

The Shepherd's Voice

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A recent popular cartoon showed a group of sheep at a party. One of them, the hostess, says to another, "Henry! Our party's total chaos! No one knows when to eat, where to stand, what to. . . ." Then the door opens and a dog walks into the room. The hostess breathes a sigh of relief and says, "Oh, wonderful! Here comes a border collie!"

This humorous illustration exaggerates the traits of sheep, but it makes a good point. Christians are often compared to sheep and our ministers to shepherds. Sheep have a natural inclination to assemble in flocks and to follow a leader. These characteristics enable a lone shepherd to handle hundreds of sheep successfully.

To be of any value, sheep require constant care. They are also notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become ruts, graze the same fields until they turn into dust bowls and pollute their pastures until they are corrupt with disease and parasites. Consequently, shepherds must constantly lead them to fresh pastures.

Given these traits, a shepherd's guidance is paramount. A shepherd is defined as "one who herds, guards and cares for sheep," and from this definition the spiritual applications are obvious. Peter exhorts the elders in Asia Minor:

Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory." (I Peter 5:2-4, RSV)

Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11 that God ordained "some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." Everywhere else in the New Testament, "pastor" is translated "shepherd." The Greek word *poimen* literally means "shepherd" and figuratively "pastor."

These verses clearly show that we are sheep, part of a flock, and our Chief Shepherd Jesus Christ has ordained various human men to serve as our shepherds. Paul, in his poignant farewell to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:28-30), does as Peter did: he exhorts them to feed the flock. He goes even further, however, by warning of grievous wolves, false shepherds, entering the flock, trying to turn us away from God's truth. We have heard of wolves in sheep's clothing—Paul says that some of these wolves will come from our very midst!

Sheep Know Their Shepherd

How, then, are the sheep to know their shepherd? How can the sheep know that they are not following a wolf before it is too late?

We find the answer in John 10:1-5, the Parable of the True Shepherd. In the illustration many sheep are in an enclosure where several flocks come together for the night. The shepherd comes in the morning to lead them to their pasture, and he calls to his sheep by name. Though the individual

flocks had become hopelessly intermixed during the night, the shepherd's sheep hear his voice and separate themselves from the larger flock.

Notice how often Christ emphasizes the voice of the shepherd in this short section: "The sheep hear his voice" (verse 3); "The sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (verse 4); "They do not know the voice of strangers" (verse 5). When the shepherd speaks, the sheep go to him immediately.

When "voice" is used in the New Testament, the writers all chose the Greek word *phone*, meaning sound or spoken word. But *phone* can also mean an address as to a group of people, a speech. *Phone* derives from *phaino*, meaning to enlighten or to shine. From this root meaning springs the fact that *phone* can mean disclosure or revelation through an address or speech—a message!

This is its figurative meaning in John 10. The true and faithful shepherd will be preaching a message which his sheep will hear and immediately follow!

Test the Spirits

How can we know that the message, the voice, is true? The apostle John advises us to "test the spirits" (I John 4:1). Only those of God's flock can hear God's ministers (verses 6). "Hear" in this instance means more than just hearing a sound, a voice or even a message; it means "understand." The world understands a worldly shepherd (verse 5). A message that the world acclaims should be treated with healthy skepticism.

So to know if a shepherd is true, we "test the spirits" and we hear and understand the message. "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (verse 6). "Error" means forsaking the right path. God's sheep will know the right path from the wrong through the message of His shepherd.

The job of the shepherd is to oversee the flock in all respects, including leading them down the right path. The sheep do not stay in the enclosure where they were asleep with the sheep of other shepherds. The shepherd calls them out and leads them down the paths of righteousness (Psalm 23:3).

We were penned up for the night with all the other sheep. But our ears have been opened so we can hear the voice of the shepherd and "test the spirits." If we are diligent, we will respond correctly.

"For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." (I Peter 2:25)