

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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The Flock and the Fold: A Paradigm for Unity

Kevin T. Bauder

Careful theologians do not build their doctrine of the church merely around the use of the word *ekklesia*. The New Testament uses many images or word pictures to reveal truth about the church. One of the most instructive is the image of the flock, found in John 10. It occurs in one of the few parables in John's gospel.

The parable should be read in view of the miracle story of John 9. In that story, Jesus healed a congenitally blind man. The healing infuriated the Pharisees, partly because it occurred on the Sabbath, and partly because Jesus performed it in a way that was calculated to annoy the legalists.

The story concludes with a stark contrast. On the one side stands the formerly-blind man, who turns to Christ in trust and worships Him. On the other side stand the Pharisees, who clearly reject Jesus and persecute everyone who confesses Him. This contrast sets the stage for the parable of chapter 10.

The parable is about a sheep fold. Within the fold are sheep. Different individuals present themselves to the sheep, but only one is the true shepherd. All the others are thieves and robbers. The true shepherd calls His sheep, and when they hear His voice they follow Him. The sheep that do not follow Him are not His.

Given the perspective of John 9, the parable's general meaning is relatively easy to unpack. Jesus is the shepherd (as He Himself says later in the chapter). Therefore, the sheep that follow Him must be believers (typified by the formerly-blind man), and the sheep that do not follow Him are unbelievers. In the "thieves and robbers" it is not difficult to see a reference to the Pharisees, whom Jesus had begun to excoriate at the end of chapter 9.

An important emblem in the parable is the fold itself. A fold is a compound or enclosure. It keeps the sheep together by creating a barrier that they cannot cross. The barrier is visible, tangible, and external to the sheep. Both kinds of sheep (those that belong to the shepherd and those that do not) are inside the fold.

The fold almost certainly represents national Israel. The point of the parable, then, is that national Israel includes both believers and unbelievers. Jesus, the true shepherd, has the right to lead them all, but not all of them will follow Him. Those who will not follow fall prey to the thieves and robbers, the Pharisees.

Once we decipher the imagery of the parable, we are in a position to notice a very surprising statement from the mouth of Jesus. It occurs in verse 3: "he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out." Out of what? Out of the fold, of course. Given that the fold is Israel, Jesus is saying that at some point He intends to remove His sheep—His flock—from national Israel.

The removal of the flock from the fold underlines a contrast between two forms of unity. The sheep that are in the fold are kept together one way: by an external constraint. That is one kind of unity. It is the unity of the fold (the *aule*), and it is imposed and enforced from outside.

The sheep that follow the shepherd, however, keep together in a different way: by an internal impulse. They draw together because each is drawn to the shepherd's voice. This is the unity of the flock, the very name of which (*poimne*) is related to the word for "shepherd" (*poimen*).

The nature of the flock's unity is very important. It cannot be imposed from outside, and it cannot be contrived. The sheep do not draw together by looking at other sheep, but by listening to the shepherd. They experience unity, not because they long for unity, but because each longs for the shepherd. That is the nature of Christian unity. It never comes from focusing on other Christians or even upon unity itself. The only genuinely Christian unity is a byproduct, and it comes from focusing upon Christ.

Jesus designed the parable to contrast the flock (*poimne*) with the fold (*aule*). The fold, national Israel, includes both believers and unbelievers. They are held together by the external marks of participation in visible Israel. The flock, however, includes only believers—only those who know and follow the shepherd's voice. These, He says, He intends to lead out of national Israel. When we understand all of this, we will be prepared for the most surprising truth of all.

In verse 16 Jesus gives the parable its punch line. He states that He has other sheep that are not of the fold (*aule*). Since the fold represents Israel, these sheep have to be Gentile believers. These sheep also hear the shepherd's voice. What Jesus says next is breathtaking: there shall be one *poimne* with one *poimen*.

In other words, sheep from two sources will be united in one flock. Sheep who once were (but no longer are) part of national Israel will be united into a single flock with sheep who were never part of national Israel. They will be one flock because they follow one shepherd.

Jesus' parable in John 10 parallels Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:11-22. Before the death and resurrection of Christ, humanity was twofold: Jewish humanity and Gentile humanity. These two

were enemies, but the ground of their enmity was obliterated through the cross. Consequently, God has taken some who were Jewish and some who were Gentile, and He has united them into a single new humanity. This new humanity is also the one body, whose members have access to God by one Spirit. The new humanity defines the fundamental unity among Christians, providing the basis for their actual treatment of one another.

The same applications can be drawn from the parable of the flock and the fold. True Christian unity is never the unity of the fold. It never arises from external constraint or manipulation. Christians, like sheep, can be herded into proximity with one another. Without an inner attraction, however, proximity will only provide an occasion to put their disunity on display.

True unity can never be contrived. We can never get it by paying attention to unity. It never comes to those who aim for it directly. Ironically, a strong focus upon unity often proves to be a distraction from the very things that would produce unity.

Genuine unity is a byproduct. The sheep are one flock, not because they are paying attention to themselves or willing themselves to be a flock, but because they are paying attention to the shepherd. A sheep that draws near to the shepherd will also draw near to all the other sheep that are also following the shepherd. These sheep will discover a unity that they never planned and for which they never aimed.

Do you want greater unity? You will never get it by talking about unity. If you want unity, talk about Christ and follow Him. If enough of us do that together, we shall realize a unity that originates in no other way. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Veni, Creator Spiritus

John Dryden (1631-1700)

Creator Spirit, by whose aid
The world's foundations first were laid,
Come, visit ev'ry pious mind;
Come, pour thy joys on human kind;
From sin, and sorrow set us free;
And make thy temples worthy Thee.

O, Source of uncreated Light,
The Father's promis'd Paraclete!
Thrice Holy Fount, thrice Holy Fire,
Our hearts with heav'nly love inspire;
Come, and thy Sacred Unction bring
To sanctify us, while we sing!

Plenteous of grace, descend from high,
Rich in thy sev'n-fold energy!
Thou strength of his Almighty Hand,
Whose pow'r does heav'n and earth command:
Proceeding Spirit, our Defence,
Who do'st the gift of tongues dispense,
And crown'st thy gift with eloquence!

Refine and purge our earthly parts;
But, oh, inflame and fire our hearts!
Our frailties help, our vice control;
Submit the senses to the soul;
And when rebellious they are grown,
Then, lay thy hand, and hold 'em down.

Chase from our minds th' Infernal Foe;
And peace, the fruit of love, bestow;
And, lest our feet should step astray,
Protect, and guide us in the way.

Make us Eternal Truths receive,
And practise, all that we believe:
Give us thy self, that we may see
The Father and the Son, by thee.

Immortal honour, endless fame,
Attend th' Almighty Father's name:
The Saviour Son be glorified,
Who for lost Man's redemption died:
And equal adoration be,
Eternal Paraclete, to thee. ✠

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