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Sheep You Cannot Shear

D. Bruce Seymour

I hung up the phone slightly discouraged and more than slightly frustrated. The call was from Bill, (not his real name), one of my best sheep. He was the sort of sheep that any shepherd would love to have in the flock—strong and fluffy. Bill was a hard worker. He was sharp. He loved the Lord. He was grounded in the faith. He had a great family. Best of all, he had a vision for what our church could do with music and, until this phone call, had been serving as the chairman of our music committee. Now he wanted to resign. He enjoyed the ministry but his job was demanding more and more of his time, and he just didn't feel he had any time left to be involved at church. He felt pulled in too many directions at once and wanted to focus on the demands at work and his family.

Part of me wanted to agree with Bill. Work and family are important, but as the under-shepherd of God's flock in this place, I felt we needed this sheep. In my frustration I paraphrased the old Mother Goose rhyme.

Baa, baa, fat sheep / Have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes sir, / Three bags full.
One for my boss, / And one for my wife,
And one for all the other things, / I need in my life.
Baa, baa, fat sheep, / Have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir, / Three bags full.

Bill was a three-bags-full sheep. I could agree that one bag belonged to his job. His job was important and it was what God had called him to do. I could agree that one bag belonged to his wife and family. They were very important and demanded time

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and effort. That still left one bag and it was discouraging to hear that we would not get any of that either. He was a big fluffy sheep but there was no wool for the church.

Do you have sheep like Bill in your flock? They come to church and feed with the other sheep, we guard them and make sure they stay healthy, but the church never gets any benefit from them. They are three-bags-full sheep, but the church never gets any wool. All their time, all their energy, all their talent is being given to someone else. Those sheep, like Bill, are part of your flock but they are sheep you cannot shear.

The whole idea of sheep I could not shear bothered me. Probably I was not as sanctified a shepherd as I should be, but I could not get used to feeding sheep like Bill week after week, watching them grow all that wonderful wool and then seeing them shorn someplace else. Shearing is part of handling sheep and if these were my sheep, I felt I had a right to shear them. I felt I had a right to expect someone who was a part of our church to help out in some way, to use their spiritual gifts on behalf of the rest of the flock. Why was church always the one that was so short of wool? Why were some of my most productive sheep unavailable for service? Have you ever asked those questions?

I came up with three reasons why there are so many sheep in our flocks that we cannot shear. These three reasons help explain why churches are chronically short of what they need.

The first reason is that sheep are stupid. Sheep are not aware of their purpose in life. They all hang out and produce wool, but they do not instinctively know who they are or what to do with what they produce. They have to be taught. God's sheep have to be taught that the Master Shepherd expects them to do two basic things:

1. The Master expects them to hang out together. "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together," (Hebrews 10:25), is still in the Bible. Assembling together is what makes individuals a flock, it stimulates the relationships that result in numerical growth and it is safer. It is also something most shepherds find encouraging.
2. The Master expects a contribution. God expects members of his flock to give something back. That is a fundamental part of being a sheep. Flocks do not exist to keep shepherds from being lonely. Flocks exist to produce wool. Shepherds feed, care and protect sheep with the reasonable expectation that those sheep will produce some tangible benefit. In church, that tangible benefit should show up in generous, cheerful financial contributions (2 Corinthians 9:7). God loves generous sheep and

generous sheep are very encouraging to most shepherds. The tangible benefit should also be obvious in service. God has made each of us essential to the health of the Body. First Corinthians 12:18 makes it clear that everyone has a distinct spiritual gift that must be exercised if the Body is to function the way the Holy Spirit intended it to. The whole doctrine of spiritual gifts is a powerful argument that everyone's "wool" is needed for a warm and healthy local church. Few ministries are so uniquely dependent on the cooperation of such a diverse flock to fulfill the purpose of the Master Shepherd

We, as shepherds, have a responsibility to ignorant sheep. We need to teach them the purpose of sheep and that some of the wool they produce belongs to the Master Shepherd.

The second reason there is a shortage of wool is because the shepherds are afraid. Sometimes we shepherds are afraid to do any shearing. I had to admit I was afraid. I was afraid of pushing too hard. I loved my flock, and would never have intentionally abused them, or used them, so I accepted their excuses too easily. I was so sensitive to the feelings of the sheep, that I neglected my responsibility to the Master Shepherd. I would not ruthlessly insist on shearing a sheep that was already bare, but more than once I was too timid to insist that God get His share of the wool.

This was my problem. When I let the sheep give all their wool to someone else, and did not collect any for my Master, I was not doing my job as a shepherd. I came to see that someday soon, when Jesus asks for an accounting of my shepherding, He will expect to see some wool. He will want to see services full, offerings up and spiritual gifts being utilized. He will expect to see Sunday Schools staffed, budgets met and ministries flourishing. All of that requires faithful sheep producing what I have been calling wool. For our own *bema* well-being, we must teach our sheep that some of the wool belongs to the Master Shepherd and make it clear that we are there to collect it.

I have come to believe if shepherds did those two things, taught sheep their responsibilities and insisted on collecting, most of the wool shortage in our churches would cease to exist. Most of the time the shortage is due to a lack of contribution or a lack of courage.

There is a third reason why we cannot shear some sheep. I learned this third reason from Bill. I thought through what I shared above and then decided to practice what I have just preached on Bill, so I made an appointment. I began by asking if he understood that God wanted a contribution from his sheep. God wanted attendance, support and service. Bill understood

that, but felt that he was an exception to the rule. I blundered on.

I said that I really felt a responsibility to insist that he do more than simply attend and tithe. He ought to be willing to serve in some small capacity somewhere at church. He ought to be willing to serve God, and by that I meant at church. Bill gently insisted that he was too busy at work and pointed out that his work was also a place to serve God. He felt that he was already serving God because he worked at a Christian camp. I had been seeing that as a job, Bill saw it as his ministry.

Bill's gentle insistence revealed a third reason why there may be some sheep in your church that you cannot shear. Sometimes God has made us responsible for sheep that are not really ours. Since they are not ours, we cannot shear them. In my first church, almost 20% of my sheep were full-time staff at a Christian camp. In my second church I had sheep that were home office staff for ministries like Child Evangelism Fellowship, Berean Mission, and Scripture Memory Association, as well as full-time staff for ministries like Campus Crusade, ISI and FCA. Every year there were several career missionary families on much needed furlough. In my present church several are deeply involved in the leadership of Bible Study Fellowship. You probably have people like that in your flock. Maybe your sheep are running a Christian college, or operating a retreat center. They are good sheep, great sheep, but God has called them to give all their wool to another ministry. They need your church for fellowship and encouragement, but they are sheared somewhere else.

Those of us in that situation need a special helping of humility. We will probably never be able to grow as fast or be as effective as the shepherds who have a full flock of their own sheep to work with. I had to realize that I would probably never be able to produce with 80% of a flock, what others produce with 100%. In fact, my flock might experience a shortage so that some other ministry could flourish. I had to realize that was the Master's business. He owned the sheep and ultimately He decided where they should be sheared.

I admit that it can be frustrating to see all that wool leaving our folds, but in another way it is encouraging. It is encouraging because, through those sheep, our ministry is broader than a single church. It is encouraging to know that our ministry has played a part in making sure those sheep have plenty of wool to give to their ministry.

As you look over your flock and wonder why there isn't enough wool, ask yourself these questions. Is it because there are too many ignorant sheep? If so, you need to do some teaching. Is

it because you have been timid about asking for wool? If so, then you need to do some shearing. Is it because the sheep belong to someone else? Then praise the Lord that you have been called to have such a vital part in another ministry. Then do what I do, ask God for more sheep that you CAN shear!

Writer

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