
Christian Leaders as Caring “Shepherds”

Allan Davis

Introduction

If you are a leader (church or secular), you occupy a role of privilege and responsibility, for your business and for people. The image of Jesus as the “Shepherd Leader” is one of the most effective metaphors in the Bible. (The same image is used in relation to God, Psalm 23, 80:1; Moses, Psalm 77:20; and David, Psalm 78:70-72). It was understood in Jesus’ day; many people were pastoralists. I have observed sheep with Bedouin shepherds in the Middle East; the close relationship is powerful. In Australia, where flocks run into thousands, the lesson is lost. Some men and women *lead* people (valued as people) in a New Testament way; others *drive* human resources (commodities) like graziers. In a modern market/industrial world it is crucial that leaders who are Christians care for followers according to a Biblical paradigm, leading rather than driving.

Most Christians who are leaders operate in a secular environment. They do not run Christian organisations. But they are called to be “salt” and “light” and understand how to “practice the presence of God” in the workplace, in their vocations – that can be a balancing act, given separation of church and state. Christians who are leaders do not stop being Christians (temples of the Holy Spirit, manifesting His fruit in their lives, with a Christian world view) simply because they are in the marketplace. As leaders they have a “pastoral” role that involves people. They mentor teams, care for individuals, provide direction, counsel and manage performance and output. The question is: how can they lead in a non-Christian environment (subtext = in a “Christ-like way”)? The Shepherd model shows how the world operates and how Christian leaders ought to do so.

Two Types of Shepherds (Ezekiel 34)

Society's model

- “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed those who are ill or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.”

God's Model

- “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice..... I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.”

Jesus the Shepherd Leader (John 10)

Jesus is our shepherd leader (Hebrews 13:20). He:

- knows His sheep individually, by name
- is always “there” for *them*, not for self-interest
- gains trust/confidence through mutual relationship
- goes ahead of them (leads from the front), gives focus and clear direction
- provides for them
- is motivated by a desire for their highest good (“abundant life”)
- nurtures the young, inexperienced, weak
- cares for those who stray – keeps a watchful eye on them
- unites them as one flock
- picks up those who stumble (genuine shepherds are redemptive, not judgemental)
- patches up the wounded
- defends the defenceless – knows there are always dangers
- does not do it for gain (as some do), but because He cares
- does not walk away (as some do) when the going gets tough
- knows that the sheep are dependent on the shepherd
- focuses on people, not tasks, rules or processes
- gives His life for the sheep (not conditional)

Shepherding in a Secular Society

Leaders who are Christians are *ideally located* to:

- **care** for others (love them) and keep an eye out for their well-being
- **listen**, show empathy and awareness (walk in their shoes)
- **influence** through position, relationship, commitment, persuasion and doing good
- **lead from the front**, engage, energize, motivate (inspire) and empower people
- **set the tenor**, create a positive culture (it all comes down to the leader)
- **create trust**, confidence and unity, deal with ambiguity (and peoples' differences)
- **use authority and power responsibly**, to build cohesive and collaborative teams
- **provide direction**, give clarity to vision, articulate goals (rather than coercion)
- **take responsibility** for planning, problems & outcomes (not play the "blame game")
- **recognise** individuals who are vulnerable and unfulfilled (requires genuine interest)
- **acknowledge** those who do well, encourage them to use talents (*what God gave them*) and skills (*what they have learned*) to excel; celebrate success, show gratitude
- **mentor** staff and build other leaders, in a spirit of generosity
- **model** appropriate values & behaviours and provide authentic and ethical guidance
- **provide assurance**, oppose destructive and negative forces that threaten people
- **exemplify wisdom** (James 1:5) in times of stress, change, setbacks, crises
- **model servanthood** (Luke 22:27) and character (humility, forgiveness, respect)

this is all very well but

"People" are more than "human resources". Leadership involves loving and caring for them.

Who Shepherds the Shepherds?

Leaders also need shepherds

- people will not feel safe or *follow* you if you do not demonstrate integrity (even if you are positionally their manager); ask yourself: “*Why* should this person follow me?”
 - power is not the same thing as authority
 - a “manager” is not necessarily a good leader (cf John 10:4, 5, 12, 13)
- leaders also need care; they are not invincible (1 Corinthians 10:22); *all* have weak spots, are vulnerable/targets, have human emotions, reactions and breaking points (Zechariah 13:7; Luke 22:31; John 10:10)
 - leaders are tested (see notes on *The Tests of Leadership*)
 - some former great leaders failed and are out of ministry/faith today
 - shepherd leadership requires humility, mutual submission and teachability
 - support, wisdom and guidance can come from superiors, other leaders, prayer partners, spouses & followers who help carry the load (don’t underestimate them)
 - Christians who are leaders owe it to one another to be on the look-out, for mutual benefit (“Who is sufficient for these things?” 2 Corinthians 5:16)
 - leaders get tired, make mistakes, need rest, time out and renewal (burn-out is counter-productive, from every angle), cf 2 Corinthians 4:16, Revelation 3:12

For Consideration

- As a leader, do I manage, drive or genuinely engage others by my personal style?
 - Am I open, or do I easily become defensive?
 - Am I generous, redemptive?
 - What are the results?
- How well do I look after those I lead?
 - How much, or how little, do I really care?
 - What can I do to look after my team better?
- Identify a recent change, pressure or stress in the workplace.
 - How well did I lead?
 - Did I look out for others?
 - What could I have done differently?
- What are three things from the shepherd leader model of Jesus that I can take away and seek to implement in my own life and the way I lead and care for others?