

# Sheep-Stealing: What Is It and When Does It Occur?

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In Ephesians 4:3-6 the Christians are described as “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all, and in you all.” The same thought is emphasized in Galatians 1:6-9, Romans 16:16-19, and, in fact, throughout the whole Bible, demanding from any one at any time and place: Thou shalt have no other gods! That word is at once a threat and a promise, a command and a blessing, for to His children the Lord says, “Ye are the salt of the earth;” “Ye are the light of the world.” And speaking of faith, the Bible means only the one true faith and nothing else, for this *only* leads to heaven, whereas, on the contrary, all false faith, all unbelief, is the way to hell. Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me,” and again, “Without me ye can do nothing.” Jesus permits us to enjoy this faith for our personal comfort and salvation, but at the same time this grace of God which we have received included an obligation, a God-given responsibility. Whenever it is that we realize, what a Friend we have in Jesus, that Jesus Christ has come to seek and save poor, lost sinners, that Jesus Christ is our personal Savior from sin, then we also must realize that this salvation and the gospel of it is universal, and so is our obligation. Sin is decay and corruption; we Christians are the salt of the earth, the only people to preserve the nations of the earth from self-decomposition. Salt will bite, especially when it gets into open wounds; so does God’s Holy Word when it meets the sinner; it hurts first and then it heals. “Ye are the light of the world,” says Jesus. The light gives warmth, it drives away darkness and removes its dangers. As the Scriptures say, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path;” “Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house;” “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” These words of our Lord bring out the fact that we owe the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world, and that this preaching is to be truth (salt) and love (light). The church is universal, world-wide; we have no right to make it a clique along social or a clan along national lines, nor a sect. No matter what we would like, as the lighthouse is needed most where storms, fog, and current combine to threaten the safety of the seafarer, thus men need our Gospel, or they perish, and their blood may be on our soul. These things ought to impress upon us that we must not be found narrow where Christ embraces the whole world; and at the same time we need to remember that we are not really being mission-minded or broadminded when we advocate or practice something which is contrary to the Scripture, no matter what high goal or serious intent we may have in mind. This finally is what sheep-stealing is all about.

We have the command “to make disciples of all nations (bar none),” “to baptize them,” and “to teach them *all* things that our Lord has commanded us.” In our zeal to evangelize the whole world is it possible to evangelize someone who has already been evangelized? In our zeal to preserve the whole world is it possible to actually steal someone else’s preserves? In our zeal to enlighten the whole world is it possible that our search-lights make candles and flashlights invisible? Or as this theme would have us put it, is it possible that we pastors, whom the Bible often refers to as shepherds of the sheep, in our energetic quest for sheep and our insatiable desire to bring all into the one fold which is shepherded by the Good Shepherd, to actually steal

sheep from other shepherds? In order for us to answer these questions we have undertaken the study of sheep-stealing - What is it and when does it occur?

Unfortunately the Bible never uses the word "sheep-stealing," nor does any dictionary that I looked in, including Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. Nor has this subject been written on, as far as I am able to find out, except incidentally as it applies to mission fields, especially foreign mission fields. Therefore, so that we all talk the same language, we'll simply adopt the division and the definitions that Dr. Fritz's version of Walther's "Pastorale" set forth for us. Walther, according to Dr. Fritz, used two expressions which are closely related and yet are distinctive and appropriate. According to him sheep-stealing is "enticing members to leave one congregation and affiliate with another of the same denomination." I understand this to be enticing members of my neighboring Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod congregation, or a congregation of another Synod with whom I am in fellowship, or one that may even be more distant, to leave that congregation with whom I also am in fellowship and join mine. That is sheep-stealing. Then, also according to Dr. Fritz's version of Walther's "Pastorale," there is a division of sheep-stealing called proselytizing. Proselytizing is "visiting members of a Christian congregation of another denomination with the intention of persuading them to leave that congregation and denomination." The words "Christian congregation of another denomination" I understand to mean the congregation or communions which have been formed from the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments and where such preaching and administration has continued, although these congregations or communions are not a part of our fellowship.

Bearing this division and these definitions in mind it is easy to see from the Scripture that sheep-stealing is forbidden. Proselytizing, though perhaps more difficult for some to accept and perhaps not always easy to define, is likewise forbidden.

Let us then turn our attention to the Scriptures, especially to those passages which deal with the problem at hand, so that we may understand how and when sheep-stealing and proselytizing occur and that such is forbidden.

Basic to the problem is Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2. In the Acts passage we read: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, *over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers*, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." It is to be noted here that ministers of the gospel are called by God Himself into specific fields of labor. The shepherd is not called to shepherd the whole flock of Christ but only that portion over the which the Holy Ghost has made him shepherd. God determines the place where the preacher is to preach and the teacher is to teach. He determines the field, the area, the scope (which may be large or small) where the minister of the gospel is to carry on his work. He determines the number of sheep and lambs which His shepherds are to feed. In particular, it is the Holy Ghost who makes us overseer in certain congregations, and that means definite congregations or a congregation and not another.

In the same way the Peter passage speaks of feeding "the flock of Christ which is among you." A closer look at the Greek might lead us to translate "shepherd the flock of God *in your care*." Again, shepherds have a special or particular realm of activity and particular sheep whom they are to shepherd, sheep who have been entrusted to their care by the Good Shepherd Himself, sheep who have been bought with the blood of the Son of God, sheep who are precious in the eyes of the Lord. Suffice it to say at this point, that to shepherd the sheep which have been entrusted to our care by the Holy Ghost should take all of the time, talents, and energy which God has given us without entering another shepherd's realm of activity.

As alluded to before the call from God to shepherd His sheep may not involve a particular congregation or even an area with definite boundaries. Paul was called to be a missionary to the Gentiles, and we know from his journeys recorded in the Book of Acts the many countries and nationalities that that involved. In like manner we may be called to be a “missionary at large” within a certain district of our Synod or to serve as a foreign missionary in a vast country or continent. But even here there are definite guidelines and limitations with regard to sheep-stealing and/or especially proselytizing.

In his letter to the Romans Paul says: “Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man’s foundation: But as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see and they that have not heard shall understand” - Rom. 15:20-21. The context and exegesis of these verses makes plain the purpose of Paul’s apostleship and his reason for wanting to come to Rome. The purpose of Paul’s apostleship was not to build on another man’s foundation, not to minister to an established congregation, but to be a missionary to the Gentiles, to lay the foundations where no Christian church existed. Paul was called by God to preach the gospel in virgin territory, as far as faith in Jesus Christ was concerned. This, Paul states, he has been doing and wants to continue to do. And because of this he has not been able to go to Rome; first, because there already were foundations there, and secondly, his work as a missionary to the Gentiles had taken all of his time. But, he says, he would like to visit Rome on his way to Spain where he wants to continue to witness for Christ to the Gentiles, verses 23 and 24 of this chapter.

The foundation of the Christian church had already been laid in Rome by others; therefore, Paul, by reason of his call, could not go to Rome to begin mission work there. His Call was to preach the gospel of Christ where there was no faith in Jesus Christ; others would build on the foundations which he laid. At the same time the foundation which had been laid in Rome was not that of another in the sense of someone outside of Paul’s fellowship or communion, else Paul could not have written this letter in the manner that he did.

Thus, we are given to understand in a very pointed way Paul would have been ministering contrary to the call of God which had been issued to him and which he had accepted if he would have begun to “build upon another man’s foundation,” i.e., minister to established Christians instead of preaching Christ to those who had not yet heard of faith in Jesus Christ. In that sense he would have been guilty of sheep-stealing for Paul had no call from God to shepherd the Christians at Rome.

But what if Paul just happened to be in a place like Rome and he found some shepherds there who were not properly motivated, who were not as faithful in their ministry as one might expect. Would he then assert his own person and take over the flock? Listen to what he writes to the Philippians from Rome: “And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some of good will: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to by bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.”

As Paul writes this letter to the Philippians he is being held in chains for trial at Rome. But his personal condition did not hinder the advancement of the gospel. Instead the fact that he was being held for trial because of his work as an ambassador for Christ was broadcast all over Rome. During the hearing of the appeal of the prisoner Paul to Caesar his great legal defense and its legal confirmations presented that gospel and all that it says about Jesus Christ. Thus the

divine gospel itself and its Savior, Jesus Christ, were before the supreme court of the world, and great publicity was given to it. And since the imperial court had thus far acted favorable, all of the publicity was likewise favorable. Now all of this favorable publicity about the connection of Paul's imprisonment with Christ inspired many of the "brethren in the Lord... the more to dare fearlessly to utter the word of God." Instead of being silent or waiting to see what the final action of the court would be, more brethren than ever were openly and boldly confessing their faith by letting all men hear the word of God, the gospel of Christ. But not all of the "brethren in the Lord" were speaking from the same motivation. There were two groups: "some are preaching Christ because of envy and strife," "some because of good will and love." Two things are to be noted here. First, both groups are called "brethren in the Lord" and both are preaching Christ; secondly, the motives for preaching are quite different: one, emanating from strife and envy, the other from good will and love.

We ask, "How can someone preach Christ from envy and strife?" The answer is, "Easy:" It happened then and it has continued to this day. These men were envious of Paul and intended to raise up strife in the Roman congregation. Paul was well-known; he had gifts and abilities and influence which they did not have. They had to take a back-seat to this Gentile-missionary who had been brought to Rome in chains because of the gospel. Therefore, they carp, find fault, and raise up strife. They wanted the people to know that there were other men in Rome, preachers who were there before Paul. Enough of this quoting Paul and praising Paul. They were determined to preach the gospel of Christ with such vigor that the attention of the people would be drawn away from Paul to themselves. And though their motive is all wrong, Paul does not castigate them publicly; he does not attempt to entice or steal away any sheep; instead he rejoices that the gospel is being proclaimed - and that with boldness. Now lest someone misunderstand or misinterpret these words, we hasten to add that this gives no shield to a heretic or false prophet. Nor does this passage lend credence to the idea of unionists and false ecumenists that some Christ is better than no Christ: As someone has said, "A bridge that reaches within a foot of the opposite bank is not a bridge but a catastrophe:" The point here is that Christ was being preached, howbeit from a false motivation. However, we dare never confuse motive with substance. That is why Paul was willing to bear with these preachers in Christian longsuffering.

In like manner we may not be impressed with a brother's motivation, in fact, we may be depressed by an apparent greed for filthy lucre or an insatiable quest for prominence in the church; but this gives us no cause to steal the sheep over the which the Holy Ghost has made him overseer. As long as the gospel of Christ is being proclaimed in its truth and purity we are to rejoice. The command is to make disciples of all nations, to be witnesses of Christ in all the world, not to make Paul's out of George's and Joe's.

Finally, as we conclude our discussion of sheep-stealing, we ought to say something of sheep-straying. Very often it is the straying sheep who is stolen: In the letter to the Hebrews we read "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you," Hebrews 13:17. This passage gives warning to our people who may be enticed by other shepherds or false shepherds. The sheep entrusted to the care of a true shepherd are to "obey and yield." They are to give up the notion of following after another shepherd (which also presupposes that another shepherd is also not to entice the sheep or to listen to their bleatings which might easily result in genuine sheep stealing). For as the Lord points out, the shepherds are not self-appointed or accountable only to themselves, but they are soul-watchers appointed by God Himself to whom they must also give account. Among other things, this

passage points out the great responsibility that a shepherd has. He will be called to give an account of his shepherding. Woe be to him if he is found to be an unfaithful steward of the gospel entrusted with him. Yes, and woe be to the people if they do not try (test) the spirits to see if they are of God; for if a watchman proves himself to be a dumb dog - unable to distinguish friend from foe - truth from error - or to recognize danger before it is too late, a great spiritual calamity results. On the other hand, the faithful shepherd is to be followed, remembering always that he must give an account to the Lord God Himself. If the people have been obedient and yielding, the account can be given with joy; if not, the account will be given with groaning which is very unadvantageous - yes while the shepherd groans in his accounting, those who have been disobedient and unyielding will do worse than groan. It is bad when no one rings the alarm; it is even worse when no one hears a true warning.

What has been said to this point has been directed mainly to sheep-stealing, and, with some modification, is directed also to proselytizing. The sheep of other Christian congregations or denominations with whom we are not in fellowship are not out on the open range. To the extent that the congregation or denomination is Christian, i.e., the marks of the Holy Christian Church are present, namely, the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the Sacraments, the congregation or denomination is Christian. As our Catechism makes plain on the basis of Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:16, Isaiah 55:10-11, and Matthew 18:20 "The Church is found everywhere on earth where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered, and only there." Both the Word and the Sacraments are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of the Lord God, notwithstanding they may be administered by false shepherds and mixed with error. And wherever the marks of the Church are present, there are Christians (though we may not know them even as Elijah), there is also the authority to use and dispense the gospel, and there is the authority to call pastors. Such pastors are shepherds of the flock over the which the Holy Ghost has made them overseers, and, as we have already seen, no shepherd has the right to break into the flock of another shepherd. That is not to say that a true shepherd will rejoice or call such a one brother. By no means: A true shepherd will not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers," II Cor. 6:14. Nor will the fact that the Scripture forbids proselytizing keep any pastor or any Christian from bearing testimony to the truth when called upon to do so or whenever an opportunity presents itself to do so. Such opportunities very often present themselves in our public worship services in which baptisms are being administered, catechumens confirmed, marriages solemnized, the dead buried, church buildings dedicated, or anniversaries celebrated. We have opportunity to witness for the truth and against error by placing our church papers in hospitals and rest homes, by preparing bulletins with meat in them, by broadcasting our services over the air waves, and, most importantly, by living everyday Christian lives.

And if a sheep from an heterodox church should come seeking the pure Word, having become convinced that he is not receiving the Word of God in its truth and purity or questioning the position which his particular church or denomination has taken, we dare not tell him "Stay where you are!" The Lord has enjoined us to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear," I Peter 3:15. It is the will of the Lord God that His disciples continue in His Word. We are obligated to preach the pure doctrine, and this obligation involves testimony against false doctrine. The Lord Jesus Christ did not hesitate to reprove error, and called the errorists by name. When given the proper opportunity we must do likewise. In regard to heterodox churches we dare not subscribe to a code of "ecclesiastical ethics" which would dispose of the ministry of souls in the manner in

which Big Business parcels out territory to its salesmen. When some poor sheep comes seeking the truth or when called by the Good Shepherd to proclaim the Truth in a community filled with heterodox churches, we fearlessly give witness of the hope that is in us. Such action on our part is not sheep-stealing or proselytizing. We must preach the gospel when properly called to do so; that is our God-given responsibility.

It also is not sheep-stealing or proselytizing to actually call on members of non-Christian churches, such as Unitarians, Universalists, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, etc., with the intention of winning them over to the truth and persuading them to join a Christian congregation. Jesus Christ commands that all who are to be received into His Church are to be baptized in the name of the Triune God (Matthew 28:19). All communions denying the mystery of the Trinity are, therefore, outside the Church. John writes: "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father"(I John 2:23); therefore, all worship of people who deny that Jesus Christ is the true Son of God, is not worship of God, but idolatry. Now that Christ has appeared, the Jews are no longer a people and Church of God, but the synagogue of Satan. So also all communions that, together with the Jews, deny the Word of God of the New Testament and deny that Jesus is the Christ, are not Christians, not God's people, not a church, but a synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9). All such outside of the pale of the Christian church are prime prospects for our mission zeal.

And this brings us to one last consideration: Are all those churches who have been considered as Christian for many years now, still Christian? To answer that question would take another paper. Permit a couple of quotes on the subject and an observation. In his "Large Catechism" writing concerning the Third Article, Luther said: For where He (God) does not cause it (the Gospel) to be preached and made alive in the heart, so that it is understood, it is lost, as was the case under the Papacy, where faith was entirely put under the bench, and no one recognized Christ as his Lord or the Holy Ghost as his Sanctifier, that is, no one believed that Christ is our Lord in the sense that He acquired this treasure for us, without our works and merit, and made us acceptable to the Father. What, then was lacking? This, that the Holy Ghost was not there to reveal it and cause it to be preached; but men and evil spirits were there, who taught us to obtain grace and be saved by our works. Therefore it is not a Christian Church either; for where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost who creates, calls and gathers the Christian Church, without which no one can come to Christ the Lord," - Triglotta p. 689, last paragraph.

Some years ago Pastor Theodore Graebner, a conservative and respected pastor and writer in the Missouri Synod, wrote in the "Concordia Theological Monthly," vol. 4, pages 755 ff., "I have carefully reread Lewis's "Great Christian Teachings" (a book approved by the Committee on Curriculum of the Board of Education of the Methodist Episcopal Church) and have failed to find in its pages one sentence or line that maintains any element of supernatural religion except the existence of a God (who is not a Trinity, however) and of the possibility of the persistence of the soul after death. It is a faith that will be readily subscribed to by the Ethical Society, by the Monistenband, and by the nationalism of the streets. The fundamental doctrines of Christianity are denied implicitly and explicitly. The book is antichristian, destructive of faith in the Bible and in its teachings."

Methodist and Baptist publishers, not to mention Scribner's and the Macmillans have for the past twenty years placed their facilities at the command of Modernists. As a result we have today a grown-up generation in the Protestant churches which from the days of its youth has no acquaintance with the doctrines of Christianity. This unbelieving generation is now in control of the Sunday-schools and other teaching agencies of the sectarian bodies. More and more it

becomes a problem how to deal with this situation in our mission-work. When is a “prospect” to be regarded as a Christian who holds membership in another communion and, as such, not to be looked upon as missionary material? Until fifteen or twenty years ago (and this was written in ‘33) we would say that adult persons who professed membership in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were members of a Christian body and could be presumed to have received and accepted Christian instruction. But the unquieting thought forces itself upon us - if proselytizing means to steal the sheep of some other shepherd, how about our attitude toward sheep whose shepherd we know to be a wolf? These being the thoughts of a theologian who wrote 40 years ago, what thoughts might fill our hearts and minds regarding not only those souls within the Reformed church bodies but also within the various heterodox Lutheran bodies? What saving faith can there be where the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures is not only questioned but denied? Where the doctrines of creation, the vicarious atonement, and the resurrection are subjected to reason and ridicule? Where the miracles in both the Old and New Testaments are explained away and the social gospel reigns?

Yet we must remember and admit that by the grace of God there is still some gospel there which even we human beings are able to see the fruits of from time to time. Also, we know that though the Bible is torn apart and rationalized, it too is still there with at least some respect and in many places the reading thereof is mightily encouraged. Finally, we must also admit that there are dissenters and protestors in those heterodox church bodies who are striving against error.

As pointed out heretofore, without dousing their mission zeal, without unnecessarily limiting their outreach, without quieting their protest against error, and, I might add, without using gimmicks, ruses, and tricky questions, the faithful pastors will be busy handling the mysteries of God. Beside the regular preaching of God’s Word, the administration of the Sacraments, the general counseling, the visiting of the sick and shut-ins, and the attendance at various meetings of and within the congregation, an energetic and faithful shepherd can be busy with any number of definite unchurched, split families and the children thereof, sheep looking for the truth, people moving into the area, and an area of mission work which I feel has been and is being all too often either overlooked or underestimated: the *thorough* Christian education of the children, without involving himself in something which is or may be sheep-stealing.