

Shepherding

by David Ord

In the New Testament speaks of “elders” as “shepherds.” They are to account for the spiritual development of the body of Christ. What does this mean? In what sense are they accountable?

Many have taken it upon themselves to ensure that believers conduct their lives in a certain manner, according to the dictates of their fellowship. They are in a habit of “lording it over” those allotted to their charge (1 Pet. 5:3). Of course, they do not call it that; but to exercise authority over another’s life is contrary to the system Christ ordained for His new covenant church. Jesus plainly said that in the world rulers lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave ...” (Matt. 20:25-26).

How often many of us have heard ministers declare their authority among the brethren! “No” said Jesus, “*you are to be brothers and sister in a family, each of you equal in status but gifted in different ways. You are to use your gifts to build up one another, not to gain ascendancy over other brothers.*”

John said in his third epistle, “*I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words and not satisfied with this, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church.*” Here was an elder who had gained control of the church, and was actually forbidding the brethren to listen to other who were not of that fellowship! We have no right to do such; yet this very practice takes place in many groups today.

A true elder is a spiritually mature brother who is gifted by the Spirit in a manner which enables him to lead others to a knowledge of who they are in Christ, so that they too become spiritually mature. We are to help others come into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the rules of Christ. This is the point at which a born again individual comes to an inner awareness of Christ as His total reality, so that he operates out of that fixed union which is the “mystery of “Christ in us.” It means that we believe (have faith) that Christ lives as us, expressing His life through us. This is the unity of the faith, an inner “knowing” of the Son of God, whereby we live with Him as our total supply (“fulness”).

This unity of the faith an inner consciousness of union — is something that is meant to come into being now. Paul makes this quite clear when he goes on to say that “*henceforth we are no more children who can be tossed about by every wind of doctrine*” (Eph. 4:14). We need the various gifts that are expressions of Christ in our brothers and we come into this life of union. Then, when Christ is fully formed in each of us, we too are mature and no longer need to be shepherded. From this point on, we are a mature family of brothers and sisters who share our gifts in interdependent fellowship. We each stand firmly and individually by faith, and yet we can also listen to one another and benefit from mutual sharing.

There is, then, a need for newly born babes to be shepherded and disciplined. Not in the sense of ruling their lives, or putting pressure on them to “conform.” but simply as a sharing of our maturity so that they themselves might as quickly as possible also come to know who they are in Christ. It is to those who are babes that all of the passages about

submitting to rule in the church are written. This is not a domination of personal affairs, but the right ordering of church life so that the young can grow up.

Is an elder's purpose to tell new Christians that they "can do this" or "can't do that"? Is it to place him under a system of "ought to's"? Far from it. Rather, true discipleship means that we set an example of the life of faith, and encourage others into such a life. We teach them to live in the same manner that we do — to imitate us. And how do we live? Not by external rules and regulations, but by trusting Christ in us! This is the new covenant

In practice, this means that whenever a brother or sister becomes discouraged and feels he is worthless, we snap him out of such negative feelings by exhorting him to recognition of the One who is in him. And as he becomes more aware of Christ as his true life, he will be able to live by the same Principle as we do — Christ as our total reality, He will become the unique individual he was intended to be in Christ. He will be *himself* — Christ expressed in his special way — just as we are ourselves. It is the inner mechanism of life that we imitate, not outer expressions.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, did have to tell them when they were in error. "*Not that we lord it over your faith,*" he added, "*but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm*" (2 Cor. 1:24). He didn't see himself in the role of a mediator who could tell them how to run their personal lives, his purpose was solely to encourage them to a recognition of their union with Christ so that by faith He would direct their lives.

Elder brothers helping the little children to grow up in a family atmosphere do sometimes have to speak strongly, but they are never to become mediators who dictate "God's will" to others. There is only One mediator, no one stands between you and God except the Christ who is in you! *He* will govern your life, not any man or group of men. They exist only to bring the little ones into the full awareness of their true selves (Christ in them). so that each can live fully from this reality.

Once we know that we have the fulness of Christ in us, we stop worrying about our standing with God and begin to act out of the boldness of faith. We are free to simply be what He chooses to be in us. This brings about a tremendous release of creativity, whereby He expresses Himself in a variety of ways in our common everyday lives. The whole of life becomes fulfilling, because we are fulfilled. We are able to be the full person each of us was meant to be. Shepherds exist to encourage this inner realization within each of us.

Norman Grubb's life provides an excellent example of the right kind of discipleship and shepherding He has spent countless hours with hundreds who now know who they are in Christ, accepting them as they were and patiently instructing them in the mystery of the gospel. He has gone back to their homes for days at a time, living among them and showing them Christ in his own person. He has served as a slave, going beyond measure simply to love, accept, and encourage each to an inner reality of the unique individual he or she was intended to be in Christ. And now, the dependent have become independent, and finally interdependent. They too are busy discipling other babes in Christ, helping each to recognize who he is so that he might live from his own inner faith in Christ as his total reality.

Yes, we are to give account for others; not about how we exercised authority in their lives, but concerning our faithfulness in telling them that they can trust themselves because Christ lives in them, even when sometimes they are led to a different decision than we might make. To present every man mature in Christ is our aim, and that can only be accomplished as we urge them to be the unique expressions of the true Master within them that He intends they be.