

STUDY 3

The True Shepherd and His World

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INTRODUCTION

Where are we ‘at’ in our life and mission as God’s Church? I don’t say this critically at all, but simply in light of the question that the Gospel poses to all Churches at all times, because, as the Church, we can have a tendency to shrink back ‘inside our shells’—withdrawing from the full ‘picture’ and life of who God has made and called us to be. Sometimes the Church can get to seeing not much more than its own ‘four walls’!—that is, just seeing our own existence as a local Church, where we focus on what will sustain, encourage, advance us. In which case our expression of mission is mostly about what will benefit the life of our Church—that is, put ‘more bums on seats’ and keep us tolerably financial. This is when the Church thinks and lives like a ‘goldfish-bowl’—that is, like we are a bunch of wide-eyed goldfish, staring out bug-eyed at the ‘big scary world’! When this ‘goldfish-bowl syndrome’ happens, it ‘strangles’ the life and mission of the Church. Then we have to ask ourselves: *do we have a vision for God’s purpose and work that is for the entire world?*—because that is exactly what God’s purpose is! Then we need to work through how that full vision of God’s purpose and work, might benefit and enrich both our life and mission as His people, and that of the community we live in.

These are among the urgent questions that are raised for us as the Church by the reality that *our True Shepherd* is also the True Shepherd *of His world*. In this study we will work through this matter in light of God’s covenant relationship with the whole creation, and to see that relationship grounded in the eternal being of the Shepherd–God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit; to see God Himself as the primary actor in all mission—He is the Missionary–Shepherd; to understand God’s global purpose as the filling of the earth with His glory; to see humanity grounded and fulfilled in the covenant relationship with God through the incarnate constitution and atoning work of the Shepherd–Son; finally to comprehend the Church’s life and mission as constituted by full participation in the revealing of God’s completed work in Jesus Christ—that is, to fill the whole earth with His glory.

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GOD IS THE SHEPHERD OF HIS WORLD

God's Covenant with the Whole of Creation

God has established a covenant relationship with the whole of creation. (We use the term 'covenant' here, even though the term may not necessarily be used in the biblical texts concerned. These encounters between God and His creation/creatures nonetheless express the establishment or re-confirmation of substantial relationships which, we will see, bear all the true character of the biblical covenant relationship, and are continuous with them. The substantial meaning of the term 'covenant' will be further explored and developed in the course of this study.) In connection with the covenant established through Noah following the flood, God says that this is a covenant 'between me and you and every living creature of all flesh' (Gen. 9:15).¹ (We do not and cannot explore here all of the biblical covenants, but touch only on those relevant to establishing the basis for an understanding that God's covenant is with the whole creation.) This includes not only human beings but also every animal. Yet we can go back beyond this to see that covenant relationship confirmed with Adam and Eve and all their 'seed' following the fall, in the prophetic announcement that the undoing of Adam and Eve (and their 'seed'—Rom. 5:12ff.) through the serpent (Satan), which has betrayed God's fellowship with Adam (Gen. 3:8ff), will be reversed through one of those 'seed' (Gen. 3:15). Yet we find indication of God's relationship established with the whole creation from its very beginning—indeed in its 'embryonic state' prior to the creational act in the first two verses of the book of Genesis.² The Spirit of God 'broods' over the earth which was a formless void and darkness and the deep, in the creational act of God, subduing chaos and establishing God's good order. The Spirit of God here is none other than the Spirit of the Son of God the Father—the Son of the Father's love (1 John 4:9, 10), so that the Spirit is the 'Spirit of the Son of His love' (Geoffrey Bingham). Thus the 'Spirit of God' in Genesis 1:1–2 can be understood as God the Father's 'love gift' or 'pledge' to the creation from its very birth.³

God establishes and guarantees the covenant relationship, *unilaterally* (as expressed most clearly in the form of the creation of the Abrahamic covenant, where God Himself 'makes' or 'cuts' the covenant—Gen. 17:7ff.). He assumes and commands true response from the covenant partner—whether it is with Israel, all the families of the earth, or the whole creation (creation itself is also to 'respond rightly' by submitting to God's good purpose for it under humanity's divine mandate, and being shaped accordingly—Gen. 1:28–30). Nonetheless, God's relationship or covenant, created unilaterally by Him, is also reconfirmed unilaterally—again and again, and ultimately—in the face of the failure of the covenant partner (Rom. 3:3–4). Therefore God's relationship or covenant with the whole of creation is irreducible; it is an 'everlasting' or 'eternal covenant' (Ezek. 37:26; Heb. 13:20). We will see in the end that this can only be so because of the atoning work of His Son to judge, cleanse, forgive, heal, and so reverse all covenant-breaking in Himself. Consequently, there is

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the Revised Standard Version or the New Revised Standard Version.

² Hector Morrison *The Spirit of the Everlasting Covenant*, NCTM 1999 Pastors' School Morning Studies, pp. 27ff.

³ H. Morrison, pp. 27ff.

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hope for all covenant-breakers. Moreover, since no part of the creation is outside of God's covenant, in the end none can escape reckoning with it. Further, this also raises a question for us as God's people of the covenant: Whether we at any point relate to the world outside the Church as beyond God, or beyond hope? Or do we relate to it as hope-full? In light of God's covenant, we clearly may, and must.

'God Has Elected Not to be God without Humanity' (Karl Barth)

However, the will, decision and determination of God to establish this relationship or covenant are from 'before the foundation of the earth' (Eph. 1:3–10). The creation itself was indeed with a view to this relationship; as Calvin taught, creation is 'a most beautiful theater' to display the works of God,⁴ fully seen as His redemptive purpose for the world;⁵ and Karl Barth, that 'the creation is the external basis of the covenant', and 'the covenant is the internal basis of creation'.⁶ As pre-creational, this places God's covenant with creation in the eternal being of God Himself. Ephesians 1 indicates the involvement of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the deliberation, decision and action to create unto redemption and adoption. God has eternally willed and decided to have human children with Him in the comprehensive depth and fullness of His divine being. As Barth has so finely put it, 'God has elected not to be God without humanity'.⁷ Hence the irrepressible, heartbreaking will and desire of the Father in the parable to have his son, lost in the far-country, home in the bosom of his family!

God's purpose for the universe is *a domestic one*—that is, it is about the creation and redemption of a people, a 'family', a home. The Abrahamic covenant is about God creating and blessing Abraham's family, as His people and family, with a view to the like blessing of 'all the families of the earth' (Gen. 12, 15). This finds fulfilment through the 'new covenant' established in and through Jesus Christ the Son (Jer. 31:31; Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 11:25—really the re-confirmation and fulfilment of the original covenant with all creation), who creates a whole new family (Mark 3:33–35), from all nations (Acts 10:34ff.). The final consummation of which we see in those from all the nations (families) of the earth being married into God's new family as part of His Son's Bride, the Church (Rev. 19–22). Living in this relationship is what constitutes true human fulfilment.

God's eternal election of human children as His covenant partner of course also includes their true response to His gracious election. The whole point of God's covenant is that it is about *relationship*—that is, *fellowship*. Real fellowship involves two parties *fellowshipping*. Any covenant that God established, however unilaterally created and reconfirmed, if it did not in the end find consummation in the active *fellowshipping* of *both* parties concerned, would be meaningless. What use is a marriage certificate, hanging on a wall and framed in gold, if either party ignores the other from dawn 'til dusk?! God's unilateral covenant with creation–humanity must

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeil, Westminster Pr., Philadelphia, 1960), book 1, ch. 14, pt 20 (*Institutes*, 1.14.20).

⁵ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.22.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 pt 1 (*CD*, 3.1), T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1987, pp. 95–329. (This could have far-reaching implications for environmental conservation, to place such work on a true basis, or to spur us out of apathetic quietism.)

⁷ K. Barth, *CD*, 2.2, pp. 145–95.

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and will find fulfilment in the true response of His covenant partner. (However, this fulfilment is only realised in and through our participation in the vicarious humanity of the Incarnate Son and Saviour who assumes us, flesh and blood and spirit, and fulfils and realises in His humanity all parts of our true covenant response to God the Father, vicariously—i.e. as our representative and substitute.) This is the end and goal of God's covenant.

God is the Missionary–Shepherd

As God is the unilateral creator and guarantor of His covenant, He is determined to pursue and realise its consummation. This is God's purpose or mission. God is the One who achieves this; there are many missionaries, but primarily *God is the Missionary!*⁸ For people to be called into God's family through His Son Jesus Christ, they must be called by God Himself—none other (John 6:44, 65). Jesus, God, is the one who calls His 'sheep' to Himself, and who will yet call other 'sheep' who are not yet of His 'fold' (John 10:1–18). In a mission—that is, a sending—one must be sent, and one must send. So God sends, and God is sent. Therefore, 'For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16, lit.). Mission is essentially the mission *of God*—that is, the *missio Dei*. The mission of the Church, as we will see, is nothing other—or less!—than a participation in God's missionary work.

We can see from John 10 that God's/Jesus' action in accomplishing that missionary purpose is one of true *shepherding*. The 'shepherd figure' has its uses and is helpful in filling out our understanding, yet we must allow God's revelation in Jesus according to the Scriptures to show us the true nature and action of *the Shepherd*—that is, the *True Shepherd*.⁹ The True Shepherd is the one who calls the sheep into the community and family of God's people—into the fellowship of covenant—so that they hear, and follow His direction. But the defining characteristic of the True Shepherd, the *Good Shepherd*, above all—and from which He derives His right and power to call the sheep—is that He 'lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). Jesus the Son alone has the power and prerogative to do this (John 10:17–18). God is the Shepherd; God is the Shepherd–Missionary.

THE SHEPHERD–SAVIOUR REVEALS THE GLORY OF GOD

The Glory of God

Another way that we can biblically describe God's purpose for the world is 'to fill it'. He Himself is ultimately to fill the earth (Jer. 23:24; Eph. 1:23), yet in the creational mandate He has also given and commanded humanity to fill it (Gen. 1:28), and reconfirmed in the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:1). What does God intend to fill the earth with? The psalmist prays that the Lord's glory will fill the whole earth (Ps. 72:19). Paul speaks of Christ the Son of God filling all things with His fullness

⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 2006, pp. 389–93.

⁹ T. A. Golding, *Jewish Expectations of the Shepherd Image at the Time of Christ*, unpublished dissertation, 2004, pp. 50ff.

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(which is also said to be the Church, which is His body—we will need to investigate this further in what follows), which could also be understood as the glory of God. Corresponding to this are also the prophecies that ‘every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil. 2:11); and from the seer in Revelation, that ‘I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, “To Him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!”’ (Rev. 5:13).

Yet we are further instructed if we return to the creational mandate. Here humanity is simply told that *they* are to fill the earth—that is, with themselves, through procreation. This mandate is echoed in the Abrahamic covenant: the Lord ‘brought [Abraham] outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be”’ (Gen. 15:5). Procreation is not *all* they are to do—of course!—as they are also to ‘subdue’ the earth. That is, control, determine, nurture and work upon the creation, with a view to fulfilling in its midst God’s purpose for the whole: the fulfilment of His covenant family purpose, to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3); bringing them through Jesus Christ into one new family (Mark 3:33–35; Eph. 2:11–22); to be eternal, and universally revealed (Rev. 19–22).

God’s Glory Is Not in Secret

When we ask what God’s glory is, we can rightly say that it is the outshining of His divine nature, and we could give a number of right answers as to the various aspects of His nature—that is, His eternal life, His holiness, His uncreatedness, His creative power, His beauty, His love, His mercy, His peace, His joy. We have mentioned love among these attributes, but surely love is not only an attribute in connection with God, but the one thing above all that actually describes and captures God’s most essential divine nature, Himself.¹⁰ It is the one characteristic that the Scriptures say that God *actually is this—God is love!* (1 John 4:16); He is identical with love, in that love is identical with Him (allowing God’s self-revelation in accordance with the Scriptures to define what love is as identical with Himself, and not by gaining a definition of love from human experience and understanding, and then projecting it onto God). That God is who He is, as such, is His supreme glory that outstrips any other pretended glories in heaven and earth. No other god than the God of triune love, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, could be this God. God’s love is supreme over all! All His attributes are in the eager service of His nature as love; no other love is eternal, holy, uncreated, creative, beautiful, merciful, peace-creating and joyous *as His love is!* You only need to ask a human being who has encountered it!

What this brings us to see is that the filling of the earth with God’s glory, and the fulfilling of His covenant family purpose for the whole creation, *are actually one and the same thing*. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who have this love, this glory, this fullness eternally in themselves, desired and chose that it would not be only so—that is, known only to themselves, in secret, as it were. They also desired and chose to create and redeem other children to whom they could reveal that glory, and with

¹⁰ E. Jünger, ‘What Does it Mean to Say, “God is love”?’, in T. Hart, and D. Thimell (eds) *Christ in Our Place—The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1989), pp. 294ff.

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whom they could share it (Eph. 1:3–10).¹¹ This God has done through the Shepherd–Son, through His incarnation, life of obedience, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, and which He will finally, fully reveal when He comes again *in glory!* So the Bible speaks of us as having the glory of God revealed to us (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:17); of Jesus’ glory being revealed in us (2 Thess. 1:10, 12); of us coming to glory (2 Pet. 1:3); receiving glory (1 Pet. 5:4); of our being changed from one degree of glory into another (2 Cor. 3:18); and of our being glorified (Rom. 8:17, 30). What is truly glorious about God’s glory is that *He freely shares it with us*. No other god will do that; all other gods are jealous hoarders of their own glory. In light of God’s free sharing of His glory with us, could we, or our Churches, ever legitimately struggle with ‘low self-esteem’ or ‘inferiority complexes’? And could it free us from all manner of false dependencies and idols?

THE SHEPHERD–SAVIOUR ASSUMES HUMANITY

‘The Shepherd Is a Sheep!’¹²

At the core of the True Shepherd’s identity and work is that He ‘lays down his life for the sheep’ (John 10:11–18). This is the great differentiating point of comparison with all other shepherds of God’s flock. However, the truly stunning, full revelation of His unique character as such is in that, as Shepherd, *He becomes the sheep*—that is, ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29)—and the shepherd figure is of course obliterated! His self-sacrificial death for the sheep is what qualifies Jesus as ‘the good shepherd’, by virtue of which there is established a deep, mutual ‘knowing’ between Shepherd and sheep (‘just as the Father knows me and I know the Father’—John 10:15), and consequently the Shepherd exercises an effectual calling and gathering of the sheep (John 10:2–4). In this the Shepherd has become the sacrificial lamb to be offered for the sins of His global flock (those already gathered into the ‘fold’, and those yet to be—John 10:16). As the Lamb—that is, in the full power of His atoning death—He reigns over all things from the throne of heaven, calling and shepherding ‘a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’, to gather before the throne as His blessed people in the worship of God, having ‘washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’ (Rev. 7:9–17). As the Lamb of God, the Son Jesus is the Shepherd–Saviour, with a view to His purpose for the whole world.

The Shepherd Assumes the Sheep

Yet the atoning work of the True Shepherd was also within the context of *His humanity as the incarnate Son of God*. The True Shepherd ‘became flesh’ (John 1:14), and in this sense (if it isn’t pushing the word-play too far!) ‘assumed the sheep’. The Shepherd–Saviour became, assumed, took up ‘flesh’—that is, our true, *bodily, physical* humanity. To begin from the point of Jesus’ death on the cross, it is clear from Scripture that somehow we were really included in Christ in that event, and

¹¹ K. Barth, *CD* 1.2, pp. 1–45.

¹² T. A. Golding, p. 341.

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became subject ourselves to that which He Himself was subject in that event (2 Cor. 5:14). If this is so, it had to include us *bodily, physically* in that event and not just, for example, ‘spiritually’. In the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures *human beings are physical beings, and not otherwise*. They are also *fully* spirit, mind, heart, soul, just as they are also *fully* body. Greek philosophy may have compartmentalised humanity as ‘body’ and ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ and ‘heart’ and ‘mind’; the Scriptures did not!¹³ The point here being that you cannot have a true, full human being who is not body—physical. Therefore, if we were not physically included in Christ, and subjected physically with Him to the action of the cross, its action *would not truly have happened to us, nor could its benefits be truly accredited to us*. This is the salvific point in the Christian confession of faith in the resurrection of *the body*—that is, a resurrection that is not *bodily is not a human resurrection*. (‘Life without a body is not human life’—Barth.) This was also Athanasius’ salvific point in asserting that ‘the unassumed is the unhealed’—that is, what Jesus did not take up of our humanity would remain outside the compass of God’s atoning, saving action, and its benefits. This is also why it is vital to understand that Jesus became human flesh and blood, as it actually is, in His incarnation; as that inherited from Adam—that is, humanity in its sin-broken, rebellious resistance to the will of God: that common to every human being (the only human flesh available for Him to become, according to Paul in Rom. 5:12–21). (While living a life of sinless obedience to God the Father [Heb. 4:15]—the Scriptures find no contradiction here. The holy life of the Son of God did not become ‘contaminated’ by becoming sin-broken human flesh. Rather His holy life worked out His atoning power in and upon our flesh, unto its full cleansing and healing.) If He did not become *this particular* human flesh—that is, *ours*—His saving work and its benefits could not apply to us. But as it is, He did truly become ‘flesh’.

We need now to consider the connection between the whole of Jesus’ life and our humanity. If we were included bodily in Christ in the event of His cross, then clearly we must have been so by virtue of the assumption of our humanity in His incarnation. His incarnation continued from the point of His human birth, throughout His earthly life, through His death and resurrection, through His ascension (His followers saw the same familiar, *bodily* resurrected Jesus ascend into heaven—Luke 24:36–53; Acts 1:1–11), continues now in His reign in heaven, and will never cease for all eternity. This means that our real humanity (bodily; physical—as well as spirit, mind, heart, soul) was fully assumed by Jesus in His incarnation, and was subject to all parts of His atoning, saving work, unto His reign in heaven. This is the necessary implication of a number of strands of teaching in the New Testament (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14; Col. 3:3; Eph. 2:4–6; 2 Cor. 5:15–17; Rom. 5:6, 9–10; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:21–22; John 5:24; Rom. 6:13; Col. 1:13, 21–22; 2:12; Rom. 8:30). Therefore Christ’s humanity is a ‘*vicarious humanity*’, where ‘He stands in our place and represents us, so that what is true of His humanity is true of us, and that which He did in His (our) humanity is ours’.¹⁴ In this we can see that the Son of God has entered into the covenant partner’s side of the relationship with God, and where Abraham–Israel and all the families of the earth have failed—and can only fail—to make a true covenant response to God, He has ‘got inside their skin’, and fulfilled their true covenant response in and for

¹³ R. S. Anderson, *On Being Human—Essays in Theological Anthropology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, pp. 207–14; K. Barth, *CD*, 3.2, pp. 325–436.

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, IVP, Leicester, 2009, p. 462.

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them. The Shepherd–Son has gone into the far country to seek and find the lost son (or sheep—Luke 15), has taken up, assumed the lost son in the whole of his humanity (truly taken the sheep into His bosom); in His full obedience to God the Father, has reversed and undone the sinful rebellion of our humanity which He has assumed; has completed—‘clinched’—the curing of our sinful humanity in obediently subjecting it to the Father’s judgement of death on the cross (laid down His life for the sheep); raised our now cleansed, redeemed, reconciled humanity to eternal life in the power of the eternal Spirit; and carried us home to the intimacy of the Father’s bosom in heaven (brought His sheep home into the fold).

The Sheep *in* the Shepherd

This has truly breathtaking implications for the relationship between the True Shepherd and His world, and His mission to His world! It means that in His person as the incarnate, crucified Shepherd–Saviour, He has already laid hold of and gathered His flock; those inside and those outside the Church—all the families of the earth! *Jesus in Himself is the end*—the Omega (Rev. 1:8; 22:13)—of God’s purpose for the whole world. To return again to our word-play, the ‘sheep are now in the Shepherd’. This is the true, ultimate revelation of God’s unilateral covenant of grace with humanity; and so the true, ultimate meaning of the Gospel of *sola gratia*—that is, grace alone—and so must release its full power. Therefore the Gospel sets forth the necessity and command for a true, full response of faith—with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, which includes the gifts of thanksgiving, repentance, obedience and joy.¹⁵ The Gospel also overflows with the necessity and urgency of the continuing mission call and mission response, because the covenant relationship is precisely about the passionate, full participatory response of the covenant partner. The truth that the True Shepherd has already gathered us up in Himself means that when we respond to it, we will respond to it *rightly*—that is, *by truly receiving and living it as a gift of grace*. In its orientation toward the world, this means that mission is never the Church ‘creating’ or ‘establishing’ God’s kingdom within the wider community, or within any community in the world, but rather a revelation and full acknowledgement of

¹⁵ In truly expounding the Gospel of grace the spectre of ‘universalism’ (the view that all human beings will somehow in the end just ‘wash up’ into the kingdom of God, regardless of anything!) does inevitably ‘crop up’—as it did with Paul (Rom. 3:31; 6:1–2, 15ff.). However, the whole possibility of this dead, lifeless view of humanity and the future is obliterated by the very nature of God’s covenant grace itself—i.e. covenant is a relationship of love, in which one must relate in love, otherwise *it isn’t!* Not that the truth and reality of the covenant can ever be destroyed, since it is unilaterally created and guaranteed by God. However, if one refuses to receive the grace of this covenant by faith, and therefore live in that grace, relating in love to the covenant partner (which for humanity includes repentance and obedience; and which, by the way, are never ‘works’ that contradict the Gospel, since they are always themselves gifts of grace), then they *are not* in relation to this covenant, have *shut themselves up* from this covenant, and *shut themselves out* of it. Moreover, because covenant is ontologically relational, and because humanity is ontologically created and redeemed to this covenant, there is also a dynamic action from the side of God when it is refused, and ‘lived against’. That is, there is a wrathful action of the jealous (zealous) love of God for the covenant partner as judgement; there is a *shutting up* of humanity to and from the covenant relationship *by God* in the refusal of those who refuse the grace of the covenant (Rom. 1:24–32). This is always the action of God’s love *unto* the faith, repentance and obedience of God’s covenant partner (Rom. 9–11; Heb. 12:7; 2 Pet. 3:9). However, for those who persist in refusal of God’s covenant until the end, their refusal—and ‘shutting up’ and ‘out’ from the covenant—and the refusal of God’s utterly gratuitous grace (i.e. its holiness) to be compromised, may be eternalised in an everlasting ‘shutting up’ and ‘out’ in hell. Mind you, this could never be because God’s covenant grace fails or ceases toward the covenant partner, but precisely because it will *eternally not fail!*

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what God has already created and established for and within all the communities of the world, and a full commanded response to receive it, repent, and live in obedience to this Gospel. Then we will not falsely invert the Gospel, and think and act as though we are still to ‘get ourselves up’ to where Jesus and His salvation are (‘pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps’!). This ‘blind alley’ will either crush us with despair because we know that we will never make it; or fill us with demonic pride, deluding ourselves that we are able to make it—either way it leads to spiritual death! The Gospel—grace alone!—is life; and overflowing life! *And that is what humanity has been given in the incarnation and atonement of the Shepherd–Saviour.*

THE MISSIONARY–SHEPHERD & HIS WITNESSING COMMUNITY

The Missionary–Shepherd Fulfils His Purpose with and through His Witnessing Community

We saw earlier that God, the True Shepherd Himself, is the primary missionary who pursues and brings to fulfilment His purposes for His world. Although we can only consider it hypothetically, it may be said that the True Shepherd would not necessarily require us, the Church, for the fulfilment of this task. He could have the honour—the glory—of this entirely to Himself. However, we have seen that this would be contradictory to the very nature of His purpose, which is about calling all the families of the earth to participate in the divine glory of God the Father’s new eternal family. Similarly, His concern is to share the honour and glory of the gathering and shepherding of that family, that flock—whether those inside or outside the Church—with His worshipping community through its witness to His Word and calling. It is a great honour Jesus bestows upon Peter in saying that He will make him a ‘fisher of men’ (Luke 5:10), upon whose same word of confession about Jesus will be based the Church and its witness (Matt. 16:16–18). In this witness Christ Himself speaks His own word to His sheep, which alone has power and is effectual, which the sheep will hear and respond to (John 10:11–18; so, Barth: ‘God’s Word *is His act*’¹⁶). This missionary gift and honour is renewed to Peter, and through him to the Church, when Jesus meets Peter following His resurrection specifically commanding him to participate in His shepherding work: ‘Feed my lambs’, ‘Tend my sheep’, ‘Feed my sheep’ (John 21:15–18). In mission, Jesus is the primary actor; the Church is only ever the secondary actor—very active no doubt (1 Cor. 15:10), and bearing great fruit for God’s kingdom (John 14:12), but nonetheless hers is a secondary action, always based upon and surrounded, activated and directed by Christ’s primary action (so, ‘For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them’—Eph. 2:10). It will always be a matter of ‘not I, but the grace of God that is with me’. Could this understanding of the true nature of the Church’s mission alleviate and relieve much falsely burdensome ‘missionary anxiety’ that affects the Church and individual Christians? Couldn’t it unleash much hope, vision, desire and action for joyous, effective mission? *Man—don’t you want to be part of that!*

¹⁶ K. Barth, *CD*. 1.1, pp. 125–86, 295–347.

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We also saw above that God's purpose is to fill the earth with His glory, which is to fill the earth with His children, and call and bring them together into the fulfilment of His eternal covenant community. This glory of God can also be spoken of as the 'fullness' of Christ which 'fills all in all', as God's glory is only revealed in and by Christ. Yet Paul also says that this 'fullness' *is* Christ's body, *the Church* (Eph. 1:22–23). This must mean that the Church is the fullness of Christ in the present age before its full unveiling in the age to come. At present it is only within the province of the Church, via the revelation of Christ in His Word, that the fullness of Christ—that is, the filling of the earth with God's glory, the fulfilling of His eternal covenant community—is known to faith, and confessed by faith. Only in the age to come will the truth of Christ's fullness be universally, visibly known and acknowledged. In the meantime, only the Church knows and has that fullness by faith. For its sake Christ has been made 'head over all things' (Eph. 2:23); that is, Christ rules all things in heaven and on earth, so that He can shepherd His flock in all the earth to the fulfilment of His purpose, in which He gives and calls the Church to participate via her witness. In this Christ faithfully shepherds and keeps His redeemed people, after the beautiful figure of Psalm 23, unto the full revelation of God's glory filling the earth. In this she can have sure and full hope, because 'since the end of God's purpose was before the beginning (that is, Eph. 1:3–10) that means that God's purpose for us and the world can't ever get wrecked!' (Deane Meatheringham).

Toward a Global Vision of the True Shepherd and His Work

The above is the scene and the action that we are a part of as God's people, the Church. To see this is to be on the way to a full-orbed vision of God the Father's purpose and work with His whole world. The final, full unveiling of the completion of God's purpose for the world sees those from all the nations of the earth streaming into the eternal city of God—the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21, 22). It describes the scene as one of utter, unparalleled, unimaginable beauty (Rev. 21:22–27)! The 'glory of the nations'—every element of rich, varied colour, texture, taste, aroma, music and voice—that is, the cultures, from every nation-family on earth, are to become an essential part of the true, eternal worship of God. Heaven, God's plan, eternity will not be complete without them! For example, the cultures of Zimbabwe, of the Andymanthna, Pitjajantjara, Nukunu nations (and of all the other Australian Aboriginal nations), of India, of Anglo-Saxon Australia, of Iran, of the Asian nations, of Afghanistan, of the Maoris, of the North and South American nations, etc., etc., etc. When there are encounters between the cultures, we get a taste of this—*heaven!* God is not only at work in the Church! He is shepherding all of His children on the earth, that He may care for them, see them live and fill the earth, that they may come to know of His glorious plan for them, and embrace it heart, mind, soul and body!

We need to see that our Good Shepherd is effectually doing His work of calling His sheep from all the families of the earth—those who are outside of His fold; and us with Him, and one with those 'other sheep', and sharing in His love and action of calling. That liberates us into new expansive realms of relationship and life as God's people with our wider communities—and the mission that will happen will shock us! If we believe and live this, the blood will flow and surge more and more through us that flows through Jesus' global body—all nations now made one in Him, as Paul tells us (Eph. 2:14); we will know the full life of God flowing through us. Then we will

The True Shepherd and His World

become ‘plugged-in’ to Jesus’ full, global work—His worldwide ‘power-grid’; and we won’t be just trying to run off our own little Christian-ghetto ‘generator! (which will soon run out of fuel!). The kingdom of God is not a ‘fishbowl’; *it is the ocean! and we’re in it!* and we need to be ‘swimming’, believing, and living as though we are!—that is, according to the truth!