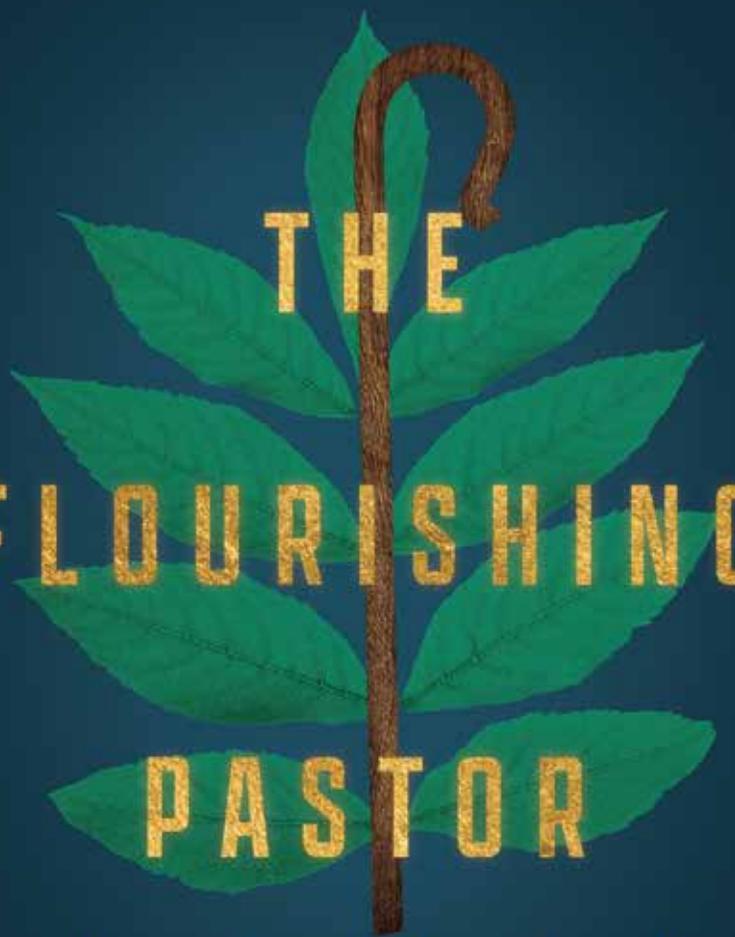


TOM NELSON



THE
FLOURISHING
PASTOR

Recovering *the* Lost Art of
Shepherd Leadership



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Flourishing Pastor* by Tom Nelson.
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Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

Henri Nouwen summarized this changing cultural milieu and its effect on clergy. “In this climate of secularization, Christian leaders feel less and less relevant and more and more marginalized.”³ Under the cultural canopy of an increasingly secular age,⁴ pastors are increasingly viewed by many people they encounter as a kind of mysterious, quaint cultural anachronism. At best, they are hopelessly irrelevant, except for perhaps marriage ceremonies and memorial services. The inconvenient truth is that many younger pastors and more seasoned pastors are hurting and ineffective. They are often inadequately trained, spiritually malformed, chronically discouraged, and woefully prepared to lead increasingly complex institutions and diverse faith communities. They often experience the gnawing fear of inadequacy deep within them.

While there are a host of external and cultural factors contributing to a lack of pastoral flourishing that require attention, perhaps more insidious and ultimately perilous are the internal dimensions navigating the pastoral calling itself. It is not just that many pastors feel over their heads and stressed out, many have lost their way.

LOST SHEPHERDS

I really enjoy officiating at weddings. I plan every detail carefully and meticulously, checking and rechecking the exact time and place of the wedding. Being late to a wedding is a nightmare I have revisited during restless nights. Recently that nightmare presented itself to me as I got in my car and headed to a wedding destination some forty miles away. The wedding venue seemed out of the way on the map, but it was not far from where I lived, so I thought I could navigate my way there with no problem. About halfway to my destination on increasingly remote back-country roads, I became more and more confused as to my location. I wasn't sure where I was, and I was even more confused as to where I should be going. I picked up my smart phone. Much to my dismay, I had no cellular service. I had no GPS, nor could I call the wedding venue. At that moment, a pit emerged in my stomach and anxious thoughts tormented my mind. I was lost. I looked at my watch. Would I be late for

the wedding? What would the wedding party do? How would I explain my tardiness to the bride and groom? I pulled over on the side of the road and shot up a desperate prayer. A car soon approached, and thanks to its local driver I was given directions that got me to the wedding venue just in the nick of time.

As a pastor, being lost is not only unpleasant, it can be quite perilous. Being lost attempting to get to a wedding venue is one thing, but being lost in the pastor calling is more consequential. While the image of a lost sheep is rather common, less common in our social imagination is a lost shepherd. Sheep are not the only ones who get lost, shepherds do as well. Shepherds and the sheep suffer for it.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel speaks timeless truth across the terrain of time. In losing their way, Israel's leaders have abandoned their vocational stewardship to care for the sheep. Perhaps they lost their first love, faced their glaring inadequacy, were simply overwhelmed, or over time felt great fatigue. Whatever contributed to their getting lost, they clearly were neglecting their vocational stewardship and blatantly taking advantage of their positions of power at the expense of the people they had been called to serve. Ezekiel lays down the gauntlet of indictment, pointing to leaders who have lost their way:

Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. (Ezek 34:2-4)⁵

While Ezekiel's literary imagery is embedded in an agrarian context, his prophetic message must not be missed for our time.⁶ Confronted with our own inadequacies, exhaustion, and pastoral disillusionment, we can abandon our shepherding calling and get perilously lost. If you are willing to be brutally honest, perhaps the prophet Ezekiel's forceful

words describe the painful reality of your heart. When shepherds become lost, neither they nor their flock flourish.

THREE PERILOUS PATHS

Pastors can get lost in their callings in many ways, but they often unwisely pursue three particularly common and perilous paths. I like to describe them as the celebrity path, the visionary path, and the lone ranger path. Let's take a closer look at the pastors who follow these paths.

The celebrity pastor. When I travel and speak, usually the first thing I encounter when I arrive at a conference venue is the green room. The green room is where pastors and musicians hang out before they go on stage. The green room has a good purpose—providing a quiet place for preparation without interruption—yet often the accoutrements of success and the exaggerated image of a celebrity brand lurk in its distorting shadows. In the green room there is often jockeying for prominence and the stroking of oversized egos. The green room culture regularly reinforces a distorted telos of pastoral success rather than pastoral faithfulness—much more about furthering a brand than furthering the kingdom, more about amplifying a person than exalting Christ. The green room often promotes a toxic celebrity Christian culture. Fame, applause, and celebrity status is a very intoxicating substance even for pastors, wooing them down a perilous path. A pastor's secure gospel identity in Christ is easily hijacked by the fickle applause of a crowd.

At the heart of the celebrity pastor is what Saint Augustine aptly described as disordered love.⁷ Lurking behind a smiling stage presence is an inordinate narcissistic love of self at the expense of love for God and others. Instead of living before an audience of One, the celebrity pastor lives before an audience of many. Most on his or her mind is how well they are performing in the eyes of the crowd. The crowd need not be big nor the stage prominent for the celebrity pastor to emerge. Celebrity is not necessarily tied to the size of the audience, but rather the size of ego longing to be stroked. A megapastoral ego is not only found in some megachurch contexts. They can be found in all sizes of

churches. Big frogs live in small ponds too. And with the advent of online services and social media, the reach of any pastor can be far and wide. The perilous path of the celebrity pastor now lurks online and in the virtual world of our interconnected global information age.

For many pastors, preaching to the gathered church is a highly important and significant aspect of their pastoral calling. I do not want in any way to undermine the high importance of stewarding well the weekly communication of God's Word to a congregation. Neither do I want to minimize the crucial importance in growing in the craft and skill in preaching if that is an essential aspect of a pastor's primary job description. As a pastor who has had the humbling privilege of preaching to a congregation for more than thirty years, I also know firsthand some of the unique heart temptations that pastors face in the preaching enterprise. At soul level, preaching puts the pastor in a very vulnerable space where our sense of self-worth can become closely connected to the affirmation or criticism of our Sunday listeners. While pastors can preach passionately about the peril of idolatry, ironically at the same time pastors can be wrestling with the idolatry of their own preaching. Pastors' hearts are idol factories too, and our preaching can become an idolatrous Sunday performance. The untold secret lurking inside the heart of many pastors is an ongoing struggle with envy of other pastors who have greater preaching skills and larger congregations. Pastors are often ranked internally and externally as successful by their upfront communication skills. Conference speaking opportunities and placement among plenary speakers along with sizes of honoraria also reinforce a success pecking order, stroking egos as well as eliciting envy from other pastors.

Many parishioners and faith communities encourage pastors down the perilous path of celebrity. I will never forget a particular time I was invited to speak at a multiday conference to be held at a church in another state. The church was both generous and gracious to pay for my family to join me. We arrived from the airport and pulled up to the church in our rental car. A big sign in bold letters greeted us. It read, "Let Tom Nelson Wow You!" At that point, my two children burst out in

uncontrollable laughter. All of us in the car knew that the church congregation was going to be sorely disappointed. They had invited the wrong speaker. Transparently, I am anything but a “wower,” yet I find that many well-meaning congregants and church leaders fuel the Sunday wow factor, reinforcing the perilous celebrity path. Is it any wonder that pastors’ roller coaster mental and emotional state of being on Monday is inextricably linked to the comments—both positive and negative—surrounding their Sunday performance?

The disordered love of the crowd’s applause is intoxicating and impairs pastoral flourishing. David French rightfully notes that celebrity pastors receive the “false blessing” that all celebrities do: “celebrity itself has its own charisma.”⁸ That is, people act differently around celebrities in exaggerated laughter, spellbound fascination with every word, and it produces a reality that is, “both exhilarating—as it feeds the ego—and exhausting.”⁹ And under the influence of this kind of applause, blurred vision hides the deceitfulness of the heart while bolstering the confidence in one’s own virtue.¹⁰ John the Baptist’s maxim deteriorates into, “I must increase.”¹¹ Though the disordered love of the crowd’s applause produces an impressive celebrity platform, it doesn’t take interest in compelling Christlike character. Equipping the church, then, inordinately focuses on the Sunday gathered church—the pastor’s platform—failing to more fully equip the scattered church for their Monday world.

Jesus is interested in something different. His restorative and commissioning words to Peter calling for a reordering of heart loves are both timeless and timely, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jn 21:15). A toxic celebrity culture is wreaking havoc in pastors’ lives, their families, on the church, and on its witness in the world. The heavy weight of pastors’ highly visible public platforms is much more than the depth of their ill-formed character can sustain. Jesus shatters any glimmer of celebrity leadership, reminding us the greatest among us will not be a celebrity, but a servant (Mk 10:42–43). Jesus does not offer shepherds a green room to pridefully bask in; instead he offers a cross to carry and a basin and towel to serve with.

The visionary pastor. “God has given me a vision!” These were the opening words declared by a Christian pastoral leader I knew as he began his persuasive appeal for a multiyear fundraising campaign. His vision was indeed grand, including the purchase of a large piece of pricey prime real estate and the early scale drawings of the magnificent buildings that would be erected on the land in the future. Many lofty words were uttered, how thousands of lives would be impacted for Christ in the city and around the world. Yet for that to happen, financial sacrifice and big faith would be needed for the entire faith community. A sense of excitement permeated the large room, trust was extended, financial pledges were made, but behind the visionary curtain more disturbing realities persisted. In an attempt to secure the pricey property, the nonprofit organization had overreached and overleveraged. Cash flow was on vapor. Employee benefits were cut. Payroll remained at high risk. Employee morale plummeted. The mission was being compromised, yet the leader’s grand vision trumped normal board prudence and critical dissent. Eventually things imploded, leaving behind a painful trail of disillusioned faith refugees fleeing from one more toxic faith visionary environment.

In my early years of pastoring, I heard a great deal about the essential role of vision within the spiritual leadership enterprise. When I crafted the initial ministry blueprint for the church plant I was leading, I found myself overly influenced by hyperbolic visionary language animated by large congregational numbers—*a church of five thousand in ten years*—and an even grander change-the-world transformation exclamation. In my heart of hearts, way too much of the motivation behind my visionary rhetoric was not about the mission of God in the world, but that I would be a successful pastor and lead a successful church. I regret this and I have needed to take this to the Lord in a spirit of repentance.

The importance of vision was often tied to a particular translation of one part of a single verse in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18 KJV).¹² When we place the entire verse in view, we note that the idea presented here is not some

human vision cast by spiritual leaders, but rather the truths of God's Word revealed to people. Later translations better capture the wisdom principle embedded in the text, framing the proper meaning as "revelation" or "prophetic revelation."¹³ The last part of the verse points to the "blessedness or happiness" of a people when they keep the law, that is, the revealed word of God.¹⁴ When a people do not have access to God's revealed word, they do "perish;" they do become "unrestrained." If we rightly apply the Proverbs principle to the shepherding pastoral role, then a primary role of spiritual leadership is to feed the sheep with the nourishing truths from Holy Scripture. Well-fed sheep are well-led sheep. The Proverbs writer is not advocating for spiritual leaders to conjure up a desired picture of the future, but rather to grasp the essential importance of the timeless truths of Holy Scripture for the flourishing of a community.

Tragically, not only has vision been misunderstood from a biblical perspective, there has been little reflection on the potential perils of vision both for the pastoral leader and the faith community. Ironically, pastors can too easily lose our way in our vision. Pastoral leadership training enthusiastically heralds the possibilities of vision but presents an eerie, deafening silence regarding the sizable downsides of the visionary pastor. Goal setting usurped by "visions" transform the power equation. A pastor friend of mine, who left a large and growing church with a self-proclaimed visionary leader, described the powerless position for those under the leader: the only person allowed to have credible, forward-thinking ideas is the visionary. Oversight boards can be hand-picked by visionary leaders and, instead of wisely stewarding the mission, they become enablers of the visionary. Visionaries become closed to true accountability and robust assessment; this inability to receive challenges often obscures their own embeddedness in contemporary values. Such a power differential flings open the door to abuse of power and reckless risk. Founding, entrepreneurial pastors are perhaps most in danger of potential abuse, but all pastors who embrace an impoverished visionary leadership paradigm are vulnerable. Of course, not all visionary leaders

go off the rails or become toxic, but the strong propensity over time is to head toward that direction.

Martyred German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced firsthand the destructive perils of visionary leadership in the rise of twentieth-century German nationalism and fascism. In his brilliant work framing the contours of a flourishing faith community, pastor Bonhoeffer points out the perilous path of the visionary pastoral leader:

God hates visionary dreaming, it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. . . . When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.¹⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer paints an ugly picture of pastoral visionary leadership driven by a vision of an idealized faith community. Pastors can easily fall into this trap, demanding a particular level of spiritual formation or a kind of utopian community that is devoid of a hopeful realism required for life together in the already, not-fully-yet moment of redemptive history. Visionary dreaming becomes more toxic when it moves beyond an idealized faith community to a grand future we strive to create—a grand future that is often fueled by cultural success norms in the bigger and the better, the more grand and spectacular, motivated not by the glory of God, but driven by the sizable ego and the glory of the visionary leader.

The rise and fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL ministry empire is one of the most tragic examples of visionary pastoral leadership that badly went off the rails. Much damage has been done to individual lives, to the church, and to our gospel witness; the damage continues to linger decades later. Analyzing the problems is not self-righteous finger-pointing but a lesson-learning exercise. A broken man, Jim Bakker was imprisoned in the Federal Penitentiary in Rochester, Minnesota, where he discovered the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer regarding the danger of visionary dreaming.

Jim Bakker, whose visionary dream became an unimaginable nightmare, wrote from a prison cell:

God had been showing me that one of my most tragic mistakes in life was allowing my vision of Heritage USA to become the focal point of PTL rather than keeping the gospel of Jesus Christ as our top priority. When I read Bonhoeffer's words, they seemed to leap off the pages at me. . . . Ouch! Bonhoeffer's words hit me right between the eyes. I did not like to see myself reflected on the pages, especially to think of myself as the destroyer of the very community I had hoped to build because of my love for my dream.¹⁶

Like so many, I looked up to a prominent leader and trusted him to be a person of integrity and impeccable Christian conduct. He was a gifted Christian speaker with a large, global vision of bringing Christian apologetics to an increasingly secular world. He had visited our congregation, equipping our faith community with the existential and philosophical underpinnings of our Christian faith. When I spent time with him, he would speak with great passion about the global vision his organization had to change the world. The author of several insightful books, I would often quote him in my sermons. I was most appreciative when he enthusiastically endorsed one of my books. When he died, I felt a sense of loss both personally and for the global church he had inspired and equipped. After he died, I wrote a tribute to him expressing my appreciation for what I truly believed was his well-lived life and impactful ministry. However, not long after his passing, reports increasingly came out that this visionary Christian leader had been living a duplicitous life, engaging in serious sexual misconduct and years of horrendous predatory abuse of women.¹⁷ I was simply devastated not only by his shocking, heartbreaking, and unthinkable, evil actions, but also by the entire organization and its board, which enabled this visionary leader to live a life of unaccountability and fostered an organizational culture that chastised anyone who would raise questions about matters of moral and financial integrity. Clearly there were many factors at work in this toxic visionary

environment, and it is a sober reminder for all of us who serve in spiritual leadership roles. The inconvenient truth is, visionary leaders and the environments cultivated around them are often seedbeds for a variety of abuses.¹⁸

The perilous path of the visionary leader is often paved with prideful distortion. Vision—with or without a “God told me” authority—can be deceptive. Vision can easily distort a pastor’s sense of self-importance and often fans vocational arrogance. Pastors are highly vulnerable to embrace the distortion that their specific callings are more important and more consequential to God and to God’s mission in the world than congregants’ callings throughout the week. Vision can lead to mission drift and drain energy and resources away from the primacy of spiritual formation and the local church’s primary disciple-making mission.

Jim Collins’ insight on leadership and effective companies has and continues to shape a great deal of thought about the leadership enterprise in the world. He points out the limitations of what he describes as the ego-driven “genius with a thousand helpers” model of leadership.¹⁹ Equally problematic in the nonprofit world is the visionary with a thousand parishioners. Unfortunately, this is often the profile of the pastoral leader that is held up as the model of effectiveness and faithfulness for other pastors to emulate.

Another problem often left unexplored is how burdensome the visionary model can be to the pastor who has embodied and embraced it as his or her leadership *modus operandi*. Creating a local church culture where the expectation of a faith community is to regularly receive a new and fresh vision of the future places enormous pressure on the visionary. Visionary pastors may not see themselves as needing to once again ascend Mount Sinai to receive the latest special revelation. However, the pressure-filled expectation of repeatedly discovering the new vision for the community is daunting and often a contributing factor for pastoral exhaustion, disillusionment, cynicism, and burnout.

As a pastor, I really enjoy my time with new people who are beginning to attend our local church. I love hearing the stories of their spiritual

journeys and how Christ is transforming their lives. One of my responsibilities in our newcomer gatherings is to articulate the mission and the culture of our church family. Usually in one form or another I am asked about the vision of our church. Though nuanced, my response is basically that there are no visionary leaders in our church, no grand guiding vision of a desired future. Instead, our vision as a faith community is the gospel vision Jesus gives us in Holy Scripture of the abundant life of intimacy, integrity, influence, and joy he invites us to experience as his apprentices. If we are going to be pastoral visionaries, this is the kingdom vision we must continually cast.

Rather than pursuing the perilous path of visionary leadership, a wiser path is to become the lead servant in a faith community. The lead servant seeks God's presence and future direction for a faith community in the context of a plurality of gifted local church leaders. Wise planning and taking bold steps of faith are a vital part of the pastoral leadership calling, but the primary vision we are to cast is the vision of the gospel life Jesus calls us to live in his kingdom reign, embodied within a local faith community in the manifest presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The vision pastors desperately need is not one of a humanized grand future, but a growing vision of the glory of our triune God. A grave peril for pastors is the seduction of accomplishment at the expense of intimacy. While celebrity pastors lose their way in disordered loves and visionary pastors in prideful distortions, lone ranger pastors get lost in their own isolation.

The lone ranger pastor. One story reveals the crisis of the lone ranger pastor. After I had finished speaking to a group of pastors on the dangers of pastoral isolation, a pastor approached me with droplets of tears on his face. His surfacing emotion and his transparent words immediately connected us at the heart level. Standing before me was a seasoned pastor who had faithfully served a local church for almost thirty years. Yet at the overwhelming realization, he could no longer ignore his own isolation. As I put my arms around him, words of heartache tumbled out of his weary soul. "For thirty years, I have done this alone, keeping my

arm's distance from others. I am going to wither and die without community." Wiping tears from his eyes, he assured me that his next step would be to reach out to another pastor in his community and pursue a transparent friendship. Before departing, we paused to pray that God would honor his courageous pursuit and provide that safe place of human connection, to know and be known by others.

Few vocations are more social in nature and people focused than the pastoral calling. The dripping irony is that surrounded by many people, pastors are often intensely lonely and socially isolated. The lone ranger pastor is one of the most harmful ways pastors can get lost in their callings. Pastoral isolation is a toxic seedbed for burnout and scandalous behavior. The damage done to pastors, their families, congregations, and the collective witness of the church is beyond description.

Matt Bloom is a leading researcher on clergy well-being. Clergy isolation from other clergy and congregational members along with a lack of close friendships outside the church is a serious obstacle to pastoral wholeness, health, and longevity. Bloom's research points to the essential need for clergy social support, what he describes as "backstage support." He writes, "Studies conducted in more than forty countries around the world have found that positive, caring, nurturing relationships are among the most important conditions for wellbeing . . . the absence of strong social support can have devastating effects on our health and wellbeing."²⁰

Extensive research by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byasse regarding clergy health points to a corollary connection tying excessive stress to pastoral isolation. While these researchers avoid strong prescriptive pronouncements, they do point out that social isolation is highly detrimental and to be avoided at all costs. They offer wise words to all pastors, but particularly those who are in the early years of their calling. "It is essential to start cultivating friendships early, perhaps while you are in seminary or with people you knew 'before,' and then continue to nurture those friendships. Consider having an annual getaway with one or two friends."²¹

Donald Guthrie, Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and their research team have conducted in-depth studies on pastoral well-being and resilience. The research points to pastoral isolation as a main concern:

We are saying that it is easy for pastors, fearing what people might think, to become isolated from others. By so doing, they fail to grow spiritually. As one pastor put it, “I have a longing to be shepherded by someone else, but a fear to actually ask someone into my life.” Again the themes weave together: isolation is bad self-care and poor leadership as well.²²

In a research study by the Barna Group, 52 percent of pastors say they have felt very lonely and isolated from others in a three-month period.²³ Clearly there is increasing evidence and a growing concern regarding pastoral isolation. For pastors to flourish over the long haul, pastors must move from the gravitational pull of relational and institutional isolation to greater relational connectedness. Yet another pernicious harm is lurking in the dark shadows of pastoral isolation—prideful self-sufficiency.

Consider the case of Alex Honnold. It may have been one of the most daring and courageous climbs in human history. On June 3, 2017, Honnold climbed El Capitan in the Yosemite Valley on the Freerider route without rope or protection. In three hours and fifty-six minutes, he ascended the three-thousand-foot granite wall, reaching the summit safe and sound.²⁴ It is hard not to be in dumbfounded awe of Honnold’s historic feat. As someone who is afraid of heights, I shudder to think of standing on top of a three-thousand-foot precipitous drop, let alone climbing it like a human fly without any safety gear. Yet this image of the free solo climber speaks loudly to the self-imposed isolation of pastoral life and leadership. There is a pervasive and prideful self-sufficient paradigm of the pastor as a solo climber, untethered to other leaders, without the ground support and safety ropes of community. A documentary on Honnold revealed that he lived his life pretty much the same way he climbed, without important and

life-giving relational connections with others. From his nonnurturing childhood to his isolated adulthood, Honnold often kept at arm's lengths others who longed to connect with him in a deepening relationship and friendship.²⁵

Holy Scripture tells us God created each of us for relational connection with himself and others. God even declared it was not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18). We cannot be well alone, or be truly joyful alone, nor can we work well alone. We are also redeemed with community in mind and are called to be a part of a local church community (Mt 16:18). Pastors are not only shepherds; they must always keep in mind they are sheep too. Pastors who flourish live before an audience of One, but they serve as chief servants among a community of many.

When we look into the New Testament, we get a powerful glimpse of flourishing and resilient shepherding leadership. There is not a hint of the self-sufficient pastor free soloing. Instead, we see a compelling picture of the essential importance of intimacy with God and the close relational connections with others.

The apostle Paul provided leadership not in self-sufficient isolation but in the context of and in collaboration with other leaders. In the book of Acts, Luke lists seven of Paul's closest traveling companions: Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus (Acts 20:4). We see not a hint of free soloing leadership isolation. Later in the book of Acts, Luke showcases, with almost a sense of literary amazement, the close relational connection and deep affection flowing in Paul's farewell address to the leaders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38). It is not incidental that Paul's final greeting recorded in his second letter to pastor Timothy lists nine individual names of his dear friends: Prisca, Aquila, Onesiphorous, Erastus, Trophimus, Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, and Claudia (2 Tim 4:19-21). Paul teaches us by his life and words that spiritual leadership may at times feel lonely, but it is never a solitary enterprise.

Henri Nouwen speaks words of wisdom:

When Jesus speaks about shepherding, he does not want us to think about a brave, lonely shepherd who takes care of a large flock of obedient sheep. In many ways, he makes it clear that ministry is a communal and mutual experience. . . . I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone.²⁶

Pastors can and do get lost in navigating their callings. All too often pastors pursue the perilous paths of the celebrity, the visionary, and the lone ranger. So how do lost shepherds find their way back home? This is where our attention must turn next.

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