

A man named William Archibald Spooner was an Anglican priest and was also a warden at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. If you haven't heard of him, that is quite alright, because he is less famous for what he did, than for what he said. In his sermons and speeches, he offered up some bizarre and memorable lines such as: "a blushing crow" for "a crushing blow," or "I have a half-warmed fish in my mind" instead of "I have a half-formed wish in my mind."

His mind rushing faster than his tongue, Spooner would frequently reverse the initial letters or syllables of two or more words until "God Bless Our Dear Old Queen" became something quite embarrassing to everyone concerned. Here are some examples: "Foon and spork" (spoon and fork)." "You didn't hear a thingle sing I said" (single thing)." "When your tumb gets nongue" (tongue gets numb).

One of my favorite of his quotes features yet another slip of the tongue. When Spooner was preaching about how "The Lord is a loving Shepherd." Somehow, "the Lord is a shoving leopard," is what came out of his mouth! The Lord as a "shoving leopard" is a metaphor perhaps worth exploring sometime, but it leads us to one of the best-loved, most familiar images for those of us who call ourselves Christian: that of a "shepherd."

Even the business world has borrowed our metaphor of "shepherd" for its definition of "leader." A host of workshops, weekend retreats, self-help literature, etc., is educating us in the skills of leadership development and adult survival skills. Consultants are getting \$2,000-\$10,000 a day for helping to culminate leadership skills in people, and training them to identify methods and strategies for surviving on their journey through life.

Think about it: Almost everybody would rather be a Shepherd, instead of a sheep. Don't believe me? How many times have you been offered the opportunity to participate in a seminar on how to be a good follower? How often do we give

instructions on how to follow an effective leader? When is the last time you studied the art of follower-ship?

The answer, of course, is almost never -- and the chances are pretty good that attendance at any such offering would be pretty scarce. Nobody dreams big dreams about being a follower. Nobody wants to grow up to be ... a sheep. Our typical perception of what life is like if you are not able to rise to leadership status is graphically illustrated in T-shirt philosophy. You've probably seen the cartoon depicting a team of sled dogs in a harness. The entire team is facing the rear of the waving, high-tailed lead dog. The caption reads: "If you're not the lead dog, the scenery never changes." Christian congregations are far from immune to this leader-of-the-pack ideology. But it is an ideology we must be willing to relinquish. We are all sheep. That's the best we can hope for!

You want to be a shepherd? You must die on a cross and rise in three days. Then you can be a shepherd. Far from testifying for the "pastor as shepherd" model, our reading from the Gospel of John this morning makes it clear that there can be only one shepherd of the flock -- and that shepherd is Jesus Christ. The qualifications for being a shepherd are straightforward -- you must be crucified, die and rise again in three days. That is what it takes to be the shepherd of God's flock. There is only one qualified candidate to serve as the "Good Shepherd."

The rest of us, all together, are sheep! But, that's ok because that does not put us in a role of subjugation, submission, or slavery. To be clear; it actually offers us a position of security which affords all members of the flock tremendous freedom. The Good Shepherd protects us at all costs -- even at the price of his own life. Which may lead us to wonder...so what have we to fear? If we are to keep the sheep and shepherd image alive, we must stop trying to become, or act, as though we are shepherds of the flock. None of us are capable of being the Good Shepherd. The very best a leader may hope to achieve is the status of a sheep dog.

A Great Sheep dog (be it a Great Dane, a Great Pyrenees, or St. Bernard,) is one that knows the Good Shepherd's will and senses the shepherd's commands. Skilled sheep dogs respond to a symphony of different whistles, a chorus of various commands, and work with the flock according to the shepherd's orders. The sheep dog's primary goal is to keep the sheep always moving toward the shepherd, eventually moving them into the safety of the shepherd's fold.

Just as a really skilled sheep dog will use a variety of techniques to keep the sheep moving, obedient leadership may be marked by some distinctly innovative tactics. A good leader may need even to nip at the heels of a slow-moving heart, or stubbornly wrong-headed idea, in order to redirect attention toward the one who must really be in charge -- Jesus Christ.

Under the protective guard of the great white sheep dogs of the Pyrenees Mountains, the flocks wander in wild country where the threat of a wolf attack is still quite genuine. Despite the sheep dogs' watchfulness and skill, the shepherds in that rough country know the dogs need additional protection in order to face all dangers with confidence. The dog's weakest point is its neck -- a wolf's favorite target. Shepherds outfit their sheep dogs with wide metal-spiked collars. This armor gives the dogs a clear advantage over any would-be marauder.

The Good shepherd has armored us against attacks as well. As members of Jesus' flock, both sheep, and sheep dogs, enjoy some special protection against the wiles and waywardness of the world as we make our journey through life. If "life is a journey, not a destination," then the Good Shepherd has outfitted us with what might be considered an "adulthood survival kit." Some of the essential tools in this kit are as follows:

Tool #1: Scripture – Do you remember the name of those old Sunday school contests, which tested who could look up a biblical text the fastest? "Sword Drills." This name was based on the declaration of Hebrews 4:12 -- "the word of God is

living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" The Bible makes a formidable barrier between Christ's flock and worldly dangers. Faith in God, and trust in God's intimate involvement in this world, culminating in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ, protect us from despair and defeat.

Tool #2: Worship – Imagine, if you will, an episode of a classic television sitcom played for laughs -a character's belief that after a single visit to church, his back pain was miraculously "healed." When a later relapse sends this same character to visit a back specialist, he winces as the doctor pushes and prods him into the correct "stress-relieving" position for his twisted muscles -- down on both knees, hands together at the chest, head up and back. For Christians, this is no laugh-track comedy. For healing and wholeness, safety and security, there is no better position than on our knees.

Tool #3: Tradition -- The sheep dogs the Good Shepherd has sent us have been many. If you are not "canine comfortable," perhaps you know them better as being a member of the "cloud of witnesses" that testify to each new generation of sheep. If we are convinced that the world is becoming an ever more dangerous, more violent place, we should find just as much conviction in the knowledge that with each passing generation, our "cloud of witnesses" -- our pack grows larger and more diverse. That single fold, the chosen people of Israel, has for more than 21 centuries expanded into a tremendous flock of listeners who spend their lives trying to be obedient to the shepherd's voice.

Tool #4: Dreams and Visions -- Adult development theorists point to whether or not we have a dream or vision for life, as one of the most important issues of adulthood. When dreams die, we die. When there is no vision, there is division. With dreams and visions, we can face the challenges of the road, especially as we seek to live out our Christian faith as Sheep of the Good Shepherd. It's no wonder then, that when people are interviewing for a job these

days, often times they are asked where they see themselves in 5 years, or what their hopes are for their future. At the very least, employers are looking for individuals who have goals and a vision for how to achieve them.

Tool #5: Knowledge -- Thanks to the study of adult development, there is now a large body of knowledge about what transitions, crises, challenges, and adjustments may be required if we are to survive in our adult years. We must avail ourselves of this knowledge, if we are to thrive in this world; where it appears as if certain cycles of information are becoming shorter and shorter. There is a story of a commuter who stepped up to a newsstand and asked for a paper. "Do you want yesterday's paper, or today's paper?" "Why, today's paper, please." "Well, then, you'll have to come back tomorrow."

In the fast-paced world we live in these days, in which there appears to be no today's, only yesterdays and tomorrows, a world in which one must step into the future to understand the past, we Christians have access to a type of knowledge which is impervious to change -- transcultural, transgenerational truths which were relevant yesterday, are empowering today, and will be liberating tomorrow. We possess the unchanging knowledge that our Lord loves us, was willing to sacrifice his own life on our behalf, and is always willing to offer us forgiveness when we repent and turn to him.

Of course more tools can be added to our tool boxes including relationships, work and play, values, etc. But no matter what we are working with, we should remember that there is only one Good Shepherd who is, as the psalmist notes, a shoving leopard -- er, a loving shepherd. And while we are called by God to be his loving sheep or

loving sheep dogs in God's service, let us strive to love and care for others as our Lord Jesus cares for us. Amen.