

When  
Sheep  
attack



*By Mark Conn*

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## introduction

When I first began to think through and organize the ideas that would become this ebook, there was a reality that confronted me that I couldn't deny:

### **I didn't think ministry would be this way.**

You see, I was a naive young man thrust into ministry by what I knew with absolute clarity (and still believe) was a calling from God.

But ministry is a different thing than what I had imagined. Oh, I knew the reality of leading a church and being a pastor, since I had grown up in a pastor's home and married a pastor's daughter. But I thought that I would be different. That because of the gifts and skills God had gifted to me, people would follow me and love me and my family, that my ministry would be just like the Book of Acts, just an updated version. People would sense the power of the Holy Spirit and there wouldn't be any disagreements.

No politics.

No one was going to spread gossip about me and my family.

### **We would be different.**

Are you smiling and nodding your head in agreement yet?

Fast forward to today. I've had the privilege of being in the ministry for over 25 years now, and can tell you that ministry with people is going to be messy.

It doesn't matter how many people are coming to Christ or how many marriages are being restored.



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It doesn't matter if the balance in the general fund hasn't dipped into the red in years.

It doesn't matter how you lead or administrate, how few personal days or vacations you take, what sacrifices you personally make.

At some point, some where, some time, the sheep are going to attack.

Sometimes it will be hidden or camouflaged, sometimes the attack will be loud and confrontational, but the attack is real nonetheless and it leaves you feeling conflicted. There's all kinds of thoughts and emotions happening at the same time (some of which, if you acted on them, would get you a prison ministry from the inside!)

Welcome to ministry, right?

The weird part is that I LOVE the ministry. I love being a pastor and leading people. I know it's what I was designed to do. Nothing gives me greater fulfillment than standing in front of a group of people and explaining the Words of God, challenging them to be holy, watching as the Holy Spirit of God radically changes lives.

There is nothing I would rather do.

But sometimes, when the sheep are attacking - well, it makes you wonder if it's really worth it, doesn't it?

In the pages of this ebook I am going to share some of the things I have learned through the years, and maybe even provide some hope and help if you are in the middle of a sheep attack - or trying to recover from one.

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## chapter 1

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3, ESV)*

*Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3, NLT)*

### **Reasons and non-reasons**

There are many possible explanations for problems inside a church, and right up front it is important to state that some of the reasons for problematic sheep is not the sheep - it's a toxic shepherd.

If you have been in the ministry for any length of time, you have probably experienced a shepherd that preys on his sheep rather than nurturing them and loving them. He expects to be treated above others, demanding a level of pay that is hard for the congregation to meet, excusing rude or rough behavior as "the use of his prophetic gift" or something else that will spin his problem in a spiritual context. Maybe it's the way he reveals confidences, or perhaps he uses the platform as an opportunity to brow beat persons within the congregation.

Regardless of the manner it happens, sometimes the shepherd really is a problem and is not leading the church in love and compassion.



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The “toxic shepherd syndrome” is not part of the discussion in this ebook. As we proceed, we are going to make a couple of assumptions. We assume that the pastor, while not perfect, is not abusing his position or the people he has been called to lead. We are also going to assume that this pastor is not demanding respect or that people follow him, but rather is leading by example and is trying to be a strong motivational and encouraging leader for the flock. Lastly, we assume that the pastor has a growing, healthy personal spiritual life.

## **Constructive criticism**

It’s also important to state that we are not talking about people coming to the shepherd with positive input or simply disagreeing with the pastor. Having an open line of communication and receiving constructive criticism is not only beneficial for the congregation, it’s healthy for the pastor to receive that kind of feedback, analyze it, and be honest with himself.

No one does everything perfectly every time, so getting good feedback helps us realize where we might need some work, and gives us important clues about possible dissatisfaction within the flock.

## **Impact on the congregation**

Regardless of the timing or reasons for conflict, right up front we need to recognize it will have an impact - usually negative - on the congregation. You probably know someone personally, or have experienced yourself, a church split. Usually that split occurs as a result of a sheep attack.

If a split doesn’t occur, there will still be some who choose to begin attending elsewhere or stop going to church altogether, some will reduce their level of financial support, and still others will diminish their regularity of attendance.

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It's a painful thing, and our enemy rejoices when he can get God's people attacking the shepherd of the flock and taking pot-shots at each other. He doesn't have to work to destroy the church, because he has the attack sheep doing it for him!

With the stage set, what are some of the reasons (or non-reasons as the case may be) for the sheep to attack?

Strangely enough, even though the circumstances may be different and the details will be unique in each instance, the true underlying reasons for the attack can be boiled down to a few specific things.

Before we examine the reasons, I have noticed that these antagonists (a term borrowed from Kenneth Haugk's *Antagonists in the Church*) nearly always exhibit similar spiritual traits: 1) they consider themselves to be more spiritual than others - and more than likely *much* more spiritual than the pastor; 2) they operate and dwell on feelings instead of facts; and 3) they gather a group of people around them who are also dissatisfied, spreading ill content and dissatisfaction as often as the opportunity presents itself.

There are several other traits that we will examine in less detail in later discussions, but these three traits, in my experience, have been universal.

Let's examine each in order, and then explore why these traits result in a sheep attack.

## **More spiritual than others**

The first universal trait I have found to be present in pastoral antagonists is a view of superior spiritual condition. Sometimes this person is a long-time member, a teacher, some form of leader within the congregation, or even a



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former pastor or staff member. But regardless of the position they occupy, they view and cultivate the idea that they are spiritually above others and as a result, their point of view (in their minds and conversations) should be given greater weight and they should be consulted (or at least briefed) before decisions are made, since they occupy a more spiritual plane than others.

This view of themselves is usually accompanied by a martyrs' complex (which will lead into the second trait we will discuss in a few moments) and is cultivated through their leading of studies, prayer groups, and other gatherings.

In the cases I am familiar with, in each instance the people involved are not evil or scheming, but rather they truly feel they are on a higher spiritual plane. In my experience, it's not a show or a guise, but is a reality in their minds, even though many times it is not borne out through their behavior.

One of the dangers is when a pastor will invite this person to occupy a position of teaching or authority within the congregation because of the seeming evidence that this person is in fact mature and should be leading and disciplining. Encouraged by this recognition of their superior spiritual position, the antagonist will then be very supportive of the pastor initially, but will gradually begin to pull away from the shepherd, sometimes as a result of a perceived slight or a teaching that does not totally align with the antagonists' own specific interpretation of a passage of Scripture.

Another danger within this trait is when this person's "spiritual gifts" aren't recognized quickly enough (in their mind) or they aren't consulted for a decision by the pastor. In either case, the perceived hurt grows in their minds and as they dwell upon it the attack begins to take hold in the heart of the antagonist.

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## Feelings not facts

Focusing on the way they “feel” about a situation or the way a perceived (or even real) slight hurt them is a strong commonality with the antagonists. Sometimes the hurt is nothing more than the Holy Spirit bringing conviction into the life of the person, but as everyone who has been convicted by the Holy Spirit can attest, it’s not a comfortable thing to have happen. The antagonist will blame the pastor and those supporting him when they begin to feel this conviction.

Sometimes the perceived slight is something that the pastor said in a message, a decision that was made by the church governing body that they didn’t agree with, or the direction the pastor is leading the church. It could be many other things, but you get the idea. The result is that the antagonist will “feel” as though their skills aren’t being considered, or their opinions aren’t important. It might be voiced in different ways, but the issue is the same.

A particular scenario being played out in many congregations in the past several years is the transition from traditional to a more contemporary form of worship. Even when a pastor has been invited into a congregation with the stated intention of helping that congregation transform themselves to be more culturally relevant, the antagonist will position themselves to oppose the pastor. In this scenario, it might be the style of music, the volume, the instruments being used, the hairstyle of the worship leader, the color of the guitar, repetition, standing too long, changing the order of the service, using “powerpoint” instead of hymnals - the list could go on, but you get the idea.

In our example, the antagonist will disagree, using phrases like “it doesn’t feel like home anymore” or “we’re losing our great old hymns of the faith.”

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Neither statement is factual, but reveals that the antagonist is focused on the way things “feel” rather than on the facts.

Maybe it’s a remodeling effort, the hiring of a new staff member, the launching of a new initiative...regardless, the antagonist’s response will be similar. The way that they “feel” about the change or decision will take priority over the reality of the circumstance.

## **Let’s be dissatisfied together**

The last trait I have found to be common with antagonists is their desire to grow a group around them who are dissatisfied just like they are. The people in this group don’t have to be disgruntled about the same things. They are just dissatisfied with something that is happening, and somehow the antagonist is able to find these people and draw them together.

I’ve seen “Bible study groups” or “prayer groups” suddenly form, supposedly because they just want to “go deeper” or “bathe the church in prayer.”

Sounds spiritual, doesn’t it?

Usually there really *is* some study that transpires, there really *is* prayer that takes place. But the common thing that is uniting this group is animosity toward the pastor or leadership.

This group feeds the growing bitterness in each other, and becomes self-justifying in their antagonism. They reason “Look at the people who agree with me. These people are good people, so I must be on the right track if they all agree!” all the while working to subvert the pastor and the vision the shepherd of this flock is trying to birth within the congregation.

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This group will sometimes reach out to people who previously left the church for one reason or another, often drawing them back into apparent “fellowship” with the church, but with an unspoken and as yet undefined plan.

These traits are almost always present, in one degree or another, with every sheep attack I have seen or coached a pastor through.

Now that we understand some of the traits that these antagonists will exhibit, let’s look at the reasons for the sheep attack.

## **Reason 1 Loss of control**

The major reason I have been able to determine for a sheep attack is the loss of control within the church. These antagonists usually view themselves as the leaders either because of generational conduct (“My grandfather built this church!”), because of donation level (“If I stopped giving, this place would fold in a month!”), because of past performance (“I have been a Sunday School teacher here for 57 years!”), because of position in the church (“I was Chairman of the Trustees when we built this building.”) or position in the community (“I lead a multi-million dollar corporation. These people need to follow me because obviously I am the most qualified to lead.”). In each instance, the expectation of continued reliance upon an individual is pretty strong, and is the motivating factor behind this reason.

Like mentioned earlier, in my experience these individuals in no way perceive themselves as hindering the work of God. Rather, they view the antagonism as the only alternative to be able to “preserve the church.” Unfortunately, “preserve the church” and “preserve my authority and influence within the church” are confused and result in the person leading, or at the very least assisting in, the attack.

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A power struggle within a church has always been a weird concept for me. Isn't a church supposed to be about realizing we are powerless and dependent upon the grace and mercy of an All Sufficient Savior?

Nevertheless, the loss of control is a primary reason for a sheep attack.

## **Reason 2 Resistant to change**

The second reason for a sheep attack is the resistance to a change. It might be something as simple as changing the water fountain in the foyer (this is not a fictional example - I know of a congregation who suffered from a sheep attack and actually split because of the angle the water came out of the newly-installed drinking fountain!) or the color of the carpeting. It might also stem from something larger, like the hiring of a new staff member or a change in the worship order. This is not a generational trait as some might suppose, but is evidenced by multiple generations for multiple reasons within the congregation.

The resistance to change can be damaging and will cause a sheep attack to be joined by others who have disagreed with any change the leadership or pastor has implemented. The change they are resisting might have been years earlier, and has been festering, seemingly forgotten. But when the attack begins often these outliers join in, perceiving an opportunity to undo the change they disapproved of.

## **Reason 3 Personal Agenda**

A clear vision can be an amazingly unifying thing for a congregation. Sometimes, though, a strong personality will disagree with the pastor's vision for

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the direction of the church, choosing instead to push a personal agenda in its place. Sometimes this personal agenda is public, sometimes it is kept private and only the resistance to the pastor's vision is evident, but the end result is the same and an attack takes place because of a congregant unwilling to follow the shepherd that God has placed within the flock.

One of the unique things about this particular reason is that often the personal agenda of the antagonist and the vision the pastor has for the congregation align closely in their desired results, but because the two aren't identical (or because the antagonist is not the one leading the vision - see Reason 1) the antagonist will attack the shepherd to try and put their own agenda in place of the one from the pastor.

It can be about something as significant as strategic planning or as seemingly insignificant as getting a new piece of office equipment. The object is really of no importance as long as the antagonist gets their way.

## **Reason 4 Dislike**

Just simply not liking the pastor is another reason that some sheep attack. Not everyone is going to like the pastor (I know this comes as a shock to you!) but some go further. The personalities of people sometimes just don't "gel" but usually we make allowances in society and realize there are some people we enjoy being around, and others - perhaps through no fault of their own - we just don't care to be with. The antagonist in this point, however, isn't satisfied with simply acknowledging that there is dislike present. Rather they attack with the intent of hurting the pastor. Anything is fair game - the pastor's weight, the way he combs his hair (or the fact he doesn't have any to comb!), the kind of car the pastor drives, where the pastor chooses to live... They will attack the pastor's family, the pastor's wife, the children, complain to the authorities about the way the pastor treats his pets.



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Sometimes this antagonist will go so far as to try and lay traps for the pastor.

This person views themselves as being on a righteous crusade to rid the church of what they view as a less-than-stellar leader, and justifies their actions accordingly.

## **Reason 5 Sin**

You might be saying to yourself “Self, weren’t some of the earlier reasons sinful as well?” and the answer your self might give would be “Yes they were.”

But in this reason, the underlying motivation is an unrepentant, unconfessed sinful condition in the life of the antagonist.

They are hurting, and rather than deal with the sin in their life they will lash out and attack the person they identify as being the cause of their trouble.

When the Holy Spirit is working on a person’s heart, it’s uncomfortable. But you know people (and if you’re like me at some point you’ve found yourself among them) who don’t want to give up their sin. They like what they are doing. Perhaps it’s an addiction or a sinful lifestyle, regardless they don’t want to stop and, not wanting their own sin to be revealed, attack the shepherd in an attempt to make the pain stop and the discomfort go away.

## **Reason 6 An unregenerate heart**

Lastly, one of the reasons for attack is sheep being led by a goat. Someone who perhaps has been in the church for years, knows all the right words to say, the right places to cry, knows all the words to “Amazing Grace,” and

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haven't missed a Sunday in 12 years. They look like, act like, and claim to be a sheep. But they're not. As a result, they don't have the Holy Spirit working in their lives, so internally they just don't understand the spiritual work the church is performing.

This leads to attack on the pastor, because they respond to a different spirit. Our enemy desires to destroy the testimony of God's leaders and God's church. If he can use an undercover agent to do that, he will.

Ultimately, each of these reasons result in a conflict. Sometimes there are things that can be done to diminish the amount of hurt and damage that's done, sometimes there's not much that can be done.

In the coming chapters, we're going to examine some of the things we can do to respond before, during, and after the attack, some of the challenges that are present in each phase of the attack, and how to help your congregation, your family, and yourself pick up the pieces afterwards.

