

“The Good Shepherd and the Sheep”

Terry L. Johnson

This is the fifth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (Jn 10:11)

Among the most cherished titles of Christ is that of “The Good Shepherd.” Never resting, ever vigilant, exposed to the elements, vulnerable to predators, the beloved Shepherd persists in leading, caring, providing and guarding His sheep. His sheep? That’s us. We are defenseless sheep, creatures capable of neither flight nor fight, prone to wander, easily lost, blindly following, and desperately needing wise shepherding. Jesus is all that *for us*.

Note the plural noun at the end of the preceding sentence: *for us*. The blessings of the shepherding of the Good Shepherd certainly apply to us *individually*. The Lord is *my* shepherd and consequently, *I* shall not want. He leads *me* to the green pastures. He leads *me* to the still waters. The first person pronoun is prominent right through to the end of the 23rd Psalm: “*I* will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Yet the primary application of the metaphor of the Good Shepherd of John 10 is to us *collectively*, the people of God together. “Sheep” in English can be either singular or plural. Not so in the original language. In Greek it is plural. The blessings of the Good Shepherd are promised to God’s people collectively. Jesus locates us *together* in the sheepfold (Jn 10:1-5). He leads us in and out, *together*, to pasture and abundance (Jn 10:11). There are “other sheep” who are “not of this fold,” that is, not of the then current ethnic-national entity the Bible calls Israel that must be brought into the “fold,” so that there might be “one flock” under the direction of “one shepherd.” That “one flock” is the church into which Israel is transformed:

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (Jn 10:16)

Sheep, fold, flock: these are all plural entities. The cherished promises of God in connection with the Good Shepherd are given to the people of God collectively, initially Israel, then the church.

Consider this teaching the Gospel of John’s equivalent of Matthew 16:18. Jesus is building His church. *The primary application of the Good Shepherd metaphor is to the flock.* The primary beneficiary of Jesus’ shepherding, His care, His provision, His protection, is the church

collectively, and me *individually* in so far as I am a part of the whole. His blessings are realized within the flock as He fends off wolves and thieves (10:2, 10). His provisions are received by the sheep (plural) as He leads them to pasture and abundance (10:9, 10). The “they” of “that *they* might have life, and have it abundantly” is plural. The life of the people of God collectively is in view.

The application of the “Good Shepherd” metaphor to which we are driving is obvious. The blessings of the shepherding of the Good Shepherd are found *in the church along with the other sheep*. That is where safety and provision are to be found. A sheep on its own, separated from the flock, is also separated from the shepherd’s care. Such are vulnerable. Such will not long survive. Such are in mortal danger. Likewise a small group of sheep, wandering off on their own, away from the flock, are exposed to the elements and predators. Sheep belong in the flock under the care of the Good Shepherd and His undershepherds to whom He has entrusted their care (10:1-5). “Shepherd the *flock* of God” as undershepherds of the “chief Shepherd,” the elders are charged (1 Pet 5:2, 4). “Pay careful attention... to all the flock, on which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the *church* of God,” elders again are charged. Life is dangerous enough *inside* of the flock, particularly because of the danger of “fierce wolves” who from outside “will *come in among you*, not sparing the *flock*” (Acts 20:28-30). *Outside* it is altogether lethal. Only as part of the flock may I have confidence of the correction of the Good Shepherd’s rod, and the guidance of His staff.

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