

Message: “Group Hurt”

Have you ever heard of Holy Creek Baptist Church? Reading from an article published August 1999, “100 years of Christian fellowship, spiritual love, Godly unity, and community growth ended last Tuesday in a fit of congregational discord not to be rivaled in this century. Holy Creek Baptist Church was ... severed from the once stalwart cord of unity that bound them together. The fist of discord [split them] ... into two disheveled, unorganized factions of estranged members.

The source of dissension is a piano bench which still sits behind the 1923 Steinburg to the left of the pulpit. Those who have friends or relatives at Holy Creek Baptist say the old bench was always a source of hostility. People should have seen it coming. ‘The congregation was getting ready to break for the last 10 years,’ some said. ‘It’s just a shame it had to be over a piano bench.’ One outside pastor commented, ‘However ridiculous it might sound, I’m sure the Lord is using this whole thing in some way none of us can see or make any sense of at all or ever hope to comprehend.’

At present (1999), Holy Creek will be having four services. There has been an unspoken agreement mediated by an outside pastor. Each faction will have its own separate service with its own separate pastor. Since the head pastor is not speaking to the associate pastor, each will have their own service, which will be attended by faction members. We are told the services are far enough apart so neither group will encounter the other. An outside party will be moving the piano bench to different locations and appropriate positions between services to please both sides and avoid any further conflict ... in [hopes of preventing] violence.”¹

Violence in the church over a piano bench?! It’s sad and extreme, but true. This story illustrates one of the hidden, and yet, most common ways people can be hurt at church. Group dynamics play a part in how we see and interact with people and how we’re seen and treated in return. When we lose sight of our purpose, we can become focused on our position.

¹ Source: <https://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0899/piano.html>

After all, who hasn't felt disenchanted because we didn't get the experience we expected, or our way, when we came to church?

There's a paradox inherent in all of this. The harshness and inconsistency of our society pushes us toward the most tangible and widely promoted expression of faith, the local church. We come hoping for safety and refuge. We also come seeking an oasis of perfection and goodness. All too often, this image is shattered by our experience.

Our expectations don't live up to our experience for one simple reason: the people we encounter in church are just like the people outside church. We're all flawed, filled with hurt feelings and struggling with our fears. Not only do our personal hurts and pains follow us, but our group behaviors follow us as well. And this leads to conflict.

According to experts, there are two categories of group conflict:² inter-group conflict (groups of individuals at odds with one another), and intra-group conflict (individuals in the same group at odds with one another). While both forms of conflict can be severe, conflict between groups is generally considered to be more powerful than conflict within a group. This is a phenomenon known as the "discontinuity effect."³ It suggests "groups are generally even more competitive and aggressive than individuals."²

Group conflict can easily enter an escalating spiral of hostility marked by polarization of views into right or wrong, good or bad, fitting with the group or not. The same actions can be viewed in diametrically opposite ways. For example, "we offer concessions, but they attempt to lure us with ploys. We're steadfast and courageous, but they're unyielding, irrational, stubborn, and blinded by ideology."⁴ Do you hear how they're the same, yet perceived differently?

Sadly, it appears both types of hostility are inversely related to our feelings to some degree. This means our external battle affects our internal state in the opposite way. For example, "in politics everyone can get an extraordinarily comforting feeling of mutual support from their group by focusing on an enemy." Even when the enemy is just like

² Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_conflict

³ Forsyth, D. R. (2009). *Group dynamics (5th ed.)*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole

⁴ Eliot R. Smith/Diane M. Mackie, *Social Psychology (2007)* p. 515

them, perhaps even a family member?! Even when different groups have the same passion, the same desire to love and be loved, we may sacrifice unity and harmony for the approval and acceptance we feel within our adopted group. This is a me-first, rather than God-first, view.

What can we do? Jesus teaches us to ask for, and freely give, forgiveness (Luke 17:1-4). And Paul is direct, as usual, *“I insist - and God backs me up on this - that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They’ve refused for so long to deal with God that they’ve lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. They can’t think straight anymore But that’s no life for you take on an entirely new way of life - a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you”* (Ephesians 4:17-24, MSG).

Sounds good, but we know it’s easier said than done. We all want to escape the cycle of conflict and uncertainty we live in daily. We want a place where we can feel welcome, where we can trust others and where we can heal from the spiritual wounds we receive.

Pastor Carol Hewitt, author of Healing Spiritual Wounds, reflects on this path using an unusual scripture reference. Jesus said, *“Treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you.”* Then he said, *“Go in through the narrow gate. The gate leading to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate leading to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.”* (Matthew 7:12-14, CEB).

When I was younger, this passage always made me think God fell in love with creation. God delighted in us and promised to cherish us. Then God decided to destroy most of us unless we happened to find an itty-bitty gate. What a horrific view of God! Yet the image fit perfectly with my imagined need for punishment. My view of God had become skewed by my hurt feelings, flaws and failures. I was limiting God or seeing God as the agent of my suffering, which was wrong.

When we remember John’s teaching, *“We’re going to love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. God loved us first”* (1 John 4:19), this image changes. God is loving and compassionate, not

seeking to destroy us. We long for a loving God, yet wrestle with the pain and hurt we encounter. It's easy to see how we can find ourselves on a destructive path, particularly as we try to make meaning out of suffering. Our attention becomes focused on pain, rather than love.

When we walk the more common path, we constantly replay in our minds the pain of our experience, our grief and trauma. We may find similar stories on the news and repeat them, over and over again. While facing our pain can be positive as we learn how to respond better or find purpose or meaning in pain, it becomes destructive when we look for ways to re-enact the violence in our lives. We find ourselves living as victims. We're holding onto our pain and it shapes us.

God's loving intention is for us to find a life-giving path.

Jesus' message of love and hope is a life-giving message of compassion. God isn't the source of our suffering. God is with walking with us, step by step, through our suffering. God isn't punishing us through pain. God is in solidarity with us, helping us learn to overcome our pain, using it for good.

The Holy Spirit is prompting me to add this note: perhaps healing for our group comes when we see another person's pain. When we have empathy for another, we no longer see them as "other" or "opposition" or "lesser" or "enemy." We see them as a human being just like us, who needs love, care and healing.

This is a powerful, new image of God. This new path coaxes us from the ruts of our victimhood and opens new possibilities. This way is narrow because it takes work. As you focus on a life-giving God, you'll have to clear away bushes and brambles. You may get scratched. The ground may seem soft at times. Yet, when we keep walking, the path becomes firmer and clearer in our soul. We can return to it more easily.

There are several ways we can focus on God's life-giving path of love. Prayer, music and meditating on scripture changes our neural pathways. Encountering God in nature changes our body. Connecting to Jesus through loving relationships feeds our heart and all of them combine to heal our soul. They heal our family and community as well.

Pastor Hewitt writes, “When we create a path of life, we can invite others to share the road. These paths are intensely personal AND communal, especially when formed with songs, patterns and scripture. Chanting and repeating well-worn passages from the Bible can rewire our brain in a positive way. This gives us another path to walk down; one of healing and ancient promises, passed down like an old friend hugging us and whispering peace to each of us.”⁵

How does this help us when we’ve been hurt by a group?

Pastor John Ortberg offers this advice, “Jesus, who was certainly hurt by others, engaged in practices which allowed God’s grace to keep replenishing his spirit. Jesus prayed, participated in community with his disciples, engaged in corporate worship, meditated on scripture, and enjoyed God’s creation. These spiritual practices rested his soul.

A common problem is people think of spiritual practices as obligations that will drain them. There are times when I may need to engage in a practice like giving generously, or serving humbly, which my [selfish] side resists. But generally, I need to engage in practices connecting me to God’s grace, energy and joy.”⁶

I believe engaging in spiritual practices together, with your group and with members of another group, is a way to rediscover what we have in common. We find some amazing things: God loves us all, regardless of how we group ourselves. God forgives us, which means relationships matter. God calls us to gather to build each other up and care for those in need. God’s Spirit helps us find what we all seek.

It’s what Jesus offered when he appeared to the disciples in their darkest time after his death, “Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36). Jesus was a Hebrew-speaking, Jewish rabbi. What he most likely said was, “*Shalom lehkhem*” (peace to you). In Israel today, when you greet someone or say goodbye, you say, shalom. Shalom is more than peace; it’s also rest. It’s more than the absence of conflict; it’s giving each other trust. You’re literally saying, “may you be full of well-being” or,

⁵ Carol Howard Merrit, *Healing Spirit Wounds*, HarperOne, 2017, pp. 53-55.

⁶ Source: www.johnortberg.com/fighting-soul-fatigue/

“may health and prosperity be upon you.” You’re speaking a blessing into the lives of others or receiving a blessing from others.⁷

What if we focused on not just a day of rest each week but getting our wholeness restored? What if we could completely refill our life tank in our bodies, hearts and minds? That’s what true shalom does, if we allow it. When our peace is full and overflowing, we can trust God to restore what may have been lost last week. We can confidently move forward in hope we’ll have all we need in the week ahead. This is a way to give and receive life from others. It’s the path less traveled, but it’s the way of faith, hope and love. To God be the glory, amen.

⁷ <https://firmisrael.org/learn/the-meaning-of-shalom/>

Ephesians 4:17-24 (MSG)

And so I insist - and God backs me up on this - that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. They can't think straight anymore. Feeling no pain, they let themselves go in sexual obsession, addicted to every sort of perversion.

But that's no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything - and I do mean everything - connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life - a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.

Luke 17:1-4 (CEB)

Jesus said to his disciples, "Things that cause people to trip and fall into sin must happen, but how terrible it is for the person through whom they happen. It would be better for them to be thrown into a lake with a large stone hung around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to trip and fall into sin. Watch yourselves! If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them. Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person."