

Welcome to the Flock

Numbers 27:12–17, Mark 6:32–34

This morning Grace OPC received a new member by profession of faith and baptism. I have had the joy of getting to know Charlie over the last months, and am encouraged by his eagerness to know God and his word. This is evidence of the Holy Spirit's working. Without the Holy Spirit changing our hearts, we want nothing to do with God, but when we are born again, then we want to know God. As humans made in God's very image, we were made for fellowship with God, but without the Spirit we reject him and spurn the fellowship of his people.

In the Bible the covenant people are called the congregation, the assembly, the sheep of his pasture, God's flock. This is actually a large theme, and one that doesn't get due attention in our highly individualistic culture. I have three points this morning: (1) sheep need a flock, (2) sheep need a shepherd, and (3) Christ is the true shepherd.

In our Old Testament text, the Lord announces to Moses that he is about to die. Moses had led Israel for 40 years. He led Israel out of Egypt (a type of our salvation), and he led Israel through the desert (a type of our pilgrim life as aliens and strangers in a hostile world). Israel was a difficult people to lead. They were stubborn, they were stiffnecked, they complained a lot. They did not always follow, and leading them was a thankless job. God raised up Moses for the task, and though he was not without sin, he had a shepherd's heart. When informed that he was about to die, Moses prayed, "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd." God answered this prayer by raising up Joshua, who led Israel over the Jordan into the Promised Land (a type of heaven). The language Moses uses under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is very pregnant, as we shall see. It is not God's will that his people be like sheep who have no shepherd. We *do* have a Shepherd, and that shepherd is Christ.

Our Old Testament text foreshadows our New Testament text: "And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things." The context is significant. The Lord's forerunner, John the Baptist, who had been prophesied in Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, had recently been cruelly murdered by wicked King Herod. John had been beheaded in prison, and his head had been brought in on a platter and presented to a dancing girl, the daughter of Herod's illegitimate wife. Though this was God's eternal plan, it was a shock and profound grief to our Lord, who took this very personally. He and the Twelve withdrew by boat to a desert place where they could rest, but the crowds followed him and wanted him to minister to them. Jesus, filled

with compassion, began to teach them. Even though he on a human level was tired and worn out both by the demands of ministry and by the grief which filled his heart with the tragic loss of his dear friend John, he was moved with compassion for his followers “because they were like sheep not having a shepherd.” The language “like sheep not having a shepherd” mirrors Moses’ words 1500 years before. Once again we are reminded how we as God’s people, living as aliens and pilgrims in a hostile world, are in need of a shepherd, and that Shepherd is Christ. Let’s consider our three points in turn, and see how they summarize large scriptural themes. First,

1. Sheep need a flock

In the Scriptures, God’s people are likened to sheep. Sheep are valuable, both for their wool and for their meat. In the Middle East, sheep are cared for by shepherds, generally young men. In my trips to the Middle East I have on several occasions seen motor traffic stop while a flock of sheep is moved across the road. Just a block or two from my daughter-in-law’s parents’ apartment in a nice part of town, traffic ground to a halt, waiting for a large flock of sheep to clear the roadway. A number of major biblical characters took care of sheep. Jacob was a shepherd who took care of his father-in-law Laban’s sheep. Moses took care of his father-in-law’s sheep in the Sinai desert before God called him to go to Egypt to demand the release of God’s people. King David, as a young man, was a shepherd, and gave to the world the memorable twenty-third Psalm, “the LORD is my Shepherd.”

But sheep need a flock—something that was surely understood by people in Bible times. While this is applicable to animals, it is applicable as well to humans. We humans need to be part of a flock that will guide us in paths of righteousness. God’s people are to deliberately avoid evil companions and seek out people who can influence us for good. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:33 that “bad company ruins good morals” (ESV). This echoes wise Solomon, who writes in Proverbs, “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.... My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path” (Prov. 1:10–16). On the other hand, the Christian can say with the Psalmist, “Lord, I have *loved* the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honor dwelleth. Gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloody men ... as for me, I will walk in mine integrity: redeem me, and be merciful unto me. My foot standeth in an even place: in the congregations will I bless the Lord” (Ps. 26:8–12). The place to find good company is in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is Christ’s true flock, and a wise person will seek it out.

It is no coincidence that one of the most important words for God’s people in the Scriptures is the word *congregation*. This word is used 331 times in the King James Version. *Congregation* comes from a Latin word meaning literally *to collect*

into a flock. The most common word for God's people is a word meaning *collect into a flock*. Sheep need a flock—not just any flock, but a flock of good role models, people committed to the Lord, and who obey his word; in other words, the church!

The first time we encounter the word *congregation* in the Bible, it has to do with the institution of the Passover (Ex. 12). God tells Moses, “Speak ye unto all the *congregation* of Israel, saying,” and then he tells them to take a lamb for each household. That lamb, of course, had come from a flock. The Passover lamb was to be chosen on the tenth day of the month, and kept until the fourteenth day, when “the whole assembly of the *congregation* of Israel shall kill it in the evening” (literally, *between the two evenings*—that is, 3 p.m.). The Passover lamb ultimately signified the death of Christ, who died on Good Friday at 3 p.m., as Passover lambs were being slaughtered all over Israel. Exodus 12:19 specifies, “Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses: for whosoever eateth that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off from the *congregation* of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land.” This is an instance of church discipline: to be cut off from the flock of God's people due to obstinate, unrepentant sin.

Sheep need a faithful flock of God's people, where they can be taught by a faithful shepherd or pastor, a man called by God and ordained by his church to preach Christ and model the life of Christ before his congregation. At the beginning of the book of Acts the church was predominantly Jewish, but later, Gentiles were brought into the flock. Jesus said, “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one *flock* and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

“Birds of a feather flock together.” Humans like to congregate with people who have similar interests. Those who are addicted to sin like to be around people who are similarly addicted. But those who are born again by the Holy Spirit are drawn to the church of Jesus Christ. The Christian says with the Psalmist, “Gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloody men . . . My foot standeth in an even place: in the congregations will I bless the Lord.” It is significant that David uses the plural: “congregations.” There are two aspects to the church: it is universal, and it is local. Paul refers to the church universal when he says, “Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). He speaks of the whole church universal—all the elect people of God in every age, for whom Christ died. Christ is the God-man; he is fully God, and fully man, two natures in one person. He had to come to earth and become a man so that he could die for men. He had to take to himself a human nature. He was born of the virgin Mary; he inherited true humanity from Mary. He had a true human nature. As a man he went to the cross and died for sinners. But at the same time he is truly divine. His divine nature gave infinite value to his sacrificial death. “For when we were yet without strength, in

due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (Rom. 5:6–9). When Christ suffered and died on the cross, he died in the place of all those whom the Father had given to him in eternity past. His death on the cross was sufficient for the sins of all his elect in every age.

David prays, “in the congregations will I bless the Lord.” He uses the plural: “congregations.” This refers to the various local churches that make up the universal church. Not only does the Bible say, “Christ loved the church” (singular, meaning the church universal), but it also speaks of various local churches: the church at Corinth, the church at Jerusalem, the church at Antioch, the churches of Asia Minor, etc.

The world judges success according to size. Is it growing? Is it attracting customers? Are people flocking to it? A lot of people judge a church by its size: if it’s big, it must be good—but that’s not necessarily so. There are two competing visions of the church. Is the purpose of the church *to attract people*, or *to worship God*? Proponents of the church-growth movement design churches to be appealing, particularly to the 25–50-year-old demographic. They want to attract people, to draw newcomers. They grow large by providing contemporary worship that is performance-oriented, involving “worship bands,” high-powered rock music, hip soloists, light shows, a theater or coffee-house atmosphere, dance, drama, skits, and positive messages that avoid biblical jargon that frightens or bores the unchurched. But one would be hard-pressed to find a pattern for this in the Bible. Isn’t the purpose of the church to worship God as he has appointed in his word? *God* is our audience in worship. Our worship must please him. People are impressed by size. Yet in Luke 12:32 Jesus actually said, “Fear not, *little flock*; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” A church may be small by the world’s standards, but if it is faithful, God is glorified. Sheep need a flock, and the safest flock for a Christian is a faithful church. Second,

2. Sheep need a shepherd

Hear Moses’ prayer, as he prepares for his own death: “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd.” Here, Moses, drawing on his many years of caring for his father-in-law’s sheep, speaks of the work of a shepherd, specifically *going out* and *going in* before his sheep, *leading them out* and *bringing them in*. Jesus echoed this in John chapter 10, where he speaks of himself as the true Shepherd of his people. He says, “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall *go in and out*, and find

pasture.” The shepherd leads his flock out by day, to find pasture, and as night closes in, he leads them back into the fold to be safe from predators. The shepherd makes his flock to lie down in green pastures, he leads them beside the still waters. He restores the soul of his sheep. When a particular lamb is fainting from exhaustion, or from the heat of the desert, the shepherd will fetch it back again, and relieve, refresh and comfort his sheep. Sometimes a sheep will fall into a pit from which he can’t climb out, and the shepherd will hear its cries and draw it out with his shepherd’s crook. Other times a sheep will get cut in thorns or brambles, and the shepherd will anoint his head with oil. Sheep need a shepherd to care for them.

In the work of caring for the flock of God’s people, the elders will visit the sheep in their affliction, as they see or face difficulties. They will sit beside a hospital bed and pray and give a word of comfort from the Scriptures. They will give godly counsel as appropriate—in conversation after a service, in a home over a meal, meeting over coffee, sometimes in a lengthy conversation over the phone. Shepherding is time-consuming work, and a pastor cannot do it alone. What a blessing are the ruling elders who can assist a pastor in his work, or godly women who can “teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home” (Tit. 2:4–5).

Sheep need a shepherd. God wants his people to thrive, to grow in godliness, to become more Christlike. Such growth takes place in the flock, the local church, where the people learn to love one another, honor one another, wash one another’s feet, be kindly affectionate to one another, be of the same mind toward one another, be like-minded toward one another, receive one another, admonish one another, wait for one another, have the same care for one another, greet one another, serve one another, bear with one another, bear one another’s burdens, speak to one another, speak truth with one another, be kind toward one another, forgive one another, submit to one another, comfort one another, exhort one another, consider one another, confess their trespasses to one another, pray for one another, love one another, have compassion for one another, have a fervent love for one another, be submissive to one another, have fellowship with one another.

Man’s first and highest duty is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourself. Because of sin, man utterly fails in this duty and stands in need of a Savior. Fallen man is an idolator, enthroning self instead of God, and injuring his neighbor instead of loving his neighbor. When we sin, we need to confess our sin to God and be reconciled to our neighbor. The gospel teaches us to do this. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). Faithful shepherds bring God’s message: “be reconciled to God.” Sheep need a shepherd. Thirdly,

3. Christ is the true Shepherd

Hear again the words of Moses: “Let the LORD ... set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in.” The one who perfectly fulfills this prayer is the Lord Jesus.

Christ is the true Shepherd. Not only does he perfectly fulfill the prayer of Moses, he also perfectly fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 40, “Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his *flock* like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” In Christ, the God of heaven comes with a strong hand to rule over his kingdom. His people are a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

Christ is the true shepherd. He boldly claims, “All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:8–9). You can follow all manner of religious charlatans dishing out their self-help advice, relationship counselors, gurus, spiritual teachers, guiding lights, masters, experts, pundits, philosophers, professors, talk-show hosts. You can choose whatever philosophy appeals to you. But Christ alone is “the way, the truth and the life.” Nobody comes to the Father, except through him. He is the Shepherd of Israel who leads Joseph like a *flock*; he alone is the one who dwells between the cherubim (Ps. 80:1).

Jesus declared himself to be the divinely-sent Shepherd. Before his crucifixion he said, “All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the *flock* shall be scattered abroad” (Matt. 26:31). He is the Shepherd who was to be smitten on behalf of his people. He is the great Shepherd of the sheep who rose from the dead after having shed his precious blood (Heb. 13:20).

Christ alone rules in the church. His word alone is to be proclaimed. His will alone is to be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Having gone back to heaven, he has left his church in the care of undershepherds, who are to feed his flock, serving as overseers, leading the people to Christ, feeding the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood, being examples to the flock (Acts 20:28, 1 Pet. 5:2–3).

We were “as sheep going astray” but have now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). At the end of time, when the chief Shepherd shall appear, we who have trusted him shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away (1 Pet. 5:4).

If you are trusting in Jesus Christ, you have nothing to fear on the day of judgment, for you are a member of his flock, whom he has promised to guide to heaven.

Yes, (1) sheep need a flock, (2) sheep need a shepherd, and (3) Christ is the true shepherd.

Welcome to the flock, Charlie! Welcome to the Lord's table. We pray God's richest blessing upon you. You join all in this church who are trusting Christ for salvation and confess him in Spirit and truth. May God be glorified in our midst! Amen.