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The Incarnate Shepherd

Warren Vanhetloo, ThD, DD
Professor, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary

God has taught His people many important spiritual truths by referring to the shepherd-sheep relationship. Practices of shepherds were familiar to the people of both Old Testament and New Testament times. Of a relationship so common in life, God did not need to draw extensive pictures or give elaborate explanations: references are brief, direct, and effective. Comparisons that were quite obvious to those who heard the prophets or the Savior may not be clear to twentieth century Americans, however, and may even be misunderstood.

Study of the various ways in which the relationship between shepherd and sheep is employed in teaching spiritual truths in the New Testament is exceedingly profitable. So many references appear that it is well to group those which have noticeable similarity. Of passages in which in the analogy the shepherd is to be recognized as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself during His earthly ministry, some clearly speak of His chosen disciples as His special flock. In other usages the "sheep" of the reference is general. The purpose of this present article is to examine six New Testament passages in which the literary motif of the shepherd-sheep appears in such fashion that the incarnate Son of God is the one represented by the "Shepherd."

The "sheep" in the analogy in these six passages are living during the years of Christ's public ministry. The sheep are the disciples, the multitudes or the nation. In two passages (Luke 12:23; Matt 10:16) the "flock" consists of the disciples gathered around Jesus during His earthly ministry. In two passages (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34) the "sheep" are the multitudes, that is, neither the nation as a unit nor necessarily

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the disciples. In two passages (Matt 10:6; 15:24) the "flock" is the nation Israel.

The aim of this investigation is to ascertain what the Bible says (*exegesis*) and to benefit from the instruction and exhortation set forth so vividly by employing the analogy of the shepherd-sheep relationship. To do this, it is important to ascertain the relationships and procedures connected with the work of the shepherd in that time that our Lord was teaching.

This examination is not particularly concerned with whether the use as a figure of speech should be classified as a simile or a metaphor, for instance. Jesus used relationships of shepherd and sheep deliberately for instruction in His public teaching. What He expected the people to recognize by using these analogies is that which this study seeks to discover.

Christ and His Disciples

Two passages build on the analogy in such a way that the likeness of the shepherd is to be recognized as the incarnate Christ and the sheep are distinctly His disciples. In neither verse is the likeness drawn out.

In one passage, Luke 12:32, Jesus refers to His immediate close followers as a "little flock." Commands to them have been negative; they are to have no great concern for food or clothing as they witness. The Father-Shepherd care is sufficient: "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

The other passage in which the disciples of Jesus are the "sheep" of the comparison is Matthew 10:16, again in a context of missionary witnessing. "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." Both of these disciple passages have important lessons and applications for all followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 12:32

The reference to "little flock" in Luke 12:32 is directly addressed to the disciples by our Lord Jesus Christ (v 22). The passage deals with concern for food and clothing (vv 22 ff), with the assurance that if they seek the kingdom, such things God would adequately provide (v 31). God the owner shepherd supervises the field shepherd (Jesus). The disciples can fully trust the Lord Jesus Christ and His heavenly Father.

The Father-Shepherd will adequately provide for the needs of this flock. The occasion of this discourse by Jesus was the request that an inheritance be divided (Luke 12:13). Not only did Jesus declare He was not a judge or an arbitrator (v 14), but He also used the occasion to teach extensively about the proper place of material possessions in life. He said to them, "Watch and guard yourself against the spirit which is always wanting more."¹ For the benefit of His followers, He used the parable of the rich fool (vv 16-21), teaching that those who have abundant possessions should not trust in riches but should endeavor to be rich with God (v 21).

Jesus next spoke more extensively concerning the attitude of people who do not have worldly riches. He urged an attitude of trust rather than of worry or anxious thought. A man must do his part and leave the rest to God. The disciples are of much greater importance to God than ravens (v 24) or lilies (v 27). God knows their needs (v 30). They should seek first the kingdom of God (v 31), maintaining a right attitude. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (v 34).

Jesus called them, "O ye of little faith" (v 28). Such things as food and clothing the nations of the world seek after (v 30), but these followers of the Lord Jesus Christ are to devote their energies to far greater acquisition, to seek the kingdom of God (v 31). The devotion to the task and the effort involved to achieve it provide one reason for the assurance of verse thirty-two, "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Gentiles exert great effort toward acquiring the fine food and clothing in this life; many are frustrated and disappointed. Urging His disciples to seek the kingdom, Jesus assures them that if they seek they shall find. Gentiles have many things working against them in their quest for worldly enjoyment. The disciples will meet opposition and difficulties, but the all-powerful God is on their side; it is His delight to give them the kingdom (v 32).

There is a sense here in which Jesus is teaching that He and the Father are one. Their interests are identical. The owner-shepherd made provision for the shepherd who led the flock into the field and for needs of the sheep. Jesus assures His disciples that God is adequate to provide fully, is concerned to provide properly, and is wise to provide completely. It is not their area of responsibility; they are not to worry. There are no possible needs He might overlook or fail to produce for.

The Father-Shepherd will watch over and protect this little flock. Jesus assures them they are to fear not. An animal conscious of

predators round about naturally fears. Jesus seems to be teaching His disciples that they should not concentrate their gaze on the forces of evil opposing their efforts; they are to look to the Shepherd whose presence comforts, whose encouragement is a constant reminder, "Fear not."

The Lord in direct address to His disciples used the article with the vocative, "the little flock." The word for flock is not a diminutive, and "little" is neither superfluous nor an epithet of affection, but an expression of fact.² As an expression of fact, the number of disciples was certainly small. As a small flock, they had a great Shepherd. The smallness of their number should not discourage them in any way.

A question that many consider is, "What is the larger flock concept of which this small flock might be a part?" The usual suggestion is that the larger flock is the nation, and compared to the nation they were few in number. Proleptically, Jesus may have had in mind the "other flocks" and the "one fold" of John 10:16. Inasmuch as it is the kingdom that He says has been divinely appointed for them, it is well to center any consideration of a larger flock on the millennial gathering, particularly of the Jewish nation. Others will sit on the right hand and on the left (Matt 10:23; Mark 10:40), but they will sit on twelve thrones (Matt 19:28), and the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb will be in the foundations of holy Jerusalem (Rev 21:14).

Disciples should not be enamored with the riches of this world (vv 13-21) but should center thought and concern on the future kingdom (vv 31-32). God will provide for the needs of the flock as the perfect Owner-Shepherd. The disciples are to lay up treasure where moth and rust do not corrupt (Matt 6:19-21). Their anxiety is to be solely that of expectation of the Lord's return (vv 35-48). They are to concentrate on witnessing, not amassing wealth.

The Father-Shepherd desires a functioning flock. There are important things to consider concerning this flock under the shepherd care of the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, there is a unity here. Disciples have been called out and gathered into a "flock" and the care of the Shepherd is of the choice flock as a unit, including every individual composing it.

Second, as a "little" flock there is a suggestion of supernatural power emphasized in the proposed mission which would turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

Third, there is an example for future undershepherds of small flocks (I Pet 5:2) to provide the same complete shepherd care that the Lord did during His first advent.

Fourth, there is a sense of inadequacy and helplessness suggested, reminding them that they are only as sheep among wolves (Matt 10:16) and thus must follow carefully their Shepherd and remain close to Him.

Addressing His disciples (v 22), Jesus calls them "little flock," but He does not emphasize His own relation as the Shepherd by saying "My" little flock. The emphasis thus is not on the shepherd relation but on the unitary dealing of God with them and upon their seemingly insignificant size. When compared with the mass of mankind or the powerful nations of the world, they are small in number, like a small flock of defenseless sheep. Yet the Father has chosen weak ones of the world for His spiritual work (I Cor 1:27).

The Father-Shepherd still encourages churches and individuals. The combined warning and encouragement of this passage applies to local churches today as it did to the assembly of disciples. A small church may be a true church; size is not crucial. The unity of the local church is of importance to the Chief Shepherd. Little is much with God; a small local church can eagerly anticipate great eternal gain. Supernatural guidance and provision are certain; each sheep should first and foremost seek to remain close to the Messiah-shepherd to be directed and used by Him.

Encouragement to each individual believer should bring forth great rejoicing and thanksgiving (not fear or unfounded concern for that which it is not our business to provide). Each sheep received food as it followed the shepherd to planned pastures. As for special needs of food or salve to put on an injury, the owner-shepherd made those provisions. Jesus says our heavenly Father will adequately and abundantly provide. It is for His glory and His good pleasure that He cares for those He sends forth.

Those who put first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:28-34) will experience not only marvelous provision but even more important will be directed and used by God to bring needy sinners unto eternal life. Work, benefit, success in winning others as they go forth to witness, recognition and regard in the millennial kingdom are all a part of Jesus' teaching. He is setting forth for all an attitude regarding riches in life; He encourages witnesses of God's special provisions for soul-winning service.

Matthew 10:16

The Messiah-Shepherd continually protects His sheep. The Good Shepherd in sending out the twelve warned them that their condition as they went forth would be that of sheep among wolves. A sheep is defenseless before a wolf. The disciples were specifically without any

personal defense, for the Lord forbade them to carry "staves" (v 10). He wished even their outward appearance to be peaceful as preachers of the Gospel of Peace.³ They are not now being sent to Gentiles (v 5) but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (v 6).

Note that the disciples are not sent to the wolves as such, but will be in the midst of wolves in order to seek out those who would receive the kingdom. The meek and defenseless messengers of peace are to execute their work among the most furious, powerful, and, as it would appear to man, unconquerable opponents of the truth. Sheep in the midst of wolves are to all human appearance wholly helpless. The wolves here signify not only cunning, but also malignant disposition and hatred of truth and of Christ. Wolves frequently break into a herd of sheep, but here the direction is reversed; a few sheep invade the territory of wolves.⁴

As sheep before wolves, they are not to seek to defend themselves. They are not to be anxious how or what to speak (v 19). The Spirit of God (v 20) is greater than the wolves among whom they go. If the "wolves" persecute them in one city, they are not to try to defend themselves; they are to flee unto the next city (v 23).

Would a good shepherd send forth sheep alone among wolves? The Old Testament clearly considered such to be unworthy shepherds.⁵ The interjection "Lo" indicates the surprising nature of what Jesus tells the twelve. Who would think of sending sheep among wolves? How long would they last? Yet this is what Jesus says He is doing.⁶ The picture is confused if it is limited to the physical Christ. Jesus Himself, personally, the Good Shepherd, is their protector. The disciples will learn it more clearly later, "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt 28:20). They are being "sent forth," but really they are being led "through the valley of the shadow of death" and thus should fear no evil, for the Shepherd is present (Ps 23:4). Just as Jesus could heal at a distance (John 4:46-53) and know at a distance (John 1:48) even though not bodily present, so can He guide and protect His own in their work for Him.

The Messiah-Shepherd desires work, not wandering. Sheep among wolves need to stay in the flock. Wolves wait to attack one who wanders away alone. The context of both passages (Luke 12:32 and Matt 10:16) is on witnessing. Jesus sent His disciples forth two by two (not all alone). The twelve as a unit function as a lighthouse (Matt 5:14). It is in witnessing, not wandering, that the believer can count on the present protecting Messiah-shepherd.

A shepherd directs the flock; sheep do not initiate plans and programs. As the disciples go forth two by two, there is still just one

head of the entire operation. In the church age the oneness is clearly to be recognized. Although Saul of Tarsus was persecuting believers in many cities outside Jerusalem (Acts 26:11), Jesus indicated the opposition was personal, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 9:5). Sheep in the midst of wolf country need not fear, for the omnipresent, omnipowerful Shepherd is directing spiritual operations.

A young David killed a lion and a bear to protect his sheep (I Sam 17:33-36). The good shepherd will continue to care for each two-man flock as they go forth among wolves. Today too, a small unit of believers can rest secure in confidence of the Lord's protection.

Jesus and the Multitude

In two passages of the New Testament employing the shepherd-sheep figure as a means of teaching spiritual truth, the "sheep" are people unorganized, that is, not the nation, not the disciples, not a "flock" as a unit with a shepherd. In both passages, the multitudes are as sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 9:36 records the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee as He went about all the cities and villages teaching, preaching and healing (v 35). "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd."

Mark 6:34 records an occasion when people assembled in the desert (v 32) without organization or preparation. About five thousand men (v 44) were fed on this occasion, perhaps 12,000 in all, from five loaves and two fishes (v 38). Seeing them as they came unto Him, Jesus was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd.

Matthew 9:36

The True Shepherd is greatly concerned about the needs of shepherdless sheep. The context for the reference in Matthew 9:36 is the teaching ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ through all the cities and villages (v 35). He had been healing all manner of sickness and diseases (v 35), but the physical needs were not themselves that which aroused His compassion. It was the aimless multitudes. Crowds contained purposeless people, uncontrolled, milling about.

The spiritual need of the confused multitude touched the heart of the compassionate Savior. He saw them in their condition before God as shepherdless sheep, and His heart was stirred. The reason

("because") for this concern is beautifully expressed, comparable to two conditions true of shepherdless sheep, faint and scattered.

The True Shepherd has concern for the pain and suffering of shepherdless sheep. The two perfect participles used function as adjectives; they describe a present condition as resulting from past acts. "Faint" is not merely physically exhausted, but the word used means "having been flayed," or "having the skin torn," as this happens to sheep wandering among brambles and sharp rocks, rent or mangled as if by wild beasts.⁷ The word can describe a corpse which is flayed and mangled; someone who is plundered by rapacious men, or vexed by those without pity, or treated with wanton insolence, someone who is utterly wearied by a journey which seems to know no end.⁸

The compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ was aroused because they were distressed and exhausted, like sheep who have no shepherd. When there is no shepherd nearby sheep become uneasy. They are harassed, vexed with weariness or worry (cf Luke 7:6; 8:49; Mark 5:35), distressed, in a painful condition. They are bewildered and dejected.⁹

The True Shepherd has concern for their needless, aimless wandering. "Scattered" is not merely indication of separation, but rather they are "thrown down prone and helpless" like exhausted, spent sheep.¹⁰ The word means laid prostrate. It can describe a man prostrated with drink, or a man laid low with mortal wounds. This second description presents the people like sheep that are exhausted, unable to walk any farther. The result of this compassion over their condition was instruction to pray for spiritual laborers (Matt 9:37-38).

The people are bruised and battered, dejected and discombobulated, not because of their nature nor because of circumstances but because of their lack of having a leader. As wandering sheep are bruised and torn by objects along their pathless route, the people are in dire need. As endlessly pressing along and never locating the real necessities of life, they are near exhaustion. Jesus is not unaware of the symptoms; His heart burden is for the deep inner need.

The compassion of the Lord is expressed by the strongest word for pity in the Greek language. It is the deep distress which knots the inner bowels. The same word is frequently used of the compassion of Jesus (Matt 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13). As wandering sheep are easily injured, Jesus is moved to compassion concerning their pain. Wandering sheep may search in vain for food or water; Jesus showed concern for their hunger and thirst. Just as a lonely sheep cries for companionship and guidance, Jesus expressed concern over their seeming abandonment. Perhaps He was most moved by their

bewilderment. Although the common people were desperately longing for God, the scribes and priests had nothing to offer them. Leaders of the day had no guidance nor comfort nor strength to give.

The expression employed by Jesus had referred to human leaders as employed in the Old Testament. Micaiah had predicted victory over Syria (I Kings 22:15) just as the false prophets of Ahab had done. But he also predicted the death of the King. "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd" (v 17), or for whom there exists no shepherd (II Chron 18:16).

Moses had similarly prayed for the need of the people, that God would set a man over them "that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd" (Num 27:16-17).

Zechariah had predicted the useless wandering of the nation, wandering after dreams and diviners, yet "they went their way as a flock, they were troubled, because there was no shepherd" (Zech 10:2). For them having wandered off, "there exists for them no shepherd." But the God of Israel is alive, just not recognized as Lord and leader. Now the incarnate God is present and the people wander aimlessly because they do not recognize and receive the True Shepherd before them.

The True Shepherd has concern that they fail to recognize God's promised leader. God had predicted that the promised true shepherd would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zech 11:4-14) and that future Israel will follow a foolish shepherd (Zech 11:15-17).

"Having no shepherd" does not mean they had no earthly king of their own; the True Shepherd of the Old Testament was God Himself, now come in the flesh before them. These followed not the God of their faithful fathers (cf John 8:42, 56) nor recognized Him who came unto His own (John 1:11) at His first advent. They heard His teaching and saw His miracles (v 35); yet they recognized no shepherd.

Such shepherds as they had were no shepherds. They were often worse than none. The people did not really follow unworthy shepherds. They followed none. Yet they were unaware of their own greatest need. The predicted Shepherd was manifesting Himself before them and preaching unto them the gospel of the kingdom (v 35), and yet they continued as sheep having not a shepherd!

What follows shows that Jesus is thinking of the spiritual condition of the people. The need is great, but not hopeless. A switch in the figure employed enables Him to stress the success rather than the failure of His concern for the multitudes: harvest, laborers needed, prayer (vv 37-38). The need is great, for all have sinned (Rom 3:23), but there is available a remedy adequate to the need. The answer is

not just hospitals and healing, but preaching the Gospel so that the wandering would learn to follow the True Shepherd.

Mark 6:3

On another occasion when Jesus employed this same figure, He was able to teach the multitudes, not just His disciples. "And Jesus, when He came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and He began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34).

The Tender Shepherd is concerned for each sheep. This was in a desert place (v 32) rather than among the cities and villages (Matt 9:35). The people ran together (v 33) until they were a great multitude, resembling in many ways a large flock. But though they were gathered together, to the eyes of the Lord Jesus Christ they were as sheep without a shepherd, and so He had compassion on them. Aware of their real need, He began to teach them (v 34). Later came the feeding of the five thousand (vv 35-44). He not only shared with them words of eternal life to meet their deepest need, He also provided physical bread to meet their immediate need, and even thereby showed that He is the Bread of Life (John 6:26-41).

Though the multitudes were gathered in the desert as a flock, Jesus saw them individually, as sheep, and His heart was moved concerning them because He saw their real need. Although there is no direct indication of the content as He taught them, surely it was to supply the lack of their lives, to present the claims of the True Shepherd of Israel, to manifest, even in the miracle of the bread, the presence of the Good Shepherd among them. A good shepherd sees to the daily needs of the flock, directing to satisfactory pasture and leading to still water.

The emphasis is on the One who meets the need: He is concerned; He can provide. The needy condition of the sheep stirs His compassion. Sheep at times are stupid and docile, prone to panic in the face of enemies. Quite often men deliberately act like defiant prodigals who demand their rights. More frequently, however, men like sheep go astray through sheep stupidity. Juicy tufts of grass lure sheep away and, following the lead of appetite, they find themselves lost, alone, and far from shepherd, flock, and fold.¹¹

The Tender Shepherd is aware of the inner need of the sheep. Sheep have daily needs that are obvious, such as food, water, rest. Their nature is such that the worthy shepherd needs also to be aware of every cause of disturbance.

Sheep in a fold become restless when they have no evidence of the presence of a shepherd, whether by sight or sound. A few sheep

scattered across a hillside might cry out in despair. Most however are oblivious to their condition. They are not aware there is no shepherd. Their condition is precarious; they cannot provide for themselves nor defend themselves. But like lost, hell-bound sinners, they are quite unaware of impending doom. Jesus taught them many things (v 34) and then taught His disciples that they could receive from Him to share with the people (vv 41-44). That same Good Shepherd dispenses through faithful preachers today. The Lord is able to provide abundantly for those who do not even know they are in need.

Messiah and Chosen Nation

In many Old Testament references the "flock" of the comparison is the nation Israel, yet few New Testament passages clearly employ the figure in this manner. Of course, the disciples were Jews and the multitude were Jews, but these are less than the nation as a whole.

Matthew 10:5-6 places the nation in contrast to all non-Israelites. "These twelve Jesus sent forth and commanded them, saying, go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He was not sending them at this time to Jews dispersed in other countries; they were to travel the cities of Judea and Galilee. Nor were they to find a few who would qualify as "lost." The entire house of Israel was to be reached.

The same expression occurs in Matthew 15:24. Jesus and His disciples were in the regions of Tyre and Sidon (v 21) and a Canaanite woman begged Him for favor. He answered, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Her request was granted because of her great faith (v 28). Again, the reference is to the entire house of Israel as the lost sheep.

Matthew 10:6

The context of Matthew 10:6 is the sending forth of the twelve (vv 1-23). The contrast is between Gentiles-Samaritans and the nation Israel. "These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not" (v 5). They are to go only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v 6). The reference to the lost sheep of the house of Israel would have definite Old Testament content for the disciples. God Himself was Shepherd of the nation Israel. These have strayed from God; they are not now turning to the One whom the disciples follow.

Almost the entire nation can be included in these that are the lost of the house of Israel.

The Seeking Shepherd concentrates efforts of seeking the lost. The perfect participle "lost" describes a present condition which is the result of a past act. These are the sheep that ought to be with the flock but are far from their Shepherd. Surely, therefore, all effort should be made to restore them to the flock. But this participle denotes more than the thought that the sheep have strayed away. Its opposite is "to be saved and thus to be safe." These sheep are in a perishing condition and having entered it, they are still in it. For their own sake they should be helped, restored (cf 9:36).¹²

They are "the sheep of Israel's house," precious on that account. The use of "house" in this expression, if the figure of the flock is maintained, is an identification of the fold to which they belong and from which they have departed and are lost. Observe that our Lord implies a special relation of Israel to God (for the house has its owner) which was lacking in the case of all other nations (cf Eph 2:12).

The concept "sheep" rather than "flock" here concerning the nation is a further emphasis on their shepherdless condition, individually rather than unitedly represented. The purpose of the disciples in going unto the various scattered sheep is to preach that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (v 7) and to display such miracles (vv 1, 8) as will authenticate the claims of the True Shepherd as anticipated in the Old Testament. They thus go forth as undershepherds seeking the lost to bring them back to the fold of the Chief Shepherd of the house of Israel.

As part of His instructions to the twelve, Jesus commanded negatively, "Go not to the Gentiles nor to any city of Samaria" (v 5) and then positively, "Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v 6). The identification is doubly clear; the description is important, indicating the chosen flock so familiar from Old Testament references, their sheep-like need of recognizing the heaven-sent Shepherd, and their lost condition (cf Isa 53:6; Jer 50:8; Ezek 34:5), having only "blind guides" (Matt 15:14; 23:16, 24).

The Lord Jesus Christ manifests awareness of God's dispensational program, to reach first the Jew (Rom 1:16) and following rejection reaching Gentiles (Acts 13:46; Rom 11:2). During His earthly ministry, His efforts were among the Jews.

The Seeking Shepherd directs His disciples in seeking the lost. The incarnate Shepherd engages in the task of teaching undershepherds who will carry on His work after He returns to heaven. He will continue as Chief Shepherd (I Pet 5:4).¹³ They now need field

experience. But their endeavors are not just "practice"; they have a divine message to proclaim (v 7) and divine power (v 8).

There is suggestion in this command of true (that is, genuine) shepherds, who go forth to seek out the lost. There is indication also of an undershepherd relationship as these twelve are sent to the task by the Lord Jesus Christ. The means of meeting the need of the lost is by preaching (v 7).

In their task of searching out and bringing to the fold, they will have divine assistance (v 8). They are to travel by faith (vv 9-10). They are to have no weapons (v 10). They have no program beyond preaching; if their message is rejected they are to depart with but a symbolic act, shaking the dust from their feet (v 14; cf Acts 13:51).

The content of their invitation is of special significance: the kingdom of heaven is at hand (v 7). They are to announce the personal presence of the King who has come to offer His rule as the Good Shepherd (see Zech 11:4-14). Just as Zechariah saw rejection, so did Jesus prepare His disciples for rejection (vv 14-15). The nation will not have the Messiah-Shepherd to rule over it at His first advent.

Jesus pointedly stresses the difficulty of their work. They are to reach unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel (v 6), going forth as sheep in the midst of wolves (v 16). Later when the seventy returned (Luke 10:17), Jesus said unto them, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Luke 10:18). Demonic powers were disturbed. Their work was in the midst of powerful principalities (Eph 6:12); yet as they witnessed, the all-observing Savior was fully aware of victories being won. Although incarnate, the omnipresent deity assured His disciples of His personal watchcare.

Matthew 15:24

In addition to the command of Jesus sending His disciples to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:6), Matthew records that Jesus used the same figure outside the borders of Judea.

The Obedient Shepherd follows God's great plan. The disciples, when Jesus was approached by the Syrophenician woman, requested, "Send her away; for she crieth after us" (v 23). Evidently the request of the disciples to send her away means, "Do what she asks and get rid of her." Christ's reply to them explains why He does not do what is asked. They care for themselves, not for her. He recalls His own charge to them when He sent them forth (10:6); it is the lost sheep of the house of Israel that have the prior claim and for the present that nation is to fully occupy Him and the Twelve. He must act in accordance with His Father's mission.¹⁴ It was not intended that Christ

should come to the Gentiles in the days of His flesh, but that He should do so at a subsequent period (28:19) in the person of the Spirit guiding the preaching of the apostles (John 10:16; Eph 2:17).¹⁵

The force of Jesus' remark on this occasion was intended both for the Canaanitish woman (v 22) and for the disciples (v 23), and also for Christians throughout the centuries that read the inspired record explaining the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth. He was sent unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus says nothing here about the rejection of the Jews and the future ingathering of the Gentiles; He states merely that His personal mission while He was on earth was confined to the Hebrew nation.

When Jesus calls the Jews "sheep," all His love and kindness toward His nation is revealed. He thus also denominates Himself as their True Shepherd. The perfect participle, added emphatically by a second article, "that have been lost," has its present implication, "and are thus now in this condition, they are now lost ones."¹⁶

This expression had been used earlier by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 10:6) in the framework of the Old Testament such that His disciples may have understood God as "shepherd" in the figure. Here there is no mistaking the implication that He Himself is the True Shepherd sent unto the nation Israel. He is the One sent (by the Father is also implied) to seek and to save the lost sheep. The tenderness in this expression is natural from the mouth of the Good Shepherd. It is appropriate here, where He is emphasizing His attitude towards the chosen people, and teaching the Canaanitish woman the relative position of Jew and Gentile.

Of the various expressions by the Lord Jesus Christ to explain His mission, this one, spoken in the regions of Tyre and Sidon (v 21), to a woman probably unfamiliar with the Hebrew Scriptures, yet incorporates and applies a vast background of revelation. God had designated the nation as His flock. He had notified them that He would become their shepherd in a special fashion. He had clearly characterized them as lost sheep, having no shepherd. Now Jesus of Nazareth claims it as His divinely appointed mission that He is sent unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

The Obedient Shepherd follows God's immediate direction. Jesus knows (probably from Holy Spirit illumination of the Old Testament Scriptures) that His mission is to the nation of Israel. As One to whom the Spirit was not given by measure (John 3:34) He experienced daily guidance for His tasks. The times that Jesus went to Samaria (John 4:4), to the Decapolis (Mark 7:31), and at this account along the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, He was not out of the will of God. Nor is it wrong

for Him to grant her request. Rather the occasion seems for her an opportunity to display great faith (Matt 15:28). As another faithful servant had testified, "I being in the way, the Lord led me" (Gen 24:27).

Several lessons seem evident in this account (Matt 15:21-28). First, Jesus purposely journeyed to the coast, and this is the only recorded activity in that area (except, in the parallel account, that He "entered into an house, and would have no man know it" (Mark 7:24). There seems to be special purpose, as when Jesus "must needs go through Samaria" (John 4:4).

Second, there is the contrast of a shepherd seeking the lost and this non-Israelite seeking the Savior (Matt 15:22; Mark 7:25), even though He was endeavoring to be hid from the public (Mark 7:24). This is part of the faith which brought the desired healing (Matt 15:28).

Third, Jesus demonstrates God's dispensational purposes. The Gospel is to the Jew first (Rom 1:16).

Fourth, Jesus shows the heart concern of a true shepherd, and also His divine ability to heal at a distance (Mark 7:29-30).

Fifth, just as in the Old Testament the work of God was primarily with the theocratic nation, yet Gentiles (for instance Rahab, Ruth, Naaman the leper) could receive divine favor, so Jesus employs a figure the woman can use to plead her case (Matt 15:26-27).

It is wrong to think of Jesus as intending here a limitation of His ministry solely to the Jewish nation; it is His primary mission that He declares. He had deliberately gone to Samaria with the Gospel (John 4:4ff). When He healed the servant of the centurion, He contrasted his faith, saying, "I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel" (John 8:10). When certain Greeks came to Philip saying, "Sir, we would see Jesus" (John 12:20-21), Jesus "answered" them at length (John 12:23ff).

The priority of His ministry to the Jewish nation had been stressed by Jesus for the benefit of His disciples and all who follow. A sequence is evident as Jesus replies to the woman, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (Matt 15:26 NIV). His reference is not to scavengers of the street but to lap dogs, customarily fed after the family meal from table scraps. The woman seizes upon the opening suggested by the Lord. Although extensive ministry among the Gentiles is yet future, still during a meal house dogs benefit from crumbs without snatching from the serving plates. Truly great was her faith.

The figure of the shepherd-sheep relation was forcefully employed by Jesus in His earthly ministry. He reflects familiarity with Old Testament uses. He proclaims Himself the True Shepherd and instructs His disciples as undershepherds to seek the lost. Each use by

the Savior urges active soul-winning. The disciple is to have the heart burden of the Master. Responsibilities of a Shepherd demand total dedication, even if it should mean dying for the sheep (John 10:11). Each undershepherd should be a true shepherd, not an hireling (John 10:12-13). Serving as a pastor of a local flock today demands similar complete dedication to the superior Chief Shepherd unto the eternal benefit of each sheep.

Notes:

- 1 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 636
- 2 Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St Luke*, 329; cf A T Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, II:178
- 3 G Robinson Lees, *Village Life in Palestine*, 166
- 4 J F Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, Matthew, 188
- 5 Warren Vanhetloo, "The Shepherd Motif in the Old Testament" unpublished ThD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965
- 6 R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Matthew's Gospel*, 398
- 7 Ibid, 383
- 8 Robertson, op cit, 1:76
- 9 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:355-6
- 10 Lenski, op cit, 383
- 11 Elmer G Homrighausen, *The Interpreter's Bible*, XII:149
- 12 Lenski, op cit, 391
- 13 Warren Vanhetloo, "Pastors and Their Chief Shepherd" *Central Bible Quarterly*, Summer 1968, 2 and "Pastor to Pastor" *Central Bible Quarterly*, Fall 1968, 10
- 14 Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St Matthew*, 216
- 15 H A W Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, 284-5
- 16 Lenski, op cit, 597