips):

Make it your aim to be at one in the Spirit, and you will be bound together in peace. There is one Body and one Spirit, just as it was to one hope that you were called. . . . We are not meant to remain as children at the mercy of every chance wind of teaching, and of the jockeying of men who are expert in the crafty presentation of lies. But we are meant to speak the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head. For it is from the head that the whole body, as a harmonious structure knit together by the joints with which it is provided, grows by the proper functioning of individual parts, and so builds itself up in love.

We continue to see brethren sidetracked by "crafty presentation." When this happens, and they remove themselves from the flock, this "chance wind of teaching" adds drag and resistance, and suddenly, they find themselves alone.

Anyone who has played team sports knows that the individual must subordinate his desires to those of the team. His goal may be to have the highest scoring average, but that may not help the team to win the championship. Likewise, a church member may think he has discovered the secret to a doctrinal question that no one else has found. But what does he do if others fail to recognize his brilliance? If he pulls out of formation, he may still make it south for the winter, or more likely, he will find himself wintering on a frozen lake in Minnesota! To do its work most fully and successfully, the body of Christ must "fly" together.

Lesson #3

When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into formation and another goose flies at the point position.

Leadership. Throughout the Bible we see God providing fresh leadership to preside over His people. When Moses' work had been completed, Joshua was trained and ready to take over. Elisha picked up the mantle that had fallen from Elijah's shoulders. When it became clear that Jesus' ministry had begun, John the Baptist humbly said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

But sometimes a leader's power goes to his head, and he swerves off course. If a flock of Canada geese leaves the Hudson Bay area headed south for Lake Lanier, Georgia, and the lead bird makes a hard left over Toronto, well, the flock is off course! They will end up in Lake Ontario instead!

As a church, we found ourselves in a similar situation not too long ago. The church's leadership took a serious turn to the left. Most of the flock continued following them, while others broke off to regain their bearings and get "back on track" toward the original destination. We had to look for a leader who was "flying" in the right direction.

In love for us, God has never failed to provide leadership for His people because our chances of attaining our goal on our own are nil. When God told the children of Israel that they would wander in the wilderness for 40 years (Numbers 14:33), some of them decided to strike out on their own (verse 40). Moses warned them that God was not with them, yet they tried to enter the Promised Land anyway. The Amalekites and the Canaanites mercilessly cut them down (verses 41, 44-45). It is a tragic but pointed object lesson.

In following a leader, we are not to follow blindly or "what is evil, but [follow] what is good" (III John 11). Hebrews 13:7 clarifies this: "Remember those who rule over [margin, *lead*] you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct." Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." There is nothing wrong with following a man who faithfully follows Christ's lead. At some time soon, we hope and pray that God brings us together again to follow the leader He has prepared for us.

Lesson #4

The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

Encouragement. To lead any endeavor, especially a scattered church, requires huge amounts of effort. To break the trail for others, to be the lead bird, is to be a target, and that can be stressful and wearying. The leader does not always know what is going on among the membership, how they feel or what questions or misconceptions they may have. Too many times all the shepherd hears is the grumbling of the vocal few.

Through our prayers and kind words we can give strength to those up ahead of us. A minister hears many tales of woe, complaints and arguments, but a sincere thank you or gesture of support sometimes makes it all worthwhile. Counseling, preparing messages, traveling and speaking are not easy to do, so any amount of holding up a minister's hands is greatly appreciated and benefits the entire congregation (Exodus 17:8-13).

This need to encourage also applies to our brethren. Not that long ago, when Carol had cancer, we would find ourselves feeling down and discouraged. Then the daily mail would bring a card or a letter that would pick us right up. Sometimes the phone would ring, and we would hear the helpful honking of our brethren - not literally, of course. This always motivated us to forge ahead in confidence.

In the parallel sports metaphor, being part of a team sometimes means we are watching from the bench. We still participate, however, by giving encouragement, by rooting for

our teammates who are on the court. Many a winning team has heaped credit on their "sixth man" or "twelfth man," the fans who cheered from the sidelines and boosted the team's efforts during critical moments of the game.

Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15), and "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25). Now more than ever, we all need the encouragement only our fellows in the flock can give.

Lesson #5

When a goose gets sick or wounded or is shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it is able to fly again or dies. They then launch out on their own, with another formation or catch up with the flock.

Family. The church, God's flock, is composed of His called children, thus it is a family. He expects us to extend the same care to each other as we would any member of our physical families. Our Savior - our Elder Brother - sets the example:

For it was fitting for Him [the Father], for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He [Christ] is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You." . . . And again: "Here am I and the children whom God has given Me." . . . Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:10-13, 17-18)

The apostle James writes that we have the same responsibility toward each other: "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). Peter says, "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins'" (I Peter 4:8). Jude shows two opposite approaches to this problem: "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (Jude 22-23).

These are just other ways of saying we must help a brother who has dropped out of formation (see Luke 15:4-7). We should never abandon a sick or wounded brother (see Luke 10:25-37). As long as there is hope, we should be there to help.

At some point, though, it may become clear that the family member is "dead." He no longer responds to any help or encouragement from the church. If this happens, we must figuratively leave him behind. Paul says, "Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (I Corinthians 5:5). At that point, it is best to let him go his own way, and we must rejoin the flock without him.

"Lessons from the Geese" is a beautiful analogy for any Christian, but especially poignant for this end-time church. Imagine if the church of God behaved like a flock of geese, flying in perfect formation, cooperating as a team, unified behind godly leadership, constantly encouraging those around us, and helping our brothers and sisters in the faith. Those who practice these things will reach the flock's destination, the Kingdom of God!