

How to Stop Offense

If we'll keep our hearts free from offense by yielding to God, we can be stronger than ever.

In a warm summer Saturday in 2003, I received a call I'll never forget. It was from Trini and Al*, previously joyful members of our church, who now sounded hysterical and confused. "The sheriff just called us, Pastor," they said. "He told us Anthony is dead."

Anthony was their bright and loving 16-year-old son. The natural athlete had been swimming in a lake in Northern California when, for some unknown reason, he slipped beneath the water and away from his family and friends forever.

The news hit Trini and Al like a bolt of lightning. It left them stunned, unable to process the words they were hearing and powerless to bear the grief.

A few hours later, they stood in a cold coroner's locker and identified the lifeless body of their son. The pain-struck parents went into a tailspin, spiraling uncontrollably downward to face the unforgiving surface of their new, unwanted reality. Friends and family rushed in to soften the blow, but the impact was unavoidable.

Unspeakable grief wasn't the only source of Trini and Al's pain. There was a secondary infection that raged through their shattered souls: the poison of offense. We had been very close to Trini and Al, so we cared for them like family. But despite hours of prayer and counsel, meals and cards, flowers and visits, their offense took on a life of its own.

They felt abandoned and thought that no one understood or cared. Their pain turned into anger, bitterness and eventually deception. They were offended with God and His people.

No matter how we all tried, nothing could keep them connected. A few months after Anthony's memorial service, they left the church.

In a world so filled with pain, God's people often find themselves struggling under the weight of past hurts and broken expectations. The difficulties of life leave us emotionally drained and vulnerable to the infections of offense. In our distress, we are set up for a fall by the enemy of our souls.

Being offended is the feeling of being insulted, slighted or wronged by others. It's an emotional response to a perceived injustice or indignity that leaves us feeling hurt, angry or even outraged.

The biblical word for "offense" means "a stumbling block" or "a trap." These definitions indicate that offenses are unexpected and can lead to a damaging downfall.

Unfortunately, they are all too common. Even in the church, instead of practicing greater love and tolerance for others, too many of us are finding new ways to feel violated and angry.

When negative things happen to us, why can't we just get over it? Why do we struggle so much with feelings of offense, blame and anger at others?

I'm convinced part of the answer is found in the increasing emotional strains of life. When we are already wrung out, it's hard to resist offense.

When hurt feelings push us to the edge, we face a critical decision: Will we get over it and walk away clean, or will we enter into a contaminating cycle of pain, confusion and conflict? The choice we make determines our destinies.

After two years of isolation, pain and emptiness, Trini and Al

made a miraculous comeback. It took some time to unearth the long-buried foundations of their pain, but the Holy Spirit took them through a process of healing that set them free.

They now understand the devastating role that offense and its secondary infections can play in our lives. When they contacted me to ask if they could “come home,” I knew they were free from the offenses that had nearly suffocated their faith.

Getting Free

Overcoming offenses requires us to look beneath the surface of our day-to-day lives. There are deep fault lines running through the souls of mankind, and the increased offenses of our time are the tremors of a distressed world struggling with its pain, sin and separation from God. Ultimately, only the power of Jesus Christ can free us.

Still, we have a part in the process. From behind the scenes of Trini and Al’s heartbreaking story, a few life-giving principles have emerged to help us. As we’ve talked about, prayed about and processed the pain, three important lessons stand out.

Surrender past hurts to the Holy Spirit. Before they could be free of their offenses, Trini and Al had to find healing for the sore spots that were part of their souls. Both of them had experienced the trauma of abandonment and rejection early in life. Life had sent them a message: “You’re on your own.”

Unresolved hurts and anger helped create the emotional condition that sent them reeling when tragedy struck. Losing Anthony took them back to the familiar script of abandonment in which they couldn’t see the role of God and their friends.

In cases such as theirs, the words of the psalmist are liberating. They describe the depth of David’s distress over the betrayal of a close friend. He wanted nothing more than to

run away and hide, just like Trini and Al did. But by the end of his song, he was able to prophesy his own pathway out of pain: "Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you" (Ps. 55:22, NKJV).

It works. Trini and Al reclaimed their joy by allowing the Holy Spirit to free them from their abandonment and rejection. This is an ongoing process that requires patience and faith, but it is paving the way for their journey out of grief as well.

Let your expectations rest in God alone. In their pain and confusion, Trini and Al looked to people to stop the pain. Without realizing it, they stumbled over their own unreasonable expectations of what others could do for them.

In a letter, they confessed to me: "We placed our hurts and frustrations entirely on your shoulders and expected for you to perform a miracle. It was much easier to place the blame of unresolved issues on someone [like you] than to trust God to work it out. But we had issues too deep for any man to reach."

Their brutal self-evaluation points the way for all of us. Are we looking to others to complete us, or is Christ enough?

Jesus flatly predicted people would offend us (see Luke 17:1). He was saying, "Be realistic in your expectations of the imperfect." But He also said we'd have an abundant life if our focus was right (see John 10:10; Matt. 6:33).

Trini and Al have regained their faith by redirecting their expectations. They no longer saddle people with the job of making them whole. They've placed their hopes entirely in Christ.

Let's follow their lead. If our expectation is in others, we'll be devastated (see Jer. 17:5-8). If we trust in the Lord, as the psalmist did, we'll never faint: "My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him" (Ps.

62:5).

Don't resist the dealings of God. The Lord may allow us to walk through times of offense because He wants to reveal something in us that needs to change. Certain distresses are designed to turn us in a new direction.

Paul said: "Distress that drives us to God ... turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let distress drive them away from God ... end up on a deathbed of regrets" (2 Cor. 7:10, The Message).

For example, God may allow us to be offended in order to reveal an area of unforgiveness deep inside. I've noticed that we all want forgiveness when we need it, but few of us want to give it to others.

Passing along God's mercy to those who have failed us is the ultimate anti-venom for offense and the best protection from the enemy (see Mark 11:25-26; Eph. 4:32). Don't resist God when He reveals the issues that drive you into offense.

Trini and Al have learned not to become discouraged or resistant if the Lord is correcting them. They know the correction is all a part of God's loving interaction with us as His children (see Heb. 12:3-9). Their amazing victory over grief and offense has opened doors for them to minister to others who suffer.

"As tempting as it may be," they say, "blaming others, running from life, or getting mad at God can never free you from pain or grief. If we let God have His way, we can be free."

One of my greatest joys lately is looking out over our congregation to see Trini and Al laughing, lifting their hands in worship and embracing others again. They still feel the loss of their son, but their shining faces remind me that despite life's deepest distresses, if we'll keep our hearts

free from offense by yielding to God, we can bounce back stronger than ever.

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