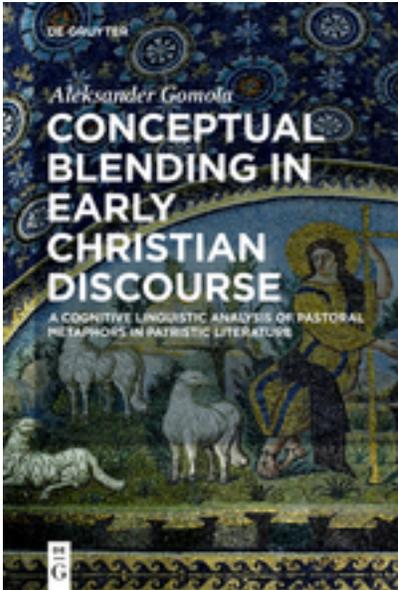


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Aleksander Gomola

***Conceptual Blending in Early Christian Discourse: A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Pastoral Metaphors in Patristic Literature***

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Robert H. von Thaden Jr.  
Mercyhurst University

Aleksander Gomola's *Conceptual Blending in Early Christian Discourse: A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Pastoral Metaphors in Patristic Literature* is a book I did not know we needed. After all, noticing that images of sheep, flocks, and shepherds are used to describe members and leaders of Christians communities seems self-evident at best and clichéd at worst. Yet, as Gomola reminds us at the end of his study, “those objects that apparently seem to be the most obvious are often the most fascinating objects to study and the image of the church as a flock seems to be a fine example” (198). Indeed, it is. Moreover, Gomola argues that these pastoral images should be seen as neither natural nor self-evident, since Christianity is the only major global religion to make use of them. “There are no ‘pastors’ or ‘sheep’ in Islam, Buddhism, or modern Judaism” (1). Adding to the mystery of the curiously ubiquitous nature of these metaphors in early Christian literature is the fact that they hardly appear within texts that would become the New Testament (1, 87). Other images (e.g., church as body or bride or house/temple or vine/vineyard) are also available in New Testament texts, but Gomola argues that none of these achieved the popularity and usefulness of pastoral metaphors (45–46).<sup>1</sup>

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1. Gomola cites Walter Schmithals, who also noted the dearth of pastoral metaphors in the earliest Christian texts a quarter of a century ago: *The Theology of the First Christians*, trans. O. C. Dean (Louisville:

Gomola uses conceptual blending theory, as developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, to undertake a deep analysis of the variety of ways patristic writers elaborate various aspects of pastoral metaphors and to what ends. He goes so far as to argue that, absent this theory of meaning making and its attendant methodology, a study such as he performs would not be possible (194). The great strength of conceptual blending lies in its ability to explain that a wide variety of competing (and in some cases diametrically opposed) instantiations of shepherding images derive from the same cognitive processes. The multiplicity of these “linguistic realizations” of pastoral metaphors are actually “variants or subcategories of the same, basic blend” (198). He notes that, while a number of biblical scholars have made use of the tools of conceptual blending theory, “there have not been, however, any serious attempts to explore the role of conceptual integration in later (i.e. patristic) Christian texts” (7). His linguistic study aims to fill that lacuna.

Unlike the biblical scholars he mentions who make use of the tools of conceptual blending theory, Gomola is a linguist who uses the religious language found in early Christianity as his arena of investigation—instead of his fellow linguists’ more typical penchant for literature or political rhetoric (8). This is an important distinction, and he reminds his readers that his analyses are therefore primarily linguistic in nature and do not pursue questions that scholars of early Christianity might ask (9–10, 63). Thus, for example, he notes that different ways of interpreting the the context of Acts 20:28–30 do not matter for his linguistic conclusions (91). Likewise, he argues that “the question of why the *Shepherd of Hermas* differs so radically from other early Christian writings in terms of shepherding imagery should be addressed to a historian or a theologian, not to a linguist” (95). On the other hand, Gomola notes that this work is also not a “quantitative analysis of the metaphor of the church as flock with regard to its frequency, distribution in patristic texts or its popularity with some authors” (10). That being said, Gomola does draw his numerous illustrations from across different linguistic (though primarily Greek and Latin), geographical, and generic fields “from the Apostolic Fathers to Augustine” (9). He also provides a useful table in an appendix citing all of the variants of the CHURCH IS A FLOCK metaphor he analyzes in one place (200–202); this will, I suspect, prove useful for future researchers who use Gomola’s work as a springboard for other investigations.

The book is exceptionally well organized into two main parts. In the first three chapters Gomola presents conceptual blending theory and the necessary biblical and cultural backgrounds to understand the specific metaphors he will investigate in chapters 4–9. Chapter 1, “The Aim and Theoretical Framework of This Monograph,” performs a notoriously difficult task well: explaining conceptual blending in an efficient manner that

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Westminster John Knox, 1997); the German original was published in 1993. Gomola’s monograph aims to explain what Schmithals observed.

provides neophytes with what they need to understand his analysis but without getting bogged down in redescribing the entire theoretical apparatus. Notable in this chapter is the engagement of material anchors (23–25) and rituals (25–26) as nonlinguistic elements at work in conceptual integration processes. In this chapter Gomola also notes the importance of folk models, which are “‘stable mental representations that represent theories about the world’ and assume a prototypical understanding of the categories by means of which we describe the world” (27). This all helps remind us that early Christians were real, embodied agents who lived in a real, material world; they did not only exist in a textual, linguistic universe.

Chapter 2, “Conceptual Blending in Biblical Exegesis,” and chapter 3, “The Cultural Background of the Image of the Church as a Flock,” further explicate how conceptual blending works and what inputs help inform early Christian writers when they deploy the image of the church as a flock, respectively. Chapter 2 explains the various types of networks that Gomola has uncovered in his research—mirror, single-scope, and double-scope—while chapter 3 examines cultural-experiential, biblical, and folk model resources for conceptualizing the church as a flock. These two chapters provide the reader with an excellent background anticipating how Gomola will analyze the dynamic language of patristic authors as they deploy the metaphor of the church as a flock in a wide variety of specific instantiations.

Chapter 4, “A Taxonomy of Blends Which Constitute the Image of the Church as a Flock in Early Christian Discourse,” is in many ways a second introduction, this time to the content portion of the monograph. The chapter describes the three main conceptual networks Gomola engages: THE FLOCK OF THE CHURCH IS THE FLOCK OF ISRAEL, SHEPHERDS ARE THE SHEPHERD, and THE CHURCH IS GOD’S FLOCK (the last will have multiple subcategories). His study focuses on these blends: “not only due to their frequent occurrence in patristic literature but primarily because they are mutually linked.” Moreover, Gomola argues that the way these three blends are used is responsible “for shaping significant aspects of early church discipline, liturgy, and doctrine” (60).

Chapters 5, “THE FLOCK OF THE CHURCH IS THE FLOCK OF ISRAEL (FCFI),” and chapter 6, “SHEPHERDS ARE THE SHEPHERD (SAS)” are relatively short (a little over three and twelve pages, respectively). This brevity, in part, stems from the fact that they are mirror networks—relatively simple conceptual blends when compared with single- or double-scope blends (that undergird typical source-target metaphoric expressions). The network THE FLOCK OF THE CHURCH IS THE FLOCK OF ISRAEL, Gomola argues, primary serves supersessionist Christian theological claims and justifies Christian use of Jewish sacred texts. The SHEPHERDS ARE THE SHEPHERD network (in all its permutations), on the other

hand, moves to bolster the authority of bishops and clergy by identifying them with Christ the good shepherd.

In chapters 7–9 (106 of the monograph’s 199 pages) Gomola engages what is the primary network under investigation: THE CHURCH IS GOD’S FLOCK (CGF). Chapter 7, “THE CHURCH IS GOD’S FLOCK (CGF) Blend in the New Testament and Shepherding Imagery in *The Shepherd of Hermas*,” is fairly self-explanatory. Here Gomola investigates the few instantiations of this network in New Testament texts: Luke 12:32; Eph 4:11; Acts 20:28–30 (the only full-blown linguistic realization of this blend in the New Testament [1]); and 1 Pet 5:2–4. He also briefly engages the Shepherd of Hermas to note that it does not fit easily in any other category of early Christian usage of shepherding imagery.

Chapter 8, “The CGF Blend as a Conceptual Instrument in Early Church Life and Practice,” discusses seven subcategories of this blend as they relate to the life and practice in early Christian communities. Various elaborations of the CGF blend that emphasize the importance of hierarchy include TEACHING IS FEEDING SHEEP, LOST SHEEP/STRAYING SHEEP, BEWARE OF THE WOLF, THE WOLVES ARE TURNED INTO SHEEP, “Blends with dogs as fierce animals attacking the sheep,” and A SICK SHEEP. Chapter 9, “THE CHURCH IS GOD’S FLOCK Blend as a Conceptual Instrument in Early Church Liturgy and Theology,” focuses mostly on baptismal theology but also analyzes discussions of church unity and theologies of repentance. The importance of Gomola’s analysis in these chapters is that he shows how the blends created by patristic authors are drawn from cultural experience, the Bible, and folk models. Gomola does note, however, the preference of the Bible as an input space for various elements of the blends created by patristic authors (since the New Testament texts do not contain many examples of the blend fully fleshed out). In this way Gomola provides a conceptual explanation for the varieties of typological and allegorical readings performed by these early Christian authors. The Bible, he argues, was a preferred resource for patristic use of pastoral imagery because writers who employed scriptural text could claim its authority for their own ideas (see 195). But cultural experience and folk models were ready at hand when the biblical texts lacked the necessary conceptual tools for an author to make the point he wanted. Moreover, Gomola shows us how conceptual blending theory can account for “sudden conceptual change[s]” (183) in the patristic authors as well as the fact that different thinkers could use the exact same blend to arrive at completely opposite doctrinal positions (184).

Throughout the book, but especially in chapters 8 and 9, Gomola reminds his readers that the pastoral images he is isolating for the purposes of analysis occur within larger discourses that make use of a bevy of other images. Although his focus is on shepherding metaphors, he takes great pains to remind us that the linguistic expressions of these conceptualizations occur in a verdant ecosystem of imagistic language that all work

together to achieve the various authors' theological goals. The pastoral metaphors were so popular and work so well, Gomola argues, because they achieve two of the most essential components of successful conceptual integration: achieving "human scale" (that is, conceptualizing abstract categories in more concrete, experiential ways) and "coming up with a story" (that is, creating a narrative to make cognitively difficult ideas easier to grasp). While the biblical scholar or scholar of early Christianity might quibble with one or more of Gomola's assertions about what a specific blend means or why it was deployed, this linguist has performed a valuable service to those of us who study ancient Christian textual worlds. By taking early Christian religious language (even seemingly obvious language) seriously as worthy of conceptual linguistic investigation, Gomola has opened many doors that are just waiting for biblical scholars and scholars of early Christianity to walk through.