

## **BAD SHEPHERDS AND THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

Unfaithful clergy are causing great trouble in Christendom across the world. Even when the existence of gay clergy threatens to split church bodies, bishops excuse themselves from firm action by the argument that they cannot pass judgment on the constitutional processes outside their own province. When Peter Akinola, the Anglican archbishop of Nigeria, called for a moratorium on the ordinations of non-celibate homosexuals, Dr Williams prevented a clear confession of the truth and avoided a break in altar fellowship by the clever move of having communion among the Primates celebrated by a priest instead of by a bishop. The 2005 convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America voted to continue its ban on homosexual clergy by a close vote of 503 to 490. However, early in November 2005 it was reported that the New York Synod of the ELCA had voted in favour of gay clergy in spite of the general church's vote. On 29 May 2005 authorities allowed a Danish Lutheran minister, Thorkild Grosboell, who publicly denied the existence of God, to return to his pulpit, and he was welcomed back by his congregation. Church leaders in Canada cut off the pay of an Anglican priest whose parishioners refused to support blessings for same sex unions. The majority of Lutheran Churches belong to the Lutheran World Federation, which openly promotes "reconciled diversity", advocates women pastors, and has encouraged compromise on justification through faith and on the real presence in the Lord's Supper. All member churches of the LWF must accept communion fellowship with each other in spite of doctrinal differences, and membership implies support of its ecumenical agenda. Lutheran clergy are leading the push to compromise the central article, justification through faith. Clergy are leading the ecumenical agenda, promoting the ideal that external Christian unity should advance at the cost of "reconciled diversity." In a number of Lutheran churches authorities do not allow men to be admitted as candidates for the ministry if they oppose women pastors. Refusal by clergy to be guided by the authority of Scripture lies at the heart of the pressure for women pastors. Lutheran World Federation leaders dismissed a Kenyan bishop from its Executive Committee for ordaining a Lutheran bishop in Sweden who opposed having women pastors. A large number of Lutheran Churches have violated Article X of the Augsburg Confession by opening their altars to members of churches that do not confess the real presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper. A recent synod of the United Church of Christ in the USA omitted a doctrinal requirement that all its ministers and churches must adhere to the deity of Christ.

Even some of the more confessional Lutheran churches are plagued by failure to exercise doctrinal discipline, toleration of evolution, and the old liberalism of higher criticism. In spite of high-sounding words, charismatic groups are tolerated, and open communion continues to be advocated by some church leaders.

In a great deal of all this we must be aware of whom to blame. Two brothers were walking through the forest when a bear attacked one of them. The brother who was not being attacked pulled out his knife and tried to stab the bear, but missed, and stabbed his brother instead. Similarly, when we see false teaching and practice in many churches, we must not condemn many Christians who sincerely want to hear the voice of their Shepherd, but whom their church leaders have oppressed with wicked doctrines and examples. There is abuse of children in society, but the loyalty of Christians to their Lord is severely threatened when they see some church leaders themselves exposed for this. Every Christian suffers from the shameful reputation that some Christian clergy bring on the church. Can we reasonably expect a person who has been abused by clergy in his youth ever to trust the word of clergy when he becomes an adult? How must this disillusion a person who would go to such a pastor for private confession, advice, and comfort? If the minister himself is living a style of life that the Scriptures forbid, what good can anyone say about his example over against the Scriptures' call for a clear conscience and daily repentance? In many areas we grieve that the world has become a Sodom and Gomorrah under the nice-sounding names of non-discrimination and toleration. How much worse is it when church leaders, who ought to be spokesmen for moral decency and courage, have become silent about their spiritually sick society or actively complicit in it? Very often in the church troubles come "from the top down." We can be sure that the Lord will deal with all impenitent wickedness in the church, and apply the principle, "Much will be required from everyone who has been given much; and, if people have entrusted much to someone, they will require more from him" (Lk 12:48).

The prophet and priest Ezekiel had harsh words to say about religious leaders of Judah while the people were in captivity in Babylon. When his message from God referred to "rams and goats", he meant people with power and influence who had oppressed the Israelites and failed to be proper shepherds. "You shove with your sides and shoulders, and butt all the weak animals away with your horns until you have scattered them to the outside" (Ezk 34:21). The Lord threatened to destroy the "sheep" that were fat and strong, but personally search for the lost ones, bring back those that had been scattered, bandage the injured ones, and strengthen the sick ones (Ezk 34:16). He asked the leaders of Judah, "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink water that has settled that you must make the rest of the water muddy with your feet? Must My sheep feed on what you have trampled with

your feet, and drink what you have made muddy with your feet?" (Ezk 34:18-19).

After the LORD had dealt with the unfaithful shepherds, He committed Himself to shepherd His flock Himself. What He promised the afflicted people of Judah at that time still applies to His afflicted people today. When Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn! For they will be comforted" (Mt 5:4), He included the people who mourn over the sad state of things in the church visible. The promise of good things for the Jews when they returned from captivity to their own land has an even greater parallel in the Good Shepherd's promise of grace and bliss in the coming heavenly kingdom. He was also concerned with other people far away from Babylon. "This is what the Lord GOD has said: 'Look! I Myself shall search for My sheep and look after them. As a shepherd cares for his flock when he is among his scattered sheep, so I shall look after My sheep. I shall rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a cloudy and very gloomy day. I shall bring them out from the peoples, gather them from the countries, and bring them to their own land. I shall be a shepherd to them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I shall look after them in good pasture, and their grazing land will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down in good grazing land and graze in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I Myself shall shepherd My sheep, and I Myself shall let them lie down', declares the Lord GOD" (Ezk 34:11-15).

We correctly identify the "David" whom the LORD promised to the exiled people of Judah with Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep, and has laid down His life for them all. We trust His promise to save His flock for eternal life. "I shall save My flock, so that they may not be something to plunder any more. I shall judge between one sheep and another. I shall appoint one Shepherd over them, My Servant David, and He will shepherd them. He will take care of them and He Himself will be their Shepherd. I Myself, the LORD, shall be their God, and My Servant David will be the Prince among them. I Myself, the LORD, have spoken" (Ezk 34:22-24).