

# COME SUNDAY: THE GOOD SHEPHERD SHOWS UP IN CHURCH

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The Netflix movie, "Come Sunday" is the story of a real-life evangelical bishop Carlton Pearson who began preaching that God was welcoming, and that even people who hadn't been "saved" would be spared from hell. That entire discussion might seem irrelevant to us, but it challenged the beliefs of the congregants at his fundamentalist Tulsa megachurch, who regarded the position as heresy.

His "Higher Dimensions Family Church" was one of the largest churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Problem was that after watching a television program about the wretched conditions of people suffering and dying from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and considering the teachings of his church that non-Christians were going to Hell, Pearson believed he had received an epiphany from God. He stated publicly that he doubted the existence of Hell as a place of eternal torment. He said that hell is created on earth by human depravity and behavior.

Played by Chiwetel Ejiofor (Chew-eh-tell Edge-ee-oh-for) with a strong supporting cast including Martin Sheen as the late Oral Roberts, we watch a spiritual leader wrestle with conscience, colleagues, and God in an intense dialogue. His personal pursuit of truth conflicts directly and substantially with his experience of fame, wealth, and social security.

On this "Good Shepherd" Sunday, where we behold Jesus' self-identification as the "Good Shepherd" we glimpse one particular congregational shepherd struggle for truth and justice for all.

In one poignant scene we witness the contrast between two key biblical passages concerned with salvation.

From Romans 10:9 we hear,

Say with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord." Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved.

Salvation emerges then from a verbal proclamation, uttered in real time and space, accomplished in the present moment.

Alternatively, we hear from 1 John 2:1,

My dear children, I'm writing this to you so that you will not sin. But suppose someone does sin. Then we have a friend who speaks to the Father for us. He is Jesus Christ, the Blameless One. He gave his life to pay for our sins. But he not only paid for our sins. He also paid for *the sins of the whole world*.

And there's the catch; Salvation for John is made possible by Christ's one-time offering through the cross – for everyone. Shouts come from the pews. "You are changing scripture." Pearson replies "I am simply reading it differently." This in a fundamentalist congregation with little experience with biblical criticism or the nuances of theological enquiry.

For Pearson, it is impossible to read Romans 10 without 1 John 2. Yes, the individual must express interest in the gift of communion with Christ which arises from salvation. Yet the action of restoring relationship with God comes through the action of Christ and not through our own initiative. John Calvin's understanding of the depravity of humanity (admittedly historically conditioned) must not obscure the invitation open to all to walk the journey of faith, hope

and love. And love is not restricted. Pearson sums up his new understanding in a closing monologue, preached to a different universalist congregation, similar to that which he actually shepherded later in Chicago.

I know what it feels like to be an outcast. I do know what it feels like to be told you are not worthy of God's love.

I spent a lot of my life living in the fear of God, and I preached that fear, and I preached it so much that I became afraid not to preach it.

Why is it so hard to let go of that fear? Is it because if God loves everyone unconditionally then we have to? Is that it?

What is it about loving each other unconditionally that scares us so much?

I do know one thing, I know it was God's love got me in this room. I know it was Jesus' love that brought me in.

I thank God for my life.

Jesus I will never forget what you've done for me,  
Jesus I will never forget how you set me free,  
Jesus I will never forget how you brought me now  
Jesus I will never forget, oh never

Now if you don't want to watch the movie for the theology, enjoy the music; it's really, really great. In a clever fictional twist, you hear a few of the classic worship songs sung with a different and more inclusive nuance by the end.

If you find the whole issue itself to be irrelevant or simply outdated, enjoy the truly fine acting. The movie only gets 5.5 on IMDB but was hugely popular at festivals including Sundance. A community of secular critics is likely more interested in spiritual rather than institutional religious themes. But for those of us who shepherd congregations, it's hugely relevant and real. You see, I feel Pearson's anxiety, as he wants to share his discoveries knowing full well the fear and distress which will shortly come his way. Been there, not on these particular issues, but in other ways.

John lays out some characteristics of a good shepherd. The shepherd protects those entrusted to her, knowing of threats, but sustaining a relationship of intimacy and knowledge. Love keeps the shepherd attentive, disciplined and in place. Money (remember the hired hand) doesn't produce commitment or endurance.

And then, John adds the game-changer. Its easy to say that *Jesus as the Good Shepherd* lays down his life for the sheep – and by the way, all types of sheep are welcome. It's another thing to include that particular cost in local shepherding enterprises.

In a significant living room scene, he tries to dial things back. In response, his associate says “will you recant what you have said?” Carlton thinks for a moment, and then realizes there is no turning back. The truth must be told and preached. Though threatened, he stands on principle. The congregation is split. Building sold. Career ruined, or seemingly so.

Returning home and to our context, shepherding is part of the pastoral enterprise. We all have needs which can and must be met through the direction and support of various shepherds, human and divine. The life of faith is a life lived in community, in our case in the church, sometimes with difficulty. It is a life worth living however,

and I think we all agree on that. That's why we are here, not because of a negative fear of all that surrounds us, but because of a love which draws us further into God's community.

We want to invest positive energy in the common life we share. We do not fear everyone and everything. We do not want to take emotional flight into a fantasy heaven. We rightly seek God's blessing, here and now, despite our various circumstances and capacities.

In a few weeks Jesus will pray to the One He calls Father (in John 17) that "they would be one, just as we are one." It's a great prayer; it's relevant; it's possible. So we can sing, one more time:

Jesus I will never forget what you've done for me,  
Jesus I will never forget how you set me free,  
Jesus I will never forget how you brought me now  
Jesus I will never forget, oh never