

Escape From Church, Inc.: The Return of the Pastor-Shepherd

E. Glenn Wagner
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It has been a long time since I've come across a book that has so impacted me as E. Glenn Wagner's, *Escape from Church, Inc.* I wept my way through parts of this book, and God has used it — to reaffirm His call on my life to be a pastor, and to clarify my vision and strengthen my resolve to be a better pastor than ever before.

Over the past two decades I've been reading reams of material to help me serve the church better. I have accumulated nearly 100 books pertaining to leadership and church growth alone — most of which I've read from cover to cover. From these books and various seminars, I've gleaned a great deal of helpful insights — for which I am grateful. However, one aspect that I sense has been either missing or pushed to the margin in the leadership genre, has been the foundation of it all — the call of God to be shepherds of His flock.

In our quest to glean insights and tools about leadership and management from the corporate world, Wagner believes we have changed the church from community to corporation, changed ministers from pastors to presidents, and sacrificed people on the altar of programs. As you will read on the book's back cover, "This book was born out of a passion for the church — and for you, one of its pastors. If you struggle with burnout and disillusionment, if something within you keeps insisting, 'This isn't what it's supposed to be about!' then Pastor Glenn Wagner offers a model for pastoring that can radically reshape how you relate to your congregation."

escape FROM CHURCH, Inc.
(excerpts referenced by page number)

PART ONE: LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

Chapter One: The Church, Inc.

"A subtle heresy that has crept into the evangelical church ... we pastors, like Esau, have sold our biblical birthright as shepherds called by God for the pottage of skills and gimmicks designed by humans. We have misunderstood the role of pastor and defined it incorrectly. We have left our biblical and theological moorings. (17)

"Over the years many 'experts' and consultants have suggested a dizzying variety of cures for the church's malaise. They spoke, and we rushed out to buy their books and attend their seminars that so confidently promised to lead us into an era of unprecedented success and growth — the pastoral promised land. Strangely, even as the American church declined, the number of resources designed to make us more effective as pastors and to help our churches increase their impact simply exploded. Today there is no shortage of seminars, books, tapes, conferences, and courses, all produced to equip us to capture a world for Christ. (18-19)

"Not long ago the so-called 'experts' came to us pastors and said, 'The best way to get people involved in the ministry of your church is to put them on boards and committees.' (19)

"A little later a new batch of 'experts' came around to insist, 'You know what? Your churches are struggling because you pastors don't know about management ...' So along came truck-loads of books, courses and seminars on management, and all of us rushed out to ... devour their wisdom. We kept hearing ... 'If you attend these seminars and read these books, you'll be better equipped to develop mission statements, vision statements, and strategic plans.' (19)

"A few years later these same 'experts' ... returned to announce, 'Folks, that's really not the way to do it ... What you really need to do is to involve people in relationships.' (20)

"Then it was, 'You know what the *real* problem is? You began to learn a little bit about management [and relationships], but you're not leaders. There's a vast difference between managers and leaders.' So books on leadership began rolling of the presses ... (20)

"First it was bus ministry Then it was body life. Then it was identifying your market. Then the church unleashed. Then spiritual gifts, personality profiles, cell churches, megachurches, and metachurches. Then seeker services. Then purpose-driven churches. (20)

"Please don't get me wrong. It is not that any one of these solutions, in and of itself, is bad. But when they are laid over a wrong pastoral identity in a church functioning with a wrong theological grid, good things soon turn destructive. (21)

"I believe that the one problem underlying all others is that we have moved both pastors and churches from a community model to a corporation model. In some churches the pastor is the preaching machine while someone else runs the business side of things. In other churches the pastor is the CEO, the boss, the chairman of the board. But in both cases the pastor is a corporate officer, not a shepherd. (21)

"If we go back to the very beginning, back to the Lord's bedrock idea for his people, back to the

Bible's fundamental plan for the church, what do we find? We find shepherds and sheep.(29)

"In essence, what all the polls tell us about men and women longing for relationships, searching for family, and seeking community, is that people need still waters. They need some green pastures. They need their souls restored. What they really need are shepherds who care about them! (29)

"When God wanted to give his people a picture of the way he wanted them to relate to one another in community, He chose the metaphor of sheep and a shepherd. He did so for a reason. He could have chosen any number of other metaphors to portray the leaders of his people — general, sergeant, king, overlord, director, prophet, patriarch — but he didn't. He chose the shepherd, the human vocation that most closely parallels his own character and his own way of relating to his people." (29)

Chapter Two: The Neglected Model

"God makes it clear that shepherds in his service are given one overriding duty that supersedes all others: to 'bestow care on' his sheep. Not to manage them (although that must be done). Not to inspire them (although that, too, is necessary). Not even to lead them (as indispensable as that is). No. The primary concern of a shepherd in the service of the Lord should be to 'bestow care on' his sheep — and if a shepherd fails in this most fundamental of duties, God promises to 'bestow punishment' on the shepherd. (42)

"We must come to see that the primary duty of those whom God calls to lead his church is *caring*

for the sheep — not managing, not directing, not vision-casting, not anything else. Shepherds who fail to care for their sheep — that is, leaders who neglect to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or search for the lost — are in danger of losing their privileged position and of incurring the discipline of God." (47)

Chapter Four: It's Not Rocket Science

"The basics of ministry are actually quite simple. What are they? Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, we are his sheep, and God has appointed certain individuals to shepherd His sheep under the authority of the Good Shepherd. That's basically it. It may take an entire library to flesh out the implications of those basics, but in essence, that's what ministry comes down to. (78)

"God tells us, 'Pastors, this is the church. You are a shepherd. That is the model under which people will grow and flourish. If you are going to fulfill my purpose, here's what you do: Feed them, tend them, protect them, discipline them. It's really pretty simple.' The goal is to bring God's people into an ever-deepening relationship with their Lord and with one another in his family. When we shepherd the flock of God as God instructs us, the sheep are brought to maturity and authenticity." (79)

PART TWO: CALLING ALL SHEPHERDS

Chapter 5: Who Am I?

"I never want to lose my focus as a shepherd of God's sheep. ... I must always retain my identity as the shepherd. I am not primarily a manager or a leader or a CEO or a facilitator or a

commander or a counselor or any of a thousand other possibilities. God has called me to be a pastor, to shepherd the flock he has placed under my care, and the only way I can fulfill that holy calling is by keeping focused on my biblical role. (92-93)

"I am convinced that many of us struggle with ministry because we have no clear idea of who we are as pastors. All of us function out of a sense of identity, but if we are not clear on that identity, we're in big trouble. (93)

[Ministry issues out of our identity.] "In other words, who we *are* determines what we are to *do*.

Consider the implications that different identities have for our ministry priorities:

- If God has called us to be leaders, then our priority becomes goals, objectives, and the bottom line.
- If God has called us to be managers, then our priority becomes structure, systems, order, and keeping everything under control.
- If God has called us to be CEOs, then our priority becomes developing a vision and issuing directives.
- If God has called us to be shepherds, then our priority becomes caring for, feeding, and correcting the sheep.

... So the first question we must answer is: What has God called us to be? What is our God-given identity? Everything else will flow from our answer to that question. (94)

"When God addresses us specifically as pastors, how does he picture our role? Is there ever a time when God says to us, 'Pastors, here is your governing model'?"

"I contend that there is. Peter — the 'rock,' the 'pillar,' the 'apostle' — lays it out for us in 1 Peter 5:1-4. In that crucial text, one image rises above all others to help us define our biblical role."

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

"Peter entreated his pastoral readers to be *shepherds* of God's *flock*. He didn't urge them to be priests or kings or leaders or managers or even servants. He vigorously appealed to them to be shepherds. (95)

"Granted, Peter does call these men 'elders,' urging them to serve as 'overseers' and warning them against acting as 'lords.' But he *emphasizes* their role as 'shepherds.' He tells them to be 'shepherds of God's flock that is under your care' and to be 'examples to the flock.' To complete this image in the strongest way possible, Peter reminds them that one day Jesus Christ, whom he calls 'the Chief Shepherd,' will reappear to present his faithful shepherds with a 'crown of glory that will never fade away.' As far as Peter is concerned, there can be no more compelling image than that of the shepherd. (96)

"Peter ... isn't the only New Testament writer to see the central importance of pastor-as-shepherd. Listen to the Apostle Paul addressing the elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts

20:28-29:

'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.' (96)

"Why is God so adamant that we behave as shepherds? ... let me suggest five basic reasons why God instructs us to find our pastoral identity in the picture of a shepherd. (97)

1. Shepherds Tend Sheep.

"When God looks for a metaphor to describe his people, the term he most often chooses is 'sheep.' Consider just a few biblical examples: [Psalm 100:3, Isaiah 53:6, Jeremiah 50:6, Ezekiel 34:31, Mark 6:34, John 10:14-16 and 1 Peter 2:25]

"With all the animal metaphors available to the Lord — horses, lions, eagles, bears, dogs, cats, cattle, fish — why does he so consistently, in both Old and New Testament, refer to us as sheep?

If we look carefully at the biblical passages that compare us to sheep, we can see several consistent features (none of which are particularly complimentary):

- We stray like sheep.
- We need protection like sheep.
- We can be foolish like sheep.
- We require caretakers like sheep.

"In short, the most obvious reason the Lord wants pastors to behave as shepherds is because the people entrusted to their care behave as sheep. Sheep need shepherds if they are to survive and thrive." (97-99)

2. Good Shepherds Are Absolutely Committed to Their Sheep.

"God also instructs pastors to be shepherds to remind us to place our flock's interests above our own. Ezekiel 34 contains a blistering indictment of the 'shepherds of Israel,' those men God entrusted to take care of the Jewish people. God begins his rebuke with these stinging words: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' (Ezekiel 34:2).

"Good shepherds are interested primarily in their sheep, not in schedules or programs or buildings or causes, as good and necessary as any of these may be. Jesus also called attention to this when he said:

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.'

(John 10:11-13)

"Of course, we pastors can't lay down our lives for our sheep in the same way and for the same purpose as did our Lord, but we are expected to care deeply for the sheep entrusted to us — even when they're not easy to tend! Some sheep stray ... Some may even bite the shepherd or butt him

when his back is turned. (99)

"Tell me ...

- How would a CEO react if an underling suddenly turned on him?
- How would a general respond if one of his soldiers refused an order?
- How would a king act if one of his subjects treated him with insolence?

It's not hard to imagine, is it? Perhaps that is why God (who knows sheep) instructs pastors to act as shepherds, not as CEOs, generals, or kings. God wants pastors who are truly committed to the sheep, not to their own interests or egos." (100)

3. Good Shepherds Have Genuine Compassion for Their Sheep.

"In Ezekiel 34 God charged Israel's 'shepherds' with several crimes that teach us, through a negative example, what shepherds are *not* to be like:

- They took care of themselves instead of the flock.
- They did not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, or bind up the injured.
- They did not bring back the strays or search for the lost.
- They ruled the sheep brutally and harshly." (100)

4. Good Shepherds Need Courage to Defend Their Flocks.

"When the apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders, 'I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock' (Acts 20:29), he was reminding them not only of their duty to protect the flock but also of their need for courage in the face of attack. 'Lions,' 'bears,' and 'wolves' cannot be confronted without courage, because it is the shepherd himself —

not an employee or a messenger or an enlisted soldier — who is responsible to meet the attack."
(101-102)

5. Shepherds Are Humble People.

"Think of a CEO, a king, a general, or a leader. Does the word *humility* leap to mind? Probably not. But it should when you think of a shepherd, which is another reason why God chose this model for us to follow. In the social structure of the ancient world, shepherds were pretty much the lowest of the low. (103)

"What, then, are we to make of God's insistence that we who are called to be pastors should picture ourselves as shepherds of his flock? I believe this divine command is meant to keep us humble. If we think of ourselves primarily as leaders or big shots, it is easy to start looking down on those who follow us.

"Perhaps this is why many today talk about 'servant-leaders.' The term 'leader,' on its own, often causes people to develop swelled heads. [Some have recognized this problem] and so prefix the word 'servant,' just to remind everyone of our Lord's strong directive in Matthew 20:25-27:

'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.'

"To be honest, the term 'servant-leader' doesn't do much for me. I appreciate what it is intended to convey ... [but] 'Shepherd' does just fine.

"Shepherds are humble people by definition. They know they occupy a lowly social position. Their whole lives are dedicated to service. The shepherd's life is not his own; the needs of his sheep take priority. Leaders may find it difficult to do 'nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than' themselves, (Philippians 2:3), but a shepherd *must* live that way if he is to faithfully discharge his calling." (104)

"Our people are crying out for shepherds.

"They've had enough of leaders.

"They've had their fill of CEOs.

"They're sick to death of managers.

"What people really want — and really need — are pastors who long to be shepherds of God's flock. People today yearn for loving shepherds who care for the sheep, not because they must, but because they are willing, as God wants them to be. And they are searching for gentle overseers who are eager to serve, not greedy for money and not anxious to lord it over the flock."

(111)

Chapter Seven: Leader or Shepherd?

"Because the church has floundered badly in the past few decades, we have adopted an executive

CEO (leader) mindset that actually works against the needs of people and what they're looking for. Men and women are not really looking for leadership; they're looking for relationships. They say, 'We want a pastor with integrity. We want someone who cares more about us than about building a big church. We want to feel loved. We want to be someplace where we belong. We don't want to feel used — we get that at work — and we don't want that here!

"We need a generation of pastor-shepherds with a sharp vision, a clear sense of call, and a deep understanding of and a passionate love for people. We need shepherds willing to lie down in the doorway of the sheepfold, ready to give their lives for the sheep. Finally, we need shepherds who are truly thankful to God for allowing them the privilege of pastoring his sheep.

"God has not called us to be merely the leaders of his church. We are not the CEOs of his church. We are not the ranchers of his church. We are not the administrators or managers or executives of his church.

"So who are we? We are pastors, shepherds called by God, ordained by God, anointed by God, and placed over a flock by Almighty God." (153-154)

EPILOGUE: TIME TO PURSUE SOMETHING ELSE

"I personally believe that when the horse dies, it's time to dismount.

"Friends, it's time for the church to pursue something else. The executive leader (CEO) model that has captured our fancy simply cannot deliver the goods. God never told us, 'Here's a scepter.'

He said, 'Here's a staff.' The scepter might look ornate, fancy, and impressive, but God calls us to walk with a staff. We are not royalty; we are servants, shepherds serving under the Great Shepherd." (245)