

Martin Luther on 1Peter 5:2  
Guarding the Flock from the Wolves

“Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;”

*Tend the flock of Christ that is your charge.*

Christ is the chief Shepherd, and under Him He has many shepherds as well as many flocks of sheep. These sheep He has assigned to His shepherds here and there in many lands, as St. Peter writes here. What are these shepherds to do? They are to lead Christ's flock to pasture. The pope has taken this upon himself and tries to prove in this way that he is the overlord who can deal with the sheep as he pleases. It is well known what leading to pasture means. It means that the shepherds give the sheep pasture and provide them with fodder to make them fruitful, likewise that they take care that wolves do not come and tear the sheep to pieces. It does not mean to slaughter and kill.

Now St. Peter is speaking in particular of the flock of Christ, as though he were saying: “Do not think that the flock belongs to you. You are only servants.” On the other hand, our bishops now say defiantly: “You are my sheep.” We are Christ's sheep, for the apostle also said above (2:25): “You have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.” The bishops are servants of Christ. It is their duty to tend His sheep and give them pasture. Therefore to give pasture is nothing else than to preach the Gospel, by which souls are fed and made fat and fruitful, and that the sheep are nourished with the Gospel and God's Word. This alone is the office of a bishop. Thus Christ also says to Peter (John 21:16): “Tend My sheep,” which is to say: “The sheep you are to tend are not yours; they are Mine.” Yet these words have been twisted to mean that the pope has external power over all Christendom.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, not one of them preaches a single word of the Gospel. And I fear that no pope has preached the Gospel since the days of Peter. Indeed, not one has written and handed down anything containing the Gospel.

Still they do no more than take consciences captive and destroy them with laws of their own. They do not preach a word about Christ.

To be sure, among all Christians one finds many, both men and women, who can preach as well as the one who preaches at a particular place. But in the whole group there are always many who are not strong. Therefore someone must be selected to strengthen them, lest wolves come and tear the sheep to pieces. For a pastor must not only lead to pasture by teaching the sheep how to be true Christians: but, in addition to this, he must also repel the wolves, lest they attack the sheep and lead them astray with false doctrine and error. For the devil does not rest. Now today one finds many people who can let the Gospel be preached, provided that one does not cry out against the wolves and preach against the prelates. But even if I preach in the right way and tend and teach the sheep, this protecting and guarding does not suffice to keep the wolves from coming and leading the sheep astray. For what is built if I lay stones and watch someone else knock them down? The wolf can surely let the sheep have good pasturage. The fatter they are, the

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<sup>2</sup> On the exegesis of this passage cf. Luther's Works, 32, pp. 71–73.

more he likes them. But he cannot bear the hostile barking of the dogs. Therefore to him who takes this to heart it is important to tend the sheep in the right way, as God has commanded.

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<sup>1</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1967). *Vol. 30: Luther's works, vol. 30 : The Catholic Epistles* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (30:135). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.