

A Healing Plan for those Wounded by the Church

Bring 'Em Back ALIVE



Dave Burchett

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In loving memory of my father,
Paul Burchett,
who went to be with Jesus on February 6, 2004.



God's Word consistently paints an image of God as our Father.

Many people struggle with that picture because they can only relate to an angry, dominating, or selfish father. I thank God I was blessed with a father who gave me a clear image of how I can relate to God as my heavenly Father.

C O N T E N T S

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

Part I: The Heartbreak of a Scattered Flock

Naming the Pain That Drives Us Apart

1 Wounded and Abandoned 7
Caring Enough to Share Another's Pain

2 Lethargic Lambs 29
Waking Up the Flock

3 Feud for Thought 51
Uniting for the Mission

4 The Heart of a Shepherd 69
Serving Where We Are Called

5 Never Leave a Lamb Behind! 89
Mobilizing a Search-and-Rescue Team

Part II: The Wounded Lamb

A Plan for Healing and Restoration

6 Lambentations 115
Encountering Hope in Our Good Shepherd

7 Your Bleating Heart (Will Tell on You) 139
Letting Go of Victimhood

Contents

8	You Haven't Got Time for the Pain	157
	<i>Choosing to Be Healed</i>	
9	Forgiveness Is Not Optional	173
	<i>Finding Supernatural Freedom</i>	
Part III: Reunited and It Feels So Good		
	<i>Sticking Together—Forever</i>	
10	Repeat After Me: "I Have the Right to Nothing"	193
	<i>Taking Responsibility for Ourselves and One Another</i>	
11	The Ultimate Gift of Gratitude	211
	<i>Committing to the Cause</i>	
Notes	217

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Bring 'Em Back

A L I V E

I N T R O D U C T I O N

I don't generally receive spiritual insights during television broadcasts of women's basketball. I suspect that hardly makes me unique. But inspiration once came clearly and forcefully to me during a telecast of an NCAA women's basketball tournament game in Boulder, Colorado.

Let me set the stage for you. I am a television sports director. I call the camera shots that dictate what you see on your screen at home. Yes, I am the faceless guy whom armchair quarterbacks yell at when they want to see this shot or that reaction. On this night an undermanned (or should I say underpersoned?) Louisiana State University women's team was battling Colorado. "Battling" was the right word because LSU had only seven players dressed to play. Five key players sat injured on the bench in civilian clothes.

I selected some shots of the tired players on the court. "LSU has fought gamely with only seven players on the active roster," the announcers reported. I took a shot of the five players in street clothes. "But when these five talented contributors are nursed back to health, and you add a group of skilled recruits, LSU is going to be a powerful force next year." Then it hit me.

In the church, when injured and wounded players are sidelined, it is easy to ignore them and simply concentrate on recruiting new ones. This doesn't make a lot of sense. Let's do the math on my basketball example: Next year, if LSU returns seven players, heals the five who are injured, and brings in five recruits, they'll have seventeen

able-bodied players on their roster. But if they discard the wounded, they'll have only twelve players to enter the battle.

I have watched dear friends limp away from my church “team” and have realized that my life and the body life of my church would never be quite the same. Yet no one—myself included—has gone after them. I sometimes wonder if we throw the term “church family” around a bit too loosely, because surely most of us would pursue and attempt to heal wounded members of our genetic family who wandered away.

When wounded Christians leave the church, we lose the value of their experience, skills, and wisdom. How much depth have we, the collective church, lost by not aggressively seeking to find and heal our wounded lambs?

It is not a coincidence that Scripture uses the imagery of sheep and shepherds to describe our relationships both to God and to one another. In the gospel of Matthew, we read an example from the ministry of Jesus:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (9:36, NIV)

I see God's sense of humor in His analogy. Sheep are not the brightest bulbs in the lamp store. One survey of innate animal intelligence cites sheep as being dumber than pigs, rabbits, hamsters, pigeons, and even skunks. Sheep are among the neediest of the domesticated animals, requiring constant and vigilant attention. They use their “superior” brains to repeatedly wander off the safe path into great danger, where they are essentially defenseless.

Because society has changed a bit in the past couple of millennia, we are liable to miss the nuances and power of the verses in Scripture that refer to us as God's lambs. We will explore the meaningful and important relationship between sheep and their shepherd in this book. Shepherds are totally responsible for the survival and well-being of the flock, yet the sheep seem oblivious to that constant and loving concern.

This book will examine the roles and responsibilities of the shepherds (church leaders), the flock (church congregation), and the sheep (you) when one of God's lambs is wounded. We will take an honest look at how God asks you to respond when you are the wounded lamb. And we will look at the model of the Good Shepherd (Jesus) to see how health can be restored to the wounded and how the church can be restored to wholeness.

My goal is simply to bring stray sheep back into the fellowship of other believers, an effort I will call reevangelism. Please understand that I am not talking about believers losing their salvation. I am specifically referring to the idea of returning those who have made a commitment to faith but are no longer part of a fellowship. We need to restore the wandering and injured sheep and heal them, emotionally and spiritually. And we must not ignore the uncomfortable fact that many injured lambs sit near us every Sunday. Even if they have not physically wandered off, many Christians are emotionally absent from the body of Christ, and their untended wounds are rendering them ineffective for the kingdom. They need our compassionate help too.

Imagine what could happen if we restored the powerful influence of once-committed believers and joined it with the energy of the new followers the Holy Spirit calls daily to the Lord's flock. Perhaps with that combined strength we would be more effective in our efforts to

establish vibrant flocks that effectively feed and tend each sheep, as well as attract new lambs to the circle. Out in the fields, successful shepherds tend the wounded, seek the wanderers, and welcome new lambs through the miracle of birth. We Christians should do the same by pursuing the abandoned, healing and restoring our injured, and adding new lambs through the miracle of spiritual rebirth.

My prayer for how God would use this book is illustrated in a riveting scene from the movie *Black Hawk Down*. In a devastating battle, the troops have the option of escaping to safety or staying to rescue their comrades. They choose to endanger their own lives because they “never leave a man behind.” Their love of country and commitment to one another prevents them from taking the easier route.

We Christians, however, are often too willing to take the easy way out and leave our brothers and sisters behind. But surely the love of God, His liberating grace, and His commitment to His bride, the church, gives us no choice but to care about and seek the lost and the wandering, the wounded, and the abandoned lambs. It is my prayer that as Christians we will come to the conviction that we must never abandon members of the flock. We are to pursue those who have been hurt or who have made bad decisions, and we have a responsibility to restore them to health, not compound their injuries. We have a call to seek those wandering lambs with the overwhelming love of Jesus. I am going to challenge you to prayerfully ask God to give you a desire to seek, comfort, and bring 'em back alive!



-Part I-

**THE HEARTBREAK OF
A SCATTERED FLOCK**

Naming the Pain That Drives Us Apart

WOUNDED AND ABANDONED

Caring Enough to Share Another's Pain

The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.

James A. Garfield

After my first book, *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People*, was published, I braced myself for a barrage of angry criticism. I hoped those who picked up the book would honor the request of Malcolm Cowley, who asked his readers to “Be kind and considerate with your criticism.... It’s just as hard to write a bad book as it is to write a good book.”

In some ways it might have been easier to deal with mail from judgmental people telling me where my eternal destination is (down), how to get there (straight), and how stupid I am (very). But as He usually does, God had something different in mind for me. I still open my e-mail with fear and trembling, but for the most part my

inbox has been filled with a more painful type of message. Again and again readers write to tell me their heartbreaking stories of hurt and devastation at the hands of Christians and the church.

Chased Out of the Pasture

I try to answer every letter I get, and I hope to continue that as long as I can (or until people actually start buying my books). I try to offer a thoughtful response instead of a form letter, but tough questions with elusive answers sometimes make reaching this goal difficult. I must admit I was taken aback when I read this question:

My husband, children and I have been brutalized by the church. I guess I understand why bad Christians do bad things, but why do good Christians let them? I would appreciate any comments you would have.

What a great question! Why *do* so many of us lack the courage to get involved when our brothers and sisters suffer from the unfair, hurtful, and sinful actions of others? Anybody out there care to take that one?

Another reader poured out her anguish:

Where is the grace? Where is the mercy? People have been so quick to point fingers everywhere but at themselves. People have been more concerned with the righteousness of their cause than in giving consideration to the righteousness of their actions.

God gives this kind of wisdom to His children through suffering. What an insightful summation of the pride that wells up in so many churchgoers driving them to prove, above all else, that they are “right.” This same reader made another profound observation:

I know that mistakes have been made, but they have been made on both sides. (I hate that term, because if we are one, how can there be sides?)

Why must there be a “winner” in spiritual disputes? Isn't the very essence of our faith to love one another in a supernatural way? Part of the greatest commandment, according to our Lord, is to love our neighbors as ourselves, and He wasn't talking about just the folks who live on our block. Is there anything distinctive about a faith that prompts us to love only those who agree with us? That is not the faith that Jesus Christ came to this planet to establish. (Understand that I am not talking about disputes concerning fundamental doctrine. There are absolutes. The choice of an assistant choir director is not one of those.)

I received a copy of another letter that was slipped under my pastor's door by an angry churchgoer. He had a dispute with the pastor and shared this edifying and uplifting message:

Shame on your family and all the people remaining in the church for siding with you. You and all of them are Hell bound!

Since I was included in the “all of them” group, I was surprised but not the least bit concerned by this stealth prophet's prediction of my own eternal destiny. He went on:

The Heartbreak of a Scattered Flock

Make no mistake about it, God knows where you are! He sees you in this time and you need fear him, he has the power to kill you and send your soul to Hell. Ever since the day you came, I knew you were unholy and on your way to burn in the Lake of Fire.

I'm sure you have detected by now the theme of our little essay here. It's easy to see why so many sheep in the flock flee the pasture and keep on running. What did the author of the above missive hope to accomplish? His portrayal of God playing a cosmic whack-a-mole game with churchgoers who (in his judgment) sin is reprehensible and damaging.

Yet another letter details how a church made a painful situation worse:

My husband and I left our church after five years of guilt-ridden manipulation. Our son, who has a disability, was excluded and singled out within that church. Currently we do not go to church.

This family, which needs the nurturing of a loving church, has instead been driven away.

Another former church attendee wrote:

[The situation] destroyed my faith in the church, as well as my heart to serve. Funny thing was that the person refused to accept that he had wounded me. My side of the story was not seen as valid at all. I left the church. I have not found the courage to go to another yet.

This is just a small sampling of the letters I have received since the publication of *Bad Christians*. Though I am merely an author of a modestly successful book, hundreds of hurt people have contacted me to tell their stories. (You can read many of these on my Web site, www.daveburchett.com.) No doubt countless other people have either quietly wandered away from the church or chosen to live a “safe” and anonymous Christian life hidden within the flock. Both the lost sheep and those effectively crippled by other Christians are heart-breaking tragedies. Christians who do not have the freedom to be vulnerable have only limited potential to grow...or to be healed.

One Is the Loneliest Number

It was never my intent to become burdened for the Lord’s wounded and abandoned sheep. But I have come to care deeply about those who have been chased off as well as those who are hurt—sometimes at the hands of others, sometimes by their own doing—and are still barely hanging on.

In his wonderful book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller talks about the urgent predicament of cast sheep. *Cast* is an Old English term for a sheep that wanders off, gets itself turned over on its back, and cannot get upright. (Remember, not every little lamb can be valedictorian of the Animal Planet Network.) If not found quickly, the cast sheep might die.

Shepherds will tell you an interesting tidbit about sheep that become lost and cast. Often they are the fittest and finest of the flock. Yet they make that one mistake and find themselves and their world literally turned upside down. The parallel is striking for Christians: No matter how “mature” we believers might be, we are always in

danger of flipping ourselves over. We must never think that we are above stumbling or beyond the reaches of temptation.

I shudder when I realize that King David, described in Scripture as a “man after God’s own heart,” committed adultery and then deceitfully and successfully plotted an innocent man’s murder. Those deplorable actions resulted from one spectacular moment of weakness. Likewise, during this past year, a Christian acquaintance destroyed a thirty-five-year career and good reputation with a series of terrible and ungodly decisions. I am not above such a fate. And neither are you.

Whether chased off or cast by their own doing, many once-vibrant followers of Christ need to be loved, healed, and restored. Noted evangelical researcher George Barna made a sobering observation in his book *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* (formerly titled *Re-Churching the Unchurched*): “Relatively few unchurched people are atheists. Most of them call themselves Christian and have had a serious dose of church life in the past.”¹ Apparently that “serious dose of church life”—as opposed to the healthy “body life” that Christ had in mind—has proved debilitating. In a related research report, Mr. Barna found that there are up to seventy million unchurched in our country; a staggering ten million of those are born-again Christian adults.² I suspect that a good percentage of those unchurched souls are wounded and abandoned lambs.

Some readers might wonder if the real problem lies with the wounded. Are they too sensitive? Aren’t selfishness and pride the real reasons that people leave the church? Are they just weak? Aren’t believers responsible for their own actions? Why don’t these “wounded” just grow up spiritually and find a church somewhere? Some of those are fair questions, and we will discuss them throughout the book.

Those of us who have never experienced a debilitating wound,

however, should be extremely careful not to judge those who have. If we have been spared pain at the hands of the flock, a fellow sheep, or a shepherd, it is by the grace of God alone. I have stumbled many times; only God has saved me from a fall. I have recovered from the wounds I have received, but I say that with no pride, only grateful realization. Those of us who are still standing shouldn't feel spiritually superior to those who are not.

Seeking the One

I love the way Jesus told stories to drive home a point. One of the parables He told was about a lost sheep and the shepherd's response to it.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I think God's sense of humor shines through His use of sheep to represent you and me. And comparing spiritual leaders to shepherds must have offended the pompous Pharisees (maybe even the sometimes-prideful disciples), because at the time shepherds were held in low esteem at Jerusalem office mixers.

The parable is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. A man who owns a hundred sheep discovers one is missing. Many of us think of this story as an illustration of how we are to evangelize non-Christians. I'd like you to read it with our wounded and abandoned lambs in mind.

Look at it this way. If someone has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders off, doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go after the one? And if he finds it, doesn't he make far more over it than over the ninety-nine who stay put? Your Father in heaven feels the

same way. He doesn't want to lose even one of these simple believers. (Matthew 18:12-14)

Some background is valuable here. First of all, most shepherds had small flocks, and one of their responsibilities was to count the sheep at the end of each day. By doing so, the shepherd would immediately know if one was missing. Jesus's contemporaries would also have known that once a sheep realized it was separated from the flock, it would simply lie down and refuse to move (much like a teenager). The only way for a sheep to be returned to the flock was for the shepherd to go find it and carry it back.

I find it noteworthy that lost sheep weren't expected to go looking for the shepherd; he went looking for the sheep. The lost sheep's entire contribution to the situation was to wander off, get lost, and then lounge around waiting to be restored to the flock.

Sheep need constant attention. More than any other domesticated animal, sheep that are not supervised and cared for have a tendency to wander off and die. Just like our woolly counterparts, Christians are a needy species. We tend to wander off (especially when we're hurt), and we often don't make any effort to return.

Knowing all of this about sheep, the shepherd goes off to find that one lost critter, leaving the ninety-nine behind. Does that mean the ninety-nine don't matter? No; it was common practice for two to three shepherds to tend a flock, and those listening to Jesus's parable would have known that. But it is clear that the head shepherd, leaving the rest of the flock in the care of his helpers, takes immediate action to find the lost sheep.

My first and admittedly hopeful response to this passage was that the onus of finding the wandering sheep might be on the shoulders

of the head shepherd. At worst, I might have to baby-sit the flock until the shepherd returned. I was wrong. This parable is one of several in which Jesus exposed the lack of concern that the hypocritical and legalistic Pharisees displayed for the spiritually lost. And I think we, too, can extract from this parable a contemporary application for seeking the one who is wounded.

Mini-Shepherds in Mega-Flocks

When a flock gets enormous, like so many churches today, the head shepherd cannot possibly count his sheep every night. The sad reality is that the contemporary church shepherd hasn't even met many of his sheep. So it becomes the responsibility of the healthy sheep in the flock to become "small-group shepherds" who regularly count their circle of sheep and—here comes the important part—who care enough to find out what has happened to those who are wandering, wounded, or cast.

I think it is interesting that the parable does not say "when" the shepherd finds the lost sheep there will be great rejoicing. This happens only "if" the sheep is found. There are no guarantees that we will find the lost sheep. So why bother? Because seeking the lost sheep is an act of obedience to God. Caring about them is an acting out of the love that He commands us to extend to one another. The prophet Ezekiel spoke about how God will seek His sheep:

As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms. (Ezekiel 34:12)

Clearly God cares when one of His sheep wanders away. So we must care as well. We have a responsibility as members of God's flock to seek the sheep who become separated from it.

In the parable Jesus told, it doesn't matter whether the sheep that wanders off is weak or not as valuable as the other sheep. There is no indication that the prize lamb from the Galilean County Fair generated more search-and-rescue zeal than an ugly little sheep with tattered wool. There is no suggestion that the shepherd should not or would not follow after a lamb that got lost as the result of its own foolish actions. In all likelihood (and I say this knowing how bright sheep tend to be), getting lost was a self-inflicted act of carelessness to begin with. Even so, the shepherd dropped everything to find that lost sheep.

You will notice that the shepherd didn't merely pray for God to lead the sheep back home. You will also note that the shepherd in our parable didn't ask the Lord to bring another shepherd along who would do this job for him. He also didn't speak ill of the creature and declare that the sheep could find its own way back if it cared to. Neither did the shepherd rejoice that his problem sheep had finally left, and now he could give his undivided attention to tending the good sheep. Nope. The shepherd went out and tried to find the lost sheep. And if the shepherd did find that lost one and brought it home, there was great rejoicing.

Welcoming Arms

Jesus's parable mentions the joy of restoring the one lost sheep that had wandered away. I realize that no joy in our faith equals that of seeing a new convert come to salvation in Christ. I would like to sug-

gest, however, that a very close second should be welcoming a one-time devoted follower of Jesus back into the fellowship of the flock.

The story of the prodigal son is a beautiful example of how God is always waiting with open arms and ready forgiveness to restore His wandering lambs. If we desire to be like Jesus, we should follow that example and welcome them when they return.

The story is familiar: The prodigal demands his inheritance and, leaving his family, squanders it all. When he realizes his tragic mistake, he comes slinking back, expecting a severe and painful rebuke from his father. I would suspect that many wandering believers hesitate to return to the flock because they fear such a severe rebuke from other Christians—and their fears are often well founded.

The words of the prodigal son reveal his sadness as well as his fear of rejection. He knows that he has messed up royally, and he knows that whatever justice he will receive is deserved. Herein lies another key lesson for us: Most people know when they have erred. They don't need our help in realizing that fact. They do need our help to *recover* from the consequences of that bad judgment. Pastor Rick Warren once said that “most people probably know how bad they are, but they need to hear how good they can become.”³

You can hear the desolation in the son's spirit as he speaks:

“I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.” He got right up and went home to his father.

When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: “Father,

The Heartbreak of a Scattered Flock

I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you;
I don't deserve to be called your son ever again."

But the father wasn't listening. (Luke 15:18-22)

What an awesome description of how the father had already granted forgiveness. The son's humble return revealed the son's heart to the father, and words weren't even necessary. And this is a picture of how God has already forgiven us when we take that first step to repent and seek His forgiveness:

He was calling to the servants, "Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" And they began to have a wonderful time. (Luke 15:22-24)

So many people out there have been given up for lost. They could be found, healed, and returned. If we could only begin to communicate that we are willing to accompany them on the road back, forgive them, love them, and celebrate their return.

Scripture reveals that not everyone will be so thrilled to see the wanderers come back:

The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said,

“Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!”
(Luke 15:28-30)

Doesn’t the older brother’s response sound natural? “I have been the responsible one. I have not caused any problems. I have not wasted my inheritance, yet you throw a party for *him*.”

Western ideas of fairness can too easily distort the grace, patience, and sovereign plan of God. How many times have I questioned what God is doing or thought that something He decreed isn’t fair? The older son got caught—as I sometimes do—in a “rights” mentality that I will discuss in depth in chapter 10. Nevertheless, both were sons of the same father, and both received exactly what they had been promised. Still the older son thought his good behavior merited better treatment than his prodigal brother received. Surely his righteousness deserved a bit more consideration! Isn’t that mind-set easy to fall into?

I hope the Holy Spirit will change our “older-brother” hearts and give us hearts to seek and find those lost, wounded, and wandering lambs. I hope He will give us an undeniable desire to bring back those who have not been so fortunate as we...and then maybe even throw a big party to celebrate their return:

His father said [to the older brother], “Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful

time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!"
(Luke 15:31-32)

Body Politics

Most of us would gladly seek to restore *some* people to the body of Christ. These are the people we connect with, like, and miss when they leave. Honestly, though, we would be just as happy if others found a different flock to call home, not because it would be better for their growth, but because we would prefer their not being around to bother us.

Yet Paul used the human body to illustrate how important even the less glamorous body parts are to our own function. You might think your big toe is not important until you break it; then you realize how vital that overlooked appendage is to everyday activities like walking. Paul made his argument to the church at Corinth:

Yes, the body has many parts, not just one part. If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. And what would you think if you heard an ear say, "I am not part of the body because I am only an ear, and not an eye"? Would that make it any less a part of the body? Suppose the whole body were an eye—then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything?

But that isn't the way God has made us. He has made many parts for our bodies and has put each part just where he wants it. What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! So he has made many parts, but still there is only one body....

Now here is what I am trying to say: All of you together are the one body of Christ and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:14-20,27, TLB)

Clearly, every part of the body matters. Who am I to look in disdain at a member of the body that I think is not important? I find that I can easily serve and be patient with those I like. But my heart is exposed when I have to listen to someone who gives me more details than I want to hear. Or when I have to decide whether or not to minister to someone whose personality grates on me. Do I have much of an argument when I say that I don't want to restore or help heal someone because that person "annoys" me?

Scripture makes it clear that every part of the body is important. Nowhere can I find that it is my prerogative to attempt to alter the makeup of the body. Yet our treatment of wounded sheep can constitute a subtle bit of such spiritual subterfuge within the flock. (Sometimes these same actions are responsible for the wounding in the first place.) Perhaps, for example, we decide to ostracize someone who doesn't share our vision, hoping that person will take the hint and move on. Or maybe we make life a little uncomfortable for an injured lamb by creating a chilly atmosphere. And perhaps, worst of

all, we make a fellow believer's life miserable by recruiting other sheep to our side of an issue.

I have to catch myself when I start thinking that I have the blueprint for how God should configure His church. Not only do I not know what each lamb can contribute to His plan, but I have no idea how God may develop a person for future service. For example, there was scant evidence in the early portions of my life that God might be preparing me to write Christian books. The truth is, the potential I see in others is often only a limited and dim vision of God's plans and hopes for them. I fear that we will be heartbroken to someday see how we Christians selfishly (or, at best, thoughtlessly) thwarted the potential that our fellow sheep possessed.

Keith Green was one of the pioneers of the contemporary Christian music movement. He once said that "it's time to quit playing church and start being the church."⁴ Part of the way we can start "being the church" is by caring about *everyone* in the body, not just the humorous, the attractive, the wealthy, and the talented. God has placed every single person in each church for a reason, and it is not our job to evaluate who should be in or out of our particular flock.

It is clearly God's heart for *all* His wounded and wandering sheep to be found and returned to fellowship with the flock. Christ punctuated this truth by summing up: "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:14, NIV).

"Does Anyone Care?"

We are not dealing with new issues here, folks. Remember what Paul wrote to the Romans:

Not everybody is ready for this, ready to see and hear and act. Isaiah asked what we all ask at one time or another: “Does anyone care, God? Is anyone listening and believing a word of it?” (Romans 10:16)

I would venture to guess that the very fact you are reading this book indicates you care and are willing to listen. I believe that millions of followers of Christ care about the others in the flock, but many just don't know how to show it.

“Does anyone care, God?” The plaintive cry of Isaiah hangs in the air today. Why don't we care more consistently? Sometimes we are self-centered. Perhaps we are unaware of others' needs. Sometimes we simply don't know what to do. One of the real dangers I personally face is that I sometimes adopt an attitude that says, “I'm okay; you're on your own.” That works out pretty well (from my self-centered view) until I need someone who cares about me. Jesus made a simple yet earth-shakingly profound comment recorded in the book of Matthew:

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being “care-full,” you find yourselves cared for. (5:7)

It is so easy for me to read the words of Jesus and then magnificently fail to understand how His wisdom applies to my daily existence. Oh, I can't give you a 100 percent guarantee that when you care, every single person will return that care. But I can guarantee that your percentages will improve dramatically, and I can throw in the added bonus of promised blessings from God. It is so incredibly simple. And since I am capable of being incredibly simple, let's review Jesus's words again:

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being "care-full," you find yourselves cared for.

My prayer is that the Lord will give every reader of this book a caring heart for the wounded and abandoned. In the chapters to come, I will lay out a plan for finding, healing, uprighting, and restoring them. The injured sheep out there present a vast, untapped resource for the church. We could contribute mightily to the cause of Christ if only we cared enough to reach out and help the injured. Some of them are cast and desperately need us to help set them upright quickly. Many are simply waiting (maybe even stubbornly) for someone to care enough to seek them out. Many are injured and still in the flock, at least for now. Some simply need to be shown the way back to the safety of the flock. Others cannot or will not be returned. But I am asking you to evaluate your heart toward wounded and abandoned lambs.

Perhaps you are a wounded lamb looking for a little hope, seeking just one good reason to return. I pray that when you close this book, you will have realized there are brothers and sisters in Christ who *do* care for you, and that you will find hope enough to return to the flock.

No "I" in Team

I live in the sports world and am fascinated by what makes a vibrant and winning team. So I'm going to share a truth from sports that offers a significant lesson to the church of Jesus Christ: A great team realizes how important every person is to the success of the organization. I can also tell you that I have rarely (and I mean rarely) seen a

championship team in which every member of the team gets along perfectly with every teammate. Even the best-performing sports teams feature players who don't enjoy the company of all their teammates. Some players find a teammate or two (or more) to be irritating—or worse. Some team members never hang out together and wouldn't even consider doing so. But when that team learns how to unite for the cause of winning, something magical happens on the field or court. Petty annoyances are forgotten in their united effort to win.

Both winning and losing teams are hodgepodes of people with different backgrounds, educational levels, personality traits, and talents. But winners allow their common goal to transcend the insignificant differences, while losers allow those same traits to diminish the team's performance. One losing baseball team's lack of unity was revealed after the game when there were twenty-five players and twenty-five cabs.

Isn't it more than a little sad that we members of God's team allow meaningless differences to short-circuit the most important challenge in our lives? What could be more important than representing to the world the saving grace of Jesus Christ? When I accepted the unmerited gift of salvation by grace and began to advertise that fact, I raised the bar on how I must live my life. I won't be flawless in that effort, but choosing to live with a mediocre faith is not going to enable me to get the job done. We believers need to love, seek, return, and accept every member of our flock as we pursue the common goal of winning people to the wonderful, liberating message of Jesus Christ. It is up to the Coach to develop the plays. My job is to show up ready to be a part of the team and to contribute in whatever way He chooses to use me.

So I have a challenge for those of you who are part of the flock. I would like to enroll you in the Shepherd's search-and-rescue team.

Our aim: to restore the hurting and abandoned lambs both within and outside the church buildings. The remainder of this section will be devoted to exploring how our team can excel in that purpose.

All of us can take inspiration from Paul's words to the church at Philippi:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. (Philippians 2:1-4)

God's Word is clear to me. His love has made a difference in my life. Being in the family of believers does mean something to me. And my marching orders seem pretty straightforward. He cares, and so must I. And, for the sake of the body of Christ, so must you.

— For Reflection and Discussion —

1. What responsibilities does a Christian have to seek and attempt to restore people who have been wounded by the church?
2. Read Luke 15:11-32. What applications to the process of restoring wounded lambs can you find in the story of the prodigal son?

3. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the physical body to illustrate our roles as members of Christ's body. Why do you think we tend to devalue some people and/or some roles in the church? What can we do to reverse this kind of attitude?
4. Is it a reasonable goal for every person in the church to like every other person? Is that necessary in order for a church to flourish? Explain.
5. Read Philippians 2. Write down five instructions for life in the community of Christ.
6. Think of someone you know who has left the flock. Make a commitment to pray for that person. Ask God to show you, as you proceed through this book, how you might be instrumental in bringing him or her back.