

Sheep-stealing

The literal crime of sheep-stealing has always been a serious offence. In days gone by you could be hung or deported for it.

I have the sneaky feeling that quite a few would welcome the reintroduction of such punishment today – for those they consider guilty of its religious counterpart!

So-called sheep-stealing within the church has always been an emotive issue. Seen as a direct attack upon a man's ability to lead a church, it threatens his sense of personal adequacy and can lead to all manner of upsets, disputes and broken relationships, not to mention the hurt and bitterness which try, sometimes successfully, to get a lasting foothold within him.

But to get to the root of the issue we must look at it from a biblical perspective and find out, first, what sheep-stealing is and, second, what it isn't.

Finding the real stumbling-block

To begin with, the Bible portrays the church as *God's* flock, purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28), so the sheep cannot be stolen from a pastor, or any other church leader. He doesn't

own them. He guards and guides them, shepherds and pastures them, but God alone possesses them. So if one of God's sheep is actually 'stolen', it can only be stolen from God, by an enemy of God who comes with only one goal in mind: 'to steal and kill and destroy' (John 10:10).

Imagine that I'm the pastor of a large, flourishing church in a town where there are many churches moving on with God, as well as all kinds of devil-inspired activities such as spiritualist churches, fortune-telling and other occult practices (see Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

If a sheep should be stolen – that is, fails to embrace genuine biblical teaching and is lured away by the deceitfulness of Satan – then I must do what good shepherds have always done: I must lay down my life for the sheep.

Instead of wallowing in self-pity, or raging with vindictive recriminations, I must go out and seek it until I find it. Confronting the lion, attacking the bear or chasing off the wolf, I must rescue the sheep and bring it home safe and sound. That is my responsibility as a man called by God to shepherd his sheep.

If, however, the flock begins to leave me spontaneously, I need to review my own shepherding skill – for my own sake, as well as for the sake of the remaining church members.

I must look at the situation honestly, asking myself and God: Why have they left, and to what have they moved on? Have they seen some truth I haven't seen? Could it be that they have experienced something fresh of God that, until now, I have been too afraid, too proud or too sceptical to accept myself?

Have I been a good shepherd? Have I strengthened the sickly and healed the diseased? Have I bound up the brokenhearted and brought back the scattered? (See Ezekiel 34:1-6.) Have I fed them in the rich pastures of God's Word? Have I led them in the paths of righteousness, or indeed along any path at all? If I myself have nowhere to go – no path to tread, no destination to reach – how can the flock follow me? (See Matthew 15:14.)

Have I really fulfilled my leadership responsibilities to the sheep, or have I become a stumbling-block to them?

What will be your epitaph?

If you are in leadership then you must ask these questions about yourself. If you aren't in leadership then you must ask yourself the questions about those who are. They may be hard to ask, and even harder to answer, but they must be faced if we are to see the situation and ourselves realistically.

To be a leader one must lead. To be a godly leader one must lead in the ways of God. And we must face the fact that many churches receiving people from other congregations today are not stealing sheep but rescuing them. They grow better grass and provide greater security. They allow God to move unrestricted in their church, and they give a stronger lead. So, naturally, they attract those who desire to be fulfilled in their walk with God and who want to respond to his call upon their lives.

There are many fellowships of God's people now emerging who can confidently say, like Moses, 'Come with us and we will do you good' (Numbers 10:29 NASB). But today is no different from history. Such moves still involve, among other elements, harsh dispute and jealousy.

Jesus himself faced that very problem. In his ministry to the 'lost sheep of Israel' and in commissioning his disciples into the same ministry (Matthew 15:24; 10:6), he was taking a deliberately provocative step. Though his motive was compassion for the people, whom he saw as 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36), he knew that the Pharisees' only concern would be his growing popularity, which would pose a threat to their own status and influence with the people.

In their eyes, with his constant call to 'come to me', he was setting himself up in competition with the religious establishment and stealing sheep which were rightfully theirs.

But they themselves cared little for the sheep. And however much righteous indignation they projected, however strong their presentation of themselves as guardians of the truth, even the fearful and indecisive Pilate was well aware that the Pharisees had handed Jesus over to death through nothing more than unholy envy (Mark 15:9-10).

It is easy to criticise but how would *we* respond – whether in a leadership role or not – in a similar situation?

Would we be prepared to listen to those leaving us and really seek God for what he wanted, keeping ourselves open to the possibility that those leaving might actually be right – or at least partly right? Or would we shut ourselves away from the opportunity of any fresh revelation from God, determined to ‘stick to our guns’ whatever?

The minister in Alan and Gillian’s church refused point-blank to recognise the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit. When Alan and Gillian eventually got baptised in the Spirit, his response was a mixture of bewilderment and resentment. He accused them of not accepting his shepherding authority, and at no time did he display any willingness to reconsider the issue, even though his wife was a beautiful, Spirit-filled woman herself.

‘He dismissed the difference in his wife simply by saying that she had a different personality from him,’ Gillian explained. ‘He certainly didn’t accept that she had anything he himself didn’t have.’

‘We left, as did about a dozen other people over the space of a couple of years – all of us looking for spiritual links which would enable us to fulfil our walk with God. He continued as minister for a further two years until he had a nervous breakdown, and now he spends his whole time studying. His wife, though she still goes to church, works full-time to support the family and seems to have no spark of life left in her. It’s a really tragic situation.’

‘If only he had been willing to listen to us, things could have been so different, but fear and pride got in the way and he couldn’t accept what God was doing.’

He couldn't accept what God was doing! What a sad epitaph. But to how many people does it apply? Could it apply to your minister, or even to you?

Fran and Gordon had a similar experience, but one showing more promise of change. The minister in their church didn't believe in baptism in water, and maintained that baptism in the Holy Spirit was something that happened automatically once you made a decision to go to church. Having experienced both baptisms, Fran and Gordon tried to explain the scriptural position to the minister. But he was unwilling to listen.

'He was very angry, and somewhat resentful, when we got baptised in water, and he wouldn't accept what we had to say about the Holy Spirit,' Fran remembered.

'He didn't want us to leave, though, so for a while we stayed on and tried to bring into the church something of what we had found. We suggested that the church meet together before the Sunday evening meeting to pray about what God really wanted for his church. Some people seemed quite interested, but the minister really wasn't keen on it and after three or four weeks it stopped.

'There was nothing more we could do, so we left. But then there was a sudden change of attitude on the minister's part. He used to spend a few hours in prayer one morning a week, and he began ringing me up, telling me what he was going to be praying for and asking me to support him in it. Recently he told us that he was looking with interest at the way our new church is growing.

'He has now retired but has said that should anyone ask him which church to go to, he would direct them to ours. I still don't think he accepts baptism in the Holy Spirit or in water as the Bible speaks of it, but he has certainly mellowed.'

Doctrinal positions and attitudes can take a long time to change. And it has to be admitted that the situation hasn't been helped by the often insensitive and dogmatic attitudes of some who have 'seen the light'. But if we remain open for God to change us and are willing to accept that we might need

adjustment on some issues, he will gradually turn us around until we are facing in the right direction.

Seeing ourselves as stewards

In sharp contrast to the Pharisees, John the Baptist is the greatest example I know of a man able to let go of his sheep so that they could move on further into God's purposes.

What do you think he felt as he began to lose his disciples? There he was, describing Jesus as 'the Lamb of God', when two of his own men, hearing this, left him and went after Jesus. What's more, the Lord was actually welcoming them! When they asked where he was staying, far from rebuking them and sending them back to John in repentance, he invited them to come and see (John 1:35-39).

The Pharisees soon learned that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John and, in keeping with their character, no doubt sought to exploit the situation to their own advantage. When our adversaries begin to gloat as the other man's work starts to outgrow our own, it's not too difficult to cope because we are well aware of their motives.

It is much more difficult to keep in perspective the concerned reports of those who through friendship and loyalty have stayed with us. John's remaining disciples were quick to point out to him the Lord's growing success, and to tell him how the multitudes who had once flocked to John were now flocking to Jesus (John 4:1; 3:27-28).

A man less secure in God than John would immediately feel threatened, and no doubt find himself relentlessly pressured by a competitive spirit. But John wasn't in competition with Jesus. He saw himself not as the owner of those whom God had placed in his care, but merely as God's steward – one who was diligently looking after God's property.

As a servant of God doing the work of God, he had prepared the way of the Lord, and his ministry was now fulfilled. And he himself was fulfilled in the knowledge that, from now on,

he must decrease while Jesus increased (see John 3:30). His followers had not been stolen, they had simply been divinely transferred into the continuing plan of God.

In a message to the congregation of the Pisidian Antioch synagogue recorded in Acts 13, Paul made some interesting observations concerning certain characters from Israel's history. Speaking fleetingly of King Saul, he summed up his whole reign with the words, 'After [God] had removed him . . .' (Acts 13:22 NASB). Remember, by the way, that Saul was rejected long before he was actually removed; continued existence does not prove divine acceptance (1 Samuel 13:13-14).

But speaking of John the Baptist, Paul records that he was 'completing his work' (Acts 13:25). That is, he was seeing through to a conclusion the work God had entrusted to him. He wasn't attempting to perpetuate into a movement what the Lord had sent only to impact the moment.

His is the example for us to follow. But down through history, the sad evidence is that what God has imparted as a revelation for the church as a whole, people have accommodated as a denomination for the few.¹ As a result, many who were once on the cutting edge of God's prophetic word are now more concerned with maintaining the identity of their past than trying to live out what God is doing in the present.

Like the minister in Alan and Gillian's church, having placed their security in their achievements rather than in God, they hold on to the past, fearful of losing what they falsely think they have. Instead they could (like Bob, the former church deacon we met in the first chapter) be reaching into God for bigger and better things and moving on in the forefront of his purposes again.

The people of God must continually be encouraged away from what is rejected and redundant, into what is relevant and revelatory concerning God's purposes *now*. There is, of course, a sense in which God's purpose remains unchanged, but he is for ever moving forward in the outworking of that purpose, and we must be flexible enough to move with him.

So, if the sheep are disappearing from your church, whether it be the odd few, or in droves, ask yourself why. And determine, with God's help, to answer with complete honesty. It may have nothing to do with the way your church is run or how the flock is pastored. But then again, it might.

Suddenly to realise that one's life and ministry, at least during the last few years, have been spent promoting the rejected and the redundant can be shattering, to say the least, and hard to come to terms with. So, also, are the feelings of failure and condemnation which naturally follow. But God is bigger than all our failings put together – he shed his blood for them all. As we release it all to him he will show us the way through and set our feet back on the right track.

Then we can be found once again in the full flow of the purpose of God and say, as could King David (Acts 13:36), that we have served God's purpose in our generation.

Chapter 9 NOTES

1 For a detailed look at this principle in church history see *Church Adrift*, by David Matthew (Harvestime)