

STUDY 2

The True Shepherd

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The theme for this paper is ‘The True Shepherd’. By implication there must be false shepherds. When Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd (John 10), he contrasted himself with the hireling. The imagery of the shepherd in the Bible is also linked to kingship as in Ezekiel 37:24, ‘My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd’.¹ However, not all the kings of Israel lived up to this. The prophet Jeremiah lamented, ‘Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD’ (Jer. 23:1).

There are two questions we need to ask at the outset. The first is: Who is the true shepherd? We know that to be God the Father. Ezekiel wrote, ‘You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord GOD’ (Ezek. 34:31). The other question is: Why is he the true shepherd? We can simply answer that by quoting: ‘let God be true, but every man a liar’ (Rom. 3:4, AV), but we need to say a little more. God is the true shepherd because he is firstly the Creator, not only of Israel, but also of all creation:

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand (Ps. 95:6–7).

That is why God’s reprimand in scripture is directed not only to Israel but also to all nations. Secondly, he is the true shepherd because he is the redeemer of his creation:

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode (Exod. 15:13).

The creation is his and, though rebellion is present, in his grace and mercy he redeemed his creation through the sacrifice of his Son in order to direct or move his creation towards his defined goal. This goal is predetermined by the Father. Only he knows what the goal is and only he can direct his creation towards this goal. That is why he is the true shepherd. God’s work in creation and redemption was aptly summed up by Isaiah when he wrote:

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior (Isa. 43:1–3).

FALSE SHEPHERDS AND HIRELINGS

Why is there a need to speak of the true shepherd? The reason is simple. There are false shepherds. The analogy of a shepherd is an image from the farming community. The role of the shepherd is to care for and protect the flock that belongs to him or the master to whom he is responsible. Jeremiah lamented of the ‘shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!’ (Jer. 23:1). Jesus warned of ‘the hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away . . . because a hired hand does not care for the sheep’ (John 10:12–13). The contrast is between the constructive and the destructive, and between caring and not caring. The contrast looks simple enough on the surface but it is a little more involved when we look into this further. What are the functions of scattering and the nature of the caring?

To destroy and scatter may be the work of the false shepherd. However, after the building of the tower of Babel, God scattered the people for a good reason and that is because of their arrogance (Gen. 11:9). When the people of Israel forsook and disobeyed God as they followed the desires of their hearts, God scattered his people. Jeremiah recorded this action of the true shepherd:

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am feeding this people with wormwood, and giving them poisonous water to drink. ¹⁶ I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their ancestors have known; and I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them (Jer. 9:15–16).

Both the true and false shepherds scatter their flocks. However, there is a big difference in the intent of their actions. The destruction and the scattering of the flock by the false shepherd is the destructive final common pathway of an evil intention that seeks to thwart the purpose of God. However, the scattering by the true shepherd is temporary and remedial, and makes possible the final pathway of the gathering. This is the healing intent of the scattering, which is to bring back once again the flock that belongs to him. This is analogous to the surgeon’s knife in removing the disease and then the final reconstruction. He is not simply making a stab wound to inflict harm and to destroy. In the scattering, the true shepherd does not leave the flock. His presence continues with the scattered flock whereas the false shepherd deserts the flock in order to look after his own interest. With the true shepherd, after the scattering comes the gathering as Zechariah records:

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Though I scattered them among the nations,
yet in far countries they shall remember me,
and they shall rear their children and return.

¹⁰ I will bring them home from the land of Egypt,
and gather them from Assyria . . . (Zech. 10:9–10).

And again in Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered (Isa. 56:8).

And also in Jeremiah:

Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them,
and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply (Jer. 23:3).

That is not so with the false shepherds. They seek to ‘steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:10). There is no remedial plan as the false shepherds desert the flock and then go to scatter the next flock. That is the only final outcome in all that the false shepherds do.

By contrast, the true shepherd remains with the scattered flock and brings hope to his flock even in the event of the scattering. So the prophet of the exile, Isaiah, comforted his people with these words:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her . . .

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep (Isa. 40:1–2, 11).

The ways of the true shepherd may seem to be severe, but that is what is needed in dealing with a rebellious and stiff-necked people. The purpose is to bring them to their senses and that is part of God’s program towards their restoration. All the actions of the true shepherd have this end point in view.

This brings us to consider the nature of caring. The true shepherd cares and, as we have considered above, this caring may require harsh measures. Again, whatever the measures may be, it needs to be understood in the context of the intention. In other words, the point we are getting to is not what the true shepherd does, but we need to see the actions of the true shepherd in the light of what we know of the heart of the true shepherd and the final outcome he has for the flock.

The flock needs caring. That is true. But does the need or perceived need of the flock determine the nature of shepherding? Remember here that we are talking about a wayward flock. It is true that the sheep need to be fed and require a shepherd to lead them to the pasture. However, the need of the sheep does not determine the nature of the feed given. Students need to be taught, but the students do not determine the curriculum. The teacher decides that. A sick patient needs to be treated, but the patient

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does not determine what is to be on the prescription or the operation to be undertaken. The doctor decides that but not before the doctor has fully interacted with the patient and knows precisely the problem. The doctor must have the freedom to do that without restraint from bureaucracy or any other who calls the tune. The patient needs to submit to the doctor who has the diagnosis and knows the treatment. The freedom of the doctor to diagnose and treat must be placed above all other considerations.

The true shepherd is free to teach and to chastise his sheep. The true shepherd does not take a consensus in order to make his teaching acceptable. Jesus taught that those who do not eat of him have no part in him (John 6:53–58). This teaching was counter to the culture and thought processes of his hearers. His hearers did not find this teaching palatable. They were bound to their cultural norm and did not realise the need to be transformed. They wanted teaching that fitted their thought processes and hence they departed from the true shepherd. This did not deter the true shepherd from persisting with this teaching. The true shepherd needs to transform the framework of his rebellious creation in order for them to function as they were created to be. The true shepherd needs to be free from and not dependent on his flock. He is a free being.² Yet at the same time, the true shepherd is intimately involved with his flock and cares for the flock with love and compassion.

THE WAY OF THE TRUE SHEPHERD

Shepherds have power and authority over the flock. They may use coercive power or such methods to achieve their goals. However, the true shepherd may sometimes appear ineffective and weak without the ‘dynamism’ and charisma that we expect of our modern-day leaders, but this is due to a self-imposed patience and tolerance.

The way in which the true shepherd achieves his goal is through the Son and the Spirit, who undoubtedly are also shepherds. Our God is one. We have seen above that the Father and Christ have been referred to as shepherds. Isaiah inferred the shepherd role of the Spirit when referring to the exodus:

Then they remembered the days of old,
of Moses his servant.
Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea
with the shepherds of his flock?
Where is the one who put within them
his holy spirit . . . (Isa. 63:11).

The way of the true shepherd lies not in the exercise of coercive forces, but in the Son’s willingness to go to the cross and the Spirit to gently apply the grace of that event. It is not merely the bringing about of an enforced or outward submission, but in the work of regeneration in the heart to love. This change comes about through the Son and Spirit.

What is important is the relationship between the true shepherd and his flock, that is, his creation. It is in the context of this relationship that the shepherd plays out the day-to-day dealing with Israel and the rest of his creation. God relates with his people

² James A Wharton discusses the philosophical implications of this freedom in the article, ‘Theology and Ministry in Hebrew Scriptures’, in E. Shelp and R. Sunderland (eds), *A Biblical Basis for Ministry* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1981), p. 26.

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in covenant relationship. In his freedom, he initiated the covenant with his creation. His choice of Israel was not because of any property inherent within Israel that swayed his decision. After all, what has Israel got that has not been given to her in creation?

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.⁷ It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples.⁸ It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:6–9).

In our attempt to understand the nature of the covenantal relationship, we have often resorted to anthropological illustrations. No matter how we may try from this upside-down approach, it will remain inadequate for our understanding. What could be worse is that we reduce the Creator to something in the created framework from which we can only slide further and further into error. It is true that the Bible uses anthropological categories like ‘grieve’ or ‘angry’, but ‘the Bible avoids the philosophical or metaphysical trap by multiplying and varying the anthropomorphic images and weaving them into a rich tapestry’.³ As a result we are not able to place that relationship in any kind of precise definition though we would certainly like to express that in some way. Whatever we may say of that relationship we would only be expressing some particular facet of it. What can be known of the true shepherd can only come about in relationship, that is, the covenant relationship. And it is only as the covenant people collectively reflect each particular facet of their experiences in this relationship that the brilliance of this multifaceted gem can be known.

The true shepherd acts out of this covenant relationship. His actions are not in response to the needs of his people. He acts in advance of their needs in a timing of his choosing. He is continually directing his creation to the goal he has pre-determined, acting through the agency of his Son and Spirit. God cannot be untrue to his covenant.

LEADING IN PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR HIS NAME’S SAKE

The true shepherd leads ‘in right paths for his name’s sake’ (Ps. 23:3). The right paths are not simply ethical but relational considerations. The ‘paths of righteousness’⁴ is a relational term. They are paths mapped out in terms of the covenant relationships and revealed in the gospel, as Paul says:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.¹⁷ For in it [*the gospel*] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ (Rom. 1:16–17).⁵

³ Wharton, ‘Theology and Ministry in Hebrew Scriptures’, p. 26.

⁴ KJV.

⁵ Italics are my inclusion.

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The way that the true shepherd is leading his flock is through the redemption effected by Christ. It is the restoration of the covenant relationship. That is the path of righteousness.⁶ In a covenant relationship, it is in the giving to and receiving from the other that one comes to know the other, and to know ourselves as well. It is the giving that is free from constraint. It is the giving of love. In all that God does in creation and redemption, he does it in the freedom of true love. God did not create because he had a need to have something. He created out of love. He did not give his Son for the redemption of creation because he had to solve a problem. He gave his Son out of love in his predetermined plan in eternity. He called Abraham and Israel not because of any qualities that made them acceptable to him. It was God's free will in covenant love.

It is only as we are restored from the bondage of our sin and guilt into the love of God that we come to appreciate the way of the true shepherd. This in turn enables us to make sense of our own ministry. Just as the true shepherd is free to act out of his love, so, in the same way, we cannot truly act as his under-shepherds when we are contracted in some way to the flock that we are to lead. In that case, the flock then determines the nature of the ministry and that should not be the case as we have seen above.⁷ Our ministry is a participation in the ministry of the true shepherd:

... the ministry of people to people is at its highest a reflection of the ministry of God to people as perceived by faith. At its best, our ministry is participation, no matter how fragmentary, in the ministry of God.⁸

What does the true shepherd expect of the sheep? Or what is the goal of the true shepherd? J. A. Wharton expresses it this way:

... what God wants for Israel and all humankind, according to the Hebrew scriptures, is nothing less than the full and free exercise of true humanity . . . That we should be who we were created and intended to become is the goal of God's ministry toward us.⁹

This then too must be the goal of the under-shepherds because we cannot act in any other direction from this. If we are to be his under-shepherds, there is a need to know the way of the true shepherd. Otherwise we will be sliding into the management format so popularly advocated today:

There is a story that made the rounds a few years ago about a meeting that supposedly took place between French and American management leaders. In talking about different approaches to business practices, the French tended to be rather philosophical and the Americans quite pragmatic. The difference in their approaches surfaced dramatically in one particular exchange. While one of the Americans outlined a certain management approach, one of the French delegates grew increasingly irritated and finally interrupted: 'That may work in practice,' he exclaimed, 'but it will

⁶ For a fuller treatment of the theme, 'The Righteousness of God', see Ian Pennicook, 'God in Three Persons: The Trinity and the First Revelation', (NCTM NSW Monthly Studies 2009, available from: <http://www.newcreation.org.au/studies/Ian%20Pennicook/pdf/God_Three_Persons_3.pdf>).

⁷ I have been talking in the context of shepherd and the flock in a hierarchical sense. If I may be permitted to move from the shepherd imagery to make a comment on the people to people ministry, then there is a sense in which the people of God collectively share in the ministry of God.

⁸ Wharton, 'Theology and Ministry in Hebrew Scriptures', p. 22.

⁹ Wharton, 'Theology and Ministry in Hebrew Scriptures', p. 37.

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never work in theory!’ There is an important lesson in that comment. It is not enough to focus on what ‘works’ in our efforts to serve the Kingdom. Some things may ‘work’ in a worldly sense that are nonetheless displeasing to the Lord. Godly practice must be grounded in godly thinking.¹⁰

¹⁰ R. J. Mouw, ‘The Heart of the Matter: Seminary and Church in a Changing World’, reprinted from *Fuller Focus*, Winter 2010, with permission from Fuller Theological Seminary.