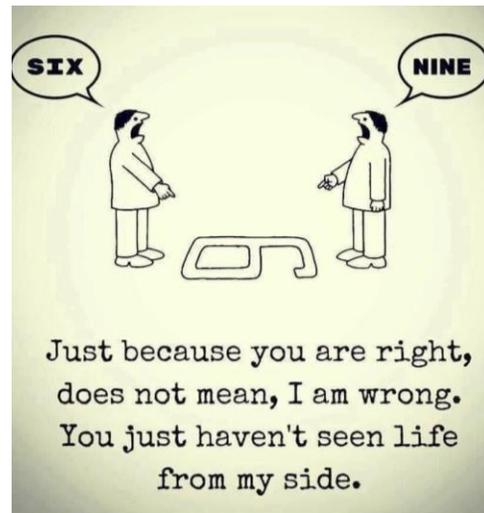


Message: “Church with a ‘C’ Hurt”

Sue Lacko shared a drawing with me this week. It clearly illustrates how different positions influence the way we perceive the world. This is a good reminder we all have perspectives shaped by our family of origin, upbringing and life experiences. The ability to listen to a person, being open to a different perspective or position, is part of what is needed to live in harmony. John Wesley knew this, even when he struggled to live it. Our founder was famous for saying, “As to all opinions that do not strike the heart of Christianity, we think and let think.” This requires openness and invites us to be together in unity.



How do we live together in unity? A common metaphor you hear is this: the church is like a hospital. “It’s a place to be messy, to be mending. Ideally, hospitalization takes us at our most vulnerable, cocoons us with care, and equips us to walk out again as a whole and healthy person. Obviously, it’ll involve pain. Nobody expects hospitalization to feel like an island spa-cation. Whether you’re getting a shot, physical therapy or birthing a baby, hurt is involved.

But what if your hurt is something more malevolent, like medical malpractice? What if you leave more wounded and vulnerable than when you came in? Let’s imagine a surgeon botched your appendectomy and nearly killed you, so you were stuck on bed rest for three months and lost your job as a result. When the collective safety measures of the hospital fail to protect a patient, that’s no time to say, ‘No hospital is perfect.’ That’s no time to ask, ‘Should I have gone to my surgeon privately to discuss the matter?’ You get the parallel

Hospitals and churches are similar, but not the same. Both are full of vulnerable, healing people, and both are committed to a standard of care. One difference is Christians are called to follow the Great Physician. We belong to the body of Christ, and if one part hurts, we all hurt (Romans 12:15). But what happens when a community claiming to

know Christ doesn't follow his character? What happens when, in defiance to its founder, the body self-harms?"¹

This is when we need to talk about church hurt by the church with a capital "C". Some call it institutional hurt. Sadly, this type of conversation can devolve into a shame-fest which shrinks "hurt" into "hurt feelings" and focuses on language rather than hearing the heart. This isn't healthy. Our siblings, already wounded by their church, get further wounded when we dismiss or belittle them. It's not easy to hear, but we must consider the reality: many people hurt by their church aren't just disappointed. Some have been deeply harmed.

Consider some examples:

- "A woman tells her small group leader her husband abused her. The leader, a beloved and revered figure in the church, says spousal abuse isn't real. He counsels her to go home and 'not deprive' her husband, citing 1 Corinthians 7:5. Unsure, she shares her dilemma with a few friends at church, who all side with the leader.
- A teen boy meets with a counselor, eventually sharing he's sexually attracted to other guys. He loves Jesus and wants to follow him, but the counselor says, 'real Christians don't have gay feelings.' Devastated, the boy shares with his parents, who are alarmed but don't confront the counselor. They don't want to be seen as divisive.
- A youth leader pioneers an outreach to inner-city teens. They also start a group for the parents, some of whom struggle with alcohol and drug abuse. The youth leader receives a barrage of critical emails from people who condemn the program and are uncomfortable with 'these people' being in their church. The youth leader is eventually fired, with no explanation, by people they once considered friends."²

This is a small taste of what it looks like when a church collectively hurts itself, rather than following Jesus into unity and maturity (Ephesians 2:21; Colossians 2:16-19). There is little evidence of a desire to listen, change and find a place for grace.

¹ www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2021/10/29/avoiding-untethered-compassion-re-engaging-in-church-after-church-hurts/

² *ibid*

It's very hard for us to hear, but real harm has been done and is being done. People are regularly harmed by the church. This is an ongoing reality. We can't cover up or excuse the real hurts we do as a body. We shouldn't hide physical, sexual or emotional abuse, violence or the abuse of power. We need to acknowledge our differences, become aware of our biases and prejudices, and realize some are minimized and mistreated.

It takes courage and sensitivity to navigate the dynamic tension between embracing our feelings and fulfilling our purpose. All too often, discussions and decisions default to "who is in control/who decides" and "who gets the resources." We find ourselves competing, rather than collaborating on ways we can serve the Lord together.

There is a need for real change. To be relevant to our peers, to the next generation and to those who haven't heard Jesus' message of grace and mercy, pardon and healing, we need to show how we can overcome our old nature and live in a new way, embracing our new nature.

How do we find love and unity when we don't know how to relate to the church with a "C"? Matthew records Jesus' teaching. Most of us know the part about division. When our positions dictate our priorities, we're often misled, following our own interests. Our purpose is to love God with our whole being and love our neighbor as ourselves. Without this unifying purpose, we become divided. And when that happens, we have little chance of standing against opposition. Only when we're together and embracing each other in love are we on the path God set before us.

To love God is to love God's people (1 John 4:20-21). In a healthy church, Christ's love helps us disagree charitably, resolve misunderstandings, reconcile relationships, learn from conflict, and grow into health and wholeness together. There is pain involved, but it's pain which leads to healing, the sort of suffering which can refine us. Healthy ways of being together transform conflict, leading to change and growth.

But not all churches are healthy. There are those who are self-serving. There are some who occupy spots of prominence and churches can

abandon their first love (Revelation 2:1-7; Luke 22:3-6). Harmful churches often have disordered priorities. It's easy to get caught up in our role, seek applause or rely on affluence. We can be articulate, intelligent and charming while, in practice, glorifying an image rather than God.

What practices might reflect an unhealthy culture? “Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, who extensively studied spiritual abuse, say abusive church systems tend to prize conformity to the church culture. This might look like ‘censorship of decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence ... and control through the use of sacred texts or teaching.’

For example, a pastor might insist the congregation get their approval before making any major choices. A leader may ask invasive questions about a person's life, then tell the person to keep the conversation ‘just between us.’ Or a church's teaching may emphasize ‘one right way’ of doing things, like counseling or children's education or marriage roles, and ostracize people who practice differently.”³

Oppressive leaders and toxic systems tend to practice accountability in name only. A pastor might have a leadership team or SPRC around them, but if they're “yes people” who are too intimidated to confront the pastor when needed, this is unhealthy. This is true at all levels of our church. Some examples include:

- An unfaithful person who is privately rebuked, but no one connects with, and cares for, their spouse, and no one follows up.
- A staff member who habitually breaks confidentially for prayer but is never corrected and never learns the damage they cause.

Accountability is a courageous challenge, wisely pointing us to the need to repent. This is the way Nathan held David accountable, and Paul held Peter accountable (1 Samuel 12-13; Galatians 2:11-21).

I'm greatly comforted by knowing Jesus not only understands what we go through, he cares. Jesus cares about our hurt and is sympathetic because he suffered. Jesus was rejected, mocked, and betrayed. He

³ Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, podcast, September 17, 2021

knows what it's like to have those he loved hurt him. Our pain matters to Jesus. When one of your children is hurt, you're moved to swoop in and offer tender care and comfort. How much greater is God's love for us, his children? We can confidently bring our suffering and weaknesses to Jesus and expect to receive the mercy and help of one who knows what it's like (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Jeremiah captures what it feels like to be in agony over poor treatment by God's people. He wrote, "*My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick within me*" (Jeremiah 8:18). Jeremiah begs, "*I wish my head were a well of water and my eyes fountains of tears, so I could weep day and night*" (Jeremiah 9:1). God doesn't want us to skip past the pain church hurt inflicts. We, too, can speak up, sharing our pain.

Healthy churches practice compassion. Compassion is showing "concern over another's misfortune."⁴ The body of Christ should be a place where you can arrive and have those in the body surround you with love, care, concern and understanding. And when you've been hurt by the church, for a group to welcome and restore you is an oasis, one in which spiritual life is restored and rejuvenated.

The best of churches practice compassion tethered to the truth of God's Word. Kevin DeYoung says, "Weeping in itself isn't sacred. The one who laughs the loudest isn't always laughing for good reason. The one who shares their pain most conspicuously isn't always lamenting for good cause. Our suffering doesn't rule."⁵ Healthy churches will have compassion with you and let God's love guide their ministry to you.

What do we expect when we show up and say, "the church mistreated me"? A healthy church will say, "I'm so sorry you were hurt. Tell me what happened." They will sit and listen without judgment. Then the healthy church will help you discern how you can respond to be like Jesus. It's fair to ask for details. Compassion, in this instance, is tethered to truth. And that's what we really want. We want to be heard, accepted, restored and affirmed. Most of all, we want to be loved.

⁴ <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2021/10/29/avoiding-untethered-compassion-re-engaging-in-church-after-church-hurts/>

⁵ *ibid*

I invite you to closer your eye and listen to Jesus words:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG). Don’t give up.

Join us as we sit together at Jesus’ feet, listening with hope.**Matthew 12:15-21, 25-27, 33 (MSG)**

Jesus, knowing they were out to get him, moved on. A lot of people followed him, and he healed them all. He also cautioned them to keep it quiet, following guidelines set down by Isaiah:

Look well at my handpicked servant;
 I love him so much, take such delight in him.
 I’ve placed my Spirit on him;
 he’ll decree justice to the nations.
 But he won’t yell, won’t raise his voice;
 there’ll be no commotion in the streets.
 He won’t walk over anyone’s feelings,
 won’t push you into a corner.
 Before you know it, his justice will triumph;
 the mere sound of his name will signal hope, even
 among far-off unbelievers....

Jesus confronted their slander. “A judge who gives opposite verdicts on the same person cancels himself out. A family that’s in a constant squabble disintegrates. If Satan banishes Satan, is there any Satan left? If you’re slinging devil mud at me, calling me a devil kicking out devils, doesn’t the same mud stick to your own exorcists?”

“If you grow a healthy tree, you’ll pick healthy fruit. If you grow a diseased tree, you’ll pick worm-eaten fruit. The fruit tells you about the tree.”