



Sheep Stealing

“There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him” (2 Samuel 12:1-3).

Suburban North America is the scene of the crime. The setting is a peaceful park, on a sleepy, serene Saturday morning. Parents and coaches have transformed normally open, grassy spaces into soccer pitches (fields), with orange traffic cones marking the boundaries.

Children ranging from pre-school to early elementary age scamper around, clad in their team colors, as coaches and parents (often one and the same) shout encouragement and praise. Fred and Marty have children on the same team who have become friends, and naturally Fred and Marty are spending more time together.

The game is over, and no one really cares who won, because no one bothers to keep score. What matters now is the lunch that follows the game. The team and its supporters gather around a few picnic tables in the park and begin to wolf down the pizzas supplied by one set of parents whose turn it was to supply lunch.

The plot thickens—Marty makes his move.

“Fred, I don’t know what you and Lisa do for church, but I have to tell you about the church Mary and I attend. It’s great, and we’d love for you to join us for Sunday morning services sometime.”

Fred explains, “Thanks Marty, but Lisa and I have a little church where we feel at home. It’s really small, only about 40-50 people usually attend, but it’s a place we feel useful.” Marty is not to be deterred: “40-50 people? We usually have about 2,000, and that’s just the second service that we go to. Attendance at the first service is also about 2,000, and

then we have Saturday night and Sunday night services also, so on any given weekend about 7,000 people attend our church—7,000 people can’t be wrong, Fred. You really need to come and check us out.”

Fred holds his ground. “Marty, I’ve heard of your mega-church, and I have to admit that Lisa and I feel somewhat defensive about how small our little church is, and we have wondered what your church is like. But we have no reason to change churches right now. We wouldn’t mind visiting, but we won’t start attending your church.”

Marty smiles indulgently, while increasing his sales pitch. “Fred, look at it this way. You may feel comfortable where you are, but you don’t know what you are missing. We have almost as many musicians on stage for praise and worship as you do in your entire church, and let me guess, you probably sit on folding chairs? We have a beautiful sanctuary, comfortable theater seats, great music and an incredible program for children of all ages. Our pastor is still young enough to be up-to-date, he preaches in jeans and Hawaiian shirts. I go to church dressed just like I am now—shorts, T-shirt and sandals. Our service is like clock-work, always ends on time, it’s seamless, professional and always entertaining. Nobody sleeps in our church.”

“And, both before and after church, we don’t have self-righteous old ladies making coffee in some old corroded coffeemaker, but we have *baristas* at a Starbucks right on our campus. You can come into the sanctuary with a latte, drop the kids off at the nursery or children’s church, and enjoy the service. You need to start thinking about your own children. How long are they going to be happy in a church with what, two or three other kids, kids that are probably not even their own age?”

Holding his ground, Fred responds: “Marty, it sounds to me like you are trying to steal sheep. Our church is small, yes, but it is a healthy, grace-based church. Our

church depends on Lisa and me. We're probably the youngest adults, and our kids are the youngest children, but they are loved by the seniors. I've been blessed and I'm making a good salary, so our contributions are probably a sizable percentage of the annual income of the church. I don't want to see my church die just because we would rather listen to a pastor wearing jeans and a Hawaiian shirt while we're sipping Starbucks lattes. I don't like the idea of North American Christianity becoming Wal-Mart-like super-churches, swallowing up all the smaller churches in the process.

"Suit yourself Fred, but just one last thing. If I were you, I would be asking myself why my church doesn't grow. There must be something wrong with your church or your pastor—I mean look at my church. Someone told me that ten years ago it was just a few people meeting in our pastor's basement, now it's huge. Our pastor writes books, travels all over the world, meets famous people, and he's interviewed in the media. That's the kind of successful church I want to be a part of—not some no-name little church no one has ever heard of."

The soccer season ended, and Fred and Lisa still were part of their little church. But Marty kept pushing and insisting, so they gave in and attended the Christmas concert at Marty's mega-church. They saw angels flying 40 feet above the stage, smelled the deposits left by live animals on the stage, and they enjoyed incredible music performed by Christian recording artists. A few weeks before Easter, Fred and Lisa left their little church and "moved up." Six months later their little church became one of a growing statistic—small churches that are closing their doors for lack of funds.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor

man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." (2 Samuel 12:4).

There are many sheep who have been sacrificed "for the good of the church"—for a variety of reasons. Fred and Lisa no longer go to any church, and looking back they feel abused by the mega-church into which Marty recruited them.

Successfully recruited by Marty, Fred and Lisa were initially dazzled

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by the new mega-church, but eventually they discovered an inordinate interest in their time and money. They were young, upwardly mobile, and it seemed like everyone in the church wanted to know them. They had lots of new Christian friends. But over time they started to observe members who had been around longer than they had who seemed to be out of favor—no longer popular. It seemed to Fred and Lisa that these people weren't as popular as they once were because they were no longer "successful."

That's when Fred and Lisa started to think that the church didn't really seem to be interested in people who were struggling with life. When they first started attending they were new members—and they were warmly welcomed. They felt good—they felt loved and wanted.

But as time passed it seemed to them they became just another number on a chart, a "church growth" plan that was actually a multi-level sales gimmick designed to fill the parking lot on Sunday mornings. Fred and Lisa quickly found out that their job was to recruit others, and that they should sacrifice their lives to serve

the church (sometimes they were told it was for the gospel, but in reality they now realize it was all about church growth). The church, it turned out, was not there to serve them—but they discovered that the real goal of their church was to use them to recruit.

Sometime within their first year of attending, Marty and one of the elders told Fred and Lisa that attending church Sunday morning wasn't enough. They were told that they had potential to become leaders, and that they should start attending discipleship classes on Wednesday night. That's when Fred and Lisa found out about the multi-level marketing schemes of mega-churches. Wednesday nights became high powered sales meetings subjecting Fred and Lisa to incredible pressure to *evangelize* new members into the church.

When they got to that level, they were able to look back and realize why Marty had been so persistent in inviting them to church. Marty was at the same level then as they were now. They had become hard-sell, confrontational salesmen, just like Marty, the salesman who sold (oops, sorry—*evangelized*) them.

Fred and Lisa are recovering. They quit the mega-church. They haven't gone back to any church—they don't know if they can trust any church, perhaps ever again. They are still Christians. Sometimes they think they are stronger Christians and closer to God because of their negative experiences with the mega-church. After all, it didn't kill them, so, they reason, it made them stronger.

Sometimes they have a small group that gets together to discuss the Bible and Christianity. They pray more than they used to, they study the Bible more than they used to. They don't recruit, evangelize or witness anymore. But they are involved in a number of Christian ministries and their relationship with God has never been better. There is hope beyond religion. □

—Greg Albrecht