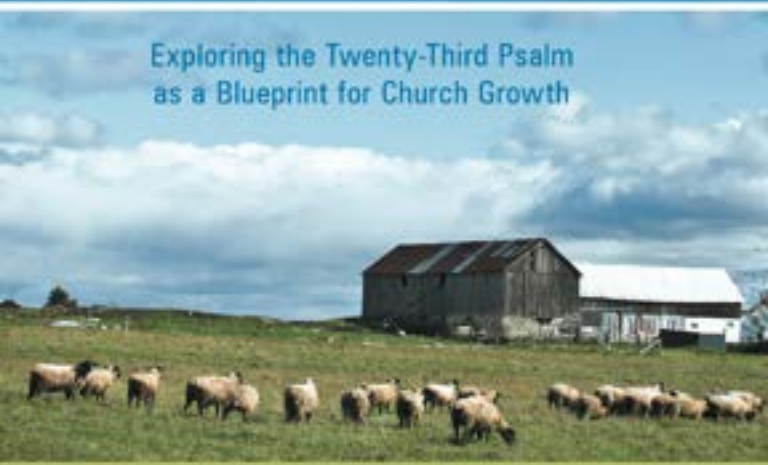


BECOMING A GRAND CHAMPION CHURCH

Exploring the Twenty-Third Psalm
as a Blueprint for Church Growth

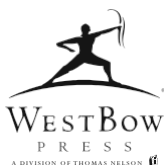


DALE HEINOLD

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Exploring the Twenty-Third Psalm as a
Blueprint for Church Growth

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PREFACE

As you peruse the table of contents, you might be saying to yourself, “Not another book on Psalm 23!” While it is true that the framework for *Becoming a Grand Champion Church* is Psalm 23, I am looking at it from a different angle and for a different purpose. The question that started the line of thought contained in this book was, how does Christ lead His church to fulfill the vision of being pure and spotless? That question brought me to the shepherding parables of John 10, which in turn opened up the duties of the shepherd as described in the twenty-third psalm. Since Christ is shepherding the church, how do the shepherding activities of the psalm apply in our local congregations? In other words, since Christ is shepherding the church, how do we participate in that work? Finding the answer to that question is the purpose and direction of *Becoming a Grand Champion Church*.

You may also look at my name and wonder, who in the world is this? I cannot provide you with a long list of academic credits. Neither can I provide credentials in the way of ordination papers. What I do offer are my years spent during my childhood raising sheep along with fifty years of growing in, worshiping in, and serving in a variety of churches. I have also spent a good number of those fifty years supporting the ministry of the church through youth leadership, Sunday school teaching, worship leading, and being an elder. I have worked closely enough with pastors to understand their hopes and frustrations while still being part of the congregation and feeling *their* hopes and frustrations. This book seeks to address the needs and hopes of both.

As you read through the book you will see that each chapter starts with a scene from my childhood when our family raised sheep to show at the county 4-H fair. My hope for these personal remembrances is to link our non-farm present with the farm-based pictures that are presented in Psalm 23. The stories are true, although some details have been fictionalized because of faded memories or for the sake of the story. For those not familiar with certain farm terms such as 4-H or “five high and a tie,” I have provided a glossary at the end of the book.

Most of all, I hope that you catch the vision that Christ has for His church, where all parts function in order to lead people to maturity in Christ and ultimately present to Himself the church as a pure and spotless bride.

Dale Heinold
August 17, 2011

The Lord Is Our Shepherd

At 4:00 a.m., the alarm rudely wakes me from a sound, warm sleep. It is midwinter in central Illinois and time to check the sheep. We are in the middle of lambing season, so my brother David and I take turns making the early morning rounds to see how the expectant mothers and newborns are doing. The small flock nestled in the old barn is our 4-H project. While I am getting ready, Mom comes downstairs. Although she understands the need for this early morning ritual, she is not comfortable having one of her “lambs” leave the warm house. After putting on my parka and boots, I trudge out to the barn.

The stars shine brilliantly overhead in the clear midwinter sky. The snow squeaks with every step I take toward the weak golden light barely visible through the cracks in the barn door. A snowdrift blocks the gate, so I awkwardly climb the fence and drop into the snow-covered pasture. As I approach the barn door, I softly say, “Morning, sheep. Just me.” The door protests at being disturbed but stubbornly yields to my tug. Inside the old barn, our small flock lies in deep straw. I continue my soft, one-sided conversation to calm them. One old ewe stirs and comes to greet me, hoping for a handout of some grain or fresh hay. I take my gloves off and pet her soft wool while looking over the flock. So far, Sophie has dropped triplets—normal for her—and they are doing fine. A lamb born a few nights ago to one of the yearlings is weaker than normal. We may have to help it nurse if it is going

to survive. Several ewes have yet to lamb. Barney is living up to her name and is as wide as a barn; she should have twins.

There are no new lambs tonight. I throw a couple of slices of hay into the pen, knock the ice from the water pans, and return to the house for a few more hours of sleep.

Later that same day, a larger flock surrounds me. It is the gathering of the church for worship. This time I am not the shepherd, but a lamb. Others are feeding, caring, and looking over my progress. Worship, Sunday school, fellowship, evangelism, and preaching are this flock's activities. Like our barn offers our flock of sheep, the church extends its sheltering warmth from the community of believers, protecting us from the cold of the world. In one way, the purpose for our little 4-H flock and Christ's purpose for the church are the same. We raise sheep to show at the 4-H fair. Christ desires "that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:27). Christ does this by shepherding individuals personally and through the local flock into which He gathers them.

A Different Focus

God designed sheep to be flock animals; they must be part of a flock to survive. The same is true for individual Christians. They must remain connected to a local "flock" to survive and thrive. That is why the title of this chapter is "The Lord Is Our Shepherd." This may seem at odds with the opening phrase of the twenty-third psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd . . ." David, the psalmist, uses "my" in a way that breaks with the traditional way of viewing the shepherding role of God. The Old Testament focuses on how God shepherds Israel as a nation and how they rebel at times against that leading. So the personal shepherding of God that David describes occurs within the context of belonging to a larger flock. Christ shepherds, leads, comforts, and meets

the needs for each individual through the context of the local “flock.”

Many books discuss Psalm 23 and Christ’s shepherding of individuals. I recommend Phillip Keller’s *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. In this book, God has moved my heart to explore how Christ shepherds the local church and people, in turn, through the church. Churches become involved in so many ideas, church growth plans, and programs that it becomes easy for Christians to lose sight of what Christ is doing. My premise is simple. Jesus already has a plan and means for growing the church. He actively serves as a shepherd to each congregation. So our goal is to discover how Christ shepherds the local congregation and join Him in that work.

Declaration and Destination

The simple statement, “The Lord is our shepherd,” is loaded with meaning. For the local flock, it is both a declaration and a destination. First, it is a declaration of ownership. Christ owns the flock. Jesus created each lamb and bought him or her by His own blood. “The Lord is our shepherd” is also a destination. On that journey, many temptations seek to take our focus off Him. Jesus said it best when He chastised Peter, “[F]or you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Mark 8:33b). It is easy to “do church” in a way that pleases people but is not following the way the shepherd leads us. The Shepherd desires, though, that we follow His way and not our own.

While a local congregation may call its leader “Pastor,” which literally means, “to shepherd,” David declares that our shepherd is the Lord. It is important to note that David uses the name God had revealed to Moses at the burning bush: “YHWH”; I am that I am (Exod. 3:14). God says, “I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides me” (Isa. 44:6). Jesus also calls himself the I Am. For instance, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I Am” (John 8:58). Hebrews

13:8 summarizes the I Am, noting, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The Lord, God himself, is our shepherd.

Saying that Christ is the shepherd is not an attempt to diminish the role or need for leadership in the local congregation. It is, instead, a call to remember that no matter how the local church is structured, Christ remains the shepherd. In fact, part of Christ’s shepherding the church is the provision of leadership within the flock: “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13).

Granted, people within the church disagree about the number and extent of each of these roles today. My personal view is that all the roles are still active and needed in the church. Whether you identify three of the five or all five as being active, however, does not matter in this discussion. What does matter is that Christ our shepherd provides these roles for the express purpose of growing the flock to maturity.

Three False “Gods”

Perhaps it seems obvious that Christ shepherds the local congregation. Just as clearly each congregation, like each individual, has areas where the Christ is not yet the Lord. Part of the journey is searching for and correcting those areas. While the list of possibilities is endless, I see in Scripture three areas are common to local congregations. All three cases depict idols that Israel corporately worshiped at various times in place of her true God.

The first idol is perhaps the most well known: the Golden Calf of Mt. Sinai (Exod. 32:1-8). The people become uncomfortable

with Moses's long stay on the mountain and they demand that Aaron produce for them an image of God that they can worship. Out of their offerings, Aaron fashions a Golden Calf.

Whenever a congregation upholds an image of God that is incomplete or out of balance, they have forged and are worshipping a Golden Calf. For example, they can worship the God of love, but ignore justice, which is also a part of God's character. The same could also be said in reverse: idolatry can come in worshipping justice, but ignoring love. The point is that Christ is not our shepherd when we worship a vision of God that is incomplete or woefully out of balance. In these instances, we have created a god in our own image and to our own liking instead of worshipping the true God according to His revealed nature. The difficulty comes in recognizing our weakness, since we are convinced that our vision of God is correct. To defeat this idol, we must first recognize that as good as our congregation may be, it does not have all the answers. Recall what James says: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6b).

The second idol also arises in the time when Israel is in the wilderness. Israel has sinned and God responds by sending poisonous snakes. When the people cry out for relief, God directs Moses to create a snake out of bronze and lift it up on a pole. Everyone who looks at the image receives healing from the effects of the snakebite (Num. 21:6-9). The Israelites keep that bronze snake; many years later Israel sins by worshipping it (2 Kings 18:4). This act of idolatry comes in worshipping past works of God.

It is good to recognize how God has moved a congregation along over many years. It is comforting to look back and see His hand through the trials and victories. But there is also a tendency to want to remain in the same pasture instead of following the shepherd to the next spot of green grass. There is a huge difference between knowing our history and worshipping it. Through one, we glorify God; through the other, we lose our way.

The third idol is the ephod of gold that Gideon made in Judges 8:26-27. Following the miraculous victory by Gideon's three hundred men over the Midianites, Gideon collected a

tribute from the spoils. From those pieces of jewelry, Gideon formed an ephod. Scripture does not say anything about what the ephod looked like. We do know that Gideon placed it in Ophrah and that the Israelites worshiped it. One hint of what the ephod may have looked like is the description of the breastplate, also called an ephod, which the high priest wore (Exod. 28:6-21). The deep irony of the story is that Gideon's first act after his call by God was the destruction of an altar to Baal belonging to his Father. Using those clues, we see that the idolatry is the pride of being right or chosen. It is the sin of declaring that Christ is *our* shepherd but not *yours*. That something we do or teach is the right way and almost everyone else is wrong. This could be at the denominational level, local level or even the personal level. Granted, there are doctrines that must be held by all that call on the name of Christ. But in the history of the church, more division has been caused by minor squabbles than anything else. One example is the church that divided over whether a person should be immersed backwards or forwards. Our differences are not the problem; however, the pride we have in those differences is an idol and a sin.

There are of course other examples of idolatry that do not fit into those three categories. Regardless of whether the issue is one of the three mentioned or something else, when Christ reveals a problem, leadership needs to determine how to move forward to correct the sin. The good news is that Christ is shepherding His church and will provide the means of correction when the leadership and congregation are willing to follow.

The Vision

We will explore two questions through the rest of the book. The first is: how does Christ shepherd individuals through the context of the local flock? The second is: how does Christ shepherd the church? One thing is certain; Christ is patiently persistent in his shepherding. Phillip Keller notes that the twenty-third

psalm could be classified as, “David’s hymn of praise to divine diligence.” Keller’s sentiment rings true as Christ shepherds individuals to maturity and as Christ shepherds the church so “that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27).



A young and skinny me with a young lamb

We Have Not Lacked Anything

The hayrack quakes over the uneven ground as Uncle Howard maneuvers the train of tractor, baler and hayrack toward the first windrow of hay. The sun is high and hot. The air is scented with the pleasantly sweet aroma of drying alfalfa. Uncle Howard revs the tractor engine and engages the power takeoff which brings the baler to life. Balers are marvelously complex machines. As the tractor moves along the windrow, the hay is gently picked up, sectioned, compressed, measured, and wrapped with twine. The resulting forty-pound bale then rides up a short chute, ready to be picked up and stacked. David and I wait at the chute for the bales of hay to emerge. We are miles away from our flock. They are either enjoying the shade of the apple tree or grazing in the pasture. However, David and I have our sights on the coming winter and the need to feed our sheep until the pasture is green again. The routine of grab and stack continues until the rack is full, five high and a tie. Later in the day, these bales will be lifted into the haymow of the barn and stacked alongside bales of golden straw to wait the coming of winter.

I also recall another hot summer week. It was a few years earlier during Vacation Bible School. Along with learning crafts and songs, my age group was tasked with memorizing Psalm 23. It was hard. Each day a new verse was added, then practiced and repeated. At the closing program, our class stood and recited in unison. I did not realize it at the time, but those verses dropped

into the haymow of my mind, ready to be used when needed along with the other verses memorized while growing up. One other thing I recall about memorizing Psalm 23 was trying to figure out what “I shall not want” means. My young mind could not wrap itself around the poetic meaning of that simple phrase.

Needs

There is an implication that must be defined in order to understand what “I shall not want” means. It goes something like this—because the Lord is my shepherd, and He is a good shepherd, I will not lack anything that is needed. The big question that must be settled is what things are truly needed. David expands those areas of need throughout the rest of the psalm. For this chapter it is sufficient to look at the whole rather than the parts.

Who determines the needs of the flock: the sheep, the circumstances, or the shepherd? That is the question that must be answered both in our personal walk with the Lord and for the flock of Christ. Since our focus is on the flock, let’s consider each in that light.

Do sheep determine their own needs? In some sense, of course, they do. Likewise there are basic needs that all humans share: the need to belong, the need for security, and the need for the essentials of food and water. But the larger question is, can the flock of Christ determine what it needs on its own? No. The appetites of the moment generally shout down wisdom and foresight. One example can be found during the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. They grew tired of the God-provided manna and grumbled for meat such as what they had in Egypt. God heard their grumbings and gave them so much quail that it lasted for a whole month (Num. 11), or as Scripture poetically records—until it came out of their noses. This is not to infer that leadership should never listen to or seek the advice of the flock. Individuals will often rightly express their lack of some basic need but they may not understand how the Lord has planned to meet

that need. For instance, the statement “I don’t get anything out the sermon anymore” might be an indication that God desires to wean that person. To move them off milk and onto feed that will require effort and discipline on their part. Therefore, while the flock will be able to recognize where needs exist, they may not see how the Good Shepherd plans to satisfy those needs.

What about circumstances; can they determine what the flock needs? Of course, circumstances also play a role in determining need. However, while appetites can trip up the flock circumstances can trip up leadership. The shepherd must know the “lay of the land,” where the water and the good grass are along with areas of danger. Congregations are called to minister to the needs of the community that surrounds them. So while it would be foolish to start an orphanage when there are no orphans in the perimeter of the congregation’s influence, it is likewise foolhardy to jump at every opportunity that presents itself without the guidance of Christ, our Good Shepherd. However, circumstances are not always opportunities; sometimes they are catastrophes. Consider the catastrophe Moses found himself in at the Red Sea. He was leading a flock that was giddy with freedom but fickle in their desires. Moses, through God’s direction, led them to the banks of the Red Sea, the army of Pharaoh threatening from behind. Sheep in this circumstance would bolt and run any way they can. But God had a plan. This conflict did not surprise Him at all. We know the rest of the story, how God provided a way of escape that also destroyed the enemy. It was a miraculous solution that did not present itself in the natural order of things. Likewise, circumstances do not catch our Good Shepherd by surprise. So while it was “foolish” for Moses to lead Israel to a place where they could be trapped, God had other plans. Likewise, perhaps it is not so foolish to build the previously mentioned orphanage because God knows the circumstance around the corner that we cannot see.

Christ, our Good Shepherd, is best at deciding what the needs of the flock are and how to meet them. Following appetite and circumstances alone will not satisfy the promise of “I shall not

want." The larger picture is that Christ knows where the flock is going and growing, and He knows what it needs to get there. He knows the challenges, difficulties, and opportunities that are around each corner. He knows the needs of each member of the flock and how to best meet those needs in order to foster maturity. He knows the "foolish" things that need to be done today in order to meet the needs of tomorrow, like spending a fine summer day storing hay to provide food during the coming winter.

Seasons

My observation is that every congregation is in one of the four seasons at any given time. It is a false notion to believe that it will always be spring with new life bursting out all over the place. Spring is the time of new growth with tender shoots emerging from the warming soil and flowers bursting forth in all their glory. Summer is the time of encouragement as the young shoots mature and the flowers turn into the promise of fruit. Fall is the time of the harvest: the blade yields its matured grain and the apples sweeten to a glorious flavor. Winter is a time of cleansing, refreshment, rest from the hard work of growth, encouragement, and harvest. Many folks have a different view; equating spring with success, summer with comfort, fall with dying, and winter with dead. However, the promise of the seasons is that after winter comes spring. I have observed congregations entering into a fall/winter season; the number of people that bolted from fellowship grieved me. Their thinking was that if a congregation enters into winter, it's all over, it's dead. But that would be a false understanding and the church is weakened because of it. Winter is a time of recharging and refocusing on the Lord. It is a time for self-examination. It is a time of gathering strength for the new growth that is about to burst out when the land warms. More than anything else, it is a time of preparation for the work ahead. It is not a time of failure or a removal of the providing and protecting hand of God.

Recall Israel's winter experience as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. God's purpose was to cleanse the congregation and to prepare them for crossing the Jordan to conquer the Promised Land. God did not remove his hand from them during their wilderness journey, but rather made it more evident. At the end of the journey Moses recorded, "For the Lord your God has blessed you in all that you have done; He has known your wanderings through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing" (Deut. 2:7).

The Lord is our shepherd. He knows exactly what we need and when we need it. He knows which spiritual season we are in and what is coming as the seasons change. His provision may not be in accordance with our appetites or our perception of circumstance, but it will be what is needed. If we continually seek Christ and stay obedient to His direction, we will be able to say at journey's end that we have not lacked a thing.

Makes Us Lie Down in Green Pastures

I burst into the house, "Dad, something's wrong with Barney." During my normal morning chores of feeding and watering the flock, I had noticed that one of the old ewes did not come to eat. I had pushed and prodded to try to get her up but she would not budge. Dad asks a few questions and then decides to take a look for himself. In the barn, he tries to coax her up as I'd done and even puts some hay just outside of her reach. She strains her neck to try to reach it but does not try to get up.

"Strangest thing I've seen; guess we'd better call Doc Steffen," Dad decides aloud. Once we are back inside the house dad, calls the veterinarian, explains the problem, and receives the vet's promise to take a look in a couple of hours.

Every few minutes one of us glances down the hard road for Doc's blue Chevy pickup. As promised, a few hours later, he pulls in to the drive and we hurry out to greet him. Doc grabs his gear and Dad shows him to the barn. David and I walk close behind, listening to their conversation for any clue to what might be wrong. Once inside the barn, Doc looks Barney over, examines her mouth, takes her temperature, and prods her torso through the thick wool. "How soon is she due?" Doc asks.

"A couple of weeks yet, maybe three," Dad replies.

"She's got lambing paralysis," Doc said flatly. "What are you feeding them?"

“Hay and cracked corn,” Dad responds.

Doc gives a little grimace, “Yep, that’ll do it. Sheep need more sugar in their diet. Here’s what you need to do.” Doc explains how to bottle feed Barney with sugar water twice a day for the next couple of days or until she’s back on her feet. He also suggests that we check with our feed man and get some sheep mix with an extra dose of molasses to add to the flock’s diet. Late the next day David bursts into the house after chores and proclaims that, just as Doc promised, Barney is back up and walking around.

The Need to Ruminant

Have you ever wondered about the phrase, “He makes me lie down in green pastures” (Ps. 23:2a). It does not say that the Lord just provides plenty of good pasture but that He also makes us lie down. To understand the importance of this requires a short lesson in sheep anatomy. I will try not to make it boring. Sheep, like cattle, have a stomach with four compartments. This puts them in a class of mammals called ruminants or “those that chew the cud.” While grazing, sheep do not chew their food but simply cut and swallow. Later in the day, they will sit and peacefully regurgitate to fully chew on what they have eaten. This is a necessary step to release the nutrients that are in the blades of grass that they have eaten. Providing food for the sheep, then, is really a two-step process. The first step is to lead them to the pastures with grass that is fresh and green. The second is to allow time for them to chew over what they have eaten peacefully. This is also a picture of how Christ desires to shepherd the church and those in it.

Christ’s desire is for the sheep of his flock to graze upon fresh grass on a daily basis. Jesus said in the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). When you consider other verses related to bread such as “man shall not live by bread

alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4) and "I Am the bread of life" (John 6:48), the full impact of "daily bread" is revealed. We as Christ followers are to seek Him on a daily basis. But, because of our church culture and the busyness of life, many in the church only eat spiritual food weekly or even less. If a shepherd only pastured the flock once a week, how healthy would it be? Sick, weak, and possibly dead. Now, before the local shepherds get offended and the sheep blame the shepherds for their condition, allow me to paint a more specific vision.

First, we must keep in mind that Christ's goal for each person is that he or she grows to spiritual maturity. One thing that separates a lamb from a mature sheep is what it eats. Lambs do not graze but drink mother's milk. In other words, the grazing and rumination of their mothers nourishes them. Essentially that is what the weekly sermon is, the result of the preacher's own feeding and meditation on the Word that is then presented in a digestible form. Whether the Word presented is easy or difficult, it is still the result of someone else's "ruminations." That is a good and necessary provision for the growth and survival of Christ's "lambs." But, milk is not sufficient for continued growth and one of three things happens. Some try to survive on a weekly intake and become weak and are easily picked off by Satan as he roams around seeking whom he can devour (1 Pet. 5:8). Some churches develop program after program to try to provide milk on a daily basis: Monday night small group, Tuesday night men's group, Wednesday mid-week service, Thursday women's group, Friday self-help group, Saturday who knows what, Sunday regular services. But, as long as a "lamb" is relying only on these things for spiritual food it will never grow to maturity. The third possible outcome is that the "lamb" becomes a disciple and relies less and less on the milk of others. This does not mean that he or she does not need the flock or a shepherd but that they can gather spiritual nourishment by reading and meditating on the Word for themselves.

Growing Disciples

Why do we need disciples anyway? Would it not be safer to simply continue to spoon-feed believers? Safer perhaps, but what happens when they enter the real world and do not know how to hear Christ? First of all, the outcome of chewing over the Word is learning to discern Christ's voice from all of the noise that surrounds us. How many folks in our churches always seem to live at the point of crisis? It is not that others do not have trouble because trouble finds us all. However, trouble becomes a crisis when we do not know how to respond or what to do next. The difference between a person who can walk through trouble spiritually unscathed and one who is always in crisis is the ability to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd through the Scriptures and apply the Word to their situation. Additionally, disciples also become leaders in various ways in the body. The number of ways that leadership is expressed is endless because of the unique way in which Christ has created each person. Lastly, Jesus commanded the church to "make disciples" as part of the Great Commission. As long as a person is feeding on milk they remain a disciple of the person providing milk; when they are able to discern the Word for themselves they become Christ's disciples and can begin to instruct others.

How do lambs make the move from milk to grazing? In shepherding, the process is called weaning. At some point, the relationship between mother and lamb must change. Typically, this is done by forced separation. However, my observation is that Christ weans each of His "lambs" in the way that is best for that individual. The change could be a slow shift or it could be very abrupt. During the process, the "lambs" may come up with some off-the-wall interpretations. Care must be taken to correct the misunderstandings while encouraging them to keep seeking. The desired outcome is that they learn to seek Christ through prayer and ruminate on the Scriptures for themselves. For the "weaned" ones, this changes the sermons and teachings of the

body of Christ from milk to be swallowed to pastures that are to be grazed upon and ruminated over.

Looking back at my own life, I can see the varied ways that the Lord provided both milk and green grass for me to eat. The preacher from my earliest memory was a big man with a strong baritone voice. I do not recall a thing that he said but I do remember his big hands. The next was a young man who was destined for the mission field in Japan. I again cannot recall a specific sermon but I do remember how he strove to form relationships even though he knew that his time with us as pastor was only for a few short years. The third is the pastor of my teen years. He was a studious man who handwrote his whole sermon. From him I learned what it meant to care for the Word. The list of those who influenced me is long, of course, and includes other pastors, special speakers, missionaries, Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, small group members, books, tapes, personal devotions, and most of all, the Word of God. Looking back helps me to appreciate my current pastor from whom I have been blessed to receive for many years. A large part of his heart and message is the desire to grow the flock to maturity.

Feed My Sheep

The Bible provides a picture of the process that we have been discussing. The scene is the restoration of Peter by Jesus after the resurrection. Three times in John 21:15-17, Jesus questions Peter's love and three times gives him a specific instruction concerning care for the flock. "So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend My lambs.' He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Shepherd My sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John,

do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend My sheep’” (John 21:15-17). Jesus’ instruction to Peter is to “tend [feed] my lambs,” “shepherd my sheep,” and “tend [feed] my sheep.” Notice the progression in both the maturity and the activity. Tending to lambs is different than tending to mature sheep. The role of local leadership in feeding the flock is identified in these three directives. “Tend my lambs”—make sure they are getting the milk that they need for growth. “Shepherd my sheep”—lead the “lambs” to maturity and discipleship by providing the guidance, discipline, and love of a shepherd. “Tend my sheep”—lead the mature to the green grass and encourage them to ruminate upon the Word of Christ. Through these three activities, the shepherd provides the appropriate spiritual nutrition for the spiritual maturity of the individual. The result is both growth in maturity and an increased reach into the world.

Quiet Waters

“Hold her still” David yells, his hands gently cradling a young lamb.

“I’m trying,” I retort, my arms tightening around the bucking yearling’s neck. We had noticed that the new mother was not tolerating the nursing of her lamb. The new sensation made her skittish; this meant that the lamb was not getting enough to eat. Dad suggested that we help her to get over her fear. The plan is simple: a couple of times a day for the next few days force her to hold still long enough for the lamb to nurse properly. Unfortunately, the yearling is not one of last year’s show sheep so she is not hand tame.

Sheep, being flight animals, are easily spooked by anything new. A new noise, a new experience, even a new sheep can upset them. But, they can also become accustomed to these new sensations. We spend several weeks each summer getting show sheep used to being led by the hand, poked and prodded by the judge, and subjected to the noise of a crowd. All of that work is necessary so that when it comes time to lead them into the show ring they will stand still.

Finally, I get the yearling to quiet. David places the lamb near the udder and encourages her to eat. As the young lamb bucks up against the udder the yearling tenses. “Easy girl,” I whisper. David grabs a bit of hay and offers it to the young mother. We both watch the lamb feed, her tail twitching excitedly as she drinks the mother’s milk. After a few minutes, the lamb wanders away and

lies down. I release the yearling. She bolts at first but returns to a slow walk after a few steps and heads straight for her lamb. They nuzzle for a few seconds until the yearling is convinced that we did not harm her baby.

After two days, it only takes one of us to help the lamb nurse. It is stronger and the mother is calmer. After four days, we don't need to help at all; the yearling is now used to the new sensations.

It is amazing how the atmosphere around our congregational gatherings can rapidly turn from peaceful to troubled. I recall one time when I was visiting a church with some family. The worship time was fantastic and there was the contented feeling of family in the air. The pastor got up to make a few announcements. The final one changed everything—he announced his resignation. It was obvious that only a few in the congregation knew what was coming. It was as if a wave had ridden over us, turning joy to anxiety. Even though we moved on with the service there was an undercurrent that even I, as a visitor, could feel as quiet waters quickly turned to troubled waters.

Quiet Waters

How does, “He leads me beside quiet waters” express Christ’s shepherding of the church? The sheep do not find quiet waters by accident; the shepherd must lead them to it. Since we have already touched on Christ’s leadership in previous chapters, we will concentrate on “quiet waters.”

In my mind, “quiet waters” is a picture of the atmosphere that must be present when the congregation, the flock of Christ, is gathered. When turmoil reigns, when the “waters” are troubled, there is no rest for the flock and they cannot drink deeply from the water of life. However, in church life it is not the outward appearance that must be peaceful, as some

suppose, but what is happening in the spiritual realm. I have visited congregations that maintained an outward peacefulness: the music was soft, people spoke in whispers if at all, and children sat quietly or were busy elsewhere. But, just beneath the calm surface was tension and unforgiveness; relationships were strained and turmoil reigned. I have also been in noisy venues that on the surface appeared to be in turmoil but held a deep feeling of peace and family. This observation does not indicate that all quiet congregations are in turmoil or all noisy congregations are peaceful. Instead, it is an observation that the atmosphere of a congregation cannot be judged by what is external but rather by the depth of love that they have for each other and for the Lord.

The world is full of trouble and turmoil. The gathering of the flock should be one place where those seas are calmed. In Revelation, John gives a vision of what is in Christ's mind for the church. "Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 22:1-5). In this text, we see water as clear as crystal, calm, and undisturbed; the tree of life bearing fruit all year round, the leaves of which are healing for the nations. The sacrificed yet living lamb, Jesus Christ, sits on the throne. His bondservants see His face, are sealed with His name, and are always illuminated by His presence. Yes, this is a picture of the coming kingdom in its fullness and it is also a picture of Christ's desire today as His church gathers.

Troubled Waters

It is against Christ's vision for the church that war is waged. Two of the primary weapons are confusion and distraction. The wielders of these weapons are the forces of darkness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). Their purpose is to trouble the waters of the congregation so that the sweet water of the Holy Spirit is polluted with bitterness (James 3:11).

Confusion is the first weapon. The apostle Paul cautioned the Corinthian church about it, "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Cor. 14:33). It is interesting that one definition of the Greek word translated "confusion" indicates rebellion: as one lexicon puts it, "to rise up in open defiance of authority." This works well with the context of Corinthians as people rose to prophesy in a way that disrupted the flow of the service. The range of the weapon of confusion runs from simple misunderstandings to outright rebellion. Confusion can be caused by simple things such as the worship slides being out of order. The more damaging strikes are those that are rooted in rebellion. Unforgiveness, perfectionism, people-pleasing, and partiality are all examples of confusion-generating rebellion. Perhaps that list surprised you a bit. Think about it for a second. If I have unforgiveness, I am being rebellious against the command of Christ to forgive my brother and to love him as I love myself. This generates confusion because my life is at odds with the scriptural mandate. Perfectionism is rebellion because it expects others to be perfect while being blind to my own sin. People-pleasing is rebellion because my actions are determined by fear of what others may say or do and not the rule of Christ. Partiality is rebellion because it elevates or debases a person based on external standards instead of how Christ sees them. Essentially, confusion and rebellion are any things that unseat Christ from the throne and replace Him with idolatry and pride.

The second weapon in the enemy's arsenal is distraction. I do not think that there has ever been a gathering of believers where distractions have not occurred. Can you imagine dealing with the

distraction of a young man falling out of a third-story window and dying? Paul did in Acts 20:9-12. After praying for the young man and restoring his life, the service continued until daybreak. It is simply impossible to remove all forms of distraction from our gatherings. Why? Because the problem is not the cause of distraction but allowing ourselves to be distracted is. Granted, there must be a desire to minimize distraction where possible. But a total elimination of distractions is impossible.

Leadership can employ two strategies to deal with distractions. The first is to ignore them by continuing with the activity of the moment as if the distraction did not exist. The second is to embrace the distraction, which opens up two doors. The first door changes the distraction into a teachable moment, as Jesus did with the children in Mark. "And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, 'Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.' And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them" (Mark 10:13-16). The second door allows those in the congregation to categorize the distraction and deal with it so that they can mentally refocus on the Lord as the service moves on. For instance, a young mother decides not to take her newborn to the nursery. During the sermon, the child begins to cry. Embarrassed, the young mother gathers her things and takes the child out. It would be a simple thing to say, "Praise God for new life!" This would ease the mother's embarrassment and let the congregation categorize the event and put it aside.

It would seem that distractions just happen, which they do, but the enemy also uses them to draw away attention at critical points. Distractions seem to strike most often when our spirits are ready to receive the Word of God in a life changing way.

Our defense against the devil's scheme is laid out in James, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee

from you" (James 4:7). The Lord is our shepherd that leads us to quiet waters. Submission to Him means staying focused on His guidance and not on the surrounding circumstances. We are to be aware of circumstances but not focused on them. James says to "resist the devil"; Paul writes in Ephesians to stand firm. When confusion, rebellion, and distraction happen, they must be resisted with a firm stance so that our focus remains on Christ. This applies to our lives in addition to our gatherings.

When we are gathered together discernment is needed to determine what avenue the enemy is using to poison the atmosphere. Is it bitterness? Disappointment? Distraction? Rebellion? Confusion? Untimely words? Unforgiveness? Judgmentalism? Pride? Anger? Woundedness? Apathy? Discouragement? The list could go on and on but the battle plan is the same: submit to God and resist the devil. Take discouragement, for example. Submitting to God means to grasp fully that Christ is shepherding the church and that the congregation must choose to follow Him and leave the results to Jesus. Resisting the devil's weapon of discouragement means to stop judging achievements as a means of discerning Christ's leading; it is like driving down the highway by only looking in the rearview mirror. As we stand firm in our resistance to the enemy's schemes the promise of Christ is that he will flee, the waters will calm, and the flock will be refreshed because the Good Shepherd led them there.



A lamb feeding