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An Ethic for Teachers

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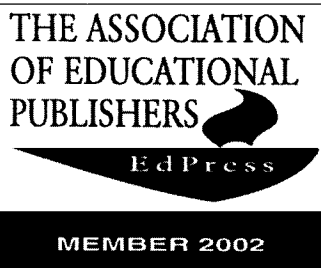
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“Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2, 3, RSV).

The risen Jesus thrice commanded Peter to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). The apostle in turn passed on the command to church pastors and teachers of every generation, including us. In his charge, we find an ethic that defines the teacher’s commission, motivation, and leadership style.

The teacher is commissioned to “tend the flock of God that is your charge.” The flock is God’s, not the shepherd’s. Therefore, shepherds must not manipulate, violate, or use the sheep under their charge. How often teaching ministry suffers public shame and ridicule because teachers exploit vulnerable students in the areas of social life, sex, or intellectual, spiritual, and emotional areas of dependency.

The shepherd/sheep metaphor is not intended to convey the image of wisdom over stupidity, power over weakness, order over chaos, or certainty over helplessness; for in the flock of God, both shepherd and sheep are made of the same stuff. The metaphor prescribes a relationship of love and care between the shepherd and the sheep, with the shepherd providing nourishment, protection from enemies, balm for the hurting, and guidance toward the final home, ever loving regardless of the cost.

To be an undershepherd, to represent the One who said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, RSV) demands the utmost love for the sheep within the fold, as well as for those all-too-many sheep that insist on being their own shepherd while grazing in the prodigal land.

Christian teaching and nurturing demand a consecrated motivation, an eagerness to serve, and high standards. Peter understood that and charged the pastors and teachers to “tend the flock of God . . . not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly.”

An inner constraint of love, an attitude of unselfishness that puts the needs of others first, an absolute commitment to our Lord, who had compassion on the children—these are the stuff of willing ministry. Intellectual acumen, a dynamic teaching style, persuasive powers, personal charm, and even brilliant problem-solving skills don’t make a Christian teacher. Nor does the possession of power and authority produce a caring teacher.

Caring teachers cannot be bought or sold. They are not mercenaries, out to make quick money. To be a Christian teacher is to be a steward, to ask not “What’s in it for me?” but rather “What should I do to tend the flock of God?”

Leadership Style

The only cure for the malignancy of selfishness and the desire for power is radical surgery: removing self-centeredness to ensure that the Chief Shepherd’s charge to tend the flock can be properly carried out. The surgery will also produce a new leadership style: “not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock.”

While Lord Acton was speaking of politics when he said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” the same applies to Christian education. Indeed, here it is even more dangerous. When ministry that should be an instrument of grace and mercy transforms itself into arrogance and dominance, when teachers called to transmit God’s wis-

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EDITORIAL

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lence become purveyors of bookish intellectual pursuits, when teaching fails to distinguish between moral development and academic mastery, watch out: We have a leadership style contrary to what Peter is affirming.

Peter's nurturing ethic is not anti-authority. Tending the flock of God requires the strong hand of authority and the discipline of an organization; but authority does not mean domination, and organization does not mean violating the personhood of fellow members of the body of Christ. "It shall not be so among you," said the Chief Shepherd (Mark 10:43, RSV), warning His disciples that lording it over others is not His model of leadership.

Servanthood is thus the key to the Christian educational ethic. Where there is the spirit of service, there can be no violation of the other or trespassing into forbidden zones. Instead, servanthood drives a teacher to be an example to students and enables him or her to say with integrity: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, KJV). ✍

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