

Helping Shepherds Shepherd the Flock of God

In Heb. 13:17, we read:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch over your souls as those who must give an account. To this end, allow them to lead with joy and not with grief, for that would be of no advantage to you.

This verse presents us with a very significant question. Can each of us identify at least one person who genuinely watches over our souls? The soul consists of the mind, will, and emotions. Therefore, we could also ask: Is there anyone who knows what I am thinking, what drives me, and what I am feeling? This responsibility for watching over souls is entrusted to leaders in the church, but is this really happening? How many church leaders can say they know the souls of those who have been entrusted to their care? And how are they fulfilling this responsibility, as those who will give an account to God?

The reason I bring this up is because I believe the very structure of many churches makes it difficult to carry out this responsibility. Many churches look to lead pastors to teach, lead, and care for the flock, but how many souls can pastors truly care for? And if they can't watch over every soul, how will this happen? Surely the solution is for multiple shepherds to fulfill this responsibility.

Consider the example of a literal flock and shepherd. What happens when one shepherd is responsible for too many sheep? To begin with, it's dangerous for the sheep. Sheep tend to stray, and sheep that stray become subject to deprivation and even attack. And the attempt to watch over too many sheep can also be very unhealthy for the shepherd.

Unfortunately, these dynamics are present in all too many churches. How many souls, then, can one shepherd actually watch over? Is there anything we can learn from the Bible itself that can guide us in this? Interestingly, in 1 Cor. 16:19, the apostle Paul writes:

Aquila and Prisca greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.

I don't believe the size of houses in Paul's day, on the average, was larger than the size of houses in our day, yet those meeting there were regarded as actual churches (see also Rom. 16:5, Col. 4:15, Philemon 1:2). Could this be an indicator of an appropriate size of each flock—the number that could gather in one home?

And can we learn something from Jesus' relationship with His disciples? Although He taught the multitudes, He chose just twelve to be closest to Him. Does this serve as another indicator of how many souls a shepherd can actually watch over?

Of course, we have many examples in Scripture of large groups coming together for teaching and other purposes (e.g., Matt. 5:1-2). However, in terms of actually shepherding, we see that this was accomplished in settings that were quite small, where the shepherds could actually know and watch over the souls entrusted to their care (Acts 2:42-47).

Many churches in our day have small groups and group leaders, but we must still ask: Is anyone truly watching over the souls of the people?

As we reflect on this question, we might ask if there are enough shepherds to care for God's flock if each flock was quite small—similar to the number of Jesus' closest disciples.

Based on my observation, I have come to believe there are many more than we might have thought. Many have them don't feel called to speak to hundreds or thousands of people week by week—and they don't want to, but they find great fulfillment in carrying out the roles of a shepherd, which include teaching, counseling, performing weddings and funerals, visiting the sick, etc.

What a blessing it could be to lead pastors if churches were filled with shepherds who could carry out these functions, and how beautiful it would be if such churches within churches learned to multiply, giving birth to new churches within their churches or beyond.

When shepherds of small groups lead well, they can be entrusted with more responsibilities, which may include shepherding other shepherds. As churches seek leaders for the larger flock, what better training and proving ground could there be than these smaller groups where shepherds are able to demonstrate their faithful oversight and care?

And how glorious it would be to see the impact this has on culture itself. Many dysfunctions in societies throughout the world come from the absence of any soul to truly bond with. What a difference it would make if shepherds were able to fulfill this role—and to equip others to do the same.

This is how God's kingdom grew in the earliest days of the Church, and if it happened then, why can't it happen now?

God hasn't changed, but have we?

For all these reasons, one of the missions of Living in the Blessing Ministries is to support shepherds in their role of shepherding God's flock. To do this in the most effective way, we believe churches should structure themselves in ways that allow multiple shepherds to care for God's flock.