

An Essay: The Shepherd's Way

The Heavenly Father shepherds a people into holy life through the saving presence of Jesus Christ. Psalm 23 gives the promise in seed form: the Lord leads, restores, protects, feeds, and brings his people home. John 10 declares that this shepherding promise is fulfilled in Jesus, who is both the Shepherd and the Gate, the one true access to life. First Peter shows the cost of that shepherding: the Shepherd does not save the flock from a distance, but by bearing wounds, absorbing violence, and bringing wandering sheep back to God. Acts 2 then shows the social form of that redemption: the saved sheep become a gathered people, devoted to teaching, fellowship, table, prayer, generosity, praise, and witness. In other words, the storyline is not merely, "God helps individuals," but, "God in Christ forms a holy people who live under his present care." That is why Friends have often recognized the church at its best not as a religious club but as a recovery of "primitive Christianity revived," a people in whom the gospel takes visible shape.^[1]

That thematic connectivity matters because each text keeps the others from being misread. Psalm 23 can be sentimentalized if it is read without John 10 and 1 Peter 2. The Shepherd's care is not soft indulgence; it is covenantal guidance through danger, correction, and homecoming. John 10 can be individualized if it is read without Acts 2. Jesus does not only offer private reassurance; he gathers a recognizable flock. First Peter 2 can be reduced to passive suffering if it is detached from Psalm 23 and Acts 2. But Peter's point is not that Christians should glorify pain; it is that Christ's holy endurance breaks sin's mastery and returns straying sheep to the Shepherd and Overseer of their souls. Acts 2 can be treated as a church-growth template if it is isolated from the Shepherd texts. Yet Luke is not describing a clever program; he is showing what happens when the risen Christ actually shepherds a people by the Spirit. This is why contextual reading matters. Scripture interprets Scripture, and the teleios, the fuller and mature picture, emerges only when the parts are allowed to speak to one another.^[2]

Psalm 23 begins the whole movement by naming the character of God. "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing" (Ps. 23:1). That is not merely a statement about provision; it is a confession of relationship. The sheep's security comes from belonging. The psalm moves from pasture to path, from still waters to dark valley, from rod and staff to table and dwelling. This means holiness is not first a human project but a shepherded life. John Wesley's old comment is useful here: the Shepherd restores from wandering and guides for his own name's sake, which means the restoration is moral as well as emotional.^[3] In our Faith's theological language, this is close to holiness as relational fidelity: God's steadfast presence with us, and our restored responsiveness to him. The psalm is not teaching self-actualization; it is teaching formed dependence. Thomas Kelly's language of the Divine Center and holy obedience fits naturally here, because Psalm 23 is a life gathered around Presence rather than around appetite, fear, or noise.^[4]

John 10 makes the implicit explicit. Jesus does not merely borrow shepherd language; he claims it. "*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*" (John 10:10). In context, this is not generic spirituality. Jesus is speaking in the wake of conflict with false leaders, which means the contrast with thieves and robbers is a contrast between exploitative religion and saving presence.^[5] The abundant life Jesus gives is therefore not consumer abundance, but covenant abundance: rescue, pasture, belonging, truth, and holy freedom. John MacArthur is right at least at this point: John 10 grows directly out of Jesus' confrontation with failed shepherds. Leonard Sweet's Christ-centered instinct is also useful here, because the Bible's great drama is not a collection of unrelated scenes but one Jesus-shaped story from beginning to end.^[6] John 10 is not a detour from Psalm 23; it is Psalm 23 with a face.

First Peter 2 deepens the picture by insisting that the Shepherd's way is cruciform. "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*" (1 Pet. 2:23-25). Peter will not let us define salvation only as forgiveness, nor holiness only as improved behavior. The cross is both rescue and reordering. Christ bears sin not only to pardon the flock, but to

turn them from straying toward righteousness. That is why Carole Dale Spencer's emphasis on holiness as the soul of Quakerism belongs here: the gospel does not stop at acquittal; it creates a new quality of life.^[7] Paul Anderson says something similar when he describes the main theme of Scripture as the healing and saving power of God's presence, fulfilled in Christ and extended through the Spirit.^[8] Even Brené Brown's language, though from a different field, gives an illuminating echo here: courage is bound up with vulnerability. Christ's shepherding authority is not domination; it is self-giving love that goes all the way down into woundedness in order to bring the flock home.^[9]

Then Acts 2 shows what shepherded life looks like when it becomes communal rather than merely conceptual. "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts*" (Acts 2:42-46). This is the visible shape of abundant life. The Shepherd has not merely improved private devotional life; he has created a people. Teaching orders their minds. Fellowship orders their relationships. Breaking bread orders their memory and gratitude. Prayer orders their dependence. Generosity orders their possessions. Praise orders their affections. Witness orders their public life. Justin Martyr's second-century description of Christian worship is striking here because it still sounds like Acts: readings from apostles and prophets, exhortation, prayers, bread and cup, and shared care for the needy.^[10] The pattern was not accidental. It was recognized as the normal social expression of the gospel. Friends have long loved this point, because true Christianity is not only believed; it is practiced as doctrine, worship, ministry, and discipline in a gathered people.^[11]

This is also where Bowen Family Systems Theory becomes unexpectedly clarifying. Sheep are easily scattered in anxious systems. When fear rises, groups become reactive, suspicious, and imitative. They look for thieves, scapegoats, quick fixes, or charismatic substitutes. Friedman's presence-oriented leadership language helps here: the healthiest leadership is not forcefulness but non-anxious, differentiated presence.^[12] That insight does not replace exegesis, but it does illuminate it. In John 10, Jesus is the non-anxious Shepherd in the middle of a conflicted field of false voices. In 1 Peter, he absorbs the system's violence without returning it. In Acts 2, the church begins to display that same transformed presence—steady, teachable, prayerful, and open-handed. Understanding "ordered mercy" is helpful here: the early church's common life is not chaos; it is compassion with form, tenderness with truth, generosity with shared responsibility.^[13] Holiness, then, is not withdrawal from systems but faithful presence within them.

N. T. Wright argues that Christian hope is never about escaping the world, but about God's future energizing faithful life in the present.^[14] That matters here because Psalm 23 ends with dwelling in the house of the Lord, John 10 speaks of fullness of life, 1 Peter speaks of return to the Shepherd, and Acts 2 shows a community already beginning to live that future in the present tense. The church is not yet the kingdom in fullness, but it is meant to be a colony of the Shepherd's reign. D. Elton Trueblood's "basic Christianity" language helps us see these texts are not theological extras. They are close to the center: Jesus gathers, restores, and sends a people who embody his life.^[15] Ronald Rolheiser's reminder is useful at this point too: the gospel demands fidelity even when it does not promise visible worldly victory. The church's calling is not to win by domination but to remain loving, integral, and faithful under the Shepherd's care.^[16]

So, what is the thread that weaves through these verses? It is the Shepherding Presence of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who lays down his life for wandering sheep, restores them to holy life, and forms them into a visible, table-shaped, Spirit-governed people. What is the thematic connectivity? It is holiness as the communal fruit of the gospel: guidance, restoration, endurance, fellowship, generosity, and praise all flowing from the same Shepherd. Why does context matter? Because without it, Psalm 23 becomes sentiment, John 10 becomes private spirituality, 1 Peter becomes fatalism, and Acts 2 becomes technique. But read together, they tell one coherent story. The Lord who once led David beside still waters now leads his church through the risen Christ. The Shepherd becomes the Gate. The Gate becomes the wounded Savior. The wounded Savior becomes the living center of a praying, sharing, holy people. And that people, when they live this way, become not an

argument for the gospel but one of the gospel's clearest forms. That is primitive Christianity revived. That is Friends theology at its best. And that, I think, is the full picture these texts want us to see.^[17]

Notes

[1] Paul N. Anderson, "Primitive Christianity Revived—The Original Quaker Vision," *Quaker Religious Thought* 131 (2018).

[2] Robert Barclay, *A Catechism and Confession of Faith* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1837).

[3] John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, on Psalm 23.

[4] Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper, 1941).

[5] John MacArthur, "I Am the Good Shepherd," sermon on John 10:11–21, Grace to You, August 3, 2014.

[6] Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012/2021).

[7] Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007/2008).

[8] Paul N. Anderson, "A Theology of Presence," *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 6 (July/August 1993).

[9] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012).

[10] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 67.

[11] Isaac Penington, *Selections and Letters from the Works of Isaac Penington* (London, 1837; Philadelphia, 1858).

[12] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, summarized in Alastair J. Roberts, *Self and Leadership* (2016).

[13] P. D. Bravard, "Ordered Mercy" and related project language, Marion First Friends Church materials, 2025-2026.

[14] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

[15] D. Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); *Basic Christianity*, ed. James R. Newby (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1977).

[16] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1999).

[17] Holiness as grace-shaped, communal, faithful presence—which is what I call relational fidelity.