

It's a New Day in the Pasture!

"Confessions of a Reformed Youth Pastor"

Every shepherd (minister) has a wonderful story that chronicles his spiritual journey through years of striving to be faithful to the divine calling God has placed upon His life. God chooses a fallen man (that would be me and you) and anoints him with this unbelievable, insatiable desire to shepherd a people. And then in His sovereignty, He appoints shepherds to a certain pastures where sheep graze (a local church!).

Many herdsman quickly become disillusioned at the state of their pasture and the health of their sheep. It seems that the "current methods" of shepherding are not producing healthy sheep. I have come to the conclusion that thousand likewise are coming to; and that is: we have drifted from the Chief Shepherd's plans for shepherding and we must go back to the manual (Bible). Wise, mature, doctrinally sound shepherds can once again reclaim the honorable call of shepherd, or elder.

How desperate the church is today for Godly church leadership that represents the man described in I Timothy 3. May we return to the Word of God to once again commit to the authority of Scripture in regard to church government. May we quickly ask for forgiveness if we have fallen into worldly models of church leadership that have pushed us into the role of professional businessmen who "run" God's bride as a proud CEO. For many, pride has come before the fall, and the testimonies of failure resonate at each pastor's conference and denominational meeting. How the church needs humble, anointed shepherds who understand covenantal life.

Instead of falling into a "gloom and doom" perspective, I wholeheartedly agree with many of my brothers in the faith. This is the most exciting time to be serving the local church, and in the immortal words of the Apollo 13 flight director, *"I believe this is going to be our finest hour."*

Shepherds today have a clear purpose and calling: Feed My Sheep! And, I have found, there are a lot of hungry sheep in our country today. Many sheep have roamed outside the fenced pasture hungry for the Word, longing for a shepherd who will care for their families and protect them from the wolves of over-programmed churches. Many sheep long for an intimate relationship with the Chief Shepherd and for a renewed vision for His church, the one found in Acts 2.

Families today are more and more discontent with the program driven church, complete with man-centered theology. They are now less likely to remain loyal to an organization that does not share their convictions. This note was received from a family who was considering assisting with a family integrated mission church:

We have been very involved members of our church for 4 1/2 years. Our Pastor is a passionate man of God with a huge vision. He is a very good shepherd and we have learned so much from him. We can think of many reasons to stay where we are and yet we feel God strongly calling our hearts to the vision and ministry of this new church!

For the last couple of years God has been increasing our passion and vision for equipping and encouraging like-minded families and in the last several months we've been experiencing a "holy frustration" of sorts. We've been reading and re-reading books like "When You Rise Up" by R. C. Sproul Jr. and thought that God was calling us to a ministry within our current church or perhaps an outreach ministry to home schooling families in our community. Mostly we've been longing for the fellowship and encouragement of like-minded believers.

A "holy frustration" is what is spreading across our nation and the winds of reformation are

growing stronger. Families have been abused with the purpose driven, seeker driven, success driven models that permeates the church today. Realistically, many pastors still active in ministry have at one time served in one of those models. More and more are being delivered. Many good, Godly men are still serving in those models and I pray that they too will be awakened one day with a Damascus road "conversation" (as I did!) and realize, "What we're doing isn't working." Something is very wrong in the way that the church has approached discipleship, especially in the area of youth ministry.

Research presented by T.C. Pinckey to the Southern Baptist Executive Committee in 2001 found that 70% of teenagers involved in church youth groups stop attending church within two years following high school graduation. The Southern Baptist Council on Family Life reported at the 2002 Southern Baptist Convention that 88% of the children brought up in evangelical homes leave church at the age of 18. These are found never to return.

I labored for sixteen-years as a youth minister, desiring to disciple the children of church members. And parents readily entrusted their teenagers to my care. But where are they today? If my "success" rate is only 12%-30%, I'm not feeling too good about all the years, energy and money that was invested by our church and myself. For those who did benefit, I rejoice, but is this the best method of true conversion and discipleship.

Most youth ministers can easily share the fallout ratio with parents. It wasn't like I was their dad. And come to think of it, where were the dads? I remember struggling to get parents involved with youth ministry events, and even having parents thank me for providing their children's spiritual training.

Today, I realize that what I did was simply wrong. Ministering to teenagers with no spiritual presence at home is understandable, but I unknowingly usurped the authority and divine calling of the father found in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. I actually assisted dads in abdicating their role as the spiritual leader of their home by taking over their job. I even made it difficult for a 40-something year old dad to compete with a younger man who by comparison seems more fun and energetic. I know of some teenagers who went on to become devout followers of Christ, but the "what if" question lingers. What if we remained true to the biblical mandate to disciple dads who in turn would disciple their own family? What if our churches would have spent as much time, energy and money on growing men as we did on growing our own kingdom?

If we add up the annual youth ministry budget in most churches and multiply that by the number of churches in one state and multiply that number by ten, representing ten years of financial resources dedicated to these programs, just how large would that number be? To think that after all the time, effort and finances given to youth ministries, the failure rate is still 70-88%! How many businesses could survive if they would continue to pump funds into a failing venture?

The truth is, we're not surviving. Year by year, statistics painfully support what we all know to be true. Most Christian adults and teenagers are not prepared to give any defense of their faith, nor have a commitment to basic of biblical truths. One of the most telling findings of the Barna Research group was that only 32% of born-again adults and 9% of born-again teenagers believe that absolute truth exists. In other words, truth is relative. The fact that Jesus actually said, "*I am the **way**, the **truth**, and the **life***"(John 14:6) must have been lost somewhere between youth camp and the overnighter. All this points to a tremendous need for shepherds to reclaim their pastures. It looks to me that there is an overwhelming need for true shepherds who want to give their lives in service to the Chief Shepherd.

Several years ago I joyfully discovered that we, (my wife & I) were not the only ones with these

concerns/convictions. There is a reformation in the church where God is calling the hearts of men back to their children, where churches seek to follow the Biblical plan for evangelism and discipleship of the next generation, and where Biblical structure of the church is restored.
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