**What is Christian Leadership?**

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# Abstract

There are plenty of available resources on leadership today, and a simple internet search for "leadership" can produce thousands of results. However, not all leadership styles should be utilized by all people, and Christian leaders do well to navigate away from secular leadership styles. At the core, the heart of the Christian leader should be the driving force behind their work.

A Christian leader should emulate the greatest leader of all time: Jesus, who modeled shepherd leadership. Jesus provided a model for the role of the shepherd leader and a model for the role of the follower. Jesus did not strive for fame or fortune but chose to provide for and shepherd his flock. In every aspect of Christian leadership, if Jesus modeled shepherd leadership, Christians should also.

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**What is Christian Leadership?**

A Biblical worldview must be grounded in the belief of the inerrancy of Scripture and the rightful position of Jesus in one's life. The unique aspect of Christian leadership versus secular leadership is that a Christian leader must acknowledge Jesus as the number one leader in their life (Lawrence, 1987). No one should strive to unseat Jesus. "The four Gospels portray Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Shepherd. . . . John's Gospel extends the pastoral imagery of the Old Testament, most notably in the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10:1-21)" (Gunter, 2016, p. 9).

**The Style of Leadership**

By studying shepherd leadership from the perspective of the shepherd metaphor within Scripture, one can understand a leader's identity by identifying the shepherd's purpose, characteristics, and responsibilities. Within Scripture, metaphors were often used, and "metaphors are often meaningful only to the culturally initiated" (Laniak, 2006, p. 33). The original audience of biblical accounts knew a shepherd's role (Laniak, 2006, p. 46).

The main concern of the shepherd was to care for the flock of sheep in his care. The shepherd guided and protected the flock and lived among the animals they cared for. They knew each sheep in their care, and the sheep knew their shepherd's voice. There was a familiarity with one another because of the time spent together. The sheep trusted and relied on the shepherd.

The shepherd leadership model is effective for Christian leadership because it follows the pattern established by God as the Shepherd of his people (Psalm 23:1). Followers of Christ rely on God to provide and protect just as sheep rely on shepherds. Additionally, the shepherd leadership model reveals the importance of the relationship between the leader and those they are leading, just as each Christian must have a personal relationship with God. "Pastoral leaders must be embedded participants in the congregation. These primarily lead by example. Shepherd elders are sheep in the flock helping others follow the Shepherd" (Kinnison, 2010, pp. 90–91).

The Lord tasked the prophet, Ezekiel, with prophesying against the self-serving leaders of his time, and he also spoke of the hope of a future good shepherd to come for his people (Ezekiel 34). During Ezekiel's time, the leaders cared more about themselves and did not properly care for the people in their care. "They knew nothing about their flock; it might be diseased, infirmed, bruised, maimed, strayed, or lost, for they watched not over them" (Torrey, 2015, p. 533). Not properly caring for the flock is a sign of bad leadership. "Figuratively, the health and multiplication of a community was a sign of good leadership (Jer. 23:3)" (Laniak, 2006, p.51). A proper shepherd leader does not look out for oneself, but is working on behalf of all of those within their care. Shepherd leadership is not self-serving; it is self-giving.

**The Role of the Leader**

God is the Shepherd, and leaders are the undershepherds. Christian leaders do not own what or who they lead; they care for what is not theirs because everything belongs to God. "A good shepherd is one who sees what the Owner sees and does what the owner does. He is a follower before he is a leader. He is a leader because he is a follower" (p. 22). To understand one's identity is first to know God's identity. Nouwen (1989) explains the story of Jesus commissioning Peter to be a shepherd. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" three times (John 21:15–17). The answer to the question is critical for the shepherd leader. A shepherd leader must love God before they can lead with the same kind of grace and care God has for his flock.

Visually, people tend to think of shepherds as lonely people working by themselves for days, months, and years to tend to their flock. However, shepherding is not always a solitary vocation. Laniak (2006, p. 51) states, "While a competent shepherd can handle as many as 500 sheep and goats alone in open pasturelands, the comprehensive work of animal husbandry requires a number of able workers." Leaders, like shepherds, need to work together for the greater good of all the flocks, not be lone rangers (Nelson, 2021). Not only does this enable the community to be well cared for, but it also models the pattern of not being isolated and self-reliant. Although often physically alone in the wilderness with his flock, David, as a shepherd, was not alone because he relied upon God for all he needed (2 Samuel 7:8–9).

Christian leaders must know the direction they are going before they can lead others. Even if a leader knows their identity is in Christ, they must also know the Bible, God's greatest leadership book. Leaders find themselves in trouble when they forget what his Word says. The enemy often attempts to lure leaders away from God by twisting what God says is true. It would have been easy for Solomon to request wealth and status when asked by the Lord what he wanted, and it would have been an excellent opportunity for Satan to interject his commentary into the situation. However, Solomon knew he would not be a good shepherd for the people if he did not have abundant wisdom from God (2 Chronicles 1:7–12). Wise shepherds know how and where to lead people because the Holy Spirit guides them.

**The Role of the Follower**

Throughout the Bible, people began as followers before becoming leaders. Solomon followed the footsteps of his father, King David, and the disciples followed Jesus during his three-year ministry. As Christians today, leaders begin as followers before being promoted to leaders.

A Christian follower must learn from someone before they know how to lead. How does a Christian leader learn? They learn through the words found in Scripture as well as observing the leadership of others. David L. Steward (2004, pp.38–39) writes, "Over the years…based on my experiences with others, [I] figured out what kind of leader I'd like to be. The leaders I liked the least placed serving their own agenda before the needs of others." A follower needs to be observant. Throughout Scripture, many kings did what was right in the sight of the Lord because of, and despite what they witnessed as followers of their fathers before them (as written throughout the book of Second Chronicles).

A Christian follower must also be willing to be led. Christian followers should strive to align themselves with good leadership, which provides their followers with purpose, vision, clarity, encouragement, and care (Williams, 2010, pp. 39–42). A Christian follower should not demand position as James and John did (Mark 10:35–45). Instead, followers should be obedient in the training season and follow the leader God has placed in front of them. As the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, their complaining and lack of trust and obedience to Moses and what the Lord told him to say led them on a much longer than necessary journey in the wilderness (Numbers 11).

Lastly, a Christian follower should have discernment. Knowing right from wrong is essential to being a Christian. Sometimes if a leader is unwilling to put God in the role of Shepherd and him or her in the undershepherd's position, a leadership change might be necessary. "This change is not so much a change in form as in substance" (Laniak, 2006, p. 148). A follower should never blindly follow a leader exercising poor or immoral decision-making. The unique aspect of humanity versus animals is that God allows each person to think and choose. While sheep may blindly follow their shepherd, humans can choose to do what is right. Choosing what is right does not always guarantee a perfect ending. However, choosing what is right not only benefits the follower, it benefits everyone in their community.

**Conclusion**

Good shepherd leadership consists of a leader who recognizes their position as an undershepherd to the Good Shepherd, and that they are responsible for some number of followers. While some people might see the shepherd leadership model solely within a pastoral role, shepherd leaders can exist in any leadership setting. Additionally, while Christian leaders should have a personal relationship with the Lord, only some followers will. However, the care a shepherd leader provides will positively or negatively impact a person's life, depending on how the leader tends their flock. That is a weighty calling.

Just as Jesus willingly gave his life for his flock, a good shepherd will also. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). A shepherd leader is not about position but purpose. While shepherd leadership may be seen as weak and unimportant by the world, a shepherd leader gains strength from the greatest Shepherd of all. Therefore, the shepherd leadership style is one to emulate for all time.

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