

When You Hate Church

Have you noticed that reality TV shows are sweeping our nation? Like it or not, programs such as NBC's Fear Factor and The Apprentice, ABC's Extreme Makeover and Fox's American Idol are revolutionizing the way millions of us entertain ourselves.

Though some of these shows contain objectionable content, I must admit to enjoying CBS' Survivor program. Survivor has an interesting set-up: For 39 days, 16 to 20 castaways are stranded in a dangerous, remote location. They are forced to band together and carve out a new life. They have to use their wits to form tribes, build shelter, find food and win rewards.

Day by day, the rough conditions and competitive challenges test the endurance of the survivors while cameras capture their unscripted experiences. Those who succeed are rewarded and stay in the game. Those who fall short risk being voted off at Tribal Council. Each week, another contestant is voted off, until only the Sole Survivor remains to claim the reward: \$1 million.

When I first saw Survivor, I was overcome with a strange déjà vu experience. Where had I seen this kind of reality—the social cliques, secret divisions, unbridled rivalry and shocking betrayals—before? Then it came to me: I know where I've seen this. These people are in my church, and they're playing this game!

That's when an idea for another reality series was born in my heart: Survivor: The Local Church! OK, this may be a little over the edge, but before you vote me off the island, just think about it.

As believers in local churches, we are like strangers stranded in a strange world. We band into groups, carve out new lives and struggle to work together. All too often, we hurt each

other and lose our rewards. Shouldn't we learn how to overcome these challenges and become soul survivors?

Survival Skills

All kidding aside, as a pastor, I want to see people become successful in the local church experience. God designed the church as a place of healing, blessing, maturing and restoration for our lives, and it can work beautifully.

But since we're talking about reality, we should face the fact that sometimes the church can be a pretty dangerous place. Anyone ever been abandoned by a distracted leader? Betrayed by a brother or sister once trusted? Blindsided by a church split?

Despite the many blessings of the local church, we can be hurt there, especially if we don't know what the rules are. In Survivor, everyone has to follow the rules of the game or lose the chance to win. What are some rules we should stick to as we work toward surviving in the sometimes-perilous setting of the local church?

1. Don't compete with other members of the tribe. Ted faded out of his church because he constantly clashed with Gene. It didn't seem right to Ted that Gene was made an elder. He himself had been in the church a long time. Why hadn't he been promoted?

Nobody wins when carnal competition kills the spirit of unity. That's why Paul warned Timothy to mark those who have "an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk ... and constant friction" (1 Tim. 6:4-5, NIV). The health of any spiritual tribe begins with a love that draws them together into one heart and vision to succeed together.

2. Flow with your tribal elders. Will and Donna became enraged

over the direction the worship pastor gave them for their dance ministry and began a subtle campaign against her in the church. Why couldn't they dance when and where they felt led? These man-made rules were grieving the Holy Spirit, they said. They eventually left, pulling their daughters out of the youth group and away from the friends they loved.

It may not be a popular truth, but the Bible teaches us to fully cooperate with our spiritual leaders—and for good reason. “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls” (Heb. 13:17, NKJV). Having a balanced relationship with a healthy Christian leader is key to our survival. Resisting them is resisting God, and it opens the door to hardships (see Rom. 13:1-2).

When we have a disagreement with a leader, we should determine if it is a matter of essential biblical truth (such as the deity of Christ) or just a difference of opinion (such as what color the sanctuary chairs should be). If a leader is in violation of God's Word, humbly appeal to him. But when it comes to mere differences of opinion, the Lord expects us to cooperate for the sake of unity and our own spiritual health.

3. Avoid having unreasonable expectations of the tribe. Pam joined a church with high hopes that this would be the place where, finally, her deepest needs would be met—but within a year she announced that she was upset because the leaders never seemed to have enough time for her. She missed the message of David, who said, “My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him” (Ps. 62:5).

Sometimes people get disappointed when they discover the church can't meet all their needs. The truth is, the church isn't supposed to meet all our needs. Only God can do that. Instead of expecting too much of others, we need to remember that people are not our source. Let's put our trust in God. He never disappoints.

The Ultimate Immunity Challenge

Survivor contestants are challenged to win immunity—a guarantee that they cannot be voted out of the game by their opponents at Tribal Council. In the local church version of Survivor, we are challenged to position ourselves to be immune to the attacks of our spiritual enemy. One of the ways we can do this is by understanding how to deal with the issue of offenses.

Nothing brings believers into defeat quicker than unresolved offenses. The enemy uses offenses to create an atmosphere of hostility and tension in a church. His goal is to sow seeds that lead to slander, backbiting and gossip.

When those dynamics are in operation, the church's mission is jeopardized because everything centers around selfish interests. Worst of all, the Holy Spirit is grieved, and close fellowship with Him is broken.

We can overcome the challenge of offenses by choosing the pathway of peace. Sue had worked hard to prepare for her ministry to the 4- and 5-year-olds on Sunday morning. She knew how important children were, and she didn't mind the extra responsibility when her turn came to help out in children's ministry.

Though it wasn't an easy job, Sue took special care to make sure that the children would enjoy their time learning about God's Word. When Troy slipped and banged his forehead on a bookshelf, Sue felt terrible.

She tried to explain how it happened to his mother, but before she could finish, Troy's mom interrupted curtly and accused Sue of neglecting the children. Those words were like arrows in Sue's heart.

But Sue was a strong believer and decided not to react

unkindly or become offended. She knew that offenses could rob her of the blessings God had for her in children's ministry. Later on, she was able to smooth things out with Troy's mom, and they became close friends as a result.

Jesus marked out the pathway to peace in the local church, where He knew that issues would arise between believers. He said, "'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother'" (Matt. 18:15). These powerful words confront us with at least three challenges we must press through when we are offended.

Can we keep it honest? When Jerry asked Marvin why he was upset, Marvin shot back, "I am not upset!" Oh, really? We need to get truthful with ourselves and then with those who have offended us. Cover-ups and denial are unhealthy and make us an easy target for the enemy. Jesus said, "Go tell your brother what your issue is."

Can we keep it private? When we go to our offender, we must do it privately. It's a mistake to bring others into our offense, even under the veil of "sharing prayer needs." Telling them of our hurt is a cheap attempt to chip away at the offender's character and a harmful violation of the spirit of unity and love.

Can we keep it redemptive? According to Jesus, the goal is to regain our brother. That's the power of the cross working in our relationships.

We've all seen attempts at reconciliation end up in a mess because the goal was to set the record straight instead of regain fellowship. But victory doesn't come when we humble our offender or prove him wrong; it comes when we make a faithful effort to restore the relationship.

By the way, keeping spiritual immunity involves a responsibility to listen when someone comes to us with a

relational issue. Let's hear what the person is saying and examine ourselves to see if his perspective has merit. If there is a hurt, let's do our part to get it healed and move forward to a place of greater maturity.

We face an immunity challenge every time an opportunity for offense arises. Will we pick up the offense and risk losing our connection to God's people, or will we choose forgiveness and reconciliation? If we are wise, we'll follow the words of Jesus and keep it honest, private and redemptive.

What if we find ourselves in a spiritually unhealthy atmosphere? Is there ever a time when we might need to leave a church in order to remain a healthy survivor?

It is true that some church environments are toxic and even abusive. In those situations, we need to seek the counsel of mature and healthy believers and pray about God's order for our lives. He may well lead us to leave, but it is important that we "go out with joy and be led forth with peace" (Is. 55:12). It is never right to react out of offense or to create a division that brings harm to others.

You and I are not called to play games, but we are called to be spiritual survivors. Isaiah prophesied of a spiritual nation that would overcome the dangers of their day: "For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this" (Is. 37:32, NIV).

I believe we are the survivors God is passionately calling forth. It would be great if every local church were completely safe. But then, where would the challenge be, and how would we grow in a spiritual hothouse? If we'll apply the survival skills we find in God's Word, He will zealously watch over us to see that we thrive in the local church.

Let's renew our commitment to the local church. When we face

pain, let's stay on the pathway of peace. And whatever we do, let's not give up on the very real blessings churches bring to our lives. We're called to be survivors, and that's a challenge we need to face together!

CHURCH SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

On the Survivor show, the contestants, or "survivors," are challenged to outlast, outplay and outwit one another. Scripture calls us to a different strategy:

OUTLOVE: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Pet. 3:8-9, NKJV).

OUTSERVE: "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13).

OUTGIVE: "Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Heb. 13:16).

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