

Fold or Flock, Relationship or Religion

You might be surprised to hear that God hates most religion. Religion as a man-made system of superstition, belief and custom takes the deep and natural desire to know and worship God and misdirects it. And with any man-made system, there is corruption. The people leading it don't practice their own preaching. Hypocrisy. Others see a grand opportunity to make money out of people's superstition and fear. Exploitation. Some of these man-made systems come into conflict with each other and you have wars between religions, wars even within religions.

People usually respond one of two ways. Some people become very disillusioned with all religion. They see people preying on the fears of others, leading the superstitious and the gullible along. They are skeptical and cynical about the whole thing: Sunday, churchy worship, or Saturday synagogue. Some have been burnt personally by giving it a try and coming out disappointed, harmed, poorer. So they become cynical about the whole thing. All religion is a sham. There is no difference between Christianity and any other religion. Anyone in religious authority must be a con-artist of some sort.

The other way that people respond is to cleave to external religion. Sometimes it is for cultural, ethnic reasons – it's my identity, my heritage, my world. Sometimes it is for superstitious reasons – life will be luckier, and less dangerous, and more comfortable if I do my time at church every week. Sometimes it is just for moral reasons – it feels better, there's a bit more meaning to life, or the community there is good, I'm not as lonely. But these people still just go through the motions. Routines without relationship, morality without meaning, services without satisfaction.

God wants us to know that mere external religion is not to be confused with Him. There will always be people exploiting religion, but it is not the same as a true relationship with Him. There will always be both the professional practitioners and participants of man-made customs and rituals and traditions, but it is not the message of the Bible.

God created us to know Him. When we fell, we began doing religion with fig leaves, and Cain's sacrifice, and multiple religions. But religion is always a selfish substitute. The gospel calls us out of the sheep pens of religion and into the relationship of being in His flock.

That is what is happening in John 10. It is almost unfortunate that it is John 10, it should really be the next verses in John 9, because it is still part of the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. The chapter divisions are not part of original Scripture; they were placed there later by translators to make it easier to find our way around Scripture. But sometimes they were put in awkward places, and this is one of them. John 10 is not a new event, a new discourse. John 10 is the continuation of the story of the blind man healed, and in particular, it explains what has happened to the man now that he has been kicked out of the synagogue. He has been kicked out of religion, expelled from the external, structural Judaism of his day.

You remember that Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath. It was an irrefutable miracle of an inborn condition. No one could argue that the man had been born blind, and Jesus had healed him. But the Pharisees couldn't accept it. If Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, and broken their rabbinic traditions, then He just couldn't be from God. So they questioned the man, and questioned his parents and questioned the man again, trying to find out if the man wasn't actually born blind, or if Jesus had done some trick. Eventually, they were basically asking the man to lie and to deny what had happened to him. His response to them was that Jesus had clearly healed him, that only God could do such a work, and that it didn't matter if it upset their traditions. At that point, they cast him out

the synagogue, which meant they formally expelled him from most Jewish life. As we saw, that meant people would keep at a distance of two metres from him. He would not be admitted into an assembly of ten men, neither to public prayer, he was not allowed to study with others, no conversation was to be held with him, he was not even to be shown the road. He could buy food, but it was forbidden to eat or drink with such an one.

Jesus found the man, and told him that He, Jesus, was the Son of God, and the man worshipped Jesus. So now comes the question: what happens to this man now? He has been expelled from synagogal Judaism, rabbinic Judaism. He has lost access to much of Jewish life. Religion has expelled him. What now? What is left of his life if he has left religion to follow Jesus?

Jesus uses an image to answer that question. John 10:1-21 is an extended image of a shepherd and sheep, with the physical fold and the flock who leave the fold. It contrasts what it is like to be in a relationship with the Good Shepherd as opposed to living under the cold, impersonal management of religious false teachers. As Jesus explains the meaning of this man's new status, it becomes an indirect call to you: Choose relationship over religion, the Shepherd over sham teachers, a Person over professionals. It becomes a test: true sheep recognise the voice of Christ and follow Him, others stay with false shepherds. Three contrasts, between the Messiah's Flock, and Man-Made Fold.

I. In Messiah's Flock There is Relationship; in Man's Fold, No Recognition

¹ "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them. (John 10:1-6)

Immediately Jesus gives us four words: the sheepfold, the door, and the shepherd, and thieves which we need to understand to get the image. The sheepfold was an actual physical enclosure, often made of stone, without a roof. This sheep-pen was where sheep would be kept when not going out to graze. An enclosure like this had a door or a gate to stop the sheep from going out, or to prevent predators or robbers from coming in. A gatekeeper would care for the sheep all night, by keeping it locked to everyone except the shepherd. Now people who are not up to mischief enter places by the door, by the appointed access points. Criminals break in and climb in where they can. Now when it comes to the sheep, the legitimate shepherd uses the door or gate. The gatekeeper in verse 3 recognises the lawful shepherd and opens the gate. He doesn't have to break in or climb in. If there's a man in that sheep-fold who didn't come in through the gate, then he climbed in and he obviously means to steal sheep, not shepherd them.

Not only so, but once the gatekeeper opens this lawful access point to the lawful shepherd, all that shepherd has to do is call his sheep by name, and they come out the fold and follow him. They know him and he knows them. They recognise his voice and are comforted and follow him, the way pets know their owners.

But if there was a thief, an impostor there in the sheep-pen at night, and trying to steal sheep, if he breaks open the gate, and tries to get them to follow him, they won't. They'll actually flee, because they don't know him.

But if you look closely, the shepherd calls his *own* sheep by name – verse 3, and also verse 4. Not

every sheep in the sheepfold is his. There were often more than one flock kept inside one sheeppen. Some are his own; some are not. He doesn't herd the whole group out; he singles them out and calls them, and the sheep that are his, come out one by one.

Now verse 6 tells us that they, the Pharisees he was talking to in 9:40, did not understand this. What did it mean? It meant this blind man had been within the sheepfold, the enclosure of Israel, with its established religion, now dominated by the Pharisees. But Jesus had called him, and he had come out. The Pharisees think they have expelled him out; but Jesus teaches that the man has really come out because he heard the voice of the Good Shepherd. He is one of Christ's sheep, and recognised the voice of Jesus. Conversely, he was able to see through the rejection of the Pharisees and fled from them as false shepherds. He didn't keep following them. He has left religion and entered a living relationship.

Look at all the differences between this relationship and religion. Jesus knows each of his sheep. He has named them individually, and calls to them one by one. They follow His voice, not some external form. They follow his authority. The sheep of Christ can distinguish his voice from other voices. The real sheep can't be duped or deceived by thieving false teachers.

In pure religion, the professional religionist doesn't care about individuals. The individuals don't know God as a person, or hear his authority in His Word. They just take refuge in the structure, the sheepfold of custom, tradition, hierarchy. They can't distinguish between voices, and so if there is someone among them, they don't know if he came in legitimately or not.

So consider your own experience. Do you recognise the voice of Jesus when His Word is being rightly divided? One of the signs of a goat is that they eat anything, and an unbeliever cannot distinguish between what is nourishing and what is poisonous. They cannot distinguish between voices, and teachers, because they all seem the same and all sound the same. To be one of Christ's you begin to recognise that some people are not shepherding for Christ; it is not His voice and authority coming through them.

Do you know Him personally, and do you know that He knows you? Do you sense God in Christ is in your life, having called you to Himself by name, and is now leading you through life in personal, meaningful providences? The experience of a believer is being under new authority, with new guidance.

If not, wouldn't you prefer to be known by name, to be led personally? Come out of dead religion, leave the fold, and join Christ's flock.

II. In Messiah's Flock, You Gain Life, In False Religion, You Lose It

⁷ Then Jesus said to them again, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly. (John 10:7–10)

Now Jesus gives the first of two I Ams in this passage. He says, I am the door of the sheep. I am that lawful access point to the fold. I am the way, the means, the entrance into salvation. ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6) ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:18)

To come through Jesus, as the blind man did, is to find salvation. Christ's sheep come through Christ, and like sheep being led out to find pasture, true believers find soul nourishment.

But those religious leaders who reject Jesus are trying to gain access to the sheepfold unlawfully. He doesn't mean anyone before Him in time, because that would disqualify the great prophets and kings of Israel.

There have always been religionists and those who wanted a real relationship. Even in Israel, there were those who did not merely do the external, but had internalised the truth – circumcised the heart, written the law on their hearts, the remnant. Those seeking the relationship always wanted to know a Person, to love Him, not just keep a code. Those ones were always seeking Messiah, the bridge to God. The faith hall of fame is a monument to people who were not merely conforming to a code, but believing in promises.

He means false teachers that rejected the Word. That makes them thieves and robbers. But again, Christ's sheep do not follow false teachers.

Here comes the contrast. Those religious authorities who reject God's appointed way of salvation are actually criminals. Criminals are not there to help the sheep. They are there to steal, to kill sheep for food, to destroy. They are motivated by self-interest, not by the sheep's interest. On the other hand, Jesus has come not to harm the sheep, but to bring them life. I want life for them, and life in great measure, copious life. And since we're all equally alive, Jesus must be referring to the quality of life He brings – a life without guilt, shame, unnecessary fears, and all the weakening, corrupting effects of sin.

The Pharisees rejected the true Messiah. They were within the sheep-fold, but they were helping themselves. They got a livelihood out of it, the praise of man, money, fame. But in their system, the sheep starved.

Mere religionists ignore Jesus as the centre of their system. They just get in some way or other, and then exploit the religion for self-interest. They want money, or power, or fame. And while they dwell within the sheepfold of organised religion, they destroy people's lives with false teaching, lies and half-truths that do not bring life. They take people's money, and in return they give false hope, false ideas, and concepts that make life worse for people.

But when Jesus calls His sheep out, they come out and in Christ, people find real satisfaction. They experience true fulfilment, real meaning, real hope, real purpose, real freedom, real love, real joy.

One of the great differences between the true faith and the false is that false systems drain and tax you. But you cannot outgive the true God. In fact, if you could, it would demean God. If you could give more to God than He gives to you, then you would be a greater Giver than God, and He will not let that happen. If in your religion, you work and God ends up in your debt and owes you something, you have a religion that kills, and steals and destroys.

To come into a living relationship with Christ is to find someone who is glorified by satisfying your soul. He is shown to be a fountain not by your trying to replenish Him, but by your drinking life from Him, and life in such abundance that you are full.

Within the sheep-fold of religion, you must pay your debt, serve, do good works, obey some rituals, all of which costs you. You are depleted. You have lost. The real God would not be glorified by the idea that humans have run at a loss by serving Him.

The real God is glorified when His sheep think about their lives and say, Jehovah is my shepherd, consequently, I have everything I need. He provides richly for me, still waters and green pastures. My inner person gets restored and replenished. I have guidance and leadership for my life. I'm not consumed with fear and worry, for God is with me. Even when I face opposition, you provide for me, you soothe me, you satisfy me. In fact, love and kindness follows me like a shadow, and my future will be in your house forever. That's abundant life.

And when you see the disease-ridden, emaciated, trembling, dirty sheep in the sheep-pen of false religion, you know who their shepherd is.

III. In Messiah's Flock there is Loving Sacrifice, In Man's Fold Low Selfishness

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. ¹² But a hireling, *he who is* not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; and I know My *sheep*, and am known by My own. ¹⁵ As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock *and* one shepherd. ¹⁷ "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

Here is the second of the I Ams, given in verse 11 and repeated in verse 14. I am the Good Shepherd. Jesus is not only the true access point, He is the true leader and lover of the sheep. He is the good shepherd. Here, He is clearly identifying Himself with Psalm 23: Jehovah is my shepherd. Jesus is the I AM.

What makes Him good? He sacrifices for the sheep. He says it five times here:

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **gives His life** for the sheep.

¹⁵ As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I **lay down My life** for the sheep.

¹⁷ "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I **lay down My life** that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from Me, but I **lay it down of Myself**. I have **power to lay it down**, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

The Good Shepherd does not only give life to the sheep, He is willing to give up His life for the sheep. That's amazing. Why would a human shepherd be willing to die for animals? Such is the love and bond of a shepherd for His sheep, that he is willing to lay down his more valuable life for the life of the sheep.

Jesus, God in flesh, is going to lay down His life on behalf of the sheep. This is the first time in John that Jesus is speaking rather explicitly about His coming death on the cross, and then He adds something they could not have understood. He dies, so as to live again. He lays down His life, and can retrieve it. Jesus is going to die and rise for the sake of the sheep.

This Gospel message is wrapped up in the love that the Father has for him. The same way that the Father loves the Son, the same way that the Father knows the Son and Son knows the Father, this is the way Jesus loves the Sheep:

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; and I know My *sheep*, and am known by My own.

Jesus even predicts the beginning of the church in verse 16. ¹⁶ And other sheep I have which are not of

this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock *and* one shepherd.

Jesus has other sheep, not of this fold. They are not in the sheep-pen of Israel, not within the physical enclosure of being national, ethnic Israel. They're in some other sheep-pen, meaning Gentile nations. Notice, Jesus is going to go and fetch them from their nations, they will also recognise His voice. He is not going to lead them into Israel. He is going to lead them out. And now the word changes from sheepfold to flock. The flock doesn't have the physical external enclosure of a sheep-pen. The only thing uniting a flock is the Shepherd. They are out in the field grazing, but they are following Him. The church, which is still future at this point, is going to be a spiritual body of Jews and Gentiles following Messiah's voice.

The contrast is verse 12 and 13.

¹² But a hireling, *he who is* not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. Jesus changes the image now from a robber or thief to a hireling. That is, a hired labourer. We would call this a temp, a contract worker, a piece job. A fellow who gets a job to look after the sheep for a day's wage.

This man has no bond with the sheep. Verse 12 tells us he does not own them. He has no real personal investment in them. Verse 13 says, he does not care about them. So, when danger comes, his lack of identification with the sheep leads him to flee out of self-protection. He is not going to risk his human skin for these animals, and even the wage he is earning is not enough. So he runs, and the wolf comes and catches some and scatters others, causing havoc. No protection for them.

In contrast to Jesus' willingness to die for His sheep, the false religious professional is just doing a job. His real treasure is money, or a quality of life, or something else. Being a pastor, or rabbi or imam, or guru, or monk, or advisor is how he gets his day's pay. The problem is not the pay. After all, the shepherd will also have a salary. The problem is that the false religious professional has no bond or deep love for the people, because he is not one of the sheep. If he were one of the sheep, he'd sense the love and sacrifice of the Good Shepherd, and be willing to do something similar for the sheep. In religion there is none of this self-dying love. There is only a transaction: money for hire.

But wait a minute! Doesn't that mean we're perpetuating the problem with church buildings and people in suits? Is the solution to de-churchify? Meet in homes? De-institutionalise the church? That would be like saying because some families are cold and cruel, we should do away with families – no more formalised marriages, no more legal status of parents over children.

The problem is not structure. It is not church buildings, pulpits, pastors in suits. If you think eliminating those things will fix the problem of professional religion, you don't understand where the problem lies. The problem lies not in religion having forms, customs, traditions, and externals. The problem lies in there being no Shepherd behind and in and around all that, no true living relationship, no real spiritual reality undergirding it. The problem is having no gospel.

The true faith is saturated with the sweet smell of gospel love. Sacrifice, dying to live, is all over it. If you are stuck in religion, then you are not captivated by love. Those that lead you are self-protective and live for self-interest. That's all they have to give, so that's all you learn. You never learn the life-transforming power of gospel love, where you can give it all up for Him, because He gave it all up for you. When you know gospel love, you can surrender your money, and surrender your plans, you can go and take the gospel to North Korea, and Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and Iran, because His lovingkindness is better than life. When you are loved by the Good Shepherd, His laying down of His life means you can lay down yours. For some that's missions, for others that's

serving your wife, or pouring your life into your children's education, or devoting yourself to a ministry in the church, or meeting needs. The sheep in Christ's flock are set free to love, because they know they are loved.

Well, as usual, this divides people up.

¹⁹ Therefore there was a division again among the Jews because of these sayings. ²⁰ And many of them said, "He has a demon and is mad. Why do you listen to Him?" ²¹ Others said, "These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (John 10:11–21)

It still divides people up. People either think Jesus was extreme, and just retreat into their institutional religion, or they consider Him seriously. Consider what Jesus is offering today. He offers to bring you out from the impersonal world of religion, into a flock where He knows you and you know Him by name. He offers to bring you out from religion and give you life, instead of taxing and taking it from you. He offers to bring you out from religion with its self-centredness and to immerse you into the freeing world of gospel-love where you can lose your life to find it. Why stay in the world when the Shepherd offers you life in His flock?

Are you in that flock? Do you distinguish between His voice and that of false teachers? Do you know something of the Psalm 23 life? Have you experienced this gospel love that frees you from the selfish life? If so, rejoice that the Lord is your shepherd.