

The Shepherd Metaphor: Guidance for Contemporary Leadership from John 10

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Abstract

The introduction of follower-sensitive leadership theories has burgeoned as leaders seek ethical, effective methods for a new generation of employees. As research strives to uncover sound principles and distill leadership truths, the ageless wisdom of Scripture remains filled with guidance. One leadership lesson that appeared throughout Scripture and that remains relevant to contemporary leaders is the shepherd metaphor (Swalm, 2010). This paper considers one of the many shepherd references, the Good Shepherd pericope of John 10:1-18, through application of socio-rhetorical analysis (Robbins, 1996) with specific consideration of the ideological texture. Beginning with exegesis of John 10 and considering ideological perspectives of ancient and contemporary audiences, practical guidance for today's leaders is developed. Rich lessons in leadership make the shepherd metaphor valuable in informing leaders in behaviors, styles, and leadership philosophies that are as effective now as when they were recorded over 2000 years ago.

Keywords: John 10, socio-rhetorical, ideological, shepherd leadership, Christian leadership, leadership, Biblical leadership.

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There is increased interest by contemporary leaders in discovering approaches that are both effective and moral in the complex, global environment of today's workplace (Hickman, 2010). As with much of discovery, theory development often mirrors the age-old lessons of Scripture, and for the Christian leader who struggles with the leadership calling and seeks Spirit driven leadership, drawing lessons from Scripture can be helpful in resolving the paradox of leadership ambition (Sanders, 2007). The shepherd metaphor, reflecting how leaders guide, protect, and provision (Swalm, 2010) as followers head their leaders voice, offers a unique picture of Christian leadership (Sanders, 2007), but to discern meaningful Scriptural lessons on leadership from God's Word, solid exegesis is essential (Bekker, 2006). Contemporary leadership books increasingly use Scripture as their framework (Swalm, 2010), and similarly this study drew insight from the shepherding metaphor depicted in John 10:1-18. The shepherd imagery is one of the most employed metaphors in Scripture, occurred over 500 times across the Old and New Testaments of the Bible (Swalm, 2010).

While the shepherd image is generally familiar (Swalm, 2010), through socio-rhetorical analysis, the ideological texture of the text was examined to consider how ideological predisposition of readers effect the interpretation (Robbins, 1996). The good shepherd in John is quite generally understood as depicting the care and protection offered by Jesus to his flock, but this paper concentrated on the leadership lessons of the pericope with particular attention to the ideological limits in interpretation introduced by today's increasingly non-agrarian society. Augustine believed that Jesus was not only addressing the Pharisees in the good shepherd lessons, but the contemporary audience of the early church as well (Wright, 2012). Similarly, the Good Shepherd pericope speaks to contemporary Christian leaders seeking wisdom. The

research question for this work was: How can the Good Shepherd metaphor of John 10 inform contemporary Christian leaders as they seek wise, effective leadership approaches?

Ideological Texture of Socio-Rhetorical Analysis

The socio-rhetorical approach to textual interpretation considers the text through multiple perspectives to reveal how social systems and language interact to color the analysis (Robbins, 1996). Five textures or perspectives have been identified by Robbins (1996) as useful when exploring the text including; inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture (p. 3). Western ideologies, presuppositions, and an increasingly urban worldview can bias the interpretation of ancient texts, and those reader constraints make exploring the ideological texture of John 10 of particular interest. Probing the ideological texture through socio-rhetorical analysis examines how beliefs, biases, stereotypes, opinions, individual values, assumptions, and presuppositions bias the interpretation, and during the investigation often underlying lessons are revealed (Robbins, 1996). In John 10, the socio-rhetorical ideological exploration was used to “peel away” western ideological filters and reveal the rich lessons from the good shepherd metaphor.

The Good Shepherd Discourse of John 10:1-18

The Gospel of John contributed not only unique perspectives on Jesus, his deity, and his ministry, but insight into characteristics necessary to be effective disciples (DeSilva, 2004, p. 391). The good shepherd narrative of John 10:1-18 offered just such unique insights on lessons in leadership directly from Jesus. The Johannine metaphors in general have not received the attention or appreciation of the synoptic parables, but they can offer equally rich understandings (Kysar, 1991). It was within the setting of John’s Christology with its unique contributions to the “identity and significance of Jesus” (DeSilva, 2004, p. 417) that the shepherd narrative depicted

characteristics of the good shepherd, the leader who protected, guided and cared for the flock. Shepherd imagery appeared throughout the Bible beginning in Genesis (Stanley, 1961), and according to Swalm (2010) shepherding occurred over 500 times across the Old Testament and New Testament. The great Old Testament leaders, Moses and David, were shepherds both of sheep and God's chosen people, while many of the Old Testament prophets also used shepherd imagery as they proclaimed their revelations. The Psalms were also filled with shepherd references and many New Testament Gospel parables used sheep and shepherds to illustrate their lessons (Stanley, 1961). Even in the judgment described in Matthew 25:32, "Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" the Lord was depicted within the shepherd metaphor (Stanley, 1961). Ezekial 34 was the likely precursor for the Good Shepherd pericope in John 10 (Wright, 2012) and depicted a messianic shepherd who gathered his scattered sheep (Scott, 1995). Ancient shepherds were not always viewed in a positive light, presenting a mixed image at best, so Jesus was clear to present himself as the "good shepherd" in John 10 (Scott, 1995) who was sacrificial and loving (Wright, 2012). The prevalence of shepherding in Scripture suggests that the several aspects of herding and caring for sheep are useful for depicting proper relationships between Christ and his people and those characteristics can similarly offer lessons in leadership (Tenney, 1981).

Commentators differ in their view of how John 10:1-18 was structured with many concluding that there are 2 sections, verses 1-5 and 7b-18 with 6-7a used to transition (Kysar, 1991), while others divide the discourse into three parts, verses 1-6 the door and the shepherd, verse 7-10 explaining the door, and 11-18 describing the good shepherd (Quasten, 1948). Regardless of the exact structure, the sections of John 10 are linked (Martin, 1978) and related in

that they apply metaphorical language of either the gate or shepherd to illustrate the shepherd principles (Kysar, 1991). The significance of this narrative by Jesus was emphasized by the use of the terms “truly, truly” in both verses 1 and 7 of John 10, a phrase that established the message as a solemn assertion (Tenney, 1981). The sheep pen to which the passage referred was a rough structure or cave with a single opening through which the sheep entered and departed, and it provided protection from animals, thieves who used trickery, and robbers who used violence, none of which cared for the welfare of the sheep (Tenney, 1981). The shepherd would enter legitimately by the door of the pen, and anyone entering another way was not to be trusted or followed (Martin, 1978; Tenney, 1981). The pen was typically shared by a number of flocks, and in the morning when they were called, the sheep would know their shepherd’s voice, and trusting the shepherd to lead them to the proper pasture, they willingly following (Grant & Easton, 1929; Tenney, 1981). The depiction and contrast of the shepherd and the thieves and robbers, illustrated the legitimacy of the messianic Jesus as the good shepherd unlike the false or lesser shepherds (Grant & Easton, 1929; Tenney, 1981). While Jesus used common imagery of the shepherd and gate in verses 1-5, verse 6 revealed that even the relatively simple figure of speech or allegory was not understood by those spiritually blind (Tenney, 1981; Wright, 2012), a condition that may also contribute to lack of full understanding by contemporary readers.

In John 10:7, Jesus once more emphasized the importance of the coming lessons with the phrase “truly, truly” as he described himself as the door to the sheep. The shift of descriptions was not an abandonment of the shepherd metaphor, but rather further clarification as the shepherd also served as the sheep pen door, allowed access to the pen, inspected each sheep for needed care, and then laid across the entrance to prevent any unauthorized access (Tenney, 1981). The illustration of both caring, protection, and judgment of worthiness for entrance

offered further refinement of the characteristics of the good shepherd as contrasted with the “thieves and robbers” (v.8, 10), false messiahs, and religious leaders who had come prior to Jesus. Jesus continued to emphasize legitimacy and authenticity as elements of good shepherd leadership. The discernment or judgment characteristic of the good shepherd was further revealed in John 10:9 as the sheep were saved when entering by Jesus, the door to salvation, echoing John 14:6 where Jesus explained to Thomas, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (ESV). The Good Shepherd was sacrificial, even laying down his life for those in his care (v.11), in contrasts not only with those who would harm the sheep, the thieves and robbers, but even those who are not invested like the hired shepherds (v.12-13) (Tenney, 1981) who desert in the face of danger or pressure. In verses 14-15, the basis of the care and sacrifice was revealed as a deep relationship of trust and intimacy between the sheep and shepherd, compared to the relationship Jesus has with the Father (Tenney, 1981). The Good Shepherd message concluded with the theological broadening of his “one flock” to include others not of the fold (v. 16), the Gentiles, for whom Jesus would also lay down his life (Neyrey, 2001).

The “voluntary nature of Jesus’ death was clearly stated” for the first time in John’s Gospel (Stanley, 1961, p. 293) as the final verse of the good shepherd passage clarified Jesus’ authority in choosing to lay down his life and take it up again. It is in that wholly voluntary nature, the free choice, that the proper depiction of the good shepherd was revealed as the essential sacrificial caregiver on a mission from the Father (Neyrey, 2001; Stanley, 1961). The good shepherd metaphor described a benevolent leader of caring, sacrifice, and dedication which when understood in the context of the ancient shepherding role, offered rich leadership insights from Jesus’ good shepherd model.

Ideological Perspectives as Limits to Understanding the Shepherd

When Jesus taught of his messianic role through the metaphor of the good shepherd in John chapter 10, the shepherd imagery would have been quite rich and meaningful to his audience. However, contemporary readers of John 10 approach the text with their non-agrarian perspectives (Swalm, 2010), and are considerably less informed in their “social, cultural, and individual location” (Robbins, 1996, p. 95). That is, the image of the shepherd and Jesus as the good shepherd are not generally intuitive in contemporary culture (Thompson, 1997). The common biased perspectives of today’s leaders, viewed collectively, comprise the ideology that colors and diminishes the lessons of the good shepherd, so before exploring the leadership lessons the pericope offers, reader ideological positions must be considered.

The Gospels were filled with parables involving sheep and shepherds (Stanley, 1961), and while not particularly familiar to 21st century readers, the shepherd would present a robust image to Jesus’ audience. Contemporary readers mostly consider the shepherd in general terms to be a guide and caregiver for the sheep, but like Jesus’ original audience who did not understand his figure of speech (v.6), today’s readers do not fully understand the breadth of the shepherd figure (Wright, 2012). In early Israel the shepherd was a primary occupation and one of importance since sheep were indicators of wealth and sources of food, clothing and sacrifice (Brand, Draper, & England, 2003). As cultivation increased, shepherding became more of a role for slaves and younger sons (Brand, Draper, & England, 2003), so shepherds were often the uncommitted hired hands Jesus spoke about in John 10:12-13. The shepherd led the sheep to pasture and water, provided protection, and even carried the weak or injured (Brand, Draper, & England, 2003; Swalm, 2010).

Ancient shepherds came to present a mixed image, so Jesus was careful to identify himself as the good shepherd (Scott, 1995), aligned with the messianic shepherd described in Ezekial 34:11-16 and other Old Testament passages (Swalm, 2010). The good shepherd owned the sheep (v.12) and did not flee in the face of danger, but protected them even laying down his life (v.15) demonstrating a radical love (Clemens, 2003; Swalm, 2010; Thompson, 1997). The shepherd also displayed justice as the gate, deciding who would enter the pen and be accepted as one of the flock. Swalm (2010), in describing the shepherd leader, identified three specific behavior characteristics; guiding, providing, and protecting. The overall strength of the shepherd metaphor was revealed by its use in referring to kings and even God in scriptures such as Isaiah 40:11; “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” and Psalm 23, the well known shepherd’s psalm. The shepherd was to be imitated, as Jesus instructed Peter in John 21:15-17 when he used the shepherd imagery during the restoration and anointing. Peter was instructed to care for God’s lambs and sheep out of love for Jesus (Clemens, 2003), to reflect the good shepherd practices in the early church.

The depth and breadth of the shepherd’s duties and motivation are lost to most contemporary leaders which limit the richness of the good shepherd metaphorical lessons. A fuller appreciation of the leadership lessons involves examining the pericope within the ideology Jesus’ ancient audience. Some intuitive clarification is revealed through understanding that the Latin word transliterated as “pastor” means shepherd (Brand, Draper, & England, 2003). To the reader familiar with pastoral callings, the pastor offers a model of the caring, compassion, love and sacrifice within the shepherd metaphor.

Shepherd Leadership for Contemporary Leaders

Scripture offers important insights for exploring leadership truths (Bekker, 2006), and a deeper understanding is accessible through analyzing the ideological texture of the text (Robbins, 1996). Translating the lessons of John 10 from the ideology of Jesus' audience to the non-agrarian contemporary reader can yield considerable leadership insight. Those lessons inform not only the specific shepherd leadership theory (Swalm, 2010), but provide depth for better understanding the many new enlightened, follower-focused leadership theories including servant leadership, transformational leadership and authentic leadership. Increasingly, many contemporary leadership books even use Scripture as their theoretical framework (Swalm, 2010, p. 3).

Leadership Lessons of the Good Shepherd

One of the boldest characteristics of the good shepherd was in his sacrificial nature, approaching the calling not only in a pastoral, selfless manner (Mein, 2007), but in love-driven sacrifice even to death (Stanley, 1961; Swalm, 2010). The good shepherd sacrifice, freely chosen from a position of power and control, was at the essence of what differentiates the good shepherd from other shepherds (Neyrey, 2001; Stanley, 1961).

The good shepherd stood in contrast to the thief and robber, those who would deceive or even commit aggression to gain what was not theirs (Kysar, 1991). The term "good" was not a simple adjective to indicate how well the shepherd performed, but depicted a moral goodness and honesty (Swalm, 2010). Unlike the hired shepherd, the good shepherd owned the flock and worked not for wages, but for the welfare of the followers (Wright, 2012) demonstrating a genuine caring (Swalm, 2010). Swalm (2010) suggested that it is who a shepherd is, not what they do that makes them a "good shepherd" or leader. The good shepherd was committed and did

not abandon the flock in times of trouble like the hireling would (Kysar, 1991; Quasten, 1948). In contrast, the good shepherd leader operated with humility, allowing for the exercise of power with benevolence (Swalm, 2010). In a depiction of “pull leadership”, verse 3 described how the shepherd went before the sheep and the flock followed. That is, the shepherd rarely drove the sheep but typically led them (Quasten, 1948).

In John 10:14, Jesus spoke of relationship, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” (ESV). Not surprisingly, the shepherd and sheep, the leader and followers were in relationship. Shepherds spent much of their time, un-busy and with the flock creating a relationship of trust and intimacy (Tenney, 1981). The “knowing” of which Jesus spoke in verse 14 and 15 as he compared it to his connection with the Father, was not just an intellectual knowing, but a deeper relationship (Tenney, 1981). Worth noting was the manner in which the shepherd metaphors almost always depicted the flock collectively, as a gathering (Thompson, 1997). When followers are autonomous, such as when western individualism leads to lack of collective relationships, followers can become vulnerable and seek “lesser shepherds” who appeal to their freedom (Thompson, 1997). The good shepherd was a loving caregiver and gatekeeper to the flock, but also protected the flock from wolves that would endanger, harm, deceive or mislead (Ogereau, 2009).

To summarize, contemporary leaders aligned with the lessons of the good shepherd metaphor are called to be sacrificial, loving, moral, relationship and group oriented, committed to the well-being of the team, humble, inclusive, and protective (Clemens, 2003; Kysar, 1991; Martin, 1978; Mein, 2007; Ogereau, 2009; Quasten, 1948; Stanley, 1961; Swalm, 2010; Tenney, 1981; Wright, 2012). The shepherd depicted an image of a paternalistic, leader-follower relationship built on trust, authenticity, caring, humility and sacrifice. Those essentials are

reflected in the plethora of recent theories that seek to describe caring, enlightened leaders. A few of those theories will be considered within the shepherd leader paradigm.

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (2010) described the servant leader as “seen as servant first” (p. 87) and viewed servant leadership as a new way to approach power and authority in less coercive ways. A leader who was a servant first would vary greatly from the typical leader who would be a leader first (Greenleaf, 2010). Between the two extremes of leader or servant is where real humans operate, and in selecting that balance, the shepherd metaphor offers meaningful insight. The shepherd leads rather than drives, cares for the flock with guidance, provisions, and protection (Swalm, 2010), and operates with commitment, morality, and humility. While the shepherd leadership model is consistent with servant leadership, and actually offers an operationalized theory that demonstrates how servanthood can be effectively applied in a Scriptural prescribed manner. Yukl (2010) identified the opposition to social injustice, standing up for what is right in the face of financial pressures, and treating the weak and marginal members of society with respect as key elements of servant leadership. Such bold, protectiveness was reflective of the sacrificial, committed shepherd who would lay down his life for his flock. While there are conceptual conflicts between some definitions of servant leadership and shepherd leadership, primarily related to the empowerment of the flock, shepherd leadership can be helpful in developing a better understanding of how servant leadership can operate in the workplace.

Transformational Leadership

Transformation leadership theory is one of the most widely accepted of contemporary leadership theories, and encompasses the dimensions of inspirational motivation, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Shepherd leadership incorporates those pillars of transformational leadership by creating trusting relationships with followers, caring for each individual, modeling desirable practices and leading the group from the front. While the shepherd leadership model does not offer an obvious connection to the intellectual stimulation element of transformational leadership, the other shepherd leadership practices are closely aligned with transformational leadership principles.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership theories are still emerging and definitions continue to vary dramatically, but generally the theory seeks to capture characteristics of an ideal, genuine organizational leader (Yukl, 2010). Most of the theory definitions emphasize positive values, trusting relationship with followers, consistency in words and actions, and a motivation based on values and beliefs rather than power (Yukl, 2010). Those characteristics are reflective of the moral, sacrificial shepherd leader, and while some versions of authentic leadership theory incorporate widespread empowerment behaviors, others explicitly declare that authentic leadership can be either participatory or directive in nature (Yukl, 2010).

Conclusion

Exegesis of John 10:1-18 that includes a consideration of the ideological perspectives of Jesus' audience compared to the less-informed readers of today, offers rich lessons in leadership from the good shepherd. Leadership that embraces the good shepherd model of deep relationships, trust, morality, sacrifice, commitment, protection, guidance and provisioning

(Swalm, 2010) is not only consistent with many emerging contemporary leadership theories, but answers some of the difficulties in operationalizing those models. While Jesus exemplified many different leadership practices throughout Scripture, the shepherd model, which appeared throughout Biblical history provides deep insight into effective leadership practices that are grounded in Truth of Scripture.

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