

Don't Let "Church Hurt" Isolate You from Your Christian Family

Everywhere I go, I meet Christians who were hurt in church or wounded by the words and actions of other believers. Some people become bitter because of these experiences. Others throw up their hands and give up on church altogether. And a few even leave the faith.

The typical scenarios of "church hurt" might include these:

- A pastor may have demanded too much from you as a staff member or a volunteer and you felt unappreciated or even abused;
- An immature church member was put in a leadership position and ended up hurting you or others;
- A Christian you trusted betrayed your confidence by sharing your personal secrets with others;
- A pastor or leader you admired had a serious moral failure and you felt betrayed by his or her sinful choices;
- A church you attended experienced a serious split because of doctrinal differences or denominational politics.

When church hurt happens, the devil has a field day. He loves to divide and conquer by sowing discord. His ultimate goal is to keep Christians angry at each other so we can't join hearts in a common purpose.

Have you given up on church because of betrayal, disappointment, mistreatment or offence? If you or someone you love has been hurt in church, I recommend taking these steps:

1. Forgive from your heart. The first step is always forgiveness. Don't fall into the trap of justifying your right to be offended. You may be tempted to scream, "But you don't understand what they did to me!" God understands – but He requires you to let go of the pain. The Word is clear: "Even as Christ forgave you, so you must do" (Col. 3:13b, MEV).

2. Learn from the other person's mistakes. I have mentors who taught me much about God, leadership and ministry. But I also have learned a lot from watching the mistakes leaders make. If someone in ministry hurts you, make a mental note: "That is not the way I want to treat people." You can actually turn your disappointments into blessings if you learn from them.

3. Remain humble. Pride thrives in bitter soil. If you allow anger or resentment to lodge in your heart, it won't be long before your character is completely poisoned. Your desire to prove your point will inflate your ego – and God will resist you. Paul told the Galatians: "For if someone thinks himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (Gal. 6:3). Don't let someone else's mistake turn you into a monster.

4. Try to make peace. Never let an offense destroy a relationship. It's childish just to walk away. Does the leader know how he or she hurt you? Make an appointment and share your heart. Give the other person a chance to apologize or give an explanation. Our tendency is always to magnify the other person's mistakes while we excuse our own behavior. It's never wise to break a relationship without making every effort at reconciliation. If you feel you can't talk to the person because of intimidation, write a letter and explain the situation.

5. Stay in fellowship. The devil is like a wolf – he isolates his victims before he attacks. Many people who are hurt by leaders leave church altogether. It's OK to take a short break to recover. But if you go two months, then six months, then a

year without being in close fellowship with other Christians, you are making yourself vulnerable. You may be tempted to believe that there are no healthy pastors or churches in your area – but I dare you to disprove that.

6. Get godly counsel. It is never wise to walk through a relationship breakup without getting an outside perspective. You may think you are the victim – until a friend points out your own blind spots. Share what happened with trusted, spiritually mature people and ask them how you should respond. If what a leader did to you was criminal (like sexual abuse or financial exploitation), you may have to consult a lawyer. But in most cases, you will simply need to forgive and renounce any desire for revenge. Practice Romans 12:17a: “Repay no one evil for evil.”

7. Move on. I’ve met Christians who still nurse the same grudges after 30 years. They keep their pain alive by reliving the offense over and over. As a result, they are stuck in a time warp and no one wants to be around them because their sarcasm is so toxic. You must let go. Say what Jesus said on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

8. Reconnect. In this pandemic season, many people have pulled away from regular fellowship. Don’t let the virus keep you from building healthy relationships and don’t let the enemy whisper lies to you about your pastor or your church. You cannot thrive in perpetual quarantine. Leave your offenses at the cross and don’t let anyone’s mistakes prevent you from being a part of a healthy church. {eo}

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