

THE WELL OR THE FENCE?

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. (John 7:37)

I am told that ranchers in Australia have two methods for keeping their cattle. Some build fences. These cattlemen know that fences give clear definition to which cows are theirs and which cows belong to someone else. A fence imposes order by defining who is in and who is not. Other cattlemen, however, especially those in the vast Australian Outback, use another technique. These ranchers have discovered that fences are unnecessary if you dig a well. A thirsty cow that knows where to find water will simply not wander that far away! Both strategies "work" and produce roughly the same results: the flock stays together and behavior is controlled. However, the motivation of the cows is radically different. In the former case, cows stay in the herd because they must. In the latter, they stay because they want to.

In a similar manner, churches usually opt for one of two methods for keeping their flocks (sheep, not cows!). Some use the "fence" method. They believe that well-defined boundaries are needed to make clear those sheep that are in the fold and those that are not. These churches usually insist upon a list of expectations all the sheep are expected to meet: ethical behavior, doctrinal beliefs, ministry involvement, financial participation, etc. In churches like this, it is normally quite clear who is in and who is out.

Other churches have a different philosophy of shepherding. They manage their flock not so much by a fence as by creating a source of life-giving water. They know that sheep will keep coming back to the place where their thirst is satisfied. These churches seldom talk about the fence. The motivation for right living and right thinking is not some boundary that has been imposed from outside. These sheep stay in the fold not because they "have to" but because they "want to." People on the pews of these churches are evaluated not so much by their relationship to the fence but rather by their relationship to the well.

The fence and the well illustrate the difference between a religion that is based in law and a Gospel that is based in grace. Moses gave us the fence. Jesus gave us the well. He did not come to remove the fence of the Law (Matthew 5:17-20). No! He knew the value of a well placed fence! His emphasis, however, was not law but grace.

I long to be a shepherd in a church where the well is more important than the fence! Though some pastors today boast that their church has no fence at all, only a well, I am not ready to adopt such a naïve method of shepherding. I know sheep. They need to know where the fence is. Yet, as a minister of the Gospel of Grace I want to manage sheep not so much by imposing boundaries but by offering water!

I'm grateful this morning for God's Law. It helps a dumb sheep like me to know who is in and who is not. But I'm even more grateful for the well of Living Water. I'm thirsty. Why don't you join me at the fountain this morning. There's free grace on tap for one and for all.

Pastor Stan