

Jesu, Great Shepherd of the Sheep

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Jesu, great Shepherd of the sheep,
To thee for help we fly:
Thy little flock in safety keep!
For O the wolf is nigh!

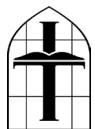
He comes, of hellish malice full,
To scatter, tear, and slay:
He seizes ev'ry straggling soul,
As his own lawful prey.

Us into thy protection take,
And gather with thy arm!
Unless the fold we first forsake,
The wolf can never harm.

We laugh to scorn his cruel pow'r,
While by our Shepherd's side;
The sheep he never can devour,
Unless he first divide.

O do not suffer him to part
The souls that here agree!
But make us of one mind and heart,
And keep us one in thee!

Together let us sweetly live!
Together let us die!
And each a starry crown receive,
And reign above the sky.



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In the Nick of Time

Analogy and Accuracy

Kevin T. Bauder

We know God through analogies. We know ourselves through analogies. We know the world through analogies. In each case, what we already know provides some parallel to help us grasp what we do not. But how can we have confidence that these analogies are giving us accurate knowledge of the thing we wish to know?

The problem grows out of the nature of analogies. Analogies enable understanding, but they may also disable it. The proposition, “The Lord is my shepherd,” draws an analogy. We envision the Lord as a shepherd in the role of provider and protector. But doesn’t the shepherd also fleece the flock? Won’t he eventually slaughter some of his sheep? In the one case, the analogy of *shepherd* helps us to envision God rightly. Wrongly appropriated, however, it could mislead us.

Consider the expression, “Christ is our sacrifice.” Set against the backdrop of Old Testament substitutionary offerings, it enhances our understanding of the atonement. Set against the backdrop of Aztec human sacrifice, however, it would create entirely the wrong perception. Every analogy is used within a context, and outside that context it can lead us astray.

To understand biblical analogies for holy things, we must first understand something about the source image of the analogy in biblical culture. Just as importantly, we should grasp how Scripture itself develops and perceives that source image before employing it as an analogy for the target.

The Bible depicts shepherds in many places before it specifies that “the Lord is my shepherd.” It also shows millennia of propitiatory, vicarious sacrifices before it ever shows Christ as a sacrifice. We must understand those source images in their original contexts before we can sense how they explain the target (the reality that we want to understand).

We must keep in mind that no analogy ever fully explains a reality. The Lord *is* a shepherd, but He is more than that. Other images are necessary. Furthermore, the same source image (or a similar one) may sometimes be applied to different things. For example, Christ is the foundation of the Church (1 Cor 3:11), but so are the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). Israel is

the wife of Jehovah (Isa 54:5), but the Church is the bride of Christ (Eph5:21–33). If we intend to understand reality accurately, we must not muddle these similar images, and we must not over-apply any given image.

But can any analogy give us truly accurate understanding about God? How can finite things ever provide adequate analogues for divine things? Here is where our doctrine of inspiration helps us. If indeed all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16), then the analogies of Scripture must be divinely chosen. They are what God says about Himself.

David clearly thought that God was his shepherd. Importantly, though, *God* thought that He was David's shepherd. When David wrote those words, God was writing them through him. David said it, but God also said it.

Evidently, God thought that the image of *shepherd* was adequate to convey at least some element of true understanding about Himself. Otherwise, He would not have chosen it. Furthermore, God is the one who invented language about shepherds. God knew ahead of time what words and structures would be necessary for humans to grasp this aspect of His character. Language is adequate for expressing true ideas about God because God made it to be adequate.

We can go even further, but this is where things get a bit difficult. We are often tempted to think that when God was trying to explain Himself to us, He went looking for analogies that would help us to understand Him. We suppose that God must have glimpsed shepherds and thought, "Aha! A shepherd is just what I need to explain how I protect and provide. How very fortunate!"

You may laugh, but sometimes we really do think that way. And when we do, our thinking is wrong. God never has to discover an analogy. He is the Creator, and He put things like shepherds into His creation so that they could be used when we needed them.

God really is a shepherd. He is the ultimate shepherd. And so, He created little shepherds, shadow shepherds, copy shepherds here in our world, so that these shepherds could image Him. These creaturely shepherds jump-start our understanding of God. In the long run, though, if we want to understand what a shepherd *really* is, we must look to God. He is the true shepherd, and all others are the copies.

God really is a Father. He is the ultimate father. And so, He created fathers, shadow fathers in our world, so that these fathers could image Him. Of course, human fathers fail ever to live up to the true fatherhood of God. In some sense we understand God by looking at human fathers, but ultimately we must judge what human fatherhood should entail by looking at the true Fatherhood of God.

Does hell have real flames? Yes! In fact, true fire exists only in hell. All that we ever see in our world is the shadow fire that God has created as an analogy for the flames of hell. Our experience of flames here on earth helps us to understand what hell must be. But if we are to understand our world, our apprehension of earthly fire must be informed by the ultimate flames of hell.

In this world, gold exists so that we can understand something about the eternal city. Water exists so that we can thirst for the living water, the water of life. Vines grow so that we can understand how Christ is the true vine. We have hands so that we can understand how God manipulates things. We have eyes and ears so we can understand how He perceives. But in every case, the ultimate reality is the heavenly, the eternal, and the divine.

So, *yes*, analogies can and do provide us with true knowledge about God. They do this when they are made by God and explained by Him. They help us to know not only God but also ourselves and our world. They do not give us exhaustive knowledge, but the knowledge that they impart is true.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
