

SHEEP AND SHEEPFOLDS
Finding salvation in community

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Introduction

Simply, salvation is found in community. When we hear the call of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, we become the ‘sheep of His pasture’.¹ And we are also called into His sheepfold to be saved.² We are sheep in a sheepfold. The individual challenge of Christian salvation must always be linked to the aspect of community. Identity and community – these are the two absolutes that must be held together at all times. They are as co-essential as God’s three-ness and His one-ness. We have written on these aspects elsewhere. Our aim here is to discuss the aspect of community. Community is essential to individual salvation. However we heard the gospel and found salvation, however real our

1. Psa 100:3 2. John 10:9

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experience was, we must realise that we are not walking in salvation until we are part of a community where the life of Christ is being expressed.

This call to live in community is very specific, meaning that we are called to be part of a local, Christian community where our lives are laid down for one another in love, in very practical ways. We cannot speak in general terms of love, life, fellowship and salvation, without living in a very specific context of committed relationship. 'This commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.'³ John's epistle is devoted to this subject. If indeed we love God whom we have not seen, then we will love our brothers whom we have seen.⁴

It is only when we realise the specific nature of community that we grasp the full impact of what Jesus meant when He spoke of sheep, sheepfolds, shepherds, the door, the wolves, the thieves and robbers, etc. We are not merely part of a large, spiritual sheepfold with a purely symbolic relationship to Christ and to one another. The terms and conditions for being part of a Christian community are very specific. The one Shepherd ordains and speaks through His messengers, He gives entry to the fold and guards the door, He removes thieves and robbers, He appoints servants to give food in season, He gives authority and establishes doorkeepers, He shepherds the flock through overseers and protects the sheep from wolves. Christ accomplishes all this by a very specific order.⁵ And despite the fact that church groups are so diverse, there is an expectation laid upon every believer, by Christ Himself, that each should live in love, trust, integrity, commitment, submission and fruitfulness, in a specific local community, for these features are the evidence of eternal life.

3. 1 John 4:21 4. 1 John 4:20 5. Luke 12:42; Mark 13:34; 1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28-29

The assurance of eternal life

In our recent booklet, Remember the Heights, we studied the assurance of eternal life. How do we know that we have eternal life abiding within us? What do we understand by eternal life? Have we adopted religion to avoid hell and qualify for eternity in heaven? Do we know we are saved because we have made a profession, been baptised, or joined a church? No, the evidence of eternal life is something much more tangible than a quiet, inner witness. Very simply, we know because we love! ‘We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.’⁶ Jesus called all those who did the will of His Father, ‘brethren’.⁷ And John says that if we love the Father who begat the many sons, we will love those who are begotten of God.⁸

Expanding upon this theme, there are three indications, and these relate to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Firstly, we know because we are born of the Father, and the power in His divine seed is the power to lay our lives down. Secondly, we know because we obey the new commandment, which is to love one another as Christ loved us. Thirdly, we know ‘by the Spirit Whom He has given us’.⁹ When tested, as John shows, our ‘spirit’ is one that abides in love, continues in relationship, hears the voice of others, lives in the truth and obeys His commandments.¹⁰ As an overall statement then, we know that eternal life is already within us, here and now, because we keep His commandments, and we love one another.¹¹

Living in community

The proof of eternal life is that we live in community, not just in a social sense, but in specific relationships where we lay down our lives. When we meditate on this theme, it is not possible to generalise. For how, exactly, do we

6. 1 John 3:14 7. Matt 12:50; Heb 2:11 8. 1 John 5:1 9. 1 John 3:24 10. 1 John 2:19
11. 1 John 5:2

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demonstrate that our lives are laid down? We show it when we give, serve, consider others, prefer others and reveal others, having put aside self-seeking, independent and religious agendas. We are not first of all finding life; we are losing it, remembering Jesus' words about what it means to be one of His disciples.¹² We are not preserving and saving our own lives, seeking validity, definition and fulfilment of our selfish ambitions. We are losing, forfeiting, yielding and denying ourselves for the sake of our brethren. Active love, in 'deed and truth', not just in 'word or tongue', is the proof that eternal life is abiding in us.¹³

Eternal life must be seen in the fundamental areas of living, in the way husbands love their wives, children obey their parents, families care for one another, and in the way local church communities live as part of the one sheepfold of Jesus Christ. When individual accountability meets family and community accountability, then we know that eternal life is present.

The question we must ask ourselves is, 'Do we truly live in community, in the practical way mentioned above?' Do we live in trusting commitment within a local Christian community where we live as branches of the one vine?¹⁴ And do we also live this way at the family level – from 'house to house', as the term is used in the book of Acts?¹⁵ We might attend a church, without ever being joined in community. We might give Christian service from house to house, but do so with an entirely selfish agenda. Until we lay our lives down and offer our trust, submission and whole-hearted giving to a very specific group of people, we are not in 'community'.

And this relationship is not possible, in the span of life, with a vast number of people. Of course, we can show virtue and 'pursue peace with all men', but the extent of our immediate community is only as

12. Matt 10:39 13. 1 John 3:18 14. John 15:1-8 15. Acts 2:26; 20:20

great as the impact we can have, and the fruit we can bear, in the time and space allotted to us.¹⁶ As a church grows larger, we are certainly joined to the whole, while of course we cannot maintain community with everyone. Here is the summary. When I eat and drink communion with my brethren in a church setting, I am making a commitment to this specific community as a whole. I am also confessing that I will practise community in my family and from house to house as an outflow of the life I have received. The two dimensions must correspond – public confession and private practice.

It's clear then that our connection must be practical and organic. We cannot merely be connected in a token, nominal or casual sense. We will only bear fruit, as we are appointed to do, if we live in vital, tangible, practical relationship.¹⁷

Where to find community

This challenge, this imperative, concerning eternal life and community, must undercut all our uncertainties and questions about the divided state of the church. There are church groups everywhere, both historic and contemporary, exclusive and popular, doctrinaire and existential. Many people are born to a particular church tradition, others exercise a freedom to choose the tradition, program or emphasis that suits them best. Many never change communities, some do. The point here is that we cannot use the confusing landscape of the church as an excuse to negate or avoid the call to community.

Let us restate this point, from two sides – toward leaders and then toward believers in general. First of all, Christian leaders, if they are true shepherds, must not fail to mark out the door of the sheepfold, to sound the voice of the Master, and to define the nature of true community, simply because there is so much confusion. Secondly,

16. Heb 12:14 17. John 15:2,16

followers of Christ may not simply choose groups that suit them, or veto groups that may show more conviction toward community, on the basis that there is no 'right' church.

The present Christian landscape

Certainly, the present landscape across the church is very difficult to interpret. There are groups claiming to be true Christian communities who are not. There are believers desiring to live in true community, who cannot find a context for it. In terms of the eating and drinking of communion as the centre-point of Christian proclamation, there are 'tables' that are closed, ie restricted to approved members, and there are tables that are 'open' to all believers.

Many questions could be asked. If there is just one sheepfold, does it matter where we join ourselves? Is there a single 'right' church that is the true sheepfold? Since no group is the 'right' church by New Testament standards, where do we go? Does it matter? If a particular church shows a superior fervor for New Testament truth, is this the right group? Does a group have the right to call its members to submission, to commitment? Does every group have the same right, regardless of their apparent faults and shortfalls against the Scriptural standards? For example, if the church of our persuasion begins to stray from clear Biblical teaching, to embrace homosexuality for example, does it still have the right to call for our submission to community? Who decides if a church group has ceased to be viable, since there is no global governing body, no context for the leaders to be corrected, and no context for adherents to object or contend? If believers leave, is this justified? Are all divisions justified? Who will judge these questions? Why should we seek a community when there are all these factions? Should we not rather reserve the right to judge truth for ourselves, and determine our own future?

This is the complex backdrop to our subject. The ideals of the Scripture are the hope of all believers, but is there a context where faith toward these ideals is being expressed? And then we must ask, 'Is there a basic commitment that we each as individuals must make toward community?'

We will structure our meditation from here in these two areas:

1. The faith to establish and define a community (which is a question for all leaders), and 2. The commitment to be part of a community (a question for all of us).

On the first point, in every generation, God does raise up messengers who have authority and faith to establish and define New Testament community. On the second point, you and I must not refuse to live in genuine community, right where we are. We should therefore list a number of questions, as we shall do further down, as a way of giving account.

This meditation becomes exceptionally vital if we remember that salvation depends upon it. We shall be saved if we have eternal life abiding within us. The evidence of this life is found in the way we live in community.

The faith to establish & define a community

Let us say again, that we shall address ourselves to two questions: the faith upon which we establish and define a community, and the commitment we must make to be part of a community. On the first of these, we shall proceed with our subject in the form of a testimony. As shepherds within a community for over thirty years, we have reflected upon these matters very often, and have been tested on our foundations many times. It is true to say that any and every Christian group needs to state its own basis for existence in a similar manner. Again, if there is one right church, then we should all have joined it. Because some churches have insisted on a 'closed table', and nominated a basis for membership, we are

compelled to have an answer as to why we have not joined that table. We also find ourselves the subject of cross-examination as to why we have not joined ourselves to other pre-existing denominations.

A total review of history is not possible, or called for, in this present context. However, a few keynote reflections will establish our point. The communion 'table' to which we began to gather in the early 1970s had its inception when the Latter Rain movement heralded a focus on the restoration of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit drew believers together from a whole range of backgrounds. The previous Pentecostal movement of the early 1900s revived the truth of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and was itself a restoration movement. As the next restoration emphasis gathered momentum from the 50s through the 70s, many new 'tables' were established in faith, conviction, commitment and vision, toward the restoration of the body. Restoration was the key word.

We became aware that the whole of church history was a record of 'restoration' communities who were invariably resisted by the pre-existing structures - when in fact these existing structures were themselves the result of earlier restoration.

We were aware from our inception that faith for New Testament restoration provided the only validity for stepping outside the existing structures. We commenced a table, and proclaimed the challenge of becoming a viable New Testament community, as an expression of commitment to restoration. God gave us the word of restoration, and through those He raised up as messengers, we heard the unmistakable voice of the one Shepherd calling us to be one fold. We 'set' the table of the Lord in this faith, not as a closed table, but as open to all believers.

In the New Testament beginnings, there was only the one universal fold, expressed in each city. The leaders were ordained by Christ's apostles, and there was a visible, global authority that was able to protect the sheep and mark those who caused division. Today then, in

the absence of this lampstand-church structure, what are Christians to do? Clearly, because we are in a phase of restoration toward this New Testament pattern, we must proclaim restoration, and must advance a table that upholds our faith toward this goal.

In the mid-70s, the Brisbane fraternal of ministers involved in renewal discussed 'restoration' teaching. Most acknowledged that the Ephesian Pattern was indeed the New Testament model. However, the improbability of relinquishing existing structures became the reason for not proceeding toward unity. In time, it was evident that the general acceptance and popularity of the independent model cast the restoration model into the 'too hard basket'. In fact, it was deemed to be invalidated by the lack of support.

As we proceeded, we did not assume that our table was the only one expressing restoration. We have never said, 'We are the church in the city', in the way that was voiced by Witness Lee.¹⁸ Our faith has continued toward restoration, and this has enabled us to progressively clarify and affirm the essence and power of New Testament community. Had we not proceeded in all the points the Lord laid upon us across the years – the Ephesian Pattern, baptism in the triune name, first love, lampstand connection, seven-five administration, headship order etc – we would have forfeited the right to profess that our table stands in the faith of restoration.

The communion table

Accordingly, our attitude as we gather to the table is this. We are not the 'right' church. We don't assume ours is the only table that expresses restoration and genuine community. We accept that there are multitudes who belong to

18. In *The Normal Christian Church Life* chapter 4, entitled 'The Church Founded by the Apostles' by Watchman Nee, he helpfully points out that the New Testament church was linked to a city – eg the church in Ephesus, Rome etc. Later, his pupil Witness Lee insisted upon this point in a much more legalistic manner, claiming that churches with this teaching were the correct churches in their particular cities.

the body of Christ, and we trust that they are expressing community where they are called to live and lay their lives down. We are not calling everyone to our table. There is nevertheless a grace-authority given by Christ that has confirmed His word of restoration. He has borne witness through signs following. He is granting us the capacity to be a valid and sustainable community. We welcome all who visit among us. We proclaim the restoration of true community to all hearers without distinction. Those who partake of the table with us are thus called to be stewards of the obligation that the table represents. In truth, some will partake of life, and some will eat judgement to themselves, just as Paul teaches. It is not possible, nor laid upon us, to determine who is who.

Our attitude is as expressed in the words of Jehu: 'Is your heart right, as my heart is toward your heart?', to which he then added, 'If it is, give me your hand'.¹⁹ The attitude of heart one toward another reflected here, is the basis of eating and drinking together. Because there is one sheepfold overall, our hearts must be right with other believers elsewhere.

As for other tables in our region, the onus rests upon the overseers in those communities to define the basis of their faith. Do the tables represent the prospect of coming together as one flock? Are they the tables of denominations, of personalities, of unique ministries, of schisms? Do these tables carry the corresponding obligation to be committed to community? Or do they tend to validate independence? We do not and cannot know all the answers.

The point is this. The popular atmosphere of independence does not permit us to establish more and more communities, so called, unless they are raised up by messengers who proclaim the word of restoration. The criteria for establishing another community, outside of the existing structure, is very specific.

19. 2 Kings 10:15

It is only justified where messengers have specific revelation regarding restoration, and authority from Christ to call and recall His people to a single community. Obviously, there is going to be a confused landscape in this regard, because there are many diverse 'spirits' and prophets that have gone out into the world.²⁰

However, this confusion around us does not excuse us for being loose in our commitment to loving one another. And when messengers do stand and deliver a restoration message 'that proceeds from the mouth of God', they should not be placed in suspicion of being cultish because they state the New Testament standard for community living.²¹

So if our table is open, as it should be, then it is also a place for judgement, as at Corinth, and a place where divisive persons can be warned and opposed. Once it is clear that we have a faith toward New Testament realities, we have freedom and accountability to proclaim each and all of the Scriptural standards, while we also accept that the full authority of a lampstand-church in each city does not yet exist.

Publicly – house to house

If such an expression of the body is valid in the public communion setting, then it is equally valid for this community to meet in the same faith from house to house. Public faith must be mirrored in the house-to-house community. This means that the same community obligation that is enjoined upon believers in the public arena, is urged from house to house by faithful brethren who stand in one mind with the overseers. If our participation in Christ as a public community is valid, and not just a token, then we must each measure ourselves, at all levels of life, to this obligation -individually, as families, and as church communities. We

20. 1John 4:1 21. Matt 4:4

must be a community that lays life down for one another, in a specific and organic manner.

At this point, the injunctions of Scripture become an imperative, and are not an option just because the whole body is not yet united in a region. If we do not walk openly with our brethren, in local and practical communion, then we hate our brethren, and the truth is not in us – according to John’s letter. If we do not open our hearts in compassion one to another, the love of God does not dwell within us, and there is no assurance that the quality of eternal life is abiding.²² Our very salvation is at stake if we do not repent and return to doing good in real and practical living.²³

The commitment to be part of a community

Let us turn to the second key question advanced above. What commitment do we need to be part of a genuine community? To join community is not a static membership, as if we are added to a church roll-call. True community is a living, moving relationship, in which we are hearing the ever-present word of Christ, ‘obeying the truth’ and living in ‘sincere love’.²⁴ True community is a pilgrimage in harmony with the living voice of the Good Shepherd. We must join this faith-pilgrimage, in our generation. We must move in restoration, in whatever setting we are in, regardless of the apparent limitations. ‘Truth’ doesn’t change, but our capacity to live in truth, in love, in our generation, demands constant change, both individually and collectively, as we respond to the Shepherd’s living word. If we do not move forward, under the conviction of His word, we will interpret everything we see and hear by our history. We will agree with some things, or disagree, as if we alone are the judges. Then former dogma will make us dogmatic about cherished practices. And when we begin to extol and build

22. 1 John 3:17 23. Rom 2:7 24. 1 Pet 1:22

monuments to the former prophets, we also begin to stone the present ones.²⁵

Let us ask ourselves whether we have joined the living, Christian community. Let's consider a list of challenges that arise from this basic question, and address any shortfalls and blind spots in our concept of salvation. Let us discard the 'baggage' we may have accumulated, and clear up any anomalies in our basic commitment to serving our local Christian community. In this way, we will properly enter the sheepfold by the door. We must all enter by this door, not just once, but many times, as we are led in and out fulfilling our Christian duties.

1. Have we turned from our lawlessness and accepted Christ as our Lord? Have we taken up our cross to follow Him as new-born sons of one Father?

2. If we have passed from death to life, are we now heeding the new commandment, viz. to love one another, in a specific community context where we can lay our lives down in practical ways?

3. Is this specific community the context where I am committed to demonstrate eternal life? Is this the place where Christ is Lord, and where I will surrender to His Lordship? Will I love this particular group of brethren within the body of Christ? If not, I must answer these same lordship questions somewhere else.

4. Have I heard the voice of the Good Shepherd through the overseers in this particular community? As Jesus said, 'He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me'.²⁶ Christ does appoint messengers to our lives, and to hear them is to hear Christ. Do we see the importance of this question? If we have no faith to hear the word of these particular brethren as the word of God, then we will have no faith to eat and

25. Luke 11:47,48 26. Luke 10:16

drink with them at the same table of the Lord.²⁷ We will have no faith to join ourselves to this community as a genuine community, if we have not resolved this question. The faith of overseers to establish a table toward restoration must be met by the faith of believers to eat of this table, and by the faith to live out the obligations of so eating and drinking. These community obligations must be lived publicly and from house-to-house, or our faith is in vain.

5. If we have previously been committed to other communities of believers, the following challenges are crucial. Are we resolved with believers elsewhere – since we must not be in breach with other sheep anywhere within the one fold, while partaking of the table here? Are we resolved with shepherds elsewhere? Are there overseers who have laid their lives down for us, and who have challenged us concerning our salvation, to whom we owe our submission? Are we being led within the one fold, by the Good Shepherd? Are we truly finding pasture, under His shepherding hand, or are we leading our own lives for self-centred advantage? Do we merely have ambitions for service and ministry that have not been fulfilled? Can we lay down all former definitions and aspirations, to be planted once again in this part of the vine?

6. Will we commit to the obligations of community living, both publicly and from house to house? Having examined our hearts upon eating and drinking the communion, will we walk and live in the ‘light’ with open hearts, so that the blood of Christ can be effective to bring cleansing and change?²⁸

7. Will we serve, work and bear fruit in this sheepfold, accepting help to be equipped and adjusted to our unique work and place in the body? Will we be led in and out, in a fruitful routine of obedience,

27. 1 Thess 2:3 28. 1 John 1:7

believing that God's righteousness in us will be revealed to a 100-fold degree?²⁹

How to become a genuine community

To conclude our meditation in a practical way, let us imagine the following practical scenario. In a small country town, a number of believers may be seeking renewed spiritual life, some with church backgrounds, some without. They may begin to gather in the search for 'something more'. Their reasons for gathering may be as many as there are individuals in the group. How then will they become a genuine community? Certain things are clear. They are not a true community until (a) they have resolved where they are going and where they have come from, (b) they are heeding the authority from Christ that can challenge their lives, and (c) they are practically laying down their lives for one another in a viable expression of community.

Let us express the same thing in the negative. A community is not genuine, until it ceases to be a conglomerate of various denominational backgrounds, a gaggle of self-interested visionaries, a collection of religious seekers, or a membership of adherents, and begins to be a community of families that practise 'first love'.³⁰ Such a community may begin to assemble, but it cannot be established without the word of Christ in the mouths of messengers, who themselves demonstrate the foundational capacity for a sheepfold - the power to lay life down.

Shepherds entering by the door

This is the central message of John chapter ten. The Good Shepherd Himself came through the door by laying His life down. Similarly, shepherds who are appointed over the flock of God, purchased by Christ's blood, will prove themselves by passing through the same door that they announce to followers. They will mark out the door by their own discipleship, and they will define the

29. John 10:9 30. Rev 2:4

terms of genuine community by their own commitment to relationship. As these shepherd-watchmen walk together, eye to eye, they will lay a foundation by expressing the authority of Christ that is given to them. Their authority rests only in the immanent word of Christ. If they have no word from Christ that can 'set a table' toward restoration, and if they are merely misplaced ministers or worse, wandering stars, then they have no mandate or capacity to establish a Christian community.

The second qualification is that messengers must also define a lifestyle of trust, integrity and submission that marks a foundation to which others can be called. They will exhibit the essence of community among themselves.

This is the power behind the term, 'brethren'. Of course, all those who are born of the Father are the brethren of Christ. But in a more specific sense, those who visibly lay their lives down to provide the foundation for specific, organic community, in a local area, are 'the brethren' of which John speaks. These are the 'us' to whom he refers when he speaks of 'we' who have heard, seen and touched His life, and when he speaks of those who 'go out from us'.³¹ If restoration communities are to be established here and there, Christ must raise up the 'us' who are prepared to forsake all else to lay down their lives for one another.

Why are these questions so important?

John wrote his epistle so that we would know we have eternal life. We know we have eternal life when we are living in the fold, abiding in the vine, laying our lives down in love for the brethren. When we become blind to relationship, to the impact of our lives upon others, we are in

31. 1 John 1:1;2:19

darkness, the darkness of non-accountability. We are growing deaf to the word of Christ that is being addressed to us.

There is a grave danger that our pathway to salvation will become an empty routine, a 'position' of rightness upon which we depend. All the above challenges depend one upon the other. If Christ is not Lord, we cannot live in relationship in a community. If we reject the fold, in practical matters, we are rejecting the Good Shepherd. Once relationship is affected, a believer may not continue to presume that he is forgiven. We must forgive and be forgiven to enter the kingdom of heaven, for we all have one Father.

Finally, our meditation is important because there is severe spiritual opposition to this foundation for salvation. Our enemy, Satan, is promoting thieves and robbers who do not bring the true gospel.³² And wherever there is a commitment to sincere community, there is a voice that accuses us of being feeble, mindless and cultish, simply because we live in relationship. This voice must not be heeded.

At the same time, the battle abroad is causing us to affirm the basic truths about salvation. We must all be clear and firm. If the above challenges are not answered, then the central Christian proposition, the New Testament truth of being 'in Christ', will fade away to a philosophical shadow. The living context of a sheepfold where we may enter by the door, live in committed relationship, and thus be saved, is the single biggest issue in our day. Let us be sheep in a local fold, laying down our lives for one another.

32. John 10:8