When the Shepherd Abuses the Flock

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A Call to Repentance

SOLOMON KPOU



When the Shepherd Abuses the Flock: A Call to Repentance

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This book discusses spiritual, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Some readers may find parts of it distressing. Support services are listed at the back of the book.

The information in this book is general in nature. It is not legal, medical or psychological advice. Laws on reporting abuse differ between states, territories and countries, and they change. Readers should seek advice from a qualified professional about their own situation.

Any case studies or illustrations that are not drawn from a cited source are composites or hypothetical, and are presented as such. Names and identifying details have been changed or left out. The author's personal account in Chapter 2 is his own recollection; names and identifying details have been left out.

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May this book bring glory to God and strengthen His Church.

Preface

> *Shepherd the flock of God which is among you … nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*
> 1 Peter 5:2–3

The Church is called to reflect the heart of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. Yet throughout history, some of those entrusted with shepherding God's people have wounded, manipulated, neglected or exploited the very flock they were called to protect. Many believers have quietly walked away from the Church, carrying scars that could have been prevented if accountability, humility and biblical leadership had been upheld.

This book is not written to condemn the Church, but to call it back to Christ. It is a plea for holiness, accountability, humility and genuine repentance among spiritual leaders. Many pastors and leaders serve with integrity and sacrificial love, and I honour them. Every chapter rests on the conviction that biblical leadership is servant leadership, and that every shepherd will one day give an account to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

The Church belongs to Christ. The flock belongs to Christ. Every shepherd is accountable to Christ.

If these pages challenge you, I pray they draw you closer to God's heart. If they comfort you, may they strengthen your faith. If they convict you, may they lead you to repentance and renewed obedience. Above all, may Christ be glorified.

Solomon Kpou
Perth, Western Australia

INTRODUCTION

The Scandal and the Silence

> *Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*
> 1 Corinthians 4:2

The Staff That Rescues and the Staff That Strikes

Every shepherd in ancient Israel carried something in his hand.

When the young David went down into the Valley of Elah to face Goliath, Scripture tells us that he "took his staff in his hand" (1 Samuel 17:40). The giant noticed. "Am I a dog," he sneered, "that you come to me with sticks?" (17:43). To a soldier, a shepherd's wooden tools looked ridiculous. To a shepherd, they were the difference between a flock that survived the night and one that did not.

Years later, David remembered those tools when he wrote the most loved psalm in Scripture:

> "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4)

The rod and the staff were not the same instrument. The rod was generally a short, heavy club, the shepherd's weapon against wolves, lions and thieves. The staff was longer, something to lean on along rough paths and to guide or steady the sheep. One defended the flock against what threatened it from outside. The other directed the flock from within. Together they stood for the shepherd's authority, and David says that in God's hand that authority brings comfort.

Pause on that for a moment. A sheep in a dark valley sees the shepherd's club and is not afraid. It is not threatened by the weapon, because it knows whose side the weapon is on.

Now move forward several centuries to the prophet Ezekiel. He is living among the exiles in Babylon, and news has just reached them that Jerusalem has fallen (Ezekiel 33:21). The people of God are scattered across a foreign empire. Into that grief, the Lord gives Ezekiel a word for the leaders whose failures helped bring them there:

> "The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them." (Ezekiel 34:4)

It is the same flock, and the same kind of authority. But this time the sheep are not comforted. "They were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field" (34:5).

One word in that verse deserves attention. The Hebrew word translated "cruelty" is rare. It is the word used in Exodus to describe how the Egyptians made the Israelites serve "with rigor" (Exodus 1:13–14). It appears again in the Law of Moses, where God forbids His people to treat a fellow Israelite that way: "You shall not rule over him with rigor, but you shall fear your God" (Leviticus 25:43). The charge against Israel's shepherds is staggering. God had brought His people out from under Pharaoh's harsh hand. Now their own leaders were ruling them the way Pharaoh had.

That contrast sits at the centre of this book. The tools in the shepherd's hand did not change between Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. What changed was the heart of the person holding them.

A staff can hook a lamb out of a ravine, or it can be brought down across its back. A rod can drive off a wolf, or it can be turned on the sheep. The wood does not decide. The shepherd does.

Spiritual authority works the same way. The pulpit, the counselling room, the prophetic word, the authority to appoint and to discipline, the trust people place in a pastor's prayers: none of these is evil. God gives them to His Church for its protection and growth. In faithful hands, they comfort. Anyone who has walked through grief, addiction, a broken mar-

riage or a crisis of faith with a godly pastor beside them knows what David meant. Leadership like that is a gift from God.

Yet the same authority, held by a shepherd who has forgotten whose sheep they are, becomes something else. Scripture becomes a means of pressure. Confidences become leverage. The language of honour becomes a wall that no question can climb. Prayer, prophecy and pastoral care, the very things meant to bind up the broken, become the means by which people are broken.

This is why abuse in the Church is never only a matter of bad people doing bad things. It is the misuse of something holy, and that is why it wounds so deeply.

Most books on leadership begin by examining the leader. I want us to begin by looking at what is in the leader's hand. Before we ask whether a pastor is gifted, popular or successful, we must ask a simpler question: when this person lifts the staff, are the sheep comforted or afraid?

That question matters for shepherds. Very few leaders set out to wound anyone, and fewer still would describe themselves as abusive. The drift usually happens slowly, often unnoticed, and sometimes in leaders who began with real love for God's people. Every one of us who carries spiritual authority needs to look honestly at our own hands.

It matters for the flock as well. Many people who have been hurt in church struggle to explain what happened to them. No one struck them with a rod. There is no bruise to show. Yet they know that something meant to protect them was turned against them. If that is your story, my hope is that these pages will help you find words for what you have lived through.

Above all, the question matters because of who the true Shepherd is. Ezekiel 34 does not end with the charge against the false shepherds. God goes on to say, "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out" (34:11). The Lord does not answer abusive authority by abolishing shepherding. He answers it by coming Himself. Centuries later, Jesus would say, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

The staff is still in the Shepherd's hand. In His hand, it has never once been raised against the sheep.

So this book asks a question that reaches beyond those who have abused their authority. It is a question for every church and every leader: what happens when the shepherd abuses the flock, and what will we do when God brings it into the light?

The Wounds Behind a Sunday Smile

There are wounds you can see, and there are wounds that stay hidden behind a smile, a Sunday suit, a worship song or a ministry title.

Some of the deepest wounds people carry were not caused by strangers. They were caused by people they trusted.

For many believers, church was meant to be a refuge. The pastor was meant to be a shepherd, the leader a guide, the congregation a family. The altar was meant to be a place where broken people could meet the healing presence of God. People walk through the doors of a church carrying more than their bodies. They bring their stories, their fears and their hopes. They bring marriages that are struggling and children they are worried about. They bring grief they have not been able to speak about anywhere else. Some bring sins they have never confessed to another human being.

They may tell a pastor things they have never told anyone. They may ask for prayer at the lowest point of their lives. They may hand over their weakness because they believe the church is a safe place to do so.

That trust is sacred.

Few people in a community are given the kind of access a spiritual leader receives. A doctor sees the body. A counsellor hears the story. A pastor is often invited into both, and into the soul as well. People let a pastor into the hospital room, the funeral home, the marriage crisis and the moment of spiritual hunger. They give a pastor the right to speak into their lives in God's name.

This is why spiritual leadership carries such weight, and why its misuse is so devastating.

When a leader in any other setting abuses their position, the harm is serious. When a spiritual leader does it, something more is broken. The person has not only been hurt by a human being. They have been hurt by

someone who claimed to speak for God, often using the language of God, sometimes in the very place they went to find God.

Consider what that does to a person over time.

Imagine being told, again and again, that your honest questions are rebellion. Eventually you stop asking questions.

Imagine being humiliated from the pulpit in front of people you love. Eventually you stop coming to church, or you keep coming but never again let anyone see who you really are.

Imagine being manipulated through fear, with God's judgement held over you whenever you hesitate. Eventually you stop trusting any spiritual leader at all.

Imagine being told that God will punish you if you leave. When you finally do leave, you may spend years wondering whether you have also walked away from God.

These are not wild hypotheticals. Anyone who has spent time in pastoral care has heard echoes of them. And they explain why spiritual abuse must be taken seriously. A person hurt in this way is not simply leaving a church. They may be trying to rebuild their entire understanding of who God is.

Spiritual abuse reaches into places other harm rarely touches. It can damage a person's relationship with prayer, so that every attempt to pray brings back a voice that once controlled them. It can damage their relationship with Scripture, so that verses once used against them feel like weapons rather than bread. It can damage worship, community and even their sense of self. Some survivors say they find it easier to trust strangers than Christians, and easier to sit in a café on a Sunday morning than in a pew.

The greatest tragedy is when a person wounded by a shepherd begins to believe that Jesus is responsible for the wound.

But Jesus is not the abusive shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Notice the contrast He draws:

> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

The Good Shepherd gives His life. The abusive shepherd takes life from the sheep. One protects; the other exploits. One serves; the other controls. One points people to God; the other makes people dependent on themselves.

The apostle Paul understood this. He never asked believers to follow Paul for Paul's sake. He wrote, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The standard was always Christ. The leader was never meant to take His place. When a leader quietly moves from pointing to Christ to standing in front of Him, the people behind that leader can no longer see the One they came to find.

Psalm 23 gives us one of the most beautiful pictures in Scripture of God's shepherding heart. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). In the verses that follow, the Lord leads, restores, guides, protects and comforts. He prepares a table. He anoints. His goodness and mercy follow His people all their days.

That is the heart of the Shepherd. Every human shepherd is measured against it.

If you have been wounded by someone who claimed to represent that Shepherd, I want you to hear this clearly at the beginning of this book: what was done to you does not reflect His heart. The failure of a spiritual leader is not the failure of God. A pastor may disappoint you. A denomination may disappoint you. A ministry may disappoint you. Jesus remains faithful. The abusive shepherd does not define the Good Shepherd. Jesus does.

Why This Book, and Why Now

Behind every statistic is a person. Behind every scandal is a story. Behind every person who quietly stops coming to church, there may be a history nobody in that church has ever heard.

Some of those stories involve money: people pressured to give what they could not afford, or promised blessings in exchange for gifts. Some involve emotional manipulation, bullying or public humiliation. Some involve sexual misconduct and the misuse of confidential information. Some people were pushed to work beyond reason because they were told they were "serving God". Some were discouraged from seeing a doctor or a coun-

sellor. Some were told to stay silent to "protect the ministry", or warned that speaking up would bring shame on the name of Christ.

And some simply disappeared. They stopped attending. They stopped answering calls. They stopped serving, singing and praying. Sometimes they stopped believing.

Their stories matter.

For much of Christian history, these stories were rarely told in public. That has changed. In Australia, the change came most painfully through the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Established in 2013, the Commission spent five years listening to survivors and examining how institutions of every kind had responded to the sexual abuse of children in their care. It held thousands of private sessions with survivors. Its final report, delivered in December 2017, found that many institutions, including many churches, had failed to protect children and had failed to respond properly when abuse was disclosed. More than half of the survivors who spoke to the Commission in private sessions described abuse in religious institutions.

Those findings were not about one denomination or one kind of church. They were a reckoning for the Church in this country as a whole. Faith communities that preached the love of Christ had too often protected their own reputations at the expense of children. Many survivors had spoken up years earlier and had not been believed.

The Royal Commission dealt specifically with child sexual abuse. This book is broader. It addresses the many ways spiritual authority can be misused against children and adults alike: through control, manipulation, intimidation, financial exploitation, sexual misconduct and the silencing of those who are harmed. But the lesson of the Royal Commission applies across the whole subject. When the Church refuses to look honestly at itself, the cost is paid by the vulnerable.

The same pattern has emerged in other parts of the world. In recent years, independent investigations into several well-known ministries have described leaders who were shielded from accountability, warning signs that were ignored, and people who raised concerns and were pushed aside. For now it is enough to say that these are not isolated failures in a few un-

usual places. They reveal patterns that can take root in any church where power is unchecked and silence is rewarded.

So why write this book now?

First, because many people have been hurt and have never been given words for what happened to them. They know something was wrong, but they cannot name it. Without words, they often blame themselves.

Second, because many leaders do not recognise the warning signs in their own ministry. The slide from leadership into control is usually gradual. It is far better for a shepherd to be confronted by Scripture in the quiet of their own study than by an investigation after the damage is done.

Third, because many churches still do not know how to respond when someone says, "I have been harmed." Good intentions are not enough. A church that has not thought about these questions before a crisis will usually respond badly in the middle of one.

And fourth, because God is calling His Church to revival, and revival cannot flourish where sin is concealed, where pride is tolerated, or where leaders refuse correction. Peter wrote that "the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17). Renewal in the Church has always begun with honesty in the Church.

This book was born out of prayer, observation and a deep burden for the body of Christ. It is not aimed at any individual, denomination or ministry. I write as a pastor who loves the Church and believes that Christ is still purifying His Bride. My desire is not to expose wrongdoing for the sake of criticism, but to encourage the kind of repentance that leads to restoration.

Telling these stories requires wisdom. The purpose is not to create a culture of accusation in which every disagreement becomes abuse. Legitimate correction, biblical discipline and honest pastoral guidance are not abusive simply because they are uncomfortable. There must be discernment. There must be evidence. There must be due process. There must be compassion for victims and fairness towards those accused.

But when genuine abuse occurs, the answer cannot be silence.

The Church must create safe pathways for people to speak. No one should have to choose between telling the truth and protecting a ministry's

reputation. A church's reputation should never matter more than the safety and dignity of the people God has entrusted to it.

Silence is not always peace. Sometimes silence protects the wrong person. Sometimes it allows wounds to deepen. Sometimes it gives the appearance that all is well while people suffer behind closed doors. This book is written because that kind of silence has gone on long enough.

Not an Attack on Shepherds

A book with this title will make some readers nervous. Pastors may wonder whether it is one more voice joining a chorus of suspicion against church leadership. Church members who love their pastor may worry that reading it is somehow disloyal. Others, who have been hurt, may wonder whether a book written by a pastor can really be honest about pastors.

So let me be clear about what this book is, and what it is not.

It is not an attack on pastors. It is not an attempt to destroy ministries or to make congregations suspicious of every person who stands in a pulpit. Across Australia and around the world there are thousands upon thousands of faithful pastors, elders, evangelists, missionaries, youth leaders and ministry workers who serve God's people sacrificially and sincerely. Many of them are underpaid, overworked and largely unseen. They sit with the dying, counsel the confused, visit the lonely and keep preaching the Word week after week when few people say thank you. I honour them. This book is written partly for their sake.

It is precisely because faithful shepherds exist that we must have the courage to confront those who are unfaithful. Every abusive leader makes the work of every faithful leader harder. Every cover-up teaches a watching world to distrust the next pastor it meets. When the Church deals honestly with abuse, it protects not only the flock but the good name of every shepherd who serves with integrity.

This is also not a new idea. It is a biblical one.

Scripture never hides the failures of God's leaders. It would have been easy for the writers of the Old Testament to present Israel's heroes as flawless. They did the opposite. The Bible tells the truth about Noah's drunkenness and Abraham's deception. It records Moses' anger and the golden calf

that Aaron made with his own hands. It tells the story of Eli, a priest who would not restrain his corrupt sons, and of Saul, a king anointed by God who became jealous, paranoid and violent. It devotes chapters to the worst season of David's life, when the man after God's own heart took another man's wife and arranged her husband's death. In the New Testament, it records Peter's denial, the disciples' arguments about who was greatest, and Paul's sharp public confrontation with Peter over hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11–14). It names Diotrephes, a church leader who loved to be first.

God did not inspire these accounts to embarrass His servants. He inspired them because truth matters, because His people need to learn from failure as well as faithfulness, and because no human leader is meant to be placed beyond question. If the Holy Spirit did not hide the sins of Israel's kings and the apostles' failings, the Church has no business hiding the sins of its leaders today.

Several truths follow from this.

Spiritual position does not make a person incapable of sin. Ordination is not immunity. A ministry title is not a guarantee of character.

Anointing does not remove accountability. Saul was anointed, and he was still held responsible for his actions. Jesus warned that some will point to prophecies, deliverances and wonders done in His name, and He will say, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22–23). Impressive ministry is not proof of a faithful heart.

A title does not place someone above correction. When Nathan confronted David, he did not say, "You are the king, so I cannot challenge you." He said, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). Faithful confrontation of a leader is not rebellion. It may be one of the most loving things anyone can do for them.

At the same time, I want to be just as clear in the other direction. This book does not treat every complaint against a leader as true, or every hard word from a pulpit as abuse.

Leaders are human. They make mistakes. They misjudge situations, speak too sharply, make poor decisions and need to apologise. That is not abuse. It is ordinary human weakness, and it calls for ordinary grace. Pastors must sometimes say difficult things. They must teach on sin and repentance. They must occasionally exercise church discipline. Some people

will be offended by faithful preaching or by a decision they did not like. That is not abuse either.

Accusations can also be mistaken, exaggerated or occasionally false. Scripture takes this seriously. The Law required that a matter be established by more than one witness, and that judges inquire diligently (Deuteronomy 19:15–18). Paul told Timothy not to receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19). A church that rushes to condemn, without careful and fair process, can commit its own injustice.

So the Church must hold two commitments together. It must take every concern seriously, listen with compassion and act decisively where harm has been done. And it must treat the accused fairly, establish facts carefully and refuse to replace one kind of injustice with another.

These two commitments are not in tension once we remember what they are both for. They both serve truth. The God who hates the oppression of His sheep is the same God who hates false witness. The goal of this book is not to shift power from leaders to accusers, but to bring everything into the light, where the truth can be seen and dealt with.

That is why later chapters will spend considerable time on how to tell the difference between abuse and other forms of failure, how to respond to disclosures, and how to investigate fairly. Discernment is not an obstacle to justice. It is part of it.

If you are a pastor reading these pages, I ask you to read them not as an accused person, but as a fellow servant of the Chief Shepherd. If you are a church member, I ask you to read them not as a critic, but as someone who shares responsibility for the health of Christ's Church. And if you have been hurt, I ask you to trust that a book can honour faithful shepherds and still tell the truth about the unfaithful ones. In fact, it must.

A Mirror for Leaders, a Lamp for the Wounded

This book is written for two groups of readers at once, and it may help to say how.

For those who lead, it is meant to be a mirror. A mirror does not accuse. It simply shows what is there. Most of us who carry spiritual authority are

better at examining other people's leadership than our own. We can spot pride in a colleague long before we notice it in ourselves. A mirror asks us to look at our own face first.

So to every pastor, elder, prophet, evangelist, apostle, teacher, youth leader, ministry director and spiritual mentor who reads these pages, I want to put a simple question to you before we begin. Why did God give you influence?

Was it so that people would admire you? Was it so that you could direct their lives? Was it so that you could build something with your name on it? Or was it so that you could serve Christ by serving His people?

Jesus answered that question for every leader on the night before He died. John tells us that He rose from supper, laid aside His garments, took a towel and began to wash His disciples' feet (John 13:4–5). The King became a servant. The Master knelt on the floor. The One who deserved to be served chose to serve. Then He said, "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

That is Christian leadership. Everything else in this book is an attempt to apply it.

The shepherd must never forget that the sheep are not possessions. They are people made in the image of God. They have families, emotions, dreams, weaknesses and dignity. And they belong to Christ.

Some leaders who read this book will recognise themselves in it, perhaps in ways that are painful. If that happens to you, please do not put the book down and walk away. Conviction is not condemnation. The Holy Spirit convicts in order to heal. It is far better to meet the truth about your leadership on these pages, in private, before God, than to meet it later in the faces of people you have hurt.

For those who have been wounded, I hope this book will be a lamp. A lamp does not remove the darkness of a valley, but it lets you see the path. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

If you are reading this because someone who was supposed to shepherd you has hurt you, I want you to know that your pain matters. You are not weak because you were hurt. You are not rebellious for asking questions. You are not faithless for leaving an unsafe environment. You do not have to pretend that everything is fine when it is not.

God sees you. "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

Some parts of this book may be hard to read. Certain chapters describe patterns of control and manipulation that may feel uncomfortably familiar. The chapters on sexual abuse and on the impact of abuse deal with painful subjects, although I have tried to write about them without graphic detail. Please read at your own pace. You are free to skip a chapter and come back to it later, or not at all. If something stirs up distress, put the book down and talk to someone you trust. At the end of the book you will find a list of free and confidential support services in Australia. If you are in danger right now, call 000.

There is a third group of readers I want to mention: church members who have not been harmed themselves, but who care about the health of their church. You are not bystanders to this conversation. Healthy churches are not built by leaders alone. They are built by congregations who know what healthy leadership looks like, who are willing to speak up when something is wrong, and who refuse to idolise any human being. This book is for you too.

A word about how the book is arranged.

The first part looks at what God intended a shepherd to be. We will begin with the Bible's picture of the shepherd, then consider what biblical authority looks like, and then listen to what the prophets said when Israel's shepherds failed. We need to see the standard clearly before we can recognise its distortion.

The second part names the wound. It defines abuse in a spiritual context, describes how controlling ministries develop, and considers what abuse does to the people who experience it.

The third part asks why abuse survives in churches: through silence, through misused ideas of honour, and through a culture that values charisma over character.

The fourth part turns to what churches must build: equipped shepherds, accountability with real authority, and a clear way of responding when abuse is disclosed.

The final part is about repentance, healing and restoration: the danger of moving on too quickly, what grace actually requires, and how trust can begin to be rebuilt.

Each chapter ends with a short application for shepherds, another for the flock, and some questions for reflection. You may want to work through these slowly, on your own or with others. The questions are not tests. They are invitations to bring what you have read into the presence of God.

Wherever you find yourself in these pages, the same Shepherd stands at the centre of them. Leaders and members, the wounded and the unwounded, all of us are sheep before we are anything else. And all of us are called to follow the One who knows His own by name.

A Call to Repentance

The subtitle of this book is *A Call to Repentance*. That is intentional. The goal is not condemnation. The goal is repentance.

In the Bible, repentance means turning around. The Hebrew prophets spoke of it as returning to the Lord. The New Testament word speaks of a change of mind that leads to a change of direction. Repentance is not merely feeling sorry. It is a decision to stop walking one way and start walking another.

For a leader who has harmed others, repentance means acknowledging wrongdoing rather than defending it. It means taking responsibility rather than blaming the people who were hurt. It means seeking forgiveness rather than protecting a reputation, accepting accountability rather than demanding loyalty, and making real changes rather than offering a few carefully chosen words.

Sometimes repentance will require a leader to step aside. Sometimes it will mean seeking professional help, cooperating with an investigation, making restitution or accepting consequences, including legal ones. Sometimes the process of restoration will take years. A shepherd who has abused the flock must be willing to humble themselves before God and before the people they have wounded, whatever that costs.

Grace does not cancel accountability. Forgiveness does not automatically restore trust. There is a difference between being forgiven and being

trusted again, and there is a difference between being restored to fellowship and being restored to leadership. Much harm has been done in churches that confused these things. We will explore them carefully later in the book.

Repentance is not only for individual leaders. It is for churches, too.

When the prophet Daniel prayed for his people in exile, he did not say "they have sinned". He said, "we have sinned and committed iniquity" (Daniel 9:5). He included himself in the confession of his nation, even though Scripture records no particular failing of his own. There is a kind of repentance that belongs to a whole community, because a whole community allowed something to happen. Churches that ignored warning signs, silenced victims, protected leaders or valued their reputation above people's safety need to repent as churches, not merely point to the one person who did the most harm.

The Church cannot preach healing while ignoring wounded people. We cannot preach integrity while protecting misconduct, or accountability while our leaders stand beyond its reach. We cannot preach holiness while tolerating hidden sin, or love while silencing victims. And we cannot call the world to repent while refusing to repent ourselves.

The Church must do better. Our leadership structures must become healthier. Our safeguarding must become stronger. Our accountability must become genuine. Our theology of authority must remain biblical. Our leaders must be willing to receive correction. And our congregations must understand that loyalty to Christ is greater than loyalty to any human leader.

The answer is not to abandon leadership. The answer is to return leadership to the biblical model of servant-hearted shepherding.

This book will ask uncomfortable questions. It will examine the misuse of spiritual authority, the culture of silence, manipulation, leadership failure, accountability, repentance, restoration and healing. Some readers will feel challenged. Some may feel angry. Some may feel relieved, finally seeing words for an experience they could never explain. Others may recognise themselves in these pages and realise that they have caused wounds they never intended.

If that happens, do not run from conviction. Bring it to Christ. The purpose of conviction is not destruction but transformation. The Chief Shep-

herd is still calling His shepherds back to His heart. He is calling the Church back to holiness, leaders back to humility, wounded people back to healing, and His whole Church back to truth.

The question before us, then, is not simply, "What happens when the shepherd abuses the flock?" The deeper question is, "What will we do when God exposes it?"

Will we hide? Will we defend? Will we deny? Will we blame? Or will we repent?

When David finally faced the truth about his sin, he did not offer God an excuse or a strategy. He offered a broken heart: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). That is where every true renewal begins, for leaders and for churches alike.

So the prayer of this book is simple.

> Lord, search Your Church. Search our hearts. Expose what must be exposed. Heal what has been wounded. Correct what has gone astray. Restore what can be restored. And raise up shepherds who will love Your flock, protect Your people and faithfully represent the heart of Jesus Christ.

For the flock does not belong to us. It belongs to Him. And one day every shepherd will stand before the Chief Shepherd.

PART ONE

The Shepherd God Intended

CHAPTER 1

Who Is the Shepherd?

> *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.*
> John 10:11

Before we can talk about a shepherd who abuses the flock, we must first understand what a shepherd is supposed to be.

The word *shepherd* carries a rich and weighty meaning throughout Scripture. It describes someone who watches, leads, protects, feeds, guides, corrects, searches for and cares for the sheep entrusted to them. In biblical language, shepherding is much more than holding a position. It is a responsibility, a stewardship and a calling. Above all, it is accountability before God.

The shepherd does not own the sheep. The sheep belong to God. That truth must remain at the centre of Christian leadership. When a leader forgets that the flock belongs to God, leadership can slowly turn into ownership. When leadership becomes ownership, authority can become control. And when control goes unchecked, abuse can follow.

So before we examine what goes wrong, we need to return to God's design.

The Shepherd in the Biblical World

The Bible was written in a world full of sheep. For the people of ancient Israel, shepherding was not a picturesque image on a greeting card. It was hard, dirty, dangerous and ordinary work, and almost everyone understood it.

The first shepherd in Scripture appears in its fourth chapter: "Abel was a keeper of sheep" (Genesis 4:2). The patriarchs who followed were herdsmen whose wealth was counted in flocks. Rachel, the woman Jacob loved, was a shepherdess who brought her father's sheep to the well (Genesis 29:9). Moses spent forty years in Midian tending the flock of his father-in-law, and it was while he was leading that flock to the back of the desert that God met him in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–2). The God who would shepherd Israel out of Egypt first called a shepherd to do it.

We get a glimpse of what the work demanded from Jacob's complaint to his uncle Laban after twenty years of service. "That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it," Jacob said. "There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes" (Genesis 31:39–40). A shepherd was exposed to the weather, short of sleep, and personally answerable for every animal in his care.

That last point is easy to miss, but it runs right through the biblical picture. Shepherds were accountable. The Law of Moses dealt with what happened when an animal entrusted to someone else was lost. If it was killed by a wild beast, the keeper was to "bring it as evidence" (Exodus 22:13). The prophet Amos drew on the same custom when he described a shepherd taking "from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear" (Amos 3:12). The pitiful remains were the shepherd's proof that he had not stolen or neglected the sheep. He had fought for it, even if he had lost.

In other words, a shepherd in Israel could not simply shrug and say, "Sheep go missing." He had to give an account. The flock was not his to lose.

This was the world in which David grew up. When the prophet Samuel came to Jesse's house to anoint one of his sons as Israel's next king, the young men were brought before him one by one. None of them was the Lord's choice. Finally Samuel asked whether Jesse had any other sons. "There remains yet the youngest," Jesse replied, "and there he is, keeping the sheep" (1 Samuel 16:11). David had not even been invited into the room. He was out in the fields doing the least glamorous job in the family. Yet God had seen something in that shepherd boy that no one else had noticed.

David's years with the sheep shaped him for leadership. When King Saul doubted that he could face Goliath, David explained his credentials:

> "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it." (1 Samuel 17:34–35)

Think about what David learned in those fields. He learned to notice when one small lamb was missing. He learned to run towards danger rather than away from it. He learned that the life of a vulnerable animal was worth risking his own safety for. He learned to protect what was not his.

Those are not small lessons. They are the heart of godly leadership. God took a young man who had learned to fight for lambs and made him the shepherd of His people. Psalm 78 puts it beautifully: God "chose David His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds… to shepherd Jacob His people… So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Psalm 78:70–72).

Notice the two things that verse holds together: integrity of heart and skilfulness of hands. Character and competence. Both mattered for the shepherd king, and both matter for every shepherd since.

One more detail is worth noticing. In the ancient Near East, the title "shepherd" was commonly used for kings and rulers. Ancient inscriptions show that rulers in the surrounding nations, such as the Babylonian king Hammurabi, described themselves as shepherds of their people, often as a way of presenting their power in a gentle light. Israel used the same language, but Scripture gave it a sharper edge. Israel's kings and leaders were never the ultimate shepherds. They were under-shepherds of a flock that belonged to Someone else, and they would answer to Him for how they treated it.

That is why the image of the shepherd is so useful for our subject. It holds tenderness and authority together. A shepherd leads, and the sheep follow. A shepherd decides where the flock goes, when it rests and when it moves. There is real authority in the role. But that authority exists entirely for the good of the sheep. A shepherd who uses the flock for his own bene-

fit has not merely done his job badly. He has turned the whole meaning of the role upside down.

When David later sat down to write about his relationship with God, he did not reach for the language of kingship first. He reached for the language he had learned in the fields. He knew what a good shepherd was, because he had tried to be one. And he knew that before he could shepherd anyone, he needed a Shepherd himself.

The LORD Is My Shepherd

Long before Scripture applies the word *shepherd* to human leaders, it applies it to God.

Near the end of his life, the patriarch Jacob laid his hands on the heads of his grandsons and blessed them in the name of "the God who has fed me all my life long to this day" (Genesis 48:15). The verb carries the sense of shepherding. Jacob had spent decades tending other people's flocks through drought and frost. Looking back over a long and troubled life, full of his own scheming and its consequences, he could see that God had been doing the same for him. A few chapters later he speaks of "the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel" (Genesis 49:24).

The image grows from there throughout the Old Testament. Israel calls itself "the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand" (Psalm 95:7). "We are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3). The psalmist prays, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock" (Psalm 80:1). And when Jeremiah looks beyond the exile to a coming restoration, he says, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock" (Jeremiah 31:10).

The best known of these passages, of course, is Psalm 23. It is so familiar that many of us read it without noticing what it actually says. But read slowly, it is a detailed description of what a good shepherd does.

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." The first thing David says is that, because of who his Shepherd is, he lacks nothing he truly needs. A good shepherd provides.

"He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters." A good shepherd gives rest. Sheep do not lie down when they

are hungry, frightened or harassed. They lie down when they feel safe. This shepherd leads the flock to quiet water, not churning torrents. He knows the limits of the animals in his care and does not drive them beyond their strength.

"He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." A good shepherd restores and guides. And notice why: "for His name's sake". The shepherd's own reputation is bound up with how he leads. A shepherd whose sheep were scattered, starved or injured would be known as a bad shepherd. God's name is attached to the way His people are led.

That phrase deserves a moment's reflection for anyone in ministry. When a leader who claims to speak for God treats people harshly, it is not only the leader's name that suffers. It is God's. Paul made the same point to religious teachers of his own day: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2:24). Those who lead in God's name either honour His reputation as a Shepherd or misrepresent it.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." A good shepherd stays. He does not lead the sheep into the valley and then leave them there. His presence is the reason for their courage, and his authority, symbolised by the rod and staff, is a comfort rather than a threat.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over." The imagery shifts towards a host welcoming a guest, but the theme continues. The Lord honours His people, heals them, and gives generously.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." What follows the sheep of this Shepherd is not fear, not shame, not exhaustion, but goodness and mercy. And the end of the journey is home.

Psalm 23 describes a Shepherd who provides, gives rest, restores, guides, stays, protects, honours and brings His people home. Put that list beside the experience of someone who has been spiritually abused, and the contrast is stark. Many such people describe being driven rather than led, exhausted rather than rested, shamed rather than restored, and left alone in their darkest valley. What they experienced was the opposite of Psalm 23.

Isaiah adds one more detail that is easy to overlook. Isaiah 40 opens with the words "Comfort, comfort My people" and announces that God is coming to rescue His exiled people. Verse 10 describes His power: "Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him." Then, in the very next verse, the same arm appears again:

> "He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young." (Isaiah 40:11)

The arm that rules is the arm that gathers lambs. Isaiah does not set God's power and God's gentleness against each other. They belong together. The strongest Being in the universe uses His strength to carry the weakest members of the flock close to His heart, and He adjusts His pace for those who are carrying young.

This is the pattern for all spiritual authority. Real authority is not opposed to tenderness. In God, the two are one. A leader who believes that strength means harshness, or that gentleness means weakness, has not yet understood the Shepherd they claim to serve.

These passages reveal God's heart. He feeds. He gathers. He carries. He leads. He protects. He does not exploit His people.

This becomes the standard against which every human shepherd must be measured. A pastor, bishop, prophet, apostle or elder may hold a title. None of them replaces God as the Shepherd of His people. Human leaders are under-shepherds, serving under the authority of the One who first said, "I will feed My flock" (Ezekiel 34:15).

And that is why David's first words in Psalm 23 matter so much for every leader. Before David could be the shepherd of Israel, he had to be able to say, "The LORD is my shepherd." A leader who refuses to be shepherded by God will eventually become dangerous to the people they lead.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

The clearest picture of shepherding anywhere in Scripture is found in Jesus Christ. In John 10, He takes all the shepherd language of the Old Testament

and applies it to Himself. But to understand what He says, we need to notice where and why He says it.

John 10 follows directly on from John 9, and the chapter break can hide the connection. In John 9, Jesus heals a man who had been blind from birth. Instead of rejoicing, the religious leaders interrogate the man, question his parents, and grow angry when he refuses to deny what has happened to him. When the man dares to point out the obvious, that only someone from God could open the eyes of the blind, they turn on him: "You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?" Then, John tells us, "they cast him out" (John 9:34).

This is a picture of spiritual authority being used against a vulnerable person. A man who had spent his life begging, who had just received his sight, was humiliated and expelled by the leaders of his religious community because his testimony was inconvenient to them.

What Jesus does next is remarkable. "Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him…" (9:35). The leaders threw him out. Jesus went looking for him. And then, speaking to those same religious leaders, Jesus begins to talk about shepherds.

That context changes how we hear John 10. It is not a gentle meditation detached from real life. It is Jesus' response to a group of leaders who had just mistreated one of God's sheep. In effect, He is saying: "You have shown what kind of shepherds you are. Now let Me show you what a true shepherd looks like."

He describes several marks of the true shepherd.

The true shepherd comes in by the door. "He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (10:1). Legitimate shepherding has a rightful way in. The thief climbs over the wall because he has no right to be there and no intention of serving the sheep.

The true shepherd knows the sheep personally. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (10:3). In a culture where several flocks might share a fold overnight, each shepherd would call his own animals out in the morning, and they would respond to his voice. This is not a relationship of strangers. The shepherd knows each one.

The true shepherd leads from the front. “When he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (10:4). He does not drive the flock from behind with shouting and blows. He walks ahead, into whatever is coming, and the sheep follow because they trust him.

The true shepherd gives life. “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (10:10). This is perhaps the simplest test of any ministry. Are people becoming more alive, more free, more whole in Christ? Or are they being drained, diminished and used up?

The true shepherd does not run. Jesus contrasts Himself with the hired hand: “But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep” (10:12–13). The hireling’s problem is not that he is paid. It is that, when protecting the sheep would cost him something, he protects himself instead.

That image speaks directly to the way some churches have responded to abuse. When the wolf appeared, leaders who should have stood between the flock and danger chose to protect themselves, their institutions or their reputations. They were not necessarily the wolves. But they fled, and the sheep were scattered.

Above all, the true shepherd lays down his life. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (10:11). Jesus says it again a few verses later: “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own… and I lay down My life for the sheep” (10:14–15). And He adds that no one will take His life from Him: “I lay it down of Myself” (10:18).

This completely transforms our understanding of leadership. Jesus does not say, “I am the good shepherd because the sheep serve Me.” He says, in effect, “I am the good shepherd because I give Myself for them.” The relationship runs in the opposite direction from what the world expects. In most human hierarchies, those at the bottom serve those at the top. In the kingdom of God, the Shepherd at the top gives His life for the sheep at the bottom.

The New Testament gives Jesus three shepherd titles, and together they summarise His ministry. He is the *good* Shepherd who dies for the sheep (John 10:11). He is the *great* Shepherd, brought again from the dead (Hebrews 13:20). And He is the *Chief* Shepherd who will appear and reward His under-shepherds (1 Peter 5:4). In His death He gives Himself for the flock. In His resurrection He lives to care for it. In His return He will judge how it has been treated.

For any leader, this is both a comfort and a warning. The flock has a Shepherd who loves it enough to die for it, who is alive to protect it, and who is coming back. Every person sitting in a congregation has a story, a soul and a value that Jesus Himself has established at the cost of His own blood. They are not attendance numbers or financial contributors. They are not volunteers to be used, or supporters of a pastor's ambitions. They are people the Good Shepherd knows by name.

The blind man in John 9 learned this in the most personal way. The religious shepherds of his day had thrown him out. The Good Shepherd came and found him. Many who have been driven out of churches since have discovered the same thing. Human shepherds can expel. Only the Good Shepherd seeks.

Under-Shepherds and Stewards

If God is the Shepherd of His people, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then what exactly are pastors and church leaders?

The New Testament answers clearly. They are under-shepherds. They have real responsibility, but it is delegated responsibility. They care for a flock that belongs to Someone else.

The apostle Paul made this plain in one of the most moving scenes in the Book of Acts. On his way to Jerusalem, knowing that imprisonment and suffering awaited him, Paul called the elders of the church in Ephesus to meet him at the port of Miletus. It was a farewell. They would not see his face again. Paul reminded them of how he had lived among them, and then gave them this charge:

> "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the

> church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Acts 20:28)

Every phrase in that verse matters.

"Take heed to yourselves." Before Paul says anything about the flock, he tells the leaders to watch themselves. The first danger to a church is not outside it but within its leadership. In 1656, the English Puritan pastor Richard Baxter wrote an entire book on this one verse, *The Reformed Pastor*, urging ministers to examine their own hearts before presuming to oversee anyone else's. More than three and a half centuries later, his warning has lost none of its force.

"The Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Leadership in the church is appointed by God. It is not seized, inherited or purchased. And what God appoints, God can also call to account.

"To shepherd the church of God." Notice whose church it is. Not the pastor's church. Not the founder's church. Not the denomination's church. The church of God.

"Which He purchased with His own blood." Here is the reason a leader can never treat the flock carelessly. These people have been bought at the highest price imaginable. Every member of a congregation, including the difficult ones, the questioning ones and the ones who have left, was considered worth the blood of Christ. A leader who harms one of them is damaging something God paid for with His own life.

Paul then warns the elders about what was coming: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:29–30). The threat would come from outside, but also from within the leadership itself. And notice the mark of the leader who goes wrong: he draws the disciples "after themselves". Instead of pointing people to Christ, he gathers them around his own person.

The second key word for Christian leadership is *steward*. A steward manages something that belongs to someone else. In the ancient world, a wealthy household might be run by a trusted servant who controlled its finances, supervised its workers and made daily decisions. He might have

enormous practical authority. But he was still a servant, and the master could call him to account at any time.

Paul uses exactly this image of himself and his fellow ministers: "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). The goal of a steward is not to be impressive, successful or admired. It is to be faithful to the master's purposes.

Jesus told a parable that speaks with unsettling directness to our subject. He described a steward whom the master had placed over his household to give the other servants their food at the proper time. If the master returns and finds him doing that, the steward will be blessed. "But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him" (Luke 12:45–46).

Look at what the unfaithful steward does. He forgets that the master is coming back. He begins to mistreat the people in his care. And he uses the household's resources for his own appetite. The parable describes, in a few words, the pattern of abusive leadership: a leader who has stopped living as though he will give account, who harms those beneath him, and who feeds himself from what was meant for others. Jesus ends the parable with a principle every leader should take to heart: "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

Peter brings these ideas together in his instructions to the elders of the churches he wrote to:

> "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2–3)

Once again, it is "the flock of God". Peter names three temptations: serving reluctantly, serving for money, and serving as a lord. He answers each with its opposite: willingly, eagerly, as an example.

The warning about money deserves particular attention, because it is one of the most common ways stewardship turns into exploitation. Finan-

cial support for genuine ministry is biblical. Paul taught that "the laborer is worthy of his wages" (1 Timothy 5:18), and those who give themselves to the work of ministry may rightly be supported by it. But there is a line between being supported by ministry and exploiting it. When money becomes more important than people, something has gone wrong. When a leader's lifestyle matters more than the needs of the congregation, something has gone wrong. When people are pressured to give beyond their means through fear, manipulation or false promises, something has gone badly wrong.

The steward must always remember that none of it is theirs. The church, the people, the money, the buildings, the platform and the influence all belong to Christ. The leader holds them on trust, for a time, and will hand them back with an account of what was done.

This is not meant to make leaders anxious. It is meant to make them free. A steward does not have to build their own kingdom, defend their own reputation or prove their own worth. They simply have to be faithful to the One who entrusted the flock to them, and who will one day say to every faithful servant, "Well done."

Feed, Protect, Seek

Matthew gives us a glimpse into the heart of Jesus as He travelled through the towns and villages of Galilee: "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

Jesus looked at crowds of ordinary people and saw sheep who had been neglected. They had religious leaders. They had synagogues and teachers and a temple. But they were weary and scattered, because the shepherds they had were not doing a shepherd's work.

What is that work? Scripture describes it in many ways, but three tasks stand out: to feed the flock, to protect it, and to seek those who are lost.

The shepherd must feed the flock.

When Jesus restored Peter after the resurrection, He did not give him a vision statement or a leadership strategy. He gave him a simple instruction,

three times over: "Feed My lambs… Tend My sheep… Feed My sheep" (John 21:15–17). The first task of a shepherd is to nourish the people in their care.

In spiritual terms, this means teaching the Word of God faithfully. Paul charged Timothy: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2). Notice the balance in that verse. Convincing and rebuking sit alongside exhorting. And all of it is to be done "with all longsuffering", that is, with patience.

A shepherd who only tells people what they want to hear is not feeding them properly. There will be times when the Word encourages us and times when it corrects us. There will be times to preach about blessing and times to preach about repentance, holiness, sacrifice and judgement. Paul could tell the Ephesian elders that he had "not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

But feeding also means handling Scripture honestly. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Some of the deepest harm in churches has come not from neglecting the Bible but from misusing it: lifting verses out of context to demand obedience, to silence questions or to justify a leader's decisions. A shepherd who feeds the flock with twisted Scripture is not feeding them at all. They are poisoning the pasture.

The pulpit is not a place for personal manipulation. It is not a place to settle conflicts, to embarrass members or to pursue ambition. It is a sacred trust.

The shepherd must protect the flock.

Sheep in the ancient world were vulnerable to predators, thieves, harsh weather and their own tendency to wander into danger. David's lion and bear were not exceptional. Every shepherd knew that protection was part of the job.

Spiritual shepherds carry the same responsibility. Jesus warned His followers, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). A shepherd must guard the flock against false teaching, exploitation, manipulation and pred-

atory behaviour, including when the danger appears in sheep's clothing, and including when it appears inside the church.

This responsibility is especially serious where children and vulnerable people are concerned. Jesus spoke strongly about the little ones in His kingdom. "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones," He said (Matthew 18:10). Just before that, He warned that it would be better for a person to have a millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the sea than to cause one of these little ones to stumble (Matthew 18:6).

A shepherd should never knowingly place vulnerable people in danger to protect a ministry's reputation. Protection must matter more than reputation. A ministry's reputation can be rebuilt. A person's life can be permanently damaged.

This is why safeguarding is not merely an administrative task to be delegated to a committee and forgotten. Background checks, safe-ministry policies, training and clear reporting procedures are modern expressions of an ancient duty. They are part of shepherding.

The shepherd must seek the lost.

In Matthew 18, the parable of the lost sheep comes immediately after Jesus' warnings about the little ones. A man has a hundred sheep, and one goes astray. "Does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying?" (Matthew 18:12). When he finds it, he rejoices more over that one than over the ninety-nine. Jesus draws the conclusion: "Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).

The shepherd does not say, "We still have ninety-nine. Let that one go." He notices the missing sheep. He cares that it is gone. He goes looking.

This challenges a great deal of modern church culture. Churches can become more concerned with attendance figures than with individual people. Someone stops coming, and nobody calls. Someone becomes isolated, and nobody notices. Someone is struggling emotionally, spiritually, financially or in their relationships, and nobody checks on them.

It is worth asking why the sheep went missing in the first place. In some cases, they wandered. But in others, they were driven away. Ezekiel's list of the shepherds' failures includes this very charge: they had not "brought back what was driven away" (Ezekiel 34:4). Some of the people

missing from our churches did not drift. They fled. They were hurt, silenced or pushed out, and no one came after them.

A true shepherd goes looking even for those, and perhaps especially for those. They are willing to hear why someone left, even if the answer is painful. They are willing to discover that the problem was not the wandering sheep but the way the fold was being kept.

Biblical shepherding requires presence. People need to know that they matter, that they would be missed, and that someone would come looking. That is what the Good Shepherd does. It is what every under-shepherd is called to do as well.

The Shepherd Who Must First Be a Sheep

So who is the shepherd?

The shepherd is not simply the person standing behind the pulpit, or the one with the largest congregation, the most followers or the most impressive title. The shepherd is the person entrusted with the care of God's people, and the biblical shepherd is called to care for them the way Jesus does: to serve rather than dominate, to protect rather than exploit, to feed rather than starve, to restore rather than destroy, to guide rather than manipulate. Above all, the shepherd is called to love the flock, because the flock belongs to Christ.

But there is one truth about shepherds that is easy to forget, and forgetting it is often where the trouble starts. The true shepherd never stops being a sheep.

David's most famous words about God were not written from the throne room. They were written by a man who knew what it was to be cared for. "The LORD is my shepherd." David led Israel, but he never stopped needing to be led. His finest moments as king came when he remembered that. His worst came when he forgot.

The same was true of Peter. Peter became one of the great leaders of the early Church. He preached on the day of Pentecost, and thousands were added to the Church. He would later write to elders and call himself "a fellow elder" (1 Peter 5:1), not a superior. Yet before Peter shepherded anyone, he had to be shepherded himself. On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter denied

Him three times. After the resurrection, beside a charcoal fire on the shore of Galilee, Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love Me?", and three times entrusted him with the flock (John 21:15–17). Peter's authority to lead grew out of the experience of being restored. He knew he was a sheep who had needed rescuing.

That knowledge is a safeguard. A leader who remembers that they are also a sheep will find it harder to treat other sheep with contempt. They will be slower to judge and quicker to listen. They will know their own capacity for failure. They will remember that everything they have, including their calling, came to them by grace.

The leader who forgets this is in danger. When a shepherd begins to see themselves as essentially different from the flock, as above them rather than among them, a subtle shift takes place. The people become an audience to impress, a resource to manage or a problem to control. Questions begin to feel like insubordination. Criticism begins to feel like attack. And the leader begins to believe that the rules that apply to others do not apply to them.

This is why accountability matters so much, and why we will spend a whole chapter on it later in this book. But it begins here, with a leader's understanding of who they are. Before I am a pastor, I am a child of God. Before I am a leader, I am a disciple. Before I shepherd anyone, I am a sheep in the care of the Good Shepherd.

There is a sobering side to this truth as well. Sheep belong to the Shepherd, and so do under-shepherds. Every leader will one day give account to Him.

The writer of Hebrews describes faithful leaders as those who "watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Hebrews 13:17). James puts it even more directly: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Leadership does not reduce accountability before God. It increases it.

This should produce humility. Ministry is not a game. The pulpit is not a stage for ego. The congregation is not an audience. Leadership is not a privilege to exploit. It is a sacred trust, and the One who entrusted it will ask about it.

One day titles will disappear. Church positions will disappear. Buildings will be sold or torn down. Conferences will end. Crowds will go home. Social media followers will no longer matter. On that day, the questions that matter will be very simple. Did you feed My sheep? Did you protect them? Did you go after the ones who were lost? Did you love them as I loved you?

Jesus said, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples" (John 15:8). The fruit God looks for in a shepherd is not first the size of the ministry but the health of the people. Are they becoming more like Christ? Are they safe? Are they free? Are they growing up into maturity, or are they becoming more dependent on the leader?

The question every shepherd should ask is not, "How many people follow me?" but, "How faithfully am I caring for the people God has entrusted to me?" Not, "How powerful is my ministry?" but, "How much does my leadership look like Jesus?" Not, "Are people loyal to me?" but, "Are people becoming faithful to Christ?"

Perhaps that is where every shepherd must begin, with a simple prayer: "Lord, shepherd me before You allow me to shepherd others."

When a shepherd is rightly positioned under the Chief Shepherd, the flock has every opportunity to flourish. But when a shepherd refuses to submit to the Chief Shepherd, the flock becomes vulnerable.

And that brings us to the question at the heart of this book. If this is what a shepherd is meant to be, what happens when the one called to protect the flock becomes the one who wounds it? Before we can answer that honestly, we need to understand what kind of authority God actually gives to those who lead His people. That is the subject of the next chapter.

FOR SHEPHERDS

Write a one-page stewardship statement for your ministry. Name whose flock you serve, to whom you will give account, and what faithfulness would look like in your setting this year. Then share it with someone who has permission to hold you to it.

FOR THE FLOCK

Read Psalm 23 slowly and ask where your experience of church has matched it, and where it has not. If your loyalty to a leader has quietly taken the place of your loyalty to Christ, bring that honestly to God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What picture of a shepherd did you grow up with, and how does John 10 confirm or challenge it?
2. Why do you think Jesus spoke about the hireling straight after the religious leaders cast the blind man out?
3. What changes in a leader's behaviour when they begin to see people as "theirs" rather than God's?
4. Where is your church strong in feeding, protecting and seeking, and where is it weak?
5. Who shepherds you?

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Baxter, Richard. *The Reformed Pastor*. First published 1656. Many modern editions.
- Laniak, Timothy S. *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 20. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press / Leicester: Apollos, 2006.