

**PASTOR ABUSERS**  
*When Sheep Attack Their Shepherd*

© Kent Crockett & Mike Johnston

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## A Word from the Authors

If you are a pastor who is experiencing turmoil with members of your congregation, we recommend that you do everything in your power to resolve the dispute. If you and your adversaries are willing to work through your differences, many areas of disagreement can be settled.

Unfortunately, many people don't want reconciliation. Saul never wanted to make peace with David. A book on conflict resolution never would have helped Paul get along with those who were plotting to kill him. If you have already tried every effort to make peace, and those who oppose you won't reciprocate, you need a different set of instructions. Our book is a *survival manual* to show you what to do.

An abused wife who has been beaten by her husband doesn't need more advice on what she can do to make him happy. She needs to know how to protect herself. A pastor who is being abused by members of his congregation also needs to know how to survive and protect his family.

The stories in this book are true. We interviewed dozens of abused pastors for this project and we've let them tell their stories in their own words. Their names have been changed but the testimonies are accurate.

The pastors we interviewed represent a wide variety of denominations from different states in America, yet the details of how they were abused by church members were uncannily similar. Whenever we talked with an abused pastor, he typically gave us three or four more names of other ministers who had been unjustly fired or forced out of their churches. We collected far more names than we were able to interview.

We also sought to only interview ministers who were known to be men of integrity and above reproach. The harassment they received wasn't due to them being immoral, unethical, or cruel dictators. They were innocent shepherds who were maliciously persecuted by mean-spirited members of their own congregations. Many of them are no longer pastors but are now working secular jobs.

As you read these ministers' shocking testimonies, keep in mind that vast majority of parishioners are friendly people who support their pastor. In most churches, the people who attack the pastor comprise only four percent of the congregation, or just seven to ten people. Although they are a minority, they are more powerful than the majority, making them a pastor's worst nightmare.

Can anything be done to stop them? How widespread is this problem? What can a pastor do when he is under attack? Why won't his supporters speak up for him? What are his options if he is fired or forced out of his church? We will answer all those questions in this book.

We spent many hours interviewing pastors who had been through this horrible experience and included their disturbing quotes in every chapter of the book. We were shocked that pastors from different parts of the country who didn't know each other were telling us the same stories.

We also share from our own personal experiences of being attacked. Because we have co-written this book, we have added our names in the footnotes so the reader can identify which author is telling his personal story.

We hope that you will find strength and encouragement as you read this book, realizing that you are not alone in suffering for the work of the Lord.

Kent Crockett and Mike Johnston

## Chapter 1

### The Secret Church Scandal

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves.” (Matt. 10:16)

At age twenty-six, one of the most brilliant men in Colonial America, Jonathan Edwards, became pastor of a church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Five years later, he became a leading voice in what later came to be known as the Great Awakening. He was considered America’s first and possibly greatest theologian. His powerful sermons and books stirred the colonies. Many thousands were converted to Christ during his ministry.

What you may not know about Jonathan Edwards is—his own church voted to fire him! Unbelievably, someone in his congregation spearheaded the termination of a man God was using to revive an entire nation. Edwards was left to care for his wife and ten children.

We’ve all heard stories about abusive pastors; false shepherds who are despicable, domineering, and manipulative. They treat their congregations harshly. They might be having an affair, or using offerings for personal gain and lavish lifestyles. These cruel, unrepentant pastors are a disgrace to the church and need to be held accountable and terminated.

But you probably haven’t heard about a different kind of church scandal. Newspapers don’t print stories about this injustice. Even most church people are ignorant about the disgrace taking place right under their noses. But ask any pastor who has served in two or three congregations and he can tell you more horror stories than you care to hear—if you can get him to talk about them.

The secret church scandal we’re talking about is the persecution of the pastor by mean-spirited people within the church, who are the “pastor abusers.” They’re planted in nearly every congregation. Many are even running the church. They may be deacons, elders, or disloyal staff members who are working behind the scenes to undermine your ministry through slander and false accusations. Outwardly they may look respectable, but inwardly their hearts are wicked, and their mission is to bring down the pastor.

If Satan can’t get a pastor to fall into corruption and immorality, he resorts to Plan B—persecution. Just as Jonathan Edwards was fired nearly three centuries ago, multitudes of pastors today are unjustly driven out of their churches.

Pastor abuse is the church scandal that no one is talking about. The mistreatment of clergy is as horrifying as it is secretive, and the casualties are reaching epidemic proportions. Over 19,000 pastors get out of the ministry every year. When the sermon ends on Sunday, over 350 pastors will be gone before the next Sunday service begins.

But the saga doesn’t end with an empty pulpit. After the abusive church has fired the pastor and washed their hands of guilt, they carry on business as usual. Yet, a more tragic story unfolds in the ousted pastor’s household. The abrupt change in plans throws the ex-pastor and his family into a financial crisis, forcing them to sell their home and frantically search for a new place to move. Without a church income, he’ll need to go find a secular job. A terminated pastor shared his feelings:

They don’t care what happens to you. They don’t care what happens to your family.  
They don’t care what happens to your children. When they fired me, they didn’t care

that I had to jerk my kids out of school just after they had gotten started for that year. They don't care—just so long as you're gone.

Few people can truly understand how emotionally devastating it is for a minister to be severed from his congregation. A sharp blade cuts deep into his heart, every time he reflects on being rejected by those he poured his life into. As one former pastor described it: "It's like going through a divorce with hundreds of people at once."

And church ministry can be just as harsh on the pastor's wife. The following testimony from an abused pastor explains how the mistreatment by a few antagonists affected his spouse:

I wouldn't allow the small group of troublemakers in our church to bring me down, but it was more than I could take when my wife had an emotional breakdown. As I held her in my arms, she cried uncontrollably, sobbing a few words at a time: "All we've tried to do . . . is love these people . . . and all we get in return . . . is *hate*."

This wasn't what I anticipated when I was preparing for ministry in seminary. No one warned me about psychopathic church members and how they would affect my family. I wasn't about to lose my wife over a church! She's the most godly and gentle servant of God that I know, and it ripped my heart apart to see my devastated wife in a crumpled heap.

By God's grace, the cruel people left our church and she recovered from her devastation. Everything was fine for the next few years, until two disgruntled members unleashed more vicious attacks. My wife had an even worse breakdown this time, crying every day and sometimes unable to stop.

That did it—we were done! I started looking for a new place to go, and the Lord mercifully opened a door for me to work in a Christian organization.

Her experience isn't an isolated case. Eighty percent of pastors' wives wish their husbands would choose another profession. And don't think that their husbands haven't thought about it. Fifty percent of pastors are so discouraged they would leave the ministry immediately if they could make a living any other way.

What is it about the ministry that's causing so many to leave? Simply stated, it's a small, hostile group within nearly every church that criticizes, harasses, and bullies their pastor until he's so beaten down and discouraged that getting out of the ministry looks better than staying in. It's the persecution of the pastor—not by atheists, but by mean-spirited people *inside* the church.

God's messengers have always been mistreated. The Old Testament prophets, New Testament apostles, and Jesus Himself all suffered for speaking the truth to unbending, religious people. Why do we assume that it won't happen to us today? In this book, we'll demonstrate how the harassment pastors are receiving from stubborn church members can be traced back to the mistreatment of the Old Testament prophets.

While some shepherds have been physically tortured for their faith, most pastors are persecuted through false accusations and malicious slander, which ultimately leads to termination. When the abusers start unleashing their hostility, some pastors take this as a warning sign to get out while they can. They'll secretly mail their resumes to churches in need of a pastor, trying to secure a new place to go before they are either fired or forced to resign.

In many churches, the pastor is terminated unexpectedly, which usually leaves him without an income and nowhere to go. His dismissal also serves as a death sentence for any

future ministry. Once he's been terminated, he is viewed as a leper by pastor search committees, who immediately reject resumes from fired clergy. As a result, the former pastor will probably be forced to switch careers, discard his seminary education, and search for secular employment.

### **The Minority Rules**

As hard to believe as it is, the hostile group that forces a pastor out of the church is typically only seven to ten people, or just 3% to 4% of the congregation. These confrontational individuals often call secret meetings to conspire against the pastor and plot his firing.

Shockingly, seminaries and Bible schools fail to adequately prepare their students for the mistreatment they are about to experience from these tyrants. Although ministerial students are trained to care for cooperative church members, little is mentioned about how to handle antagonists in the flock. Consequently, when the abusers begin their onslaught, the pastor is caught off-guard, not knowing how to defend himself.

Although most parishioners support their minister, they passively allow aggressive egotists to take control the church and thus perpetuate the problem of clergy abuse. The typical pastor, weary of fighting troublemakers, ends his ministry career after just fourteen years and then finds employment in the secular field.

You would think that the church would be the safest place for a minister to raise his family, and it should be. But when uncooperative, headstrong laymen stubbornly resist the pastor's leadership, it brings untold misery into his household. Prepare to hold your breath as you read these horrifying statistics:

- ◆ 1,600 pastors leave the ministry each month.
- ◆ 25% of current pastors have been terminated at some point in their career.
- ◆ 33% of churches either fired their last pastor or forced him to leave.
- ◆ 90% of pastors said the hardest thing about ministry is dealing with uncooperative people.
- ◆ 70% of pastors feel grossly underpaid.
- ◆ 80% of pastors say their ministry has had a negative impact on their children.
- ◆ 65% of pastors have thought recently about giving up on ministry.
- ◆ 80% of pastors' wives feel left out and unappreciated by the church members.
- ◆ Over 50% report a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.

This disturbing data represents what is happening to God's called and gifted servants—perhaps even to you. To demonstrate how widespread this crisis has become, one pastor shares this shocking report:

In one year, 27 ministers in my district were forced to resign their pastorates, without charges of wrongdoing, unethical behavior, or immorality. Many because they were causing growth. Most cases it was the power bloc that ran the church that had them removed. Many have lost their pastorates, many their reputations and many have lost their enthusiasm about staying in the ministry.

Another pastor shares his observations concerning the alarming rate of minister attrition, and places much of the blame on angry, critical parishioners:

As I reflect on 35 years of ministry, I realize that many of my former colleagues are no longer pastors. Somewhere along the line, they left their “calling” and undertook a different path for their lives. Reflecting on my friends who used to be pastors, I realize that they are now a majority. Those, like me, who have stayed in ministry are actually the minority. The attrition rate has been high and the cost to souls is astronomical.

The majority of my acquaintances encountered such turmoil and situational conflict (from church members) that they felt they could not continue to pastor. Congregations overwhelmed my pastor friends with unrealistic expectations, negative criticism and misplaced anger. Some congregations even assumed the perfect pastor was “out there,” so their fallible pastor was terminated.

### **Abuse is No Excuse**

No matter how bad a marriage may be, spousal abuse is inexcusable. “Wife abuse” occurs when cruel husbands attempt to beat their wives into submission or drive them away in divorce. It occurs in such normal looking settings you would hardly ever suspect it.

“Pastor abuse” is frighteningly similar to this. The pastor isn’t physically beaten, but is so mentally tormented, emotionally stripped, and spiritually trampled on that it kills his desire to minister. Although the abuser can be one person, it typically occurs when a small group of disgruntled church members band together to hammer their pastor into submission or drive him out of the church. Sometimes he’ll submit to the abuse because he believes it’s better to take the beatings than to be thrown out on the street. Because pastor abuse is generally instigated by just a small circle, most church members have no idea what’s happening behind the scenes.

### **The Typical Pastor Abuse Scenario**

The harassment can be administered in a variety of ways, but usually starts with innocent sounding suggestions of things the pastor might do differently. Most pastors are receptive to fresh ideas concerning how to improve the ministries of the church. When good suggestions are successfully implemented, everyone wins.

However, when a suggestion comes from clergy abusers, it usually pertains to an issue that contests the pastor’s leadership. It’s designed as a test to see if the minister will give way to a small, antagonistic group. At first, the shepherd may not realize these “suggestions” are actually orders coming from his adversaries, who have a hidden agenda. However, if he doesn’t take the hint, he will be reminded again in a more ominous way.

The ringleader will probably ask the pastor to meet him for lunch—not for fellowship, but to get his undivided attention about an issue or complaint. After some light small talk, the spokesman explains his concerns and the steps for dealing with them.

If his intimidation proves to be fruitless, the thermostat is turned up. Even though most of the congregation supports him, the handful of unhappy members starts their campaign to change minds by sharing their “concerns” with others. They spread gossip with those who are most likely to advance their cause, trying to expand their sphere of influence. Without exception, tidbits of information are stretched, distorted, and magnified, as the case is built against the pastor.

The pastor senses something is going on behind the scenes. Some parishioners who were previously friendly are now avoiding him. Those who used to warmly smile at him now wear scowls on their faces. He’s puzzled by their change in behavior and wonders what he did to offend them.

By now he’s received a few angry letters of disagreement, criticizing him about a number of issues that he’s not handling properly. Usually these hateful letters are left

unsigned, making his attackers undetectable so he can't respond to them. The criticisms against him escalate, and the conflict drags on for weeks. Every decision he makes is countered with a rebuttal from his persecutors. He receives phone calls in the middle of the night, where an unrecognizable voice tells him to get out of the church and then hangs up.

The ringleader calls a secret meeting, inviting only the disgruntled church members. The gripe session against the pastor quickly turns into a feeding frenzy, like sharks smelling blood. Before the evening ends, the angry dissenters join themselves together to drive the pastor out of the church.

As the minister wrestles with his competency and calling, the fog lifts and what was hidden before is now obvious. It dawns on him—these pastor-attackers aren't showing any mercy, kindness, or compassion toward their God-called leader. They magnify his every inadequacy and twist the truth with phantom allegations, which puts a negative spin on every good work the pastor attempts to do. Rather than letting the shepherd lead, they apply more pressure so he will surrender to their demands.

The pastor finds himself tossing and turning at night. He can't eat, sleep, or concentrate. His wife is suffering even more, as she helplessly watches her loved one being destroyed right before her eyes. She worries that the anti-pastor faction will force her husband out and frets about the future of her family if he loses his job. His children wonder why he's been edgy lately, but he can't tell them, lest they turn their anger against God.

The joy he had when he first came to the church has been replaced with misery and anguish. Ironically, the very members who had previously extended the call are the ones trying to expel him. His focus shifts from reaching the lost and making disciples, to answering allegations and squashing rumors. His vision for growing the church has been crushed. Now the only vision he has is seeing the moving van in front of his home.

Another secret meeting is called to decide the strategy for ousting the pastor. The details are hashed out, the date is confirmed on the calendar, and the plan is ready to launch.

The final blow is generally administered in a meeting between the pastor and the confrontational group. The anti-pastor faction shows up in full-force, unleashing a barrage of vicious attacks and unwilling to accept any option other than termination. By now the pastor is so battered and worn out, all he can think about is leaving. With no more will to resist, he is either fired or forced to resign.

Once terminated, the pastor must make a gut-wrenching decision—either stay in the pastorate or get out. He asks himself, *Do I want to put my family through this again in another church? I've barely survived this ordeal, and I can't fathom the thought of going through it again.* The other option is to start a new career in a secular vocation, but where? What kind of job is looking to hire a fired preacher? Either way, it's going to be an extremely tough road ahead. (We'll provide some helpful guidance in another chapter.)

Meanwhile, the revolving door at the church makes another turn. As the fired pastor makes his exit, the old guard looks to find another pastor who will meet all of their expectations, and history repeats itself with a new victim. Just like the abusive husband beats his next wife, the abusive church will mistreat its next pastor. A former Church of Christ pastor gave us this account:

I recently spent some time with the pastor who took my place, and he started pouring his heart out to me. He's only been there a few weeks and he's already being criticized for minor things. One person has already been complaining to others, "I think the new pastor has an agenda." I looked at him and jokingly said, "Let the beatings begin!"

It's just being a part of being a pastor in America. They just want to use you as a punching bag. He asked me if I was ever going back to being a pastor. I told him, "I'm not doing that again. I'm not going to subject myself or my wife to that anymore—not to the way we do church in America nowadays. I would have to have a burning bush experience to know it was God telling me to do it again."

Incredibly, no matter how cruel a church may be, over two hundred eager (but foolish) pastoral candidates will submit their resumes to replace him, without researching the reasons for the former minister's departure. If a prospect does his homework and gets suspicious, the pastor haters are crafty at manipulating their story and covering their tracks, so they come out smelling like a rose.

Why is this group so hostile toward its pastor? They want to be church bosses and will resist anyone who attempts to lead them out of their comfort zones. The anti-pastor faction refuses to let the shepherd guide them and rejects all ideas that don't originate with them. When ungodly, unqualified individuals wield swords of authority in the church, pastor abuse is inevitable.

The pastor is constantly learning about the most effective ways to reach people through church growth conferences, pastor training workshops, and cutting-edge books. Then he hits a wall of resistance when he tries to implement these new ideas in his congregation. He unfortunately discovers the old guard bristles at ideas they didn't initiate. They're nervous about trying something they've never done before and prefer to keep the church as it's always been. These are two completely different mindsets, and only one can and ultimately will rule the church.

### **Mike Johnston's Tragic Experience**

I was never called to be a politician. I was called to preach the matchless grace of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of the Living God placed a burden on me that multitudes of lost and empty people desperately need Jesus. I knew exactly what Paul meant when he wrote, "woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel."

I remember being so excited about winning souls and building the church I could think of little else. In fact, I often quoted Hank Aaron who said, "I still can't believe they pay me to play baseball." I felt the same way about ministry.

In my naiveté, I believed that if I faithfully followed my calling with integrity, the sheep would naturally follow the shepherd. And while most of my flock did joyfully follow my lead, a small group of pastor-resisters were also sitting in the pews plotting my demise. Jesus warned us to beware of those who come in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt. 7:15). Whenever I read that verse, I always thought it applied to someone else. Little did I realize that they resided inside the church where God had called me, and I was on their menu.

If you have never experienced pastor abuse then you will probably not understand my next statement. *My heart may never be whole again!* Call me a crybaby or whatever you want. But please understand that trying to expunge memories of the misery they caused me and my family has been difficult, to say the least. You always loathe what happened to you because it is so personal, unjust and horrifying. Please forgive my candor, but I have only recently found the strength to pray God's blessing on my persecutors.

The conflict began a year and a half after I accepted the call to the church and lasted for two grueling years. The church was in a spirit of revival and we were growing dramatically. Yet, as I preached, I noticed that some members' icy stares penetrated my soul



like cold, steel daggers. It became clear to me that these people were angry about the influx of all the new members. God had been blessing our services in every way imaginable and they were losing control!

This wasn't the first time they had intimidated their pastor and it wouldn't be their last. My predecessor had been fired and the pastor who followed me was also terminated just one year after he was hired. Despite the old guard's reputation as pastor abusers, I thought they would change if I just kept loving them. They didn't respond like I had hoped.

When they first started taking potshots at me, I wasn't sure how to react. Their attacks began as minor confrontations. I would humble myself and apologize, but my efforts to appease them were treated with indifference and contempt. Then I started hearing rumors of secret gatherings, where I was obviously the subject of their conversations.

Business meetings that once were times of thanksgiving and praise suddenly became arenas of conflict. They started opposing ministry suggestions, which they had previously supported. Soon they began making surprise visits to my home with petty lists of "concerns." One of them kept showing up unannounced where my wife worked to spy on her.

Their grumblings became more frequent, intense, and widespread. It was as if they were examining me under a microscope, hoping to find something to criticize. Their continual criticisms tied my stomach in knots. I spent many sleepless nights, wondering what I had done to deserve their cruel treatment. Many times I asked myself, *Why hadn't I been warned about this when I was in Bible school?*

All I wanted to do was reach people for Christ. While I was pastor, the church more than tripled in attendance in less than two years, and offerings rose dramatically. We built a brand new facility, won hundreds of people to Christ and were among the leaders in baptisms in the State of Michigan. Due to our rapid growth, I was selected as a church growth consultant with the Southern Baptist Convention Sunday School Board in Michigan.

Things were never better for all of us, so you would think everyone would be thrilled, right? Wrong. With so many new people joining, the old guard was losing control of "their" church and was furious at me for being responsible. In sheer desperation, I confided in a man who had previously been a friend and supporter. I didn't know that he was a spy sent by the abusers to obtain information. After some strategic collaborating, they were ready to drop the bomb.

It culminated unexpectedly during a Wednesday night business meeting. What hurt most was that my children, my wife, and my parents were all there to witness the demolition of someone they loved. I'll never forget the look of disbelief in the eyes of my family as contrived allegations were fired at me with machine gun rapidity.

I now know what a lynch mob looks like. As I helplessly searched for compassion in the faces of those I had often assisted, I received hate and anger in return. They accused me of lying, but never cited an example. They accused me of stealing, although it was impossible. I never touched an offering and couldn't even sign a check. The viciousness of their allegations impugned my integrity and undermined my effectiveness as a pastor.

I can't tell you how abandoned I felt as I sat silently with my face buried in my hands and let them attack me—the one whom God called to be their shepherd! They knew that if they could make my life miserable, they could drive me away. They were right. I couldn't put my family through any more of their excruciating torment, so I submitted my resignation.

I had a family to support, yet we had nowhere to go, no opportunities for employment, and no idea what I was going to do the rest of my life. But did any of that bother the ones who forced me out? No. They were glad I was gone.

## Stopping the Insanity

The sign of a sick church is the revolving door of ministerial turnover, while the ones who kicked the pastors out remain in power. Consequently, any minister invited to serve in that congregation will probably be moving again in less than three years. An abused pastor shared this report with us:

After that small faction started fighting me, I decided to research the history of the church to see how long this had been going on. I went back to 1945 and discovered that I was their twenty-second pastor since the end of WWII, for an average stay of just over 2.5 years each. When I shared this with the church council, the antagonists saw nothing abnormal with the frequent pastor turnover. That short tenure of the pastorate was normal in their eyes.

Many shepherds have tried to cooperate with the anti-pastor coalition, hoping to ease tensions and resolve differences. But no matter how many concessions pastors make to please these mobsters, it only serves to delay the inevitable. In pastor abusers' minds, termination of the minister is the only viable "solution" to the problem.

Ross Campbell, a psychiatrist who has worked with many terminated ministers says, "Termination can happen to any minister no matter how good he is. The more ministers are compassionate or are servant pastors, the more vulnerable they are. If you get a mean, sociopathic board member, it's easy to manipulate a pastor. This is happening to our best, most wonderful pastors."

This vicious cycle of hiring and firing pastors must be stopped. But how? Although we will give numerous suggestions throughout this book, the bottom-line cure is found in God's Word:

Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (Heb. 13:17)

Because pastor abusers rarely repent, they will remain entrenched in power until someone unseats them. As shepherds continue to be battered, they ask themselves, *When will the silent majority of godly church members join together and excommunicate these bullies?*

Until that question is answered, Satan will gleefully keep notching his gun with the names of God's shepherds—who were destroyed by the very people they came to lead.

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