

Every one of us has had painful experiences in our relationships with others. This is because when sinners do life together, we are bound to be selfish, say hurtful words, and do hurtful things. Relationship “hurt” is unfortunately inescapable, and if we’re honest, we have been the culprit at times. But what do you do when someone gets hurt by the Church?

The term “church hurt” has become increasingly popular in modern culture, but the concept is nothing new. I’ve talked to many people through the years and often ask, “Do you have a church home somewhere?” When they say “No,” I will sometimes press a little further. “Why not?” Their answers are not usually a difference of beliefs or a lack of desire. Instead, one of the most common answers people give is, “I’ve been hurt by the church.”

## Church Hurt is Real

See if any of these similar answers are familiar to you:

“I didn’t feel welcome.”

“I don’t trust religious leaders.”

“The people were too judgemental.”

“They weren’t supportive during a time of need.”

“I’ve just had bad experiences at the church.”

All of these responses are related to Church Hurt in some type of way. Worse, there are many who have suffered abuse, manipulation, and mistreatment within the church. We may be quick to dismiss their response as unfounded and insignificant. But the truth is people have had real hurt from others, and we need to be careful in our reaction. We all can take part in helping people reconcile relationships, seek healing, and understand the gospel of forgiveness.

## Pastors Face Hurt, Too

Church Members aren’t the only ones who get hurt. Pastors can be victims of this as well, and sometimes more severely. [Forced termination](#), secret meetings, harsh criticism, gossip, and lack of care are all examples of hurt that pastors experience.

The pressure of ministry can sometimes feel insurmountable. In the [podcast episode](#) this week, Jimbo and Bob help us understand how to endure church hurt and bounce back from painful experiences. If you are reading this as a church member, a pastor, or a replanter, here are a few ways that you can recover from church hurt.

# #1. Evaluate Your Experience with Self-Awareness

I cannot stress how important self-awareness is. [Two psychologists](#) came up with this definition: Self-awareness is the ability to focus on yourself and how your actions, thoughts, or emotions do or don't align with your internal standards. If that wasn't clear enough, I'll put it another way: step out of your emotions of the situation and internally think about what actually happened in your hurtful experience.

We need to separate in our mind what *feels true*, versus what *is true*.

Without diminishing the experience of church hurt, I fear that we are too quick to highly-sensationalize our hurt and project it on to other people, oftentimes using friends as a sounding board.

If we were to step back and survey our experience of hurt, we could probably come back with some observations. We know all people are sinners. We know that sometimes people say hurtful things. We know that not all are as spiritually mature as others. And we know that sometimes, our feelings control our responses instead of rational thinking. As Bob mentioned in the podcast, "We're not as great as we think we are, and we're not as bad as we think we are."

Should church hurt ruin your experience of church all together? Don't let a few experiences destroy your ability to love the church as God's bride that will one day be sanctified. We should face the *rational truth* that the "Church" doesn't hurt people, and God doesn't hurt people. Sinful people within the church hurt people.

The church is universal. And if a relationship is unable to be reconciled, you may end up seeking a new church. But to drop out of church altogether shows that you think that all churches will hurt you in a similar fashion. This is simply not true. To learn the ability of self-awareness means that you know your identity. And you must be able to cut through the noise of your emotions and think about how to handle the situation to bring God the most glory.

# #2. Seek Reconciliation with the Parties Involved

I wonder how many believers have gone through a hurtful experience and never sought reconciliation of any kind? The scriptures are clear on what we are to do if a brother sins against us:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others

along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” [Matthew 18:15-17](#)

The problem is we are so quick to ignore this command, and we don't even try Step One. We go straight to the church (we begin to gossip and win people to “our side”) without first going to our brother or sister. If we were to obey this scripture that Jesus teaches, we would probably win over (or win back) our brother or sister without it ever going to the church and creating more of a mess than what it actually was.

If our church hurt comes from a verbal exchange, it's best to go to that church member and say, “My brother, I'm not sure you realized that when you said \_\_\_\_\_, I felt like you were saying \_\_\_\_\_. This was hurtful to me.” I wonder how many times we would see the grace of reconciled relationships, if we simply tamed our tongues and went directly to the source of the conflict.

If God sent his Son to die on a cross and save you of your sins, he can give you the power and ability to witness his grace and forgiveness between believers. Immaturity, hurtfulness, and selfishness can come from a church that is not eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

But we are called to be peacemakers, not peacekeepers. There is a difference. Peacekeepers seek to drown out the noise, find some points of agreement, and bury the conflict. Peacemakers address sin, rebuke it, encourage repentance and reconciliation, and move on with grace and forgiveness. This promotes maturity in the church and a unified spirit, while peacekeeping shows a lack of care and hides sin beneath a rug.

By the power of the Holy Spirit living in us, we can seek reconciliation from church hurt and move on with one another in the work of ministry.

### #3. Be Patient in Seeking Recovery

I admit and agree, not every hurtful experience ends with friendship and hugs between parties. Some of these experiences are real, damaging, and require some separation. It may be necessary for your health to separate from a relationship, especially if it's a repeated pattern of painful experiences. While it may be true that time heals wounds, it only heals if there is intentionality in pursuing health throughout the experience. And the closer a person is to you, the more hurtful the experience is.

But the work of ministry and the expansion of God's kingdom is bigger than our earthly relationships. There are some ways in which we can, “bear with one another in love,” to continue serving together in the same body of Christ, even after a painful experience.

One biblical example of this hurt would be between Paul and Barnabas. “And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left . . .” (Acts 15:38). In Paul’s relationship with Barnabas, there needed to be some time they spent away from one another. After a “sharp disagreement,” they parted ways, but still continued on with the work of ministry. Interestingly, near the end of Paul’s life, he said this to Timothy: “Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry,” [2 Timothy 4:11](#).

After a hurtful experience, we must begin leaning forward, and not get stuck. It’s easy to drown out in isolation and be alone. But healing takes more time when we are alone. My encouragement is this: surround yourselves with counsel and solid friends as you recover. If needed, seek professional help as well. Because the work of ministry must go on. James 5:16 says, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” If I need healing, I know I need close friends around me, praying for me.

While church hurt is real and painful, keep this in mind: we will only experience hurt on this side of Heaven. And we have a day to look forward to in which “pain will be no more.” While we are on this earth, let us not only seek God’s grace to recover from pain, but let us also extend that grace towards others around us. Painful experiences are a part of being human, but we can control how we handle it, to the glory of God.