

STUDY 16

The Shepherd Loves the Flock

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TENDING THE FLOCK

It was ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’.¹ I had prepared a powerful sermon, and I was going to let the congregation have it, like both barrels of a double-barrelled shotgun. I forget now what it was about: maybe I thought they were not giving enough money to the church, or they needed to be praying harder or reading the Bible more. It was a scorcher of a sermon, very clever and very piercing. They would not have been able to sit comfortably in the pews for very long; they would have gone away with a flea in their ear, and I would have got that particular problem off my chest.

And I was going to do it! Too right I was—right or wrong—I had it all prepared, and I was going to serve it up.

I came into the church building first thing in the morning to pray before the services. And it could not have been clearer if Jesus himself had been standing in front of me, telling me. I knew that, much as I might have wanted to, I could no longer preach that sermon. I believe Jesus was truly standing there, as my good shepherd. He was showing me what was really going on. The picture in my mind was that we—the congregation and I—had come to the edge of a very steep precipice. The congregation were all running towards it like a mob of silly sheep, and I was urging them on, and I was going to kick each one of them over the edge as they came up to it.

A horrifying picture, which came to me as a terrible shock when I realised that this was what I was about to do, and was wanting to do.² And there was Jesus, the good shepherd, with his big strong rod, stopping me. He was saying: ‘You can go ahead if you like—and that’s what you’ll be doing—but I can show you a different way’. Then, along the very edge of the precipice, I could see a narrow, winding rocky path, leading down. Jesus started off along that path, inviting me to follow, and to bring all the congregation along it with me. I then knew that if we all went down that path, even though it could be dangerous and difficult in places, we would be safe there together with him, and on the way to the good pastures.

¹ Fourth Sunday of the Easter season in the Anglican liturgical calendar, on which the gospel reading is always from John 10.

² It was about this time also I was struck forcibly by these words in Geoffrey Bingham’s short story ‘Angry unto Death’ (in *Angel Wings*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1983, p. 19): ‘My considered opinion, from the story of Jonah, is that he carried a deep hatred for the Ninevites’—Jonah *hated his congregation*—he didn’t want them to be saved!

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So there I was, a few minutes before the service with no prepared sermon I could use—the notes were torn up—and I just had to get up into the pulpit and tell the people about the good shepherd—how he loves them more than I ever could, and how he is to be trusted, and followed, and listened to.³

I shudder to think what might have happened to that church, and to the people, and to me and to my ministry, if I had preached that other sermon. It could be that, in the purposes of God, we had come to a turning point. Probably none of us was aware of it. It could be that Jesus, as our good shepherd, is doing that for us all the time, and we don't know the half of it. But when he shows us something like that—perhaps something awful, some unimagined horror, that he has saved us from or is saving us from, for something much, much better, and all his boundless loving-kindness is present in that—that is when our love for him is strengthened beyond measure.

THREE QUALIFICATIONS FOR TRUE SHEPHERDING⁴

We might think, then, that what qualifies us for pastoral ministry must be a love for the people with whom we minister. True as that is, there is a greater love that must come first:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:15–17).⁵

What is happening here? We are mindful that before the crucifixion Peter denied three times that he belonged to Jesus (John 18:15–18, 25–27), and that this encounter after the resurrection is a threefold redressing of that situation. So is Jesus reminding Peter of his earlier sin—sticking the knife in and giving it a twist? That can't be so: Jesus risen from death has already appeared to Peter and the others (with a special appearance to Peter alone; Luke 24:34) and said, not, 'Where were you lot when I needed you most?' but (twice), 'Peace be with you' (John 20:19, 21). The peace of the forgiveness of sins from God for all who receive it (as in John 20:23), wrought at great cost on the cross: 'he showed them his hands and his side' (John 20:20). So Jesus here is not seeking to convict Peter of sin—that happened at the time when 'The Lord turned and looked at Peter',⁶ and Peter 'went out and wept bitterly' (Luke 22:61, 62). Was Jesus, then, in view of Peter's previous lapses, seeking to be sure that Peter had repented and was now a changed person who really loved Jesus, as if there might be some doubt about it? Before Peter's denial, and fully aware of it, Jesus had prayed for

³ I recall when a colleague of mine in parish ministry came across Ezekiel 34:15: 'I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . says the Lord GOD'. He couldn't wait to tell his congregation: 'This church has a Pastor—it is God Himself!'

⁴ After the fashion of the three key determinants of property value: location, location, and location!

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁶ Even so, we are not told what was in that look, whether accusation, disappointment, 'See, I told you so', or just the scorching beams of grace-filled holy love.

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Peter that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:31–32). Peter’s ill-founded faith in himself and in his personal loyalty to Jesus did fail spectacularly (see Luke 22:33–34), but Peter’s faith that was fixed on Jesus did not fail, because Jesus did not fail Peter in carrying through his redemptive love for Peter—as Peter said later, ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness’ (1 Pet. 2:24)! Jesus already knew that, and he knew that Peter needed to be absolutely sure of it if he was going to have responsibility for the flock of God. The three questions Jesus put to Peter—all with the same answer⁷—are not asked so Jesus can find out whether or not Peter loves him. Peter’s reply each time is an acknowledgement that Jesus already knew the answer to the questions: ‘you know that I love you’; ‘you know everything’.⁸ No—Jesus asked Peter the questions so that Peter would come to know and be sure of the answer, perhaps much to his own surprise! Peter’s newfound deep love for Jesus was a gift that had been given to Peter, in answer to Jesus’ prayer that Peter’s faith not fail, and had been secured by Christ’s own redemption of Peter on the cross. In the light of this encounter with the risen Jesus, it is little wonder that Peter later said:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3).

As a result of this love for Jesus his Redeemer on the part of Peter, Jesus commissions Peter to pastoral ministry: ‘Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep’.⁹ Love for Jesus, as Saviour and Lord, is the primary qualification. When Jesus asked in the first question, ‘do you love me more than these?’ he may have meant, ‘do you love me more than these others do?’ referring to Peter’s earlier protestation, ‘Even though all become deserters, I will not’ (Mark 14:29).¹⁰ But it could be saying, ‘do you love me more than you love these others?’:

Peter had three times denied Jesus, so that his devotion must be held to be suspect. But he had remained with his fellows and gone fishing with them. Where did his supreme affection lie? With his companions with whom he resorted, or with Jesus whom he denied?¹¹

If our relationships with members of our congregation—as ‘fishing mates’—is more important to us than our primary relationship with our Saviour, then the deadly sin of people pleasing¹² may be in play. But our love for Jesus also needs to be of a different order from that of ‘fishing mate’. It must be love for and on account of the one who has saved us through his longsuffering loving-kindness and sacrificial propitiating grace:

⁷ The Greek for ‘do you love’ in Jesus’ first two questions is ἀγαπᾷς, *agapas*, and for the third question is φιλεῖς, *phileis*; and for ‘I love’ in all three of Peter’s answers is φιλω, *philō*. While B. F. Westcott (*The Revelation of the Risen Lord*, Macmillan and Co., Cambridge, 1891, pp. 123–136) and others make something of this distinction, Leon Morris (*The Gospel According to John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971, pp. 869–77) after an exhaustive survey concludes: ‘It is simplest to see here a further example of John’s love of variation in triple repetitions’ (p. 873).

⁸ Peter’s humble demeanour under the circumstances would rule out any self-justifying protestation here on Peter’s part.

⁹ Again, ‘most people see the variation as no more than stylistic’; L. Morris, *John*, p. 874.

¹⁰ In John 13:37 it is simply, ‘I will lay down my life for you’.

¹¹ L. Morris, *John*, pp. 870–71.

¹² See Study 13, pp. 13.1–13.2.

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We are sometimes inclined to think that a question about Peter's love was superfluous. But this is not the case. His actions showed that Peter had not wanted a crucified Lord. But Jesus was crucified. How did Peter's devotion stand in the light of this? Was he ready to love Christ as He was, and not as Peter wished Him to be? That was the question and it was an important one. Peter must face it and answer it.¹³

And so must we. Especially if what Jesus says about where the pastoral ministry will take Peter is true of us too. Peter will be taken to situations that are not of his choosing where matters are not determined by his will and are outside his control. He will need to trust the One in whose hands they are, who has chosen him for this task:

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me' (John 21:18–19).

LOVE IS A CHOICE

We may be disturbed when we hear Paul say: 'Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord' (1 Cor. 16:22). It simply means that unless we know and love Jesus as the one who has come to us with salvation, we remain under the curse that rests on the whole of unsaved humanity. Or when we hear Peter say: 'Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy' (1 Pet. 1:8); we may wonder with some concern whether we truly love Jesus like that. We may respond by trying to gee ourselves up, at least in public, to some more effusive emotional attachment to Jesus. Or we may dully despair of ever making the acceptable grade. Or we may take it simply that we do.

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye, struck by the young people's preference for a marriage based on love rather than one arranged by their parents, asks his wife a question:

(Tevye) Do you love me?
(Golde) Do I what?
(Tevye) Do you love me? . . .
(Golde) Do I love you?
For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house
Given you children, milked the cow
After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now? . . .
(Tevye) But my father and my mother
Said we'd learn to love each other
And now I'm asking, Golde
Do you love me?
(Golde) I'm your wife
(Tevye) I know . . .
But do you love me?

¹³ L. Morris, *John*, p. 871.

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(Golde) Do I love him?
For twenty-five years I've lived with him
Fought him, starved with him
Twenty-five years my bed is his
If that's not love, what is?
(Tevye) Then you love me?
(Golde) I suppose I do
(Tevye) And I suppose I love you too.¹⁴

Marriage is a great mystery. How do we come to love another person, and what is involved in that? Is it because we are loved first, or is there something mutual in it, or is there something outside of us both that is drawing us together? However that may be, a point comes when the question is asked:

Will you love her . . .
and, forsaking all others,
be faithful to her, as long as you both shall live?

And we answer,

I will.¹⁵

And so we do.

Love is a choice that is lived out in life. A choice that is not necessarily of our making. Certainly so in the case of our relationship with Jesus, who said, 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16). Once we are aware of his choice of us, however, the choice is also ours. Jesus said to Peter, 'Follow me'. And he did.

SHEPHERD THE CHURCH OF GOD

Once our relationship with Jesus is in place, we are then in a position to love others rightly. The New Testament sees all relationships—between elders and younger, employers and employees, husbands and wives, parents and children, governments and citizens—explicitly in the context of a relationship with Jesus. Expressions such as 'in the Lord' or 'for the Lord's sake' are commonly used.¹⁶ Outside of that context, our relationships are inextricably complicated by sin. Truly helpful closeness can come only when there is a certain distance between us that is occupied by the Saviour himself, who has taken sin away. As Jonathan said to David, 'The LORD shall be between me and you' (1 Sam. 20:42). That is our true bonding in love.

In particular in the church, Paul said we must relate with others primarily as servants of their Lord and ours:

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand (Rom. 14:4).

¹⁴ *Fiddler on the Roof*, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, book by Joseph Stein <<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/fiddlerontheroof/doyouloveme.htm>> (accessed 4th July 2010).

¹⁵ *An Australian Prayer Book*, AIO Press, Sydney, 1978, p. 549.

¹⁶ See Martin Bleby, *Power in Relationships: Issues of Love and Control*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2008, pp. 82–92.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes:

Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them. As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others, too, can be saved only by Christ himself. This means that I must release the other person from every attempt to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain his independence of me; to be loved for what he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ brought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for my brother, before I could begin to act, I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him only as the person he already is in Christ's eyes. This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ. Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognises the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.¹⁷

It was in the context of this relationship with the Saviour that Peter said, 'Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins' (1 Pet. 4:8). Any 'love' outside of Christ, that is us trying to do the 'loving' thing, will not do that, but may only exacerbate the situation.

Not that this stopped Peter when necessary from saying things like this:

... your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness (Acts 8:21–23).

Or Paul:

... 'You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?' (Acts 13:10).

The holy presence of the one who is between us will impact us both:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted (Gal. 6:1).

THE PASTORAL RELATIONSHIP

Peter, on the basis of his relationship with Christ and his experience of pastoral ministry, wrote this:

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for

'God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.'

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, 1954, pp. 25–26. Quoted in Bleby, *Power in Relationships*, p. 91.

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Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you (1 Pet. 5:1–7).

Similarly, Paul exhorted the elders from Ephesus:

Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son (Acts 20:28).

The Anglican ordination charge picks up on these texts:

Have always . . . printed in your mind how great a treasure is committed to your care. For they are the sheep of Christ, whom he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood. The church and congregation whom you must serve is his bride and his body. And if it should come about that the church, or any of its members, is hurt or hindered as a result of your negligence, you know the greatness of the fault and the judgment that will follow.¹⁸

Johnathan Edwards, preaching at the installment of the Rev. Samuel Buel, as pastor of the church and congregation at East Hampton on Long Island on 19th September 1746,¹⁹ took as his text Isaiah 62:5:

For as a young man marries a virgin,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you (RSV).

The words ‘your sons’ Edwards took to be a reference to the ministers of the church. Thus he is able to say:

The text thus opened affords these two propositions proper for our consideration on the solemn occasion of this day.

- I. The uniting of faithful ministers with Christ’s people in the ministerial office, when done in a due manner, is like a young man’s marrying a virgin.
- II. This union of ministers with the people of Christ is in order to their being brought to the blessedness of a more glorious union, in which Christ shall rejoice over them, as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride.

Edwards brings out the implications of this comparison:

A faithful minister, that is in a Christian manner united to a Christian people as their pastor, has his heart united to them in the most ardent and tender affection. And they, on the other hand, have their hearts united to him, esteeming him very highly in love for his work’s sake, and receiving him with honor and reverence, and willingly subjecting themselves to him, and committing themselves to his care, as being, under Christ, their head and guide.

Of course, what we have said above about never relating directly with any other person but only through Christ applies no less to this pastoral relationship between minister and congregation. If it did not, the relationship would amount to little other than pastoral adultery.²⁰ So Edwards is careful to say:

¹⁸ *An Australian Prayer Book*, pp. 609–10.

¹⁹ ‘Five Sermons. On Different Occasions, Sermon 2. The Church’s Marriage’, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Ethereal Christian Classics*, <www.ccel.org/e/edwards/works2.iii.ii.html> (accessed 4th July 2010).

²⁰ I can remember one possible pastoral appointment, from which the Lord mercifully spared me, being very much of this order in my thinking about it and glorying in it beforehand.

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It is only with reference to Christ, as the true bridegroom of his church, that there is any union between a faithful minister and a Christian people, that is like that of a bridegroom and a bride.²¹

Any marriage-like relationship between pastor and people must be only with a view to their marriage with Christ:

Let us see to it that our hearts are united to them, as a young man to a virgin that he marries, in the most ardent and tender affection; and that our regard to them be pure and uncorrupt, that it may be a regard to them, and not to what they have, or any worldly advantages we hope to gain of them. And let us behave ourselves as those that are devoted to their good; being willing to spend and be spent for them; joyfully undertaking and enduring the labor and self-denial that is requisite in order to a thorough fulfilling the ministry that we have received. Let us continually and earnestly endeavor to promote the prosperity and salvation of the souls committed to our care, looking on their calamities and their prosperity as our own; feeling their spiritual wounds and griefs, and refreshed with their consolations; and spending our whole lives in diligent care and endeavor to provide for, nourish, and instruct our people, as the intended spouse of Christ, yet in her minority, that we may form her mind and behavior, and bring her up for him, and that we may cleanse her, as with the washing of water by the word, and purify her as with sweet odors, and clothed in such raiment as may become Christ's bride. Let us aim that when the appointed wedding-day comes, we may have done our work as Christ's messengers; and may then be ready to present Christ's spouse to him, a chaste virgin, properly educated and formed, and suitably adorned for her marriage with the Lamb; that ye may then present her to himself, a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, and may receive her into his eternal embraces, in perfect purity, beauty, and glory.²²

What is it that most delights a pastor's heart? Seeing people come to Christ, and grow to maturity in their relationship with him. Equally what most distresses and grieves a pastor's heart is the prospect of their departing from him:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2–3, RSV).

What does it mean to say 'The Shepherd Loves the Flock'? We love the people best when we love Christ first.

Possible question for discussion:

How does loving the flock fit with other responsibilities; for example, family and the wider ministries we may have?

²¹ *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 'Five Sermons'.

²² *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 'Five Sermons'.