

Healing Your Church Hurt

*What to do when you still love God
but have been wounded by his people*



STEPHEN MANSFIELD

BARNA 

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Healing Your Church Hurt: What to Do When You Still Love God but Have Been Wounded by His People

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To

BILL RUFF

*who wept with me
and stayed true*

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Foreword

THE UNITED STATES IS A HUGE, POPULOUS NATION. As such, it is home to numerous epidemics. One of them is the dreaded, but widespread *ecclesia exitus* disease—the Latin term for church dropout. Perhaps you’ve experienced it—the decision to permanently withdraw from a congregation you had considered to be your “church home.” The symptoms are many, but the outcome is unambiguous: pain, disappointment, and spiritual anomie.

Personally, I’ve had several bouts of *ecclesia exitus* over the years. In one case, it was caused when our pastor disagreed theologically with something that I wrote in a book. Rather than confronting me personally—the practice he taught from the pulpit, based on Matthew 18—he chose to avoid me and instead go public with his disenchantment. And he didn’t do it by just bad-mouthing me to a few of the faithful: he wrote an entire book on the subject, using me as his unknowing, voiceless foil. When I asked him why he had not contacted me first to discuss his concerns so that we could resolve

our differences as mandated in Matthew 18, his response was that if I had a problem with his approach, well, tough luck. Shocked and wounded by the hypocrisy of his actions, and his unwillingness to engage in further conversation regarding his actions, my family and I sought another church to call home.

In another instance, I was serving in a leadership capacity at a church when the senior pastor became uncontrollably jealous of the national attention that my ministry was receiving. He froze me out of leadership meetings and regular processes, and made comments about me to other congregational leaders that were both untrue and unfair. Because he was not willing to admit to me that these things were happening, and other people in the congregation were becoming increasingly upset by the odd behavior of their pastor, it seemed that the most honorable thing for me to do was leave that body. Although the environment had become toxic, it was still a crushing blow for me and my family.

Another instance stemmed from how a predominantly white, affluent congregation treated my Hispanic daughters. All of my daughters are adopted, and two of them are from a Latin American country. While my wife and I were welcomed with open arms by the congregation, the distasteful treatment accorded to our little girls in their Sunday school classes—by teachers and students alike—made it impossible for us to stay put. Once again, the gap between what was preached and what was practiced made it unbearable for us to remain in our church home.

All of these examples are recalled simply to say that I understand the pain involved in being chewed up by a church—a place where you go to worship God, to become more Christlike, to serve others, to enjoy positive relationships with other Christ followers, and to have a safe and reliable place to bring truth seekers for exposure to biblical

principles in thought, word, and deed. It can be a shattering reality when your “church home” becomes a place of rejection and suffering while you are doing your best to be part of the spiritual family. It turns your world upside down, births a variety of spiritual doubts, and leaves a sour taste in your mouth.

If you think about it, though, the causes of *ecclesia exitus* have been afflicting the Lord’s people since the beginning of church history.

- + Jesus was sent to save the Jews, whose leaders rejected and conspired to orchestrate His murder, in defiance of the spiritual laws and principles that they taught fellow Jews.
- + Paul’s letters were written to churches that were distorting the principles provided by Jesus and consequently hurting many people through the misapplication of His truths and admonitions.
- + The description of five of the seven churches depicted in Revelation 2 and 3 reflect congregations that did a poor job of handling Jesus’ teachings—and God’s people.
- + Even the early church leaders were guilty of infighting and bitterness. Paul had a less-than-amicable parting of ways with John Mark and Barnabas despite a successful initial missionary journey.

Conflict and interpersonal pain are as old as humanity. Perhaps not surprisingly, such difficulties have been present in the Christian Church from its origins, and are likely to be part of every human institution until the end of the age.

Our contemporary culture certainly fans the flames of *ecclesia*

exitus. Think about the way in which millions of people interpret fundamental Christian principles and behaviors. Grace is interpreted by many as a weakness to be exploited. Compromise is seen as a loss of substance or courage. Discernment is criticized as intolerance. Blame and retribution are preferred to forgiveness and mercy. In our society, behaving with kindness and humility is often considered with disdain: the choice of losers and wimps.

The paradox inherent in all of this is that the inconsistencies and harshness of our society often drive us toward the most tangible and widely promoted expression of Christianity—the local church, an assumed oasis of perfection and goodness, a place where sinners are transformed into reasonable facsimiles of Christ Himself. But that expectation is often shattered. After all, the local body of believers is still a collection of sinners seeking a place where they can discover wisdom, truth, grace, healing, and love. No local church will ever be perfect as long as people are part of it. In our thirst to experience the righteousness of God, we sometimes forget that we have the capacity to wound others, even in a spiritual environment, as well as a higher-than-desirable probability of being wounded by a community of faith.

Spiritual injury occurs in churches more often than we would like to admit. My research among unchurched adults reveals that nearly four out of every ten unchurched people (37 percent) in the United States avoid church life because of bad past experiences in a church or in relation to church people. Whether the issue is the judgment rendered against them by church people, the lack of trust between congregants and church leaders, perceived hypocrisy in the lives of the church people, or outright incivility or meanness suffered at the hands of other church members, some 25 to 30 million adults

stay away from Christian churches because of the past treatment they have experienced from the local body of Christ.

Too many adults have contracted *ecclesia exitus* because of how they were treated by the church community during difficult times—after a divorce or sexual affair, in response to rebellious children, because of substance abuse, due to living an unbiblical lifestyle, and the like. The people who were called on by God to represent Him as lovers and healers failed. Those who bore the brunt of that failure took their pain elsewhere, seeking acceptance, understanding, and wisdom from places that simply cannot provide such a balm. But it's all they had available. The church of Jesus did not behave like Jesus the Savior.

Sometimes people leave the local church because they did not get the God experience they were so desperately seeking. Again, my national studies have shown that close to one out of every four adults regularly feels disappointed by the worship services at the churches they attend; about three out of ten adults feel as if they rarely or never connect with God or sense His presence at worship services; and more than one-third of self-identified Christian adults rarely or never feels as if the worship service at their church turns out to be the most important experience they have had all week.

The sting of disenchantment is felt more heavily by some than others. Young adults are especially likely to feel let down or hurt by a church. The same goes for Hispanics and men. And people who are refugees from Catholic and mainline Protestant churches are more likely than those who have participated in other Christian faith communities to suffer from their past experience with churches.

In the midst of the emotional and spiritual upset that occurs when a church hurts or disappoints us, we tend to lose sight of the fact that

the local church is merely a collection of people on a challenging journey—a group of people who are involved in a long-term transformation process. We fail to see many churched people as more godly today than they were in the past; still imperfect, yes, but making slow progress toward becoming more godly. Consequently, these works-in-progress become the target of ugly labels and derisive comments. “Hypocritical.” “Judgmental.” “Narrow-minded.” “Holier than thou.” And worse . . .

As those pronouncements become more comfortable, sometimes we adopt unreasonable expectations of the body of Christ. When those unfortunate expectations are combined with our culture’s general disinterest in facilitating change that takes substantial time and effort, we get disastrous results. One such result is the growing proportion of young adults who drop out of church during their twenties. Currently, 61 percent of people who were churched during their adolescent and teen years drop out of Christian churches when they reach their twenties. Some of them return when they have children, when they get over themselves, or when their hurt has healed enough to give organized religion another chance. But millions of young adults never get that far. Once they leave, they are gone for good. And the proportion of those who are “gone for good” is growing.

Put it all together and it paints a rather dismal portrait of the American church. But that’s why Stephen Mansfield’s words are so important—both for those who have left the church and for those who have never left. Stephen, another kindred spirit who has suffered through his own bout with *ecclesia exitus*, graces us with the benefit of his years of reflection on the experience. He reminds us that because we are the Church—the aggregate body of believers

bound together by our common love of Christ and each other—we are influenced in more ways than we may realize by the presence of this disease.

If you want a resource that merely sympathizes with you over your unfortunate encounter with a church, this may not be the book you are seeking. Stephen's well-considered advice is that you need to deal with the things you can control, and that puts the focus squarely on you. Stephen is not out to beat you up or to engage in "blaming the victim," but his words provide a dose of tough love for all of us: both those who have been hurt and those who have inflicted the hurt. He will encourage you to not simply run from the experience, rewrite it, or contract amnesia regarding the relevant difficulties. Instead, he'll help you dive deep within your heart, mind, and soul to ascertain the best way for you to handle your own pain and doubt.

Personal growth is often preceded by hardship. Jesus even promised that heartbreak and persecution would be part of the journey to wholeness. Stephen Mansfield's words will put all of that in better perspective as you try to make sense out of the role of the local church in your life. It is vital that each of us remains immersed in the community of faith to benefit from the growth potential that can only emerge from being in a relationship with other Christ followers. I believe that this book will enable you to do so with greater enthusiasm, wisdom, and contribution.

George Barna

VENTURA, CALIFORNIA

JUNE 2009

Prologue

YOU ARE LIKELY READING THIS BOOK because you believe that you have been hurt by a church or you know someone who has. Or perhaps you were forced to witness a hurtful church fight, and the experience has wrenched your soul ever since. Whatever the case, there was an incident, a turning point, and since then you have been different.

Things were probably good at the beginning. You joined a church and felt at one with it all. You belonged. You had, perhaps for the first time in your life, that band of brothers we all need, that loving sisterhood that makes life feel complete. So you invested. You sang in the choir or you worked on staff or you assisted the pastor or you raked leaves in the yard. You cared. You prayed. You made this body your own.

Then *it* happened and you've been running the facts over and over again in your mind. There was the turning. Perhaps you should have seen it coming. There was a change in spirit, a look on someone's

face, or an unsettling feel to a crowd. And the stormy season came. Maybe it was merciful and quick and private. Or it may have been that long, public, and humiliating kind. But it happened. The storm spit you out like a slowing tornado in Kansas and you have never been the same.

Since that time you've tried to move on but you cannot let it go. You replay the facts in your mind but that only deepens the wound. You wish you could reclaim who you were before the blows came but you do not want to go back to that hurtful time and place. So you simmer in the toxins of your bitterness. And it hurts. God knows, it hurts.

You reach for relief. You find a gang of similarly damaged friends and you drink and you cuss. Or you lose yourself in busyness. Or you eat yourself to peace, but at night you still feel the burning acid reflux of the toxins in your soul.

It may sound like I'm taunting you. It may sound like I'm accusing you of fault or smirking at your pain. No. Regrettably, I've seen it before. The fact is you are walking a well-worn path.

Here is all I ask of you for now: agree with me that you are not as you should be. I'm not asking that you change your version of the facts or jump back into church or even become the good little praying/Bible reading/smiling Christian you once thought you should be. All I ask is that you agree that the state you are in is not the right state of your life, that something is wrong and has been since the season of the storms. Your body tells you and the face you see in the mirror tells you and the turbulent sea inside you tells you that this posture, this condition, this current molding of your life is not as it should be.

It is as though there is a splinter working its way to the surface, only this splinter is in your soul. And just as the skin wants a foreign object gone and pushes it out, the soul wants to be healthy and will not leave you in peace until you stop drenching it with the poisons of your feelings about the past.

All you need to do for now is agree that you are not whole and have not been since that day. This is the beginning. For we have not met here to whine about what they did to you or teach them all a thing or two. We are here to turn our hearts toward healing, knowing that we cannot continue as we are.

Be brave, then. Tell yourself the truth. Declare the reality of what has happened to you. And then you'll be ready for what comes next.

CHAPTER 1

The Image of Our Folly

ONE OF THE DEFINING IMAGES OF MY LIFE first announced itself when I was twenty-two. At the time I was the director of a dormitory at a major university in the Midwest. My job was to tend the dorm life of several hundred men and to scurry about the campus in response to the many urgent messages that buzzed the pager I carried on my belt. Because this was back in the Dark Ages, the pager was the size of a small house, made a noise like a jet engine each time it went off, and seemed to dominate my life in nearly every way.

One of these urgent messages came on an April morning and sent me rushing to the university's sports complex. The message was followed by a code indicating the matter was serious—paramedics were on the way.

When I arrived, the scene was near madness. My attention was first captured by a dark-haired, attractive woman. I say she was attractive but I have to admit that this was a guess on my part, for the truth is that she was hard to see. She kept bending at the waist, covering her

face with her hands, and wailing, “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” at an ever-increasing volume, as though she had just discovered the presence of evil in the world. I had no sooner taken her in, when a short, balding man charged at me, his finger violently jabbing into my chest, while he yelled that I would suffer the tortures of the damned in court. “I will sue you, your mother, and this university for all you’re worth!” the man raged. To this day I’m not sure why he threatened my dear mother, but that is exactly what he did.

Just beyond the wailing woman and the jabbing man was a university security guard. I’m fairly sure that at that moment he was quietly celebrating the university policy that prevented him from dealing with the public. He stared at me blankly, yet with one eyebrow slightly raised as though to say, “It’s all yours, bubba. Let’s see what you can do.”

At the center of this bedlam was Timmy. I knew it was his name because his beanie baseball cap, his matching sweatshirt, and yes, even the socks that rose from his saddle shoes to just below his neatly pressed shorts all sported the word: *Timmy*. And Timmy was in trouble.

I knew that Timmy was in trouble because he was screaming as loudly as any child ever has. The source of his trouble seemed to be that his right arm had been swallowed by a candy machine. There was Timmy with his shoulder jammed up against a huge machine; from time to time, he would angrily try to pull his arm free but couldn’t. Then, too, there were those trickles of blood that were working their way down Timmy’s arm, threatening to stain the sleeve of the sweatshirt that bore his name.

It was the blood that seemed to incite the aggrieved cries of the woman, who, I soon understood, was Timmy’s mother. She would

point at the blood, return her hands to her face, wail with the grief of the ages, and commence bending at the waist. The man, of course, was Timmy's father, and in the time-honored manner of men, he expressed his concern for his son by finding another man and threatening him. The man he chose was me.

As a well-trained college dorm director, I had absolutely no idea what to do. Still, taking stock of the four people in front of me, I decided my best chance was with Timmy. I walked over to him, ran my hand up his arm into the candy machine to determine what was really happening, and tried to be comforting.

It was then that I noticed it. Timmy's arm was taut in a way that suggested perhaps he wasn't really stuck after all. By then the paramedics had arrived, but I waved them off.

I stepped back from the screaming boy, looked him firmly in the eye and said, "Son, let go of the candy bar." The mother stopped her wailing. The father backed away from my right ear, in which he had been screaming for several deafening minutes. The paramedics and the security guard looked at me as though I had just denied Christ on the cross. Everyone went silent, waiting to see what would happen next.

And Timmy, mercifully quiet for the first time, pulled his hand out of that machine.

I can picture an adult Timmy years later telling a crowd at a cocktail party how that machine walked across the room, sucked in his arm, and wouldn't let go. But it didn't happen that way. All of that commotion and fear, all of that screaming and rage, was because Timmy had a death grip on a Snickers bar.

*I stepped back
from the screaming
boy and said,
"Son, let go of the
candy bar."*

I cannot tell you exactly why, but God has brought that image back to me again and again throughout my life. Maybe because that screaming boy—the one who threw everyone into turmoil because he refused to let go—has often been me. When I have had my seasons of darkness in my otherwise blessed life, God has used Timmy to remind me that nothing can keep my soul in bondage except the forbidden or unclean thing I insist on holding tight.

It is an image that has served me well. When life has bled me dry or friends have failed me or I have fouled my nest through my own folly, I remember that better days always lie ahead if only I will loosen my Timmy Death Grip on what I should have left alone in the first place: my offenses, my bitterness, my need for revenge, my anger, my self-pity, my pride.

Never was this lesson and the image of Timmy more vital to my soul than when I found myself in the middle of a good old-fashioned church fight. For nearly a decade, I had been the pastor of a growing and influential church. It had been a glorious experience and I had loved the life that we shared and the history that we made as this nearly four thousand-member congregation pursued the things of God. But then, for reasons that don't need airing here, it all came to an end amidst conflict and uproar. Oh, it was a classic—complete with a conspiring church board and gossip packaged as “sharing” in prayer meetings and accusations flying fast and loose. Demons danced and angels wept, and I should say quickly that I sinned, too. But for the record, I did not shoot John F. Kennedy, I did not create global warming, and I did not offer Adam and Eve the forbidden fruit.

Frankly, it was a soul-deforming season of hell, and it ended with me leaving the church I had led for more than a decade, suffering all the isolation and suspicion that such departures usually entail. I was stunned by the humiliation, lashed by the loss and the loneliness. Each morning when I awoke, I had to remember what was happening to me, my soul so fractured at the time. And when it was all over, it wasn't over. Though I thought I had gone through all the required horrors and had begun to move on, I soon found that those horrors kept cycling through me.

This is when the real horrors began. The sheer force of what I had experienced and my foolish habit of constantly replaying it all in my mind shoved me off balance and began squeezing me in a vise of pain and hostility. I was becoming a sour, angry, dangerous man. In my agony, I could justify almost any moral choice and in my mind somehow make that choice a jab at my enemies and, yes, at God. He, after all, had allowed all this to happen.

It got worse. I wanted them to die. All of them. The ones who had hurt me, the ones who liked the ones who had hurt me, and the ones who sat silently by while the other ones hurt me. I wanted them to die and die horribly, and I wanted to do it myself.

And when that murderous rage turned inward, I began to plan my own death. In desperation, I had gone to a monastery to pray and try to recover. It was a horrible decision. I had chosen to do this in the dead of winter. Everything was brown and frozen. And the facilities were, well, monastic. It was

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just after Christmas, no one was around, and since the place was run by Trappist monks bound by a vow of silence, no one would talk to me. It was a depressing experience on top of my already depressing experience. On the drive home, I imagined how peaceful it would be to let my car drift into the path of an oncoming truck.

I was a mess. It had happened not just from the bludgeoning of the initial church fight, but from my ignorant decision afterward to let my soul become a toxic bog. I was spoiled little Timmy and I had a death grip on my own version of the forbidden candy bar—a life-deforming bitterness.

It was at that moment that some men, by the grace of God, stepped forcefully into my life. They were pastors, but pastors of an exceptionally bold and unapologetic kind. I would like to tell you that they sweetly and gently led me to truth. They didn't. They nearly beat me to death. It didn't matter to them that I had pastored a church of thousands. They didn't care. They called me an idiot, told me that I'd better grow up, and then they proceeded to take me apart, one unclean piece at a time. It was torturous, unfair, embarrassing, and rude. And it set me free.

What I learned during that rough season of soul surgery is found on the pages that follow. More important for the moment is what I experienced as I emerged clean and free: adversity, endured righteously, has the power to lift a man to new heights.

Or as George Whitefield said, "A man's suffering times are his best improving times."

Or as Hebrews 12 indicates, hardship is God's discipline in preparation for a better day.

However you say it, the lesson is the same: if you do the hard

thing the right way, you become a better person. And by the grace of God, I did.

Shortly after my long, dry season, God opened a new and surprising phase of life for me. He allowed me to begin speaking around the world. He made it possible for me to write books on vital topics and some of those books became international best sellers. He gave me influence in the corridors of power in our nation, and he allowed me to help shape, in very small ways, some of the major events of our time. After more than two decades of pastoring a church, God still allowed me to pastor people, only now I did so from behind the scenes.

I do not recount these opportunities to make myself seem grand. I've already admitted that I'm a knucklehead, and I realize that anything I have achieved has been due to God and others. But it is important that you know who I became so that I can describe to you what I began to see.

It is universally true that the experience of one man exerts a magnetic pull on the similar experience of another man. Pain, I assume, calls to pain. Victory calls to victory. I suppose people who have been abused in some way can sense it in others even if no words are spoken. I imagine the rejected can instantly sense rejection in others, or those who have conquered some fierce moral flaw in themselves can quickly identify those of equal character nearby.

Perhaps because of this truth about the human experience and perhaps because God wanted me to learn what will fill these pages, I began shortly after my dark season to experience what can only be

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called a grand tour of the religiously wounded. It was inescapable and profound.

My first book as I stepped into my new life was *The Faith of George W. Bush*, which was a best seller and made me welcome among some of the politically powerful in our country. Time and again, though I would say nothing about the subject, well-known men and women began talking to me about what they had suffered at the hands of their fellow believers and how it had marred their lives. Sometimes the issues were petty. One national leader told me how he had left his Episcopal church in anger over the placement of a bike path. At other times, the issues were a bit more substantial. A very powerful man I came to know well had left his church because the cross on the church wall was replaced by a video screen. The man, known for his angry approach to politics, had clearly been damaged by the experience. And then there were the tales of cruelty and spite. One of the most powerful CEOs in America wept with me in his office as he recounted how fellow church members distanced themselves from him when he was vilified in the press. Another, a handsome white man, married a beautiful black woman but then found his church home of decades alienating them because of the mixed marriage. This man was a visible national leader, but the experience of religious spite has left him distanced from his past, his God, and even parts of himself ever since.

After my book on President Bush's faith, I wrote another called *The Faith of the American Soldier*, which required that I go to Iraq to find out what was happening in the religious lives of the U.S. troops

there. It was a glorious experience for this Army brat, but again, the theme of hurt in church emerged often. There was the brave chaplain who spent an hour telling me how the church he pastored back home had pledged to keep him as their pastor while he was at war only to remove him months later and treat his wife harshly. This chaplain planned to leave the ministry after his tour of duty was done.

There were also stories that circulated among the young soldiers, members of a generation already suspicious of “organized religion,” that made them cling to God but hate the church. Again, some of it was petty: disagreements over styles of music, a favorite minister who was fired, or a bitter feud about the building fund. However, some soldiers were the children of clergy who had witnessed bloodlettings over politics in the pulpit, pastors being fired without severances, a leader’s family suffering an entire community’s ire over a single sermon, and incessant church infighting that ultimately led to heart attacks, divorce, crippled souls, and scuttled churches.

These were weighty matters, and their anger seemed justified. But then, even as I continued to listen compassionately, I also heard these young warriors speak with just as much heat about matters that seemed trivial. One soldier told me how he left a church when the leaders decided to pave the parking lot. An airman told me of his church splitting over the worship team’s insistence on wearing jeans, and another spewed rage over his pastor’s insistence on using the New International Version of the Bible rather than a version more to his liking.

In time, I became aware that what is important is not so much the *cause* of the offense, but rather the common characteristics of the offended soul itself. No matter the size or importance of the event

that had led to the offense, I encountered a poisoned soul. In each case, a soul was distanced from God. In each case, a leaking toxic bitterness was tainting everything that soul touched. In each case, morality, vision, and love suffered.

These common characteristics of the offended soul knew no bounds. I had the privilege of going to the Vatican and ended up talking to a priest over pasta about his harsh treatment by a supe-

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rior. I lectured at the United States Military Academy and found a high ranking officer who “loved God but hated his people” and planned to “do my own religious thing” for the rest of his life. While sitting in a Starbucks drinking a chai latte and reading a book, I ended up in a conversation with a young man who took certain scandals among famous preachers so hard you would have thought the wrongdoings were personally directed at him. In each case, no matter the cause, the condition of the soul was the same.

And I remembered Timmy. I remembered the candy machine that held him bound. And I remembered that Snickers bar.

I came to the conclusion that no matter how large or petty the cause, every religiously wounded soul I encountered was in danger of a tainted life of smallness and pain, of missed destinies, and the bitter downward spiral. And every soul I encountered had the power to be free, for each of them, no matter how legitimately, was clenching the very offense or rage or self-pity or vision of vengeance that was making life a microcosm of hell.

I understood. I understood it all. I knew what it was to want to

serve God and to be so naive and eager that when the blows came you could not breathe for the pain. I knew what it was like to lay awake all night thinking about the good days and the tender talks and the laughter that promised friendship for a lifetime and to wonder where it all had gone. I too had thought so hard about the harm to my children and the carpet bombing of my life that I sometimes made myself ill.

Then there was the problem of God. Every person whose story I heard was wrestling with God or with his will or with the fact that his children could be so cruel. Some tried to dismiss it all by refusing to believe any longer. Others drifted, suspended somewhere between unknowing and doubt, but none would ever approach God the same way again.

I do not mean to overstate, but it did not take me long to see this religious offense syndrome as a plague. I was stunned by what had been lost to the Christian church through offended people slipping away. When my friend George Barna told me that in fifteen years, present trends continuing, church attendance in America will be half of what it is today, I knew immediately that much of this had to be as much due to offense and wounding as it was to the other factors Barna identifies so well. This is happening at a time when the gospel in America is under vicious attack and when the state of the world cries out for a vibrant, whole, passionate church to tend its woes and lead it to truth.

So we come to this book. Both friends and publishers have asked, “Why would an author of books on popes, presidents, and prime ministers write a book about getting over your church hurt?” I told them what I’ve told you here: that the poisoning of souls through church

hurts is killing us. That the cause of Christ is hindered because the body of Christ is bruised. That most of the Christians I know either believe they've been wronged by a church or have friends who do.

***Every person
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heard was
wrestling with God.
None would ever
approach him the
same way again.***

That some of these confessions have been among those presidents and prime ministers I write about. And that some of the most gifted and potentially powerful Christians I know are right now at a Starbucks or at a bar somewhere griping about the church, too tainted by grief and bitterness to be of any use to anyone.

I want to bring them home. I need them. You need them. I'm tired of seeing the best souls of my generation bearing the mark of Cain, rootless wanderers roaming the earth thinking they can never go home again.

When I consider how I might accomplish this, I'm reminded of a story. A guy falls into a deep hole and starts yelling for help. Soon a doctor happens by and hears the anguished cry. The doctor peers down into the hole, writes a prescription, throws it to the guy below, and keeps walking. Before long a priest comes by and he peers into the hole. Seeing the man below, the priest writes out a prayer and throws it down before walking on. The guy in the hole starts yelling even louder. Soon his friend Joe comes by.

"Hey, Joe, help me. I'm down in this hole."

So Joe jumps down into the hole too.

"What have you done?" our guy says. "Now we're both stuck down here!"

“Yeah,” says Joe calmly, “but I’ve been down here before and I know the way out.”

And I do. I know the way out, not because I’m smarter or holier than anyone else. I know the way out because I fell harder and deeper than most people do. Perhaps my only saving grace was that I also yelled harder and longer for help than most people do.

I know what you or your wounded Christian friends have been through. I know what it is like to drive the streets on a Sunday morning, unable to attend your usual church but too embarrassed to attend a new one.

I know what it is like to meet old friends on the street and to feel the faint chill, the uncomfortable distance, as they quizzically search your face for some trace of the evil that caused those other folks to treat you so horribly.

I know what it is like to sit up all night rehearsing conversations that you will never have with friends you will never see again about events that only you seem to remember.

I know what it is like to play the scenes over and over again in your mind only to conclude that the whole thing was your fault, too, and then to get so depressed about it all that you wonder why God doesn’t destroy his church in some new kind of flood and start all over again.

I know what it is like to think that the warm ooze at the bottom of a bottle or the warm skin you aren’t supposed to touch or the mountain of food or the nasty Web site or the angry band of brothers will soothe your soul’s need.

I know.

I know, too, because I have a Timmy nature that is spoiled and

childish and won't let go of what it wants no matter the turmoil it creates, no matter the pain it inflicts on me and others.

I know the way out, and if you are going to follow me out through these pages, you are going to have to understand three important truths.

First, I'm not your counselor. I'm your coach. If you want to sit around discussing the psychology of spiritual abuse there are plenty of books on the subject, but this isn't one of them.¹ If you want to talk about Mom and Dad and your dysfunctional family and how you hoped for more from the church, there are plenty of folks who have hung out shingles to have just such a conversation with you, but I'm not one of them.

I want to show you how to get clean and free from what you have done to yourself in your church hurt. That's it. Along the way we are going to talk a bit about how to be part of a church without surrendering your soul and what healthy churches look like. But I'm not trying to fix the body of Christ. I'm trying to get you to fix what you can in you, so that God can fix the rest and get you back into the fold.

Counselors nurture souls. Coaches teach skills. I'm your coach.

Second, I want you to understand that you will not get free unless someone gets tough with you. When we are in pain, we have too many voices playing in our heads—voices from the past, voices of our critics, voices of our admirers, and even the voice of our own inner dialogue. There are likely some other voices from demons we have known and loved. More about this later. Suffice it to say, a riot is taking place in our souls when we hurt. All of this tends to make us distracted at best and crazy at worst. We need someone to cut in harshly and silence the storm.

Remember those 1950s movies in which every time a woman got a little flighty somebody would reach up and slap her hard across the face? It was weird, I know, but sometimes that is exactly what we need in the stormy swirl of our pain. In a sense, this book is written to be a slap in the face. It is a one-on-one between you and me and I'll spare you nothing because the only way I got free was to be spared nothing by men who loved me. Don't read any further if you're not willing to endure a little pain.

Finally, there is a myth that we need to knock in the head—and we need to knock it in the head now. When we've been hurt by the church we often tell ourselves that we are going to keep on loving Jesus but that we no longer want anything to do with his people. We say this to ease our pain but we are fools when we do. First, the Bible makes it clear that we cannot love Jesus and hate his people. First John 4:20 boldly states, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." To think that we are entitled to love God and hate his people is sin. And, perhaps as important, it is impossible. Frankly, when we think we are loving Jesus but hating his people, we are actually loving Jesus so little that his people don't matter anymore.

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But there is a second reason this "love God, hate the church" approach is doomed, and you must get this straight. Here's the mystery: Jesus has a thing for his bride. From the

Song of Solomon to the book of Revelation, the truth of Scripture is that Jesus loves his bride the Church. There's just no getting around it and we ought to stop trying.

We really shouldn't be surprised. This is the way it is among us mortals, as well. If you are going to be my friend, you have to at least be pleasant to my wife. I'm wild about her and you can't mistreat her and expect to be close to me. You just can't come to my house to hang out with me and eat my food and soak up my air conditioning but ignore my wife. The same is true of Jesus. He loves his bride. Go figure. She's a mess in my view, but he's crazy about her and won't put up with me either speaking ill of her or pulling away from her if I'm going to be intimate with him.

That's why this book is no "what-bad-things-those-church-people-did-to-me" memoir. Nor is it a guide to "go-it-alone" Christianity. The fact is that if you are going to love Jesus, you're going to have to make nice with his wife. To intend otherwise is pride, and you need to decide now whether you want to live what Jesus calls

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the Christian life or if you're going to make up some new religion called "Salvation My Way."

Decide. Now. And, then, if you're ready, let's get on with it.

One more thing: My focus in these pages is on you and how to get you whole. I cannot judge between you and the church that you believe did you harm. I'm going to talk about your church hurt and, yes, I may allude to how abusive some churches can be. But do not misunderstand: I am not the judge in a lawsuit. I am not the

mediator in your dispute with whatever organization wronged you. I am someone who nearly let his offense with the church ruin his life, and I am putting these words on the page to help you avoid the same sad mess.

I'll take it a step further. You have been replaying the facts of your situation over and over again in your mind. You want to talk about the facts as you see them, and then you want to set those facts afire and shove them into the faces of those who wronged you. But hear me on this: there may be a time and a place for the facts to be aired, but getting the facts right will never set you free. Even if everyone involved in your hurtful situation instantly agreed with your perspective on the facts, it would not heal the damage that has been done to your insides. So, excuse me while I sidestep the facts—your version and theirs—and simply show you the path to wholeness. Then, may God do with the facts of your painful situation whatever he pleases.

So now, once again, when you're ready, let's get on with letting go of your candy bar.