

How to React When the Church Fails You

During the 1980s I was part of a vibrant Christian ministry that focused on reaching university students. The people involved were passionate for Jesus, excited about evangelism and eager to send missionaries to the world. There is no question that we were a revival movement. But flawed human beings were involved—and because most of us were under 30 we had no idea what we were doing!

We were idealistic, untrained and horribly naive. As a result, many mistakes were made. Scripture was misused. Judgments were hurled. People got hurt. Marriages fell apart. Churches closed. And some people never got over the fact that Christians did mean things to each other.

Everywhere I go, I meet Christians who were hurt in church or wounded by the words and actions of leaders. Some of these people are bitter. Others have given up on church. Some have even left the faith. And a few suffer from the spiritual equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder. 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 hurt. The Word is clear: "Even as Christ forgave you, so you must do" (Col. 3:13b).

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 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. Break free from manipulation. Sometimes immature leaders make harsh judgments against church members. Other leaders use their authority to punish what they perceive as disloyalty—and the person feels cursed. Inappropriate words like this have the power to maim people spiritually. If this has happened to you, ask a pastor or mature friend to pray for you and break the power of these words so you can be healed.

8. 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).

Don't let disappointment in others lock you in an unhappy past when God has a joyful future for you. Leave your offenses at the cross, and don't let anyone's mistakes prevent you from being a part of a healthy church.