

## Biblical Good Shepherd Imagery And Church Leadership In Nigeria

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### Abstract

The paper argues that the intended leadership of the church is service to the people, which is derived from the oriental shepherd figure in the Bible. The contemporary model of Church leadership is a business executive who combines some biblical insights with entrepreneurial skills. Most books available today on church leadership and growth are basically books on how to become a successful entrepreneur in-charge of mega churches. Against this backdrop, the paper proposes the Good Shepherd model in the Bible wherein the leader is a servant figure who tends, cares and feeds the flock as a model of leadership for the contemporary church. This was achieved by examining the Good Shepherd image in the Bible and its application in New Testament leadership of the church. From the findings, recommendations are made. It is the opinion of the paper that the church will only fulfill her mandate if her leaders would imbibe the qualities of shepherds.

### Introduction

In the ancient Israel and among the oriental peoples, the shepherd image was a well-known figure. Every man and every woman was a shepherd. More so, the oriental shepherds reared sheep for wealth, prestige and sacrifice, and not for the meat (mutton). This enabled them according to Lamido “to develop intimate and committed relationship with their flock” (2007: 22). This idea of a caring shepherd was so familiar and meaningful to the people that it guided human relationships in all spheres of life. The shepherd-sheep metaphor

shaped the worldview through which relationships were established and maintained.

However, in the modern times, as a result of what Brandon calls “so few pastoral communities” (1972: 88) such as the nomadic tribes of the Fulani of Nigeria and West Africa, the Massai of Kenya in East Africa, and the Bedouins of the Arabian Peninsula, the work of a shepherd in caring for his flock is not well known among other peoples. As a result, relationships both secular and religious are not influenced by shepherd-sheep metaphor. This has led to a great deal of confusion in the understanding of leadership in the church today. Leaders in the church today discharge their duties in a manner least suggestive of a ministry patterned after the good shepherd (West; 2013).

The work of a shepherd in guiding, feeding, protecting and developing intimate relationship with the flock is lacking in the present approach to ministry. In its place, a different approach to ministry has developed. The quest for materialism, fame, significance, popularity and relevance has taken the centre stage. Pastors now measure success in ministry in terms of material acquisition; the number of exotic cars in one’s fleet, oversea travels and ostentatious lifestyle. The average church leader adopts what Spencer (2013) calls “seeker-sensitive approach” to the pastoral ministry. Consequently, opinions vary as to whether today’s ministers are still to be called priests, pastors, prophets, preachers, evangelists, administrators, which are their calling or social workers, civil servants, psychotherapists and businessmen which have nothing to do with their ministry

In spite of this apparent demonstration of lack of understanding of the ministry and its effect on the church, not much has been done to reposition the church’s leadership. The work of Church leaders as shepherds has not been given adequate attention in available literature on church leadership. Emphasis is being laid on how to apply gimmicks to record quick success in the ministry.

This work aims at restoring to the contemporary church the pastoral model of leadership established and developed in the Old Testament Israel, which devolved upon the New Testament leadership of the church. This is achieved by careful examination of the good shepherd image in both the Old and New Testaments and its application in the New Testament Church.

### **Conceptual Clarification of Terms**

In the context of this paper, certain concepts germane to the understanding of the objective of this paper require clarification. They include; the church, the good shepherd, servant leadership.

#### **The Church**

The word church as used in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means in a classical sense an official assembly or a gathering of citizens. In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), the term was used for general assembly of the Jewish people especially when gathered for a religious purpose such as one for hearing of the reading of the law (Deut. 9:10; 18:16). But it acquired exclusive usage in describing the assembly of God's people (the Church) when Christians applied it to themselves. Therefore in the New Testament, it is used of the entire body of Christ (Mat. 16:18), of the believers in a particular area (Acts 5:11) and also of the congregation meeting in a particular house (Rom. 16:5). This is distinguished from or goes beyond what is today called Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Reformed, Orthodox, Coptic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, etc. In support of this view, O'Donovan (1996:151) observes that "many people think of a Church as a particular building. Others think that Church refers to a certain denomination, like Baptist, Anglican or Roman Catholic".

In the light of the above, Stott (1990: 243) is right when he observed that church is "a people who have been both called out of the world to worship God and sent back in the world to witness and to serve." Therefore, the Roman church constituted of those called out in Rome to worship God and sent back to witness to their people in the name of Christ. The same can be said of the church at Ephesus, Jerusalem, Corinth, and elsewhere. Hence, It is in the light of the above definition and characteristics that the church is understood and used in this work.

#### **Good Shepherd**

The word shepherd according to Still (1994), means pastor, and is one who tends the flock. In this context, it is one who knows serves, feeds, rules, guards, seeks and leads the flock (the people) of God (Taylor; 1983: 7). Further, it is one who according to Stott (1992: 273) "exercises pastoral functions to the people on behalf of God." The

word shepherd and pastor are used interchangeably and both refer to those who were entrusted with leading the people of God (Israel). The adjective good was used to contrast with bad shepherds who worked as hireling in their relationship with the sheep. Hence, in ancient Israel, there were good and false shepherds and they had to be distinguished.

### **Servant**

The meaning of servant from everyday usage is one who serves. It is usually one from a low estate serving another who is of a higher estate. In this sense, it involves master-servant relationship and one who is the master lords it over the servant. However, in another context, its meaning is better understood from the word minister with which it is interchangeably used. A minister in secular usage usually in government circle is one who is in charge of a government department. In religious parlance, it is a trained religious leader. In its verb form, it is to care for somebody, especially one who is in need and to make sure they have all they need. Hence, the word minister has both political undertone and in its noun form means a leader (political or religious) who cares for others who are in need. This is the understanding and usage in both Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament, it refers to various relationships between Israel and Yahweh. In Isaiah, it refers to the Israel as a nation (41:8), as individuals who have a close relationship with God in Samuel (2 Sam. 7; 3). In Isaiah's servant songs (42: 1-4; 49:1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13-53:12), it includes a distinctive reference to a servant figure whose obedient, underserved suffering leads to death as a means of taking away the sin of the people.

In the New Testament, Jesus appears as one who serves (Luke 22:27), his disciples are to serve (Mark 10: 43), the apostles called themselves servants of God (2Cor. 6: 4), of the gospel (Eph. 3: 7) and of the church. (Col. 1: 25)

### **Good Shepherd Image in the Old Testament**

The people of Israel according to Okwueze (2001: 29), descended from a nomadic race. In Deuteronomy 26:5, the expression; "a wandering Aramean was my father lends credence to this view. Every Israelite by implication of this statement is being reminded of his or her nomadic pastoral background. Therefore, in the Old Testament, every Israelite was a shepherd, a pastoral husband man or woman. This idea was well

developed that when David remarked in Psalm 23:1; “the Lord is my shepherd...” he had shepherded his father’s flock (1Sam. 17:34-36).

During the period of the patriarchs, they doubled as chief shepherds and chief priests of their families and clan. Therefore, the shepherd idea was a well-known figure among them. It was so familiar and meaningful to the people that it was used to describe not only human shepherds but also the attitude of God towards his people. In this sense, Yahweh was a shepherd and the entire Israel his flock. In the Old Testament, this idea was used in three chief ways.

Firstly, it was used to describe the general relationship between God and the people of Israel and this was expressed in several passages of the scriptures; he is our God, we are the people of his pastures, the sheep of his hand (Ps. 95:6, 7 ). Again, it was said of the people of Israel; “He will feed his flock like a shepherd” (Isaiah 40: 11). In Ezekiel, intimate relationship was intended: “...I will seek out my sheep and rescue them.... I will bring back the strayed...bind up the crippled...strengthen the weak..., the fat and the strong, I will watch over, I will feed them in justice.” (34: 11-16).

Secondly, it was used to describe the work of the religious and political leaders whom God appointed to care for his people and instruct to keep the law He gave to Moses. The people needed constant instruction and care from human shepherds; the priests and the prophets led them in worship, taught and counseled them on religious and moral questions, while the judges and the kings protected them from enemy nations and administered justice in the land.

Thirdly, it was used in a special way when God’s people were suffering defeat and oppression for lack of good leadership. Prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah used the good shepherd in this sense. Believing that God will never wholly forsake His people, they looked forward expectantly to the coming of a new leader, the one true shepherd (Ezek. 34: 23), the righteous branch who would execute justice and righteousness in the land (Jer. 23: 5), who will feed his flock gather the lambs in his arms (Isa.40: 11). It was as a good shepherd as well as a princely ruler that the prophets foresaw the coming of Jesus, the messiah who would save and redeem God’s people Israel.

### **Good shepherd figure in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, the idea of the good shepherd was chiefly used in two ways; Jesus was described as the great shepherd of the sheep (Matt.16: 18). On the other hand, the human leaders of the flock of God were also described as shepherds (Acts 20:28; 1Pet.5:2, 3). In the gospel of John, Jesus said of himself; I am the good shepherd who calls my sheep by name...and the sheep follow me, for they know my voice.... I am the door of the sheep...if anyone enters by me, he shall be saved. (10: 1-6).

The highest meaning of the good shepherd is exemplified in the life and ministry of Jesus (Onwu; 2002). The writer to the Hebrews also referred to Jesus as the “the great shepherd of the sheep who overcomes death by the blood of the covenant (Heb.13: 20). As the Lord and master, he humbled himself and became a servant (Phil. 2: 5ff) in sharp contrast of the idea of leadership of his time. He served those whom he led and not to be served by them (Mark 10: 45). He was one with the people and shared in the lives of those he came to seek and save. According to Stott (1985: 28), he experienced joy, sorrow, hunger, pain, anger, tiredness, disappointment etc.

Similarly, as in the Old Testament, the idea of the good shepherd was also used to describe the human leaders of the flock of God. Jesus told his apostles that they too and all his disciples were called to be servants (Mark 10: 42-44). He commanded Peter on whose confession the church is founded to “feed my lamb..., tend my sheep.” (John. 21: 17). In the apostolic Church, the apostles understood their position as that of shepherds. Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus to “take heed to yourselves and to the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts. 20: 28). Again, Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that they were servants of Christ himself, of God and of other people (1Cor. 3: 5; 4: 1; 2Cor. 4: 5). Peter equally exhorted leaders of the Churches in Asian minor to tend the congregation in their charge “willingly...eagerly...being examples to the flock” (1 Peter. 5: 2, 3).

Consequently, the New Testament description of the ministry concentrates on the committed service of leaders in the Church to fellow believers by means of which the whole body of Christ is nourished and grows to maturity. The Apostle Paul’s description of a leader is “fellow servant.” He was not meant to be a distinct personality. Hence, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers

confers to all baptized believers the authority to share in the care ministry of the Church. It is clear that the New Testament does not point to the ecclesiastical structure of hierarchy or to the authority that is constitutive of, over and above the Church except its Lord; nor to a ministry that is distinctive from and superior to the people of God.

### **Leadership in the New Testament Church**

Leadership in the New Testament was understood and developed from two Greek words: *presbuteros* and *episcopos*. From Paul's writing, the identity of *presbuteros* and *episcopos* is evident. Paul wrote about the office of bishop and deacon (1 Tim. 3:1, 12). Other passages such as "them which are over you in the Lord (1 Thess. 5: 12), "them which have rule over you" (Heb. 13: 7) and such persons as Stephanas, to whom the Christians in Corinth owe both honor and obedience, show signs of the embryonic form of a distinctive Presbyterian and Episcopal order in the New Testament Church.

However, it is noted that the terms *episcopos* and *presbuteros* are the same and were used interchangeably. Titus 1: 5-7 points to the identification in Paul's mind of the terms *presbuteros* and *episcopos*; "that thou should set in order the things that are wanting and ordain elders (*presbuteroi*) in every city as I appointed thee: if anyone be blameless, the husband of one wife, having believing children who are not charged with riotousness or unruly, for a bishop (*episcopos*) must be blameless."

It is evident from the passage that Paul says nothing about the qualification of a *presbuteros* whose appointment he has just mentioned but says something about the qualification of the *episcopos* of whose appointment he has said nothing. Therefore, we can be reasonably certain that the term *episcopos* did not denote for the New Testament Church an office distinct from and superior to the presbyterate. From this point of view, if there existed ecclesiastical order in the New Testament, its purpose may not be to create offices, titles and their relation to one another but to create a true and enduring life of the Church in such orders. Even though, there was possibility of progress in the approach to episcopacy; it was not in terms of a concrete institution but in terms of authority.

This view was demonstrated by Paul who recognized no legitimate structure within the Church such as to limit the degree and manner of his own authority. Accordingly, the commissioning of the

twelve, constituted as an authority to act in the name of the Lord, to stand in the same relationship to him as that in which he stands with the Father, not as a separate institution above the church. It is around and upon this authority that the Church first comes into being and thereafter lives (Kidder; 2009).

Consequently, all Christians are to do the work of the ministry. Such texts as Matthew 18: 18; “whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven...” and “go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28: 19ff) were addressed to the whole disciples and not the twelve apostles alone. Hence, Matthew knows no distinctive and restricted authority in the Church constitutive of it and dominant over it. The fact remains that the evangelist Matthew knows the authority of the Church, the authority of him who presiding over the Church, speaks in the name of the Church. That he omitted this limited reference to the twelve seems that the distinctive authority of the apostles over and above the Church was unknown.

Though, the twelve no doubt, were the obvious and indeed the inevitable seat and sources of authority; within a few years after the election of Mathias, whose election was to bear witness to the risen Christ, the guiding authority of the Church and the title that ought to have the authority of the Lord virtually disappeared from history. Paul believed that his call on the road to Damascus (Gal. 1: 1, 2), the conformity of his teaching to the accepted and universal tradition of the Church (1 Corinth. 13:36; 15: 1ff), the possession of the authentic word of the Lord unknown to his hearers (1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Corinth.7: 10), his position as the founding father of the Church (1 Corinth. 4:15; 2 Corinth. 10: 14), his primacy in service and suffering and the charismatic vindication of his apostolate (2 Corinth. 11:16ff; 12: 12), conferred upon him the authority to act on behalf of the Lord.

Hence, pastoral ministry in the New Testament was service in the name of God to the people. There were leaders who took the ultimate responsibility for leading, teaching, caring for and protecting the church (Adams; 2013) and their leadership was a dynamic process of interaction, persuasion and right timing between the shepherds and the sheep” (Atkerson; 2010). It is a call to servant-leadership (Osei-Mensah; 1990).



### **Delivering the Goods**

The success of the Church in fulfilling its mandate in every age according to Baxter (1658) depends on the quality of the pastoral ministry operational within the Church. From the point of view of the Good Shepherd, the work of the pastor consists in tending, caring and feeding the sheep; demanding that the shepherd gets involved in the project. The above tasks demand his devotion, love, commitment, knowledge and all the insight and strength he can muster. In order to deliver the good, the following functions of the shepherd are recommended.

### **Multiplication of the Flock**

One basic aspiration of any oriental shepherd is to earn prestige through raising his flock so that they grow in number. This accounts for the rearing of sheep for prestige, for sacrifice and not for the meat. The people of Massai of Kenya do not sell their flock for any reason even the dead ones. The death of any animal causes so much pain to shepherds that death of many of them would engender relocation to a new place. The flock reproduces to bring about growth and prosperity and shepherds derive joy from this. But the advice of Coleman (1963: 21) that Christ's concern "was not with programs to reach to multitudes, but with men whom the multitude would follow" and that of Peter White quoted by Mckee (2011) that "the churches that have been characterized by the most spectacular growth in numbers... have also featured... a systematic approach to the detailed discipling of individual," offer useful insight into the correct attitude to be adopted in multiplying the flock

### **Leading the Flock**

A shepherd sees himself as a leader of the flock. He gives them sense of direction. By this, he leads them to safe places where they can feed on good pasture and get good water (Psalm 23:1-3). The choice of pastoral field is crucial to the shepherd because of the interest he has for the flock. The shepherd will naturally be watchful such that he keeps his flock from any impending danger and rises in defense of them in case of attack by wild animals.

### **Knowledge of the Flock**

A very important virtue of shepherd is knowledge of his flock. The intimate relationship between the shepherd and the flock enables him to know his flock. He has a way of naming and identifying his flock. He knows them by name and has intimate and committed relationship with them. Knowledge of the behaviour of the sheep is necessary; their behaviour and their feeling of emotions and responds to such; when they are sick, hungry, happy, agitated. It includes knowledge of diseases that attack them, skills and strategies of shepherding and knowledge of herbs and traditional medicines for the animals.

### **Love of his Flock**

A shepherd is emotionally attached to his flock. He loves them with a passion. The Fulani herdsmen for instance, take along with them musical instrument (flute) which they use to sing to the animals when they are tired and distressed to make them happy. In appreciation, the animals shake their heads and tails and through this exercise, they are revived. This is also expected of the pastors to always show love and care to their flock (the Church) not only when things are working out fine but even when things are difficult. At such point of difficulty, the pastor should organize programmes that will restore their confidence and trust in God.

### **Provision of Good Pasture**

A shepherd is always on the look out for the best pasture for his flock. In pursuance of this, he travels with his animals over long distances in search of pasture fields and will not rest until one is found. Good pasture keeps the flock in good health, robust and reproductive. When they lack nourishment, they cannot reproduce, they become weak and this leads to death. It is incumbent upon the church's leaders as pastors to nourish their members with the word and sound doctrines (Kidder, 2009).

### **Rescue of Stray Animal**

A shepherd is concerned about every animal no matter how many are in his flock. He could for a while leave the rest of the herd, which are safe to search and rescue just one that is lost or gone astray. Jesus illustrated this by the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7; Mathew 18:12-14). A sick animal receives intense attention from the shepherd

until it is healed and able to join the rest of the herd. In the light of the foregoing, the Church leaders are expected to do the same with their straying members. They should not be concerned only on the ones that are inside the Church.

### **Adaptation to Nomadic Life**

Shepherds have no permanent home as they wander from place to place with their flock living in tents. The environment may be harsh to them yet they try to adapt as long as it is suitable for their flock. The comfort of their flock is their ultimate concern. Hence, they possess qualities of patience, self-control and fortitude. In spite of the harsh conditions of nomadic life, sheep are stupid and behave in a most annoying manner. The shepherd has to work on them patiently using both the staff and the rod (Psalm 23:4). Above all, he lives a life of sacrifice. Church leaders in respect of the nomadic lifestyle should not accept postings and transfers only when it has to do with developed or urban places.

### **Conclusion**

From the point of view of the Good Shepherd, the pastoral ministry is service; of knowing, feeding, guiding, seeking and leading the flock of God. It emphasizes that the pastor as shepherd is called to serve the people. Therefore, from the standpoint of the Good Shepherd, it falls short of establishing as the core and centre of the Church a ministry that is separate from the people. The master-servant attitude of the current leadership in the Church is a far cry from the intended shepherd-sheep relationship. It is a clear indication that the contemporary Church is not following in the footsteps of her master. As a result, there is the urgent need for those upon whom the Lord has entrusted the care of his Church to adopt the Good Shepherd approach in their relationship with the people of God.

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