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ON BEING A SHEPHERD

By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH.

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When St. Paul spoke to the ministers at Ephesus he told them, "Shepherd the flock of which the Holy Spirit has put you in charge". It was the same injunction which Jesus gave to St. Peter, and so to all Christian ministers when he said, "Tend my sheep".

The work of a shepherd has four parts. First, he forms the flock, calling it into being. This was, of course, a conspicuous part of the shepherd's work in Jesus' time. He said of himself that as the Good Shepherd he called his sheep by name, and they heard his voice and followed him, so forming themselves into a flock around him.

The minister's first task is, by preaching the Gospel, to call God's people. The work of the minister is based firmly on God's predestination plan; God has his sheep whom he has chosen from eternity. His sheep will hear his voice through the Gospel. In a vision the Lord Jesus told Paul at the beginning of his ministry at Corinth, "I have much people in this city." It was a word of encouragement, so Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months, and gathered these people to Christ through preaching of the Gospel.

Thus a minister's work is not a desperate endeavour, fighting a losing battle as it were, but rather, it is that of being a fellow-worker with God, working out God's gracious purposes, calling those whom He has chosen. "My sheep hear my voice," says our Lord, "and they follow me." He added, addressing to the unbelieving Jews, who were listening, "You do not believe, because you are not my sheep." Notice the way our Lord puts it. Christ's sheep follow because they recognise his voice; they are his sheep. They do not become his sheep by following him.

Thus, the first task of the minister is to preach the Gospel, that those whom God is calling may hear his voice, may follow, and so form his flock.

The next task of the shepherd is to feed the flock. The food of the Christian is the word of God, and the minister must preach this word in a way that can be understood, and is seen to be relevant. The food he provides must be digestible. This requires that the minister understands God's word himself; understands its full content and its implications. He must read it and study it and make use of all that is available to help him comprehend it. His task is to unfold the whole counsel of God and he can only do this by understanding it himself, when I speak of a minister, I don't just mean the public minister of a congregation. We all have ministers, in the home and amongst our friends. The preparation of the pastures occupies most of the time of the Australian shepherd or a flockmaster, these days. So, too, the provision of food through God's word will be the chief work of the Christian minister, whether he publicly ministers in the congregation or provides a ministry in the home. Parents they must not neglect their obligation to feed their children with God's life-giving word. And each of us have an obligation to feed on that Word for ourselves.

The third duty of the shepherd is to defend and protect the flock. In David's day this meant defending them against wild animals like the lion and the bear which he had to fight as he kept his father's sheep. In Jesus' day this sort of danger had passed, but there was still the robber and brigand who had to be resisted by the shepherd as he defended his flock. Put into Christian language, the duty of defending the flock means that the minister must controvert errors of teaching and of living, which despoil the faith of those in his care. He must be alert to false ideas, and be able to analyse the error and expose their character. This will require knowledge and reflection, everything runs back to the use of our time. If the shepherd is busy here and there, he will be prepared to defend the flock. The wolves, said St. Paul, may rise from the secular world outside the congregation or from the Christians within who may be propagating erroneous ways of Christian teaching and Christian behaviour.

There is then, a duty to engage in controversy for the sake of truth. The minister must not only propagate, but defend the Gospel. Controversy, of course, should be carried out in a Christian spirit, but it must be clear and vigorous if the shepherd is to do his duty of tending the flock.

The fourth duty of the shepherd is to manage the flock. For example, the modern flock-master must not neglect to dip, to drench and to cull. So, too, the Christian minister must exhort, encourage, admonish and warn not only the group from the pulpit, but also the individual member at home. Though it is most important for a minister to retire to his study for prayer and preparation, he will need also to get out of his study and get among the people. This is a very important aspect of the shepherd's work. And he may in the end need to cull out of the flock those who, in spite of admonition, refuse to abandon unchristian ways and teachings.

You will notice that the work of the shepherd is with the flock. So the minister's work is to be the minister of God's congregation. He preaches the Gospel of God's love in Christ to all and sundry. The minister must preach with diligence for it is not for him to know beforehand whom God will call. Christ's sheep might hear the Lord's voice and follow Him in His flock. Then the minister tends this flock formed in this way. But to those who do not hear Christ's voice because they are not His sheep, the minister is not ~~their~~ minister.

St. Paul told the Ephesian ministers to "take heed to yourself and to the flock". If the latter is to be accomplished according to the mind of God, the former, "take heed to yourself" must not be neglected. All of us, as Christians, must take heed to maintain our time of prayer each day, to read God's word for ourselves, and meditate on it, and to join in the fellowship with our fellow Christians. Then we will be able to discharge the work of a shepherd, for to some extent, all

of us have this duty. There will be someone to whom we have the responsibility of helping in the Christian life, of acting as a good shepherd towards them.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the chief shepherd, the flock is his, he called them; we are his fellow shepherds looking after those whom God's providence brings into our sphere.

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