

"...and Woe be to the Sheep"

The Modern Era of God's Church was provided Extraordinary opportunity and means of Proclaiming the Gospel to the World. Unfortunately, it also developed within itself a Culture containing the Elements of its own Demise!

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There once was a husbandman who had many sheep. These were no ordinary sheep. They were new stock carefully selected by His Father to be the progenitors of a master flock, intended to create a breed of the finest sheep possible. The husbandman was also the heir of a vast estate, which required he delegate the care of his flocks while he attended to matters of great importance elsewhere.

The husbandman assigned one hundred of his specially selected young lambs to each of various local shepherds. And not just any caretakers, but those whom he had personally trained and in whom he had placed great confidence. These selected lambs were too valuable to not receive the utmost care and protection that they would need. Upon departing, he instructed the shepherds, "dutifully feed these my special lambs".

After a lengthy assignment, dealing with the affairs of his estate, the husbandman returned and enquired as to the state of his now grown sheep. Expecting the flocks to have grown considerably, he was chagrined to find in the first flock he encountered, that there were but eighteen sheep remaining, and of those, few were strong.

Of course, it was with great consternation that he called this shepherd in for him to give account of what caused this alarming attrition of the flock in his care. After all, the husbandman had given this shepherd many good Talents in addition to those he already possessed. He had also given him many Pounds (the financial resources) to provide for the flock's needs. He had even brought that shepherd, in his youth, to a special training school to become a Professional Shepherd. Upon leaving, he had instructed this and all his other shepherds, "Occupy yourselves with this task, 'til I return". He was anxious to know what could possibly account for the massive reduction in this particular shepherd's flock.

At the appointed time, the shepherd in question came before the husbandman to give account for the state of his charge. Why had there been such an alarming reduction in this particular flock?

While acknowledging the losses, the shepherd, in justifying himself somewhat, exclaimed, "Well, at least I did uphold my office. I was able to maintain and magnify my authority position, as we were trained to do. I followed your example in every way that I could, after all. That should count for something, should it not? And, isn't that really the most important thing?"

This, of course, alarmed the husbandman greatly. What had he done (if anything) to give this shepherd the impression that his personal prestige and authority position over the flock was paramount? After all, the care of the flock was the specific commission each shepherd was given. His foremost interest was to have been in the welfare of his charge, not his own aggrandizement. The husbandman then set his mind to consider what punishment was appropriate in this egregious situation.

But then, reports began coming in from outlying flocks. It seems this phenomenon was not at all unique. In fact, it was common. In nearly every flock, the situation was similar. Only a remnant of their former numbers remained. Some flocks were more intact than others, (though all were smaller) while some were even totally gone! A lot of the shepherds had left the field. Some of them had even skimmed off a few out of the original flocks, and had 'gone independent' of the husbandman's endeavors. What had happened? What would cause such a dramatic and disappointing result?

Well, then, the husbandman learned that there had been a situation that developed with his shepherd general. This individual who was left to oversee the affairs of this endeavor overall, who while he

was humble, competent and astute originally, had developed a self-obsession, and in pursuit of his 'mission', had begun to embrace methods that were in large part a factor in the results that came to be. As challenges to his position emerged, this shepherd general considered and implemented ways to magnify his esteem and authority position. The greater welfare of the flocks became increasingly secondary at best.

In response to the shepherd general's obsession over his own authority position, the other shepherds took a cue and began to consider their positions in the scheme of things. Their own rank, as compared to others, became a matter of interest among them, and they also jockeyed for position. It had become so contentious that it was decided to eliminate the entire second echelon of authority.

Then it was also learned that the shepherds as a body had been associating just among themselves. They'd developed an affection for great banquets and the finest beverages. They were known to enjoy 'eating and drinking with the drunken' both figuratively, and even in some cases literally. Their regard for themselves, among themselves, was appreciated as a means for protecting themselves from one another's 'undue' criticisms. They at least were well fed and well funded, even if the flocks were not. A culture then developed among them, one not unlike the one that they'd experienced back during shepherd school years, that they projected out onto the flocks. It became important to 'go along to get along'. After all, we wouldn't want to alarm the sheep with any kind of controversy, would we?

The sheep then picked up on this thinking model, and thereafter declined to be in any way analytical with regard to their worsening situation. That was explained as 'exhibiting submission'.

Understanding the WHY

It should be painfully evident that this made-up story has a parallel with our experienced reality. Why is God's Church in this age in the condition that it is? Do we really know? Do we want to? Will we allow ourselves to examine ourselves, candidly, without leaving out those important details that we might deem too 'uncomfortable' to consider? And, is there a course of action that will improve our growth dynamic?

We should be aware, though not all are, that this situation is not a new thing. It occurred in history and is so well explained in the 34th Chapter of Ezekiel and the 23rd chapter of Jeremiah, that it is quite alarming. The preceding article in this two-part series explains that phenomenon.

What is Paramount?

Though men love to glory among themselves, the Apostle Paul apologized for using that approach in one situation where he felt he needed to do so¹

In so many cases in the organizations of men, status and pre-eminence can trump the responsibilities of the assignment. Shepherds are called to service – service to and for the flocks of our Lord. He can 'glory' before His Father, that of those that the Father gave Him, He has lost none.² Can our present shepherds boast the same? We know that answer. We allowed a culture to develop within our administration that had degenerative qualities embedded, and we paid the price. The results of it are by now self-evident. We need to examine that culture candidly and honestly.

True Servanthood

If we were to have considered just one definition given to us by Christ, perhaps things could have been different. The carnal desire for preeminence surfaced more than once even among the original disciples. Even as late as Jesus' last evening before His crucifixion, (Luke 22:24-27), at the Passover no less, the disciples thought it important to establish who was to be the greatest among them. This wasn't the first time that we know of. The matter had come up just a few days before.

On the road going up to Jerusalem a similar discussion was held. (Mk. 10:35-45). What was made especially clear in these exchanges was the definition of "Servant" as Jesus intended. His was an opposing definition from what the world thinks when it hears the word 'minister'. (minister means servant.) Being a minister in the sense He meant, was someone serving the needs of others in a self-less manner. It was the opposite of exercising authority upon people, as Gentile governments impose. (Mk. 10:42; Mt. 20:25; & Lk. 22:25)

¹ 2nd Corinthians 12:1-7

² John 17:12

But in the Church, the same error was embraced nevertheless, that the ‘minister’ occupied a position of authority, deserving unquestioned esteem and reverence. The world, at least, is transparent in that, even naming their ministers ‘Reverend’, one who is due utmost reverence! Jesus mandated otherwise. His ministers were to all be brethren, on an equal par with each other. This to pre-empt the inevitable aloofness and interpersonal competition. (Matt. 23:8, 11-12) How did we miss this?

Are You Not Carnal?

Another missed opportunity was our dismissal of Paul’s lengthy narrative against the carnality of holding the person’s of men in undue esteem. It is amazing how people can read these verses and yet continue doing the very thing they speak against. Paul even criticizes those who held the persons of men of truly great renown and accomplishment in the Church: Peter, Paul and Apollos.³ (1st Cor. 1:11 thru 3:17) It wasn’t the qualifications of these men that were at issue, it was how people regarded them, particularly as these identifications were believed to enhance their own personal status. Identifying with a prominent minister somehow was seen as enhancing the stature of the person who aligned themselves with him. People tend to think that they can become superior over others by identifying with a person they deem as superior. Here, the disease within the preeminence-seeking ministry also infected the sheep with that way of thinking! Again, had Paul’s words been taken seriously, certain problems could have been avoided. (Romans 12:3)

Ranks in the Ministry

But the next logical step, after disregarding Jesus’ instructions and Paul’s definition, there was then created, (in peoples’ minds and policies at least), a structure of increasing preeminence (ranks) for these in high regard to be placed into: The Apostle as supreme, Prophet next under the Apostle, then Evangelist, Minister, deacon, teacher, assistant, etc. and on down to the lowly member. These were

³ People back then did this with men of great renown and unquestioned credentials. People today do the same but regarding men of doubtful reputation, and under pressures from these men’s own self-serving intimidations. An even lower form of carnality.

posed as a biblically ordained ‘chain of command’, with each in lower ranks subject to the direct jurisdiction of the offices above. In actuality, this was the very thing that Jesus spoke against on more than one occasion. The question is, did our willful disregard carry a consequence?

The Church as its Organization

To uphold this structure, it was necessary to create a nominal enclave for the membership and ministry as a whole. A re-definition of “The Church” was created, that amazingly narrowed its scope to include only those who attended with this one group exclusively, and accepted such re-definition without exception. In other words, it imposed an ‘exclusivist’ “we only” self-regard, incurring further negative consequences: One being, a disdain for people who, though they believed much the same, marched to the tune of a different leader, if any. Brotherly love was redirected in a most curious way. While that narrowed entity represented itself as “the One True Church’ in this era, “the Church of Brotherly Love”, it then went on posturing as though it had no brothers, as all outsiders were labeled as false! And, the ‘love of God’ was no longer generally ‘shed abroad’, at least, not ‘in their heart of hearts’!

With this redefinition of the Church, it was posed that the Church was a two-tier entity that was divided into a clergy and a laity. It wasn’t the membership, called of God and given His Spirit, that was the major entity, as it should have been.

Exclusivism’s Barriers

Among these negative consequences were barriers against fellowship with others of like belief. Here another potent passage of scripture looms relevant.

A famous ‘bad boy’ in the early Church ministry is presented in the Epistle of 3rd John. This preeminence-loving overlord was the quintessential ‘exclusivist’. All ‘his’ followers were restricted to fellowshiping with just him within his congregation. Even the elderly Apostle John, the same who was inspired to pen the Book of Revelation, was denied access to any of Diotrephes’ congregation. And, any who violated the prohibition by reading John’s writings or fellowshiping with him, were thrown out of the Church! What is startling is that

institutionally God's Church, at times, exhibited the very same approach!

Disregarding Christ's instructions, and Paul's, led the Church into this condition. The characteristic remains in many of the 'splinter groups'. They also 'prate against' their counterparts. (v.10)

Now, being thrown out of the Church in the first century was a formidable matter. It isn't like there were alternatives at the time. The threat apparently was effective, even causing people who should've known better to disrespect the Apostle John.

Cut Off from God's Spirit

Another related barrier against interacting with other 'brother' churches is the suggestion that to be disfellowshipped from this one group effects the loss of God's Spirit. This too is a formidable matter for those new in the faith. It is intimated that the ministry has the say in and is the dispenser of God's Spirit. (In other words, that God regards their judgments in such matters, right or wrong.) Nothing could be further from the truth! But it worked! It's amazing how well it worked. To lose favor with the ministry was posed as a major danger area, spiritually. A generation later, members still don't have the courage to investigate the positions of their 'brother' organizations, let alone have the spiritual maturity to take up matters of difference with their counterparts. This ability was never instilled. It would never have been considered. No such interaction was allowed. So, the membership lacked in another important ability, due to ministerial imposition. In effect, they stood between brother and brother.

But the net effect of such prohibition created the loss of an important dynamic. Members were not 'Bereanizing', they weren't really growing nor were they able to function as the 'pillars and grounds of the truth' that 1st Timothy 3 refers to them as being. Theological matters were 'left to the professionals', and as we now know, not all of them were on the same page. Not all believed the same. And, there were some among them that were wolves in sheep's clothing.

This brings up another matter. If one in a flock in the field saw a wolf or lion approaching, should the first to see it bleat out, or should he remain quiet

and slink away to a safer place, perhaps protecting his own hide, but leaving the others to discover the danger for themselves? (And, possibly not!)

Another ramification of the Diotrephesian culture was how easily the lowly member developed a resentment, hatred even, for those in disfavor with their esteemed minister. On more than one occasion, this writer witnessed members who for all appearances fellowshipped amenably and apparently loved each other. But practically overnight, when a political schism developed, they polarized against their dissenting brethren, siding with their minister. Love of the brethren, as it is called, was exposed as being based not on the indwelling of God's Spirit, as it should be, but on ones' organizational affiliation. Another dynamic was abandoned: true brotherly love. (1st John 3:10-16, Heb. 13:1-3 etc.) We allowed our expression of love for our brethren to be manipulated by petty political considerations. Does that please God?

Standing as Intermediaries

This brings us to the next consideration. We saw the shepherds posturing as though they could intervene between the individual and God with respect to the receipt of God's Spirit. But also, we saw them standing between one member and another, both in the love toward and the inter-communications between one another. The net effect of the latter was that the members never developed normal spiritual relationships with one another. Not the kinds of relationships necessary in order to perform their important congregational responsibilities, such as we read of in Hebrews 3:13 & 10:24-25 and Romans 12:4-16. The Church was effectively undermined of the strengths and integrity it should have had through the bonds that ought to exist among brethren. In that condition, it was easy for Satan or for a froward minister to cause discord and division.

Due Diligence

The opening premise of this article was "...*Woe to the Sheep*". The companion article addressed the woes pronounced upon the shepherds as expressed in Ezekiel 34. But what part of the unfortunate condition is due to the actions of God's sheep?

Sheep are typically seen as a compliant breed.

Where the analogy breaks down is in our perceptions of sheep as unwaveringly loyal to their shepherd. This can be a virtue, but it can also be a danger. Where the difference comes is in who the sheep take their true shepherd to be. When we look to the local shepherd as being the primary authority in our lives and not our Lord and Savior, we place ourselves in extreme danger. If we fail in our personal responsibility to analyze the words and actions of the local shepherd, presuming instead that he represents the very authority of God (and if not, God will correct him, we must not), we place ourselves in danger and also others who comprise the flocks of God's elect.

Submission a Virtue

Over the years, there's been the perception that the membership is to never at any time, under any circumstance, criticize a minister. If he is wrong, God will correct him. And, thus, few ever did criticize. There were cases where egregious errors were made – heart-wrenching misjudgments and hurtful injustices, yet, it was the rare occasion where any of those injuries were addressed in a timely manner, or corrected. This bad result was much to the credit of this approach: Holding the ministry in an inappropriately high regard (Romans 12:3) and the brethren in lowest regard.

On a broader scale, congregations have been divided and re-divided. Much of the time, due to political considerations that didn't warrant the discord that was injected into the fellowship. Again, the causes were 'minister originated', rarely was it from dissent welling up from within the congregation. Yet, after all the damage inflicted, the ministry still sees itself as worthy of the highest esteem before the brethren!

Who IS Our Master?

It was the phenomenon of holding the ministry in a near-God-plane regard that stifled God's sheep from being the wise stewards of their calling that they should have been. While the 'sheep' analogy has merit to a certain degree, it also has limits. It was never intended that God's people would check their brains at the door, much less their spiritual perceptions. Too many did! We don't have God's Spirit for nothing. It provides us with faculties that we are called upon to exercise. When we fail to

use them properly and prayerfully, we put ourselves and the welfare of our brethren at risk.

Who is our Master? To whom do we relate most closely? Far too many related more to the physical administration within the Church than to God. The term 'our personal relationship with Christ' was rarely if ever used. You see, once that consideration is given place, the structure of ministerial authority becomes secondary.

To Whose Credit?

The previous article in this series addressed the faults of **the ministry** as God presents them in places such as Ezekiel 34 & Jeremiah 23. In this one, the matter of **the sheep** is considered. Where they are and where they should be. To this point it appears to be largely the ministry that's at fault. That isn't far off, but it is important that we also place due responsibility upon the flocks as well.

The quest for perfect submission, as it was taught, was as much to our detriment as anything the shepherds themselves did. Submission to the authority of God was touted (and embraced) as the ultimate expression of righteousness, except that we assigned that as being due to the ministry. In a perfect world, that might have merit, but in the real world, it creates a vulnerability. It gives Satan and those with sinister intent to take advantage of us, to the destruction of many within the flocks. To assign God-like position to any mortal, no matter how high his esteem in the organizational structure, is highly disrespectful to God. Our first obligation is to Him and His will, not the vanities of self-serving men. They are supposed to serve the people, not the people them!

At no time were we admonished to lay down our guard. God mandated that His people were to be wise stewards of their calling, being the 'pillars and ground' of the Truth. That means we are to monitor what is being taught and uphold what we know to be the Truth. The membership is to bond together in unity, not allowing any political wind to cause discord. We **MUST** 'speak often to one another' as Malachi 3:16-17 commends, with matters of importance, not just irrelevant chit chat. Those who do are the 'jewels in God's Crown'. And if we fail to do so, we will continue to be the facilitators of our own congregational demise! 