

The New Shepherd Leaders - John Sweetman

In this article, John looks at the special kind of leaders God promises his people in Jer. 3:15. He challenges all Christian leaders to be the breed of leader that God is raising up to shepherd his people.

Jeremiah 3:15 Leadership

I have been working through Jeremiah in my Bible study recently. It can be a rather repetitive book, but I've found it full of beautiful imagery and wonderful promises.

One verse particularly captivated me: "Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will lead you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer 3:15). I have been looking for a clear biblical description of Christian leadership, and I think that this is it.

Let me briefly describe the context underlying this verse. Basically the leaders had let Israel down. Early on as a nation, they had been led by some excellent guys (epitomised by David), but as time went on the quality of leadership deteriorated (with a few exceptions).

By the time Jeremiah came on the scene, the northern kingdom had been carted off into exile by the Assyrians and the southern kingdom (Judah) lay on the verge of extermination by Babylon. God was judging them for their ongoing spiritual rebellion. God makes it clear that he's laying the blame for the state of the nation firmly on the shoulders of the leaders.

Ezekiel (prophesying at the same time) rips into the leaders calling them abusive shepherds who prey on the flock and then abandon it (see Ezek. 34). You can see that God had a very low opinion of the leaders of his people.

But God promises that he will not abandon his people. He will raise up a new shepherd (Jesus - Ezek. 34:23-24) and new shepherd leaders (Jer. 3:15) who will genuinely reflect God's heart for his people.

I think that we (along with many others) are those leaders God has raised up and is raising up through Jesus. These new leaders who will follow Jesus and lead in the way God wants.

Leading as a Shepherd

The idea of shepherd is fairly deeply entrenched in the Christian psyche, but it really is a rather unusual word to describe a leader. I don't tend to think of a business CEO or a national politician as a "shepherd." The picture is too pastoral, too placid, too gentle. Leaders are dynamic, visionary, progressive, and powerful. Somehow "shepherd" just doesn't seem to cut it for an effective leader.

Yet this is the word God uses for his leaders. Not just once, but over and over again. There's something about shepherding that echoes God's heart. Maybe it's the fact that for shepherds, the sheep come first. A shepherd's agenda is the welfare of the sheep, not significant journeys or great exploits. Healthy sheep is really what the job is all about.

By the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the leaders of Judah were driven by personal success. In Ezekiel 34, God described them as anti-shepherds who preyed on their own flock and then abandoned them. They were only concerned about personal agendas - they had no heart for the sheep. God was disgusted and promised to get rid of them.

I teach Christian leadership at Malyon. We talk about vision, core values, goals, strategic plans, and intentionality. They're all important, but let me make it clear - Christian leadership at its core is shepherding. It's taking responsibility for a group of people and loving them to death (like Jesus). It's laying aside all you want to achieve and, with God's help and direction, passionately pursuing their welfare and growth. It is loving sheep with everything you've got.

Oh this doesn't stop us being leaders with courage and passion. Shepherds were like that too. Young David, the shepherd, ripped lions and bears to shreds. But he did it for the sake of his sheep, not to prove his prowess or further his agenda.

For some of you, this kind of leading comes really naturally. But for others (like me) it takes effort. I tend to want to run the ranch rather than shepherd the sheep. God promised his people, "I will give you *shepherds*." I desperately want to be one of this new breed of God's leaders - a good shepherd.

These new leaders that God is raising up are good shepherds.

Leading with God's Heart

I am fascinated by this idea of leading with God's heart. What does it mean to have God's heart? This was first raised for me when I read 1 Sam 13:14 where the prophet Samuel said to King Saul after his rejection, "The Lord has sought a man after his own heart." Now there's a guilt-inducing statement. How can anyone really have God's heart?

The biblical idea of *heart* is a little different from our modern usage. We tend to think of *heart* as the centre of our emotions, feelings, passions. Whereas our *mind* is the centre of our thinking and ideas. But the Hebrews tended to lump them all together. Your *heart* was the centre of your physical and spiritual life; the origin of your thoughts and passions and of your plans and feelings. Biblically, your heart is your central core; the basis of everything that is you; your central essence; the source of all your action.

So to have God's heart means that at the centre of your life is a deep desire to obey and serve God. When it comes to the crunch, you only want God and his ways.

No Christian leader has perfectly pure motivations. We are all broken people who have been damaged by our own sin and the sin of others. But there is still a difference between Christian leaders who basically lead to meet their own needs and those who fundamentally lead to serve God. At the very heart of godly leadership is this desire: God I really want to please you and I will do what you want whatever the cost; I'm yours.

This is what God cares about in more than anything else. Your gifts, abilities and achievements mean squat if there's no godly heart driving them. As God himself said to Samuel (1 Sam. 16:7): Everyone else looks at the exterior stuff, but I am purely interested in his heart."

In my roles at Malyon College and City Life church, I see so many younger leaders who still get things wrong, but their hearts are beautiful and godly. They probably can't see it themselves, but I can. There's a fire that burns in them to serve God. They're not afraid of sacrifice.

As a Christian leader, it's important to be a shepherd. But without God's heart, you'll take people on a pleasant but ultimately insignificant journey. We must be able to say with Paul: "Follow me as I follow Christ." (1 Cor 11:1)

These new leaders that God is raising up have his heart.

Leading with Knowledge and Understanding

There is an on-going debate in leadership circles about whether leaders are born or made. I'm sure that some people have a genetic advantage, but the Bible makes it clear that Christian leaders are made. No-one is born with "knowledge and understanding." Leadership has to grow and develop.

In this context, "knowledge and understanding" refers principally to knowledge of God and his ways. Jeremiah is prophesying that God will raise up new leaders who know him and the ways he wants them to lead.

Evangelicals have not traditionally been big on academics. Our modus operandi has been just get out there and do it. You don't need degrees or qualifications. In fact, study may well remove you from the real world and dull your passion.

Well we're both right and wrong. We're right in that we certainly don't need a degree to serve God or make a difference. God expects and empowers every believer to be a person of influence. Study has nothing to do with it.

But we're wrong if we are implying that we don't need to study the Bible in depth to lead with "knowledge and understanding." The main way we get to know how God operates is to study his Word. Of course, not every leader will do this at a formal level, but some of us need to.

We need leaders who know the Bible, who understand their contexts and histories, who can think theologically, and who can interpret the times from God's perspective. Otherwise we'll just be swept away by cultural trends and values. And there's plenty of evidence that this is happening to some wings of evangelicalism.

Yes, I am principal of a theological college, and you could accuse me of pushing my barrow. Well you're right in a way. But the reason I entered theological education after 25 years of pastoral leadership in churches is because I firmly believe that God is raising up shepherd leaders who really know God and can apply his truth thoughtfully to the contexts in which they lead. This is my calling - to equip godly shepherds to lead with knowledge and understanding.

These new leaders that God is raising up lead with knowledge and understanding.

Well I've said my bit. God is continuing to raise up these new leaders for his people. They are leading with God's heart. They are shepherding with knowledge and understanding. This is happening as God promised. I pray that you will be one of these new leaders.

John Sweetman is the Principal of Malyon College and Director of Malyon Leadership. He lectures in the fields of pastoral ministry, leadership and preaching.