

Attention Pastors! Are you a Shepherd or a Cowboy?

By Chaplain Rod Davis

“Take care of my sheep.”—Jesus

Dear Pastor,

I want to ask you a serious question. Indeed, I believe the Holy Spirit wants me to ask you this. Are you a shepherd or a cowboy? What’s the difference? One very simple difference is this; shepherds lead, cowboys drive. The old Rawhide TV theme song pretty much expresses the cowboy mentality of many who call themselves pastors.

“Keep movin’, movin’, movin’,
though they’re disapprovin’,
Keep them dogies movin’, rawhide.
No need to understand them.
Just rope ‘em, throw, and brand ‘em.
Soon we’ll be livin’ high and wide.”¹

Yes indeed, rope and brand ‘em, claim ‘em, and possess ‘em. Live hide and wide off the sheep. Who needs the reputation of being a loving shepherd? It’s best to be known, as one pastor I know, as a “shrewd businessman.” I don’t mean any unkindness, but I firmly believe that God is disgusted with cowboys who have the audacity to call themselves shepherds. Jeremiah gives an excellent description of spiritual cowboys.

“From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them,” says the LORD. (Jeremiah 6:13-15)

Jeremiah went on to say that God pronounces a curse on these so-called shepherds.

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel [the Church], says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:1-2)

I believe that one of the problems causing preachers to have an identity crises is this; just because one has a gift of preaching and teaching God’s WORD it doesn’t necessarily mean that they are called to be a pastor. Communication skills are helpful for the office but they do not necessarily distinguish one as being a true called of God shepherd. Yet, our pulpits have many with talent but few with the genuine call to be a Pastor.

Then they will cry out to the LORD, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done. This is what the LORD says: "As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him. Therefore night will come over you, without visions, and darkness, without divination. The sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them. [God will remove the light of revelation]. The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God." (Micah 3:47)

I was under such a pastor many years ago. So, I know from personal experience what I'm talking about. In the years since I left his church, I've heard horror stories from others who have left. Occasionally, I would hear from a few who are still there. [Indeed, I have a few stories of my own]

They've told me that there's still a lot of hoopla on Sundays. The praise is high energy and the "pastor" still bounces off the walls for 45 minutes. It's all very entertaining. The problem is, however, that people are not being disciplined, and worst yet, they're not being cared for properly. Plus, very little practical concern is offered for people who are genuinely hurting. It sickens me and breaks my heart and I'm sure it breaks the heart of God.

As a result the church is imploding. The "pastor" is preaching to mostly empty seats with a small scattering of the faithful few still there. Even some of the diehard church founders have left. In addition, the "pastor" has gone from being fulltime to part-time pastor. And in order to make ends meet, he has gone back to his old secular job that he had before the church was established.

I saw it coming and I take no pleasure in the fact that I was right in my prediction. I remember when it was once a great church, but now it's only a shadow of its former self. I remember the pastor when he would weep over the lost and hurting to whom he was reaching out. Sadly, I watched as over the years he went from being a young *Saul*, humbled by the calling on his life, to a controlling, self-serving *Saul* throwing spears at anyone who questioned him. It pains me deeply for I love the man very much.

Too often this happens in churches when people are drawn to personalities rather than to someone who has God's anointing to care for the sheep. They flock to preachers who have dynamic speaking abilities and great charisma. They follow these "personalities" whether or not he has a *pastoral* anointing on him. Then when they need pastoral care very little is available. Yet, people continue to blindly follow these personalities.

It's much like going out to dinner but only for the dessert. It's sweet and pleases the taste buds but offers very little nourishment. In addition if one continues eating nothing but dessert, they'll soon find themselves literally starving to death.

Another problem with having cowboys instead of shepherds is that it breeds spiritual

co-dependency. Church members are not fed, nor are they taught how to feed themselves. Therefore, they remain hungry. So, they continue to come back to the table again and again for more dessert. They are not nourished. Nor are they satisfied, and never will be, with this inapt feast. Yet, they keep bellying up to the dessert counter week after week for another plate of sweets as they continue to slowly starve to death.

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." (John 21:16)

It doesn't take long to discern the difference between a shepherd and a cowboy. Jesus told us what to look for. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) In the eyes of a true shepherd the sheep have priority over personal ambition. After his family they're his first concern. It would seem that very few of those behind pulpits today have this shepherd mentality.

They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain. (Isaiah 56:11)

Cowboys feel differently about the sheep, "Lay down my life for my congregation?! You mean I'm to lay aside personal agendas if they conflict with the office I hold, if the sheep are neglected for the sake of pursuing MY ministry?! You have got to be kidding me! Don't you know that *I* have a *vision* and these people are here to help *me* fulfill it?!"

The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! 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 use the resources the sheep provide for your personal goals but neglect the hands-on care needed by the sheep] You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick 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.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

“Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! May his arm be completely withered, his right eye totally blinded!”
—God (Zechariah 11:17)

“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi [Pastor]’” —Jesus (Matthew 23:5-7)

Undaunted, these pseudo-pastors, either directly or indirectly, continue destroying and scattering the flock. Why do they hang on to an office to which they haven’t been called? It’s simple; they love the recognition, the esteem, and the money. They love to be called “Pastor”, or “Reverend”, but to lay aside personal ambitions for the sake of the sheep doesn’t inter into their mind. Rather, they see their congregation as their own personal support system. They’re always looking for ways that the sheep can benefit their ministry, instead of looking for ways that their ministry can benefit the sheep. For indeed what these cowboys do not realize is that the sheep *is* their ministry.

Am I implying that these misguided shepherds have no feelings for the sheep? Not at all, in their own way many do have a certain amount of concern for the sheep. It’s just that they have different priorities than a true pastor. Their agenda comes first. Therefore, their warped view of ministry tends to run roughshod over many of the very people to which they are supposed to minister. This sort of thinking comes from what Jesus called a “perverse”, or twisted generation. (Matthew 17:17) Their thinking is all twisted. And now, I believe that God is stepping in and taking matters into his own hands.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 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 have 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. (Ezekiel 34:10-16)

Pastors, please don’t miss this! In this passage God clearly shows what he expects of you. He said that pastors are to *search for the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, and protect the sheep* from the sleek and the strong who might

somehow harm the sheep. And finally, pastors are to *shepherd with justice*. If this describes your heart, your ministry, then you are a true pastor.

However, if you do not feel the compulsion of the Holy Spirit in this manner, if you don't feel driven to mold your ministry and your life around something that reflects the design founded in this scripture, then chances are you have not been called to be a pastor. You're a cowboy out to promote your own agenda at the expense of the sheep.

It may be a sincere mistake of calling on your part. But please, take serious warning on this issue. If you have any concern for the welfare of your congregation, you need to step down and let the Lord place a true shepherd in your place. You must respond in obedience in this matter. If you do not then, I have some advice for you— *get ready!* God is about to remove you and it will likely be in a way that is not going to be pleasant.

Now for a word of encouragement; I'm certain that many of those who mistakenly call themselves pastor do so out of a sincere case of mistaking identity. They sincerely mistake the call to preach as a call to pastor, as well. Hey, we all make mistakes. After all, we are but jars of clay. If this describes you I pray that God will use this message to help you do a course correction in your life. However, please do not ignore the Holy Spirit's prompting! You must fervently seek God about this issue. And in so doing, you may find that you have been missing your calling all along.

There's good news in all this though, however. It's not too late to get back on course. God has great things in store for you. Just be sensitive to his leading and everything will eventually fall into place. Our God is Sovereign Lord! He has no Plan B, and furthermore, he does not need one. Romans 8:28 says it best. "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" God's sovereign hand is indeed moving on behalf of those who love him and seek him with their whole heart. Just be still, and when the time is right, God will give you directions.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers— not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

¹ *Rawhide*, words and music by Dimitri Tiomkin & Ned Washington, Copyright Date: June 18, 1959.