



"True greatness, true leadership, is found in giving yourself in service to others, not in coaxing or inducing others to serve you."
—Oswald Sanders

29-Nov-13

The Shepherd's Guidance (Part One)

A significant title of [Jesus Christ](#) is "the Good Shepherd" ([John 10:11](#), 14), and it is a perfect description for what He does in personally knowing and caring for His sheep. As part of this title, He mentions one of His primary activities in the latter half of [John 10:9](#): "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

The matter of "finding pasture" is a critical part of what a shepherd does for his sheep. Sheep are the farthest thing from being self-sufficient. They cannot make it on their own for very long—though they are seemingly oblivious to this. Left to themselves, they will not thrive because they require constant attention and direction. More than any other class of livestock, they are dependent on outside intervention, which is one reason why Jesus refers to Christians—us—as sheep: Without Him to lead, provide, and protect us, we would be in real trouble.

As Phillip Keller details in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, when sheep are left to their own ways, they cause utter desolation. Since sheep are so docile, we do not typically think of them as destructive animals, but their destructiveness lies in the fact that they are creatures of habit. Stubbornly

following their habitual nature, they do not consider the future. Sheep will follow the same trails until the trails become ruts, and they will continue to walk those ruts until they have carved gullies in the midst of their pastureland. They will graze an area, day after day, until it has been turned into a wasteland. They will nibble the grass down to its roots, leading to the erosion of what may have been prime topsoil. In addition, they will pollute those same fields until they are rife with parasites and disease.

Sheep have their favorite spots to which they will return repeatedly, quickly contaminating those areas. If great care is not taken, disease can run amok through an entire flock. If sheep are left to themselves, this is guaranteed to happen, which is why they require a shepherd's constant management and oversight.

In order to keep a flock well-fed and free of disease, as well as to maintain his pastures, a skilled shepherd keeps his flock on the move, slowly but continually. He frequently changes where they pasture, gradually moving them throughout all of his fields. In this way, he ensures that his flock has the best food and enough of it. He makes sure that he returns to an area only after the life cycles of the various parasites have run their courses, so the flock does not continually re-infect itself. The longer the sheep remain in the same place, the more the shepherd incurs the risk that they will malnourish and sicken themselves or those around them.

Since Christ refers to the church as a flock, and to individuals as sheep ([Matthew 26:31](#); [Luke 12:32](#); [John 10:16](#)), we can be sure that He will be doing something similar with His church. Left to ourselves, we tend to develop habits that can be destructive, whether to ourselves or to those in our environment. Even with the best of intentions, we [sin](#), and our sins pollute and can cause an environment of disease. We consume, but without a wise Shepherd overseeing what we consume, there is tremendous danger to ourselves and to those around us.

Thus, when we find that the circumstances of our lives are changing, we do not have to fear that things are actually out of control. They may just be out of *our* control. When we are under the ownership and care of the Good Shepherd, He changes our circumstances and keeps our lives from becoming static.

Sheep have another tendency, which Isaiah mentions in the midst of a well-known Messianic prophecy: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way" ([Isaiah 53:6](#)). Sheep have a well-deserved reputation for going astray; they will naturally wander off, each going its own way.

This propensity of sheep is analogous to the situation that the church of [God](#) finds itself in right now. In [Jeremiah 18:15-17](#), God gives the basic reason why He scatters His people: They have forgotten Him. His converted children have turned—every one—to their own ways, and the fruit of their wandering is evident in the envy, strife, division, and other [works of the flesh](#) that continue to be apparent in their lives (see [I Corinthians 3:3](#); [Galatians 5:19-21](#)).

The overall spiritual state of the church of God is not good! There is spiritual disease, malnourishment, and an ongoing desolation of the spiritual environment. This is not because the Good Shepherd has left us; He promises emphatically He will never do that ([Hebrews 13:5](#)). Rather, if we see spiritual disease and malnourishment, it is because the flock is not following the Shepherd.

If we turn to our own ways and begin to wander off, He is faithful to call us back to Him before it becomes too late. We should remember, though, that He often calls us back in a way that will move us into a situation in which we are forced to remember our absolute dependence on Him. Such circumstances—trials—can make us feel very uncomfortable. But because the Good Shepherd cares for His sheep, He continually adjusts our environment to bring out the best in us without allowing us to ruin matters for others.

His sheep hear His voice and respond willingly to Him ([John 10:27](#)), even though it means we might miss our habitual trails and favorite spots. His sheep are the ones who yearn for His guidance—regardless of the cost in personal comfort—because they trust that the Good Shepherd has a better trail for them than the way that they would choose for themselves.

Next time, we will consider other ways that Christ, the Good Shepherd, provides for us.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[**Dogs and Sheep**](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Bible contains abundant sheep metaphors. Likewise, the sheepdog is a metaphor pertaining, in its broadest sense, to anyone who engages in God's work or harvest, but more specifically to an ordained minister or elder, actively engaged full-time in the feeding and tending of the flock. Border Collies, extremely loyal, courageous, and intelligent, are specifically bred to the responsibility of herding sheep, gently moving them in the direction the shepherd has chosen to lead (rapidly changing direction, if necessary). The sheepdog must be instantly obedient to the master's voice and commands, totally self-controlled or self-disciplined (impervious to distraction), able to influence and direct without unduly frightening, intimidating, or scattering the sheep.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[**The Shepherd's Voice**](#)

by Mike Ford

God's people are often compared to sheep. Lately, however, some have begun to question whether they need a human shepherd. How does one know whether a minister is a true shepherd of God?

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