



# Counseling Church Hurt

Made to Minister 2025 | Workshop Session 3 | Tim St. John

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## Introduction to Church Hurt

- a. **Church hurt** - *any unrepentant sin that is minimized, normalized, or promoted by a church community and/or a church's leadership.*
- b. **The local church** - *an assembled group of Christians collectively committed to the gospel and collectively committed to one another's discipleship so that we grow to trust, love, and worship Christ together.*
- c. **Selected church hurt sins from Lighthouse counseling cases:**
  - i. Sexual Assault (Matt 18:6)
  - ii. Mocking (Prov 17:5)
  - iii. Lying (Prov 26:28)
  - iv. Financial neglect (1Tim 5:17-18)
  - v. Wrath (Prov 16:14)
  - vi. Cruelty (Prov 11:17)
  - vii. Overwork (Col 4:1)

## I. Understand the story of pain with them

- a. Unpack the world of sin and silence:
  - i. Know yourself
  - ii. Move Slowly and Patiently
  - iii. Have a triage for probing suffering
  - iv. Provide options for sharing
  - v. Offer grace filled summaries as they share
  - vi. Help them engage with their emotions (*see **Emotions Journal** with QR Code on page 6*)
  - vii. Track the values/standards/unwritten law of their church culture
    1. What were the things your church community valued and did that could shame others or make them feel unacceptable until they fulfilled certain requirements?
    2. What extra-biblical, cultural expectations does someone need to meet to be welcomed?
    3. What could make someone feel unworthy or unwelcome unless they adapted to certain standards? How did the leaders and congregation express their disapproval?
    4. How were careers, education, politics, and money talked about?
    5. How did your church express what they were for or against?
    6. How did the church community handle differences – engage them, learn from them, show them Christ, ignore them, isolate them? How did the community deal with conflicts that arose?
    7. What do you think people might be afraid to say in your church?
    8. What disclosures could potentially be met with anger, fear, silence, confusion? What were some of your practices for dealing with the shame of falling short of the values and norms of your church culture? Shame always comes with the temptation to hide, how did this show up in your life? (*e.g. Turning it into a joke, working really hard to prove yourself, avoiding certain people, clinging onto the occasional complement, joining in someone who mocks or puts down others in the hopes that*

*they wouldn't put you down, maybe even exaggerating or lying about something to avoid what someone might say)*

- viii. Lament for them
  - ix. Raise awareness of the reality of sin
  - x. Consider the consequences of the sin with them
- b. Help them notice and navigate the temptations they face
- i. Fear of man (Prov 29:25)

The Love of Christ	The Fear of Man
<b>Purpose: To pursue the greatest good of others, their growth in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.</b>	Purpose: To earn righteousness in the eyes of others by working to fulfill their law (expectations)
<b>Actions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Sacrifices to show them Christ</b></li> <li>○ <b>Moves toward with humility, confident in God's grace</b></li> <li>○ <b>Asks questions, builds understanding, and prays for them</b></li> <li>○ <b>Stands up against demands and expectations that turn the relationship away from seeking Christ and his Kingdom</b></li> <li>○ <b>Invites counsel from mature believers to check their heart</b></li> <li>○ <b>Endures suffering out of love for God</b></li> <li>○ <b>Pursues honesty and vulnerability in humility</b></li> </ul>	<b>Actions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Makes sacrifices to gain their approval</li> <li>○ Moves toward with fear, seeking their approval</li> <li>○ Doesn't seek a deeper understanding, mainly focuses on working to live up to expectations</li> <li>○ Accepts any demand or expectation as an opportunity to earn approval/righteousness in someone else's eyes</li> <li>○ Does not invite outside help, this is something they must prove on their own</li> <li>○ Endures suffering out of fear and the need to prove themselves</li> <li>○ Hides true feelings, does not open up, cannot show weakness</li> </ul>

- ii. Isolation (Prov 18:1)
- iii. Anger (Psalm 35:7-8)
- iv. Fear (Ps 22:11)
- v. Shame (Ps 88:18)
- vi. Pride (James 4:12)
- vii. Escapism (Psalm 11)

**II. Help them find God's grace in their suffering**

- a. Highlight and affirm grace you see at work (Prov 16:24)
  - i. Highlight specific fruit of the Spirit you see in them (Gal 5:22)
  - ii. Highlight grace as you pray for them
- b. Lament with them over the sins and losses you suffered (**Appendix 1**)
  - i. A lament over being forsaken – 2 Tim 4:16
  - ii. A lament over being betrayed by a friend – Psalm 55:12-14
  - iii. A lament over unresolved conflict in the church – Phil 4:2-3
  - iv. A lament over shepherds who harm the sheep – Mark 7:7-8
- c. Study forgiveness and help them pursue forgiveness in their context
- d. Help them embrace the importance of confessing their own sin to God with humility

### III. Take practical steps with them toward Christ

- a. **Help them strengthen their identity in Christ** (see *Understanding Identity* with QR Code on page 6)
- b. **Meditate with them on the hurt Christ endured from his community.**
  - i. Despised and rejected by men (Isaiah 53:3). How did Christ suffer rejection according to this passage? How did he respond (e.g. *Look for love, honesty, hope, conversation, humility, perseverance, joy and other attitudes and actions from our Lord*)? What passages help you see his response? Where do you see his love in the face of wrong? How does Christ's response encourage your worship? How does it encourage your ability to love others?
  - ii. Dejected by his brothers (John 7:1-8).
  - iii. His hometown of Nazareth tried to kill him (Luke 4:28-30)
  - iv. Abandoned and rejected by disciples (John 6:41-71)
  - v. Abandoned and rejected by friends (Mark 14:50)
  - vi. Abandoned and rejected by the Heavenly Father (Matt 27:46)
  - vii. Abandoned and rejected by us again and again (James 4:4)
- c. **Reflect with them on the choice to stay in a church where they have been hurt**
  - i. What is the level of suffering you and your family will need to endure if you stay?
  - ii. What do you think could be some of the short term and long-term effects of choosing to endure unrepentant sin?
  - iii. What are your hopes in staying? What unique discipleship opportunities do you see?
  - iv. What other mature believers are helping you think through this decision? What counsel have they offered to help you think through this decision?

*"Whether you decide to stay in or leave your church, beware the temptation to contribute to discord among believers. If you leave, you will need to leave honorably—being truthful with the elders about your reasons for leaving, following the process your church has for removing your membership, and humbly remaining open to reconciliation and resolution. If you choose to stay, you will need to trust God with that decision and continue to uphold the vows you took when you joined the church. [...] If you choose to leave your church, you will need to move on well—joining another biblical church as soon as possible and using your gifts for the good of God's people there. If you stay, you will need to trust that God has work for you to do and not allow Satan to tempt you to withhold good from your congregation." ~ Megan Hill (Sighing on Sunday [Day 27 – Beware Strife])*

- d. **Help them take steps toward a new Christ-centered community**
  - i. Meditate on what Christ has said about his bride the church
    1. He prayed that we would have deep unity that reflects the oneness of God the Father and God the Son (John 17:20-21)
    2. He promised to present the church to himself in splendor (Eph 5:27)
    3. He calls her his bride (Eph 5)
    4. He calls her his body (1Cor 12)
    5. He purchased her with his own blood (Acts 20:28)
    6. He set her apart as the dwelling place of the Spirit (1Cor 3:16)
    7. He gives us a glorious vision of the heavenly church (Rev 7:9-10)
  - ii. Study what Scripture teaches about building trust – *"only demonstrations of Christlike love can build trust because it points to the only one who is truly worthy of trust."*
  - iii. Prayerfully consider reconciliation (Matt 18:15 / Prov 9:7-8)

1. Is there any fruit of humility and openness of heart that would tell them it's wise to confront them?
2. Confrontation is more than just naming a wrong. Between believers it typically is a partnership in the gospel that humbly aims to walk with them. Are they willing to build long term partnerships to help this brother or sister grow in this area?
3. Are they willing to accept the additional suffering they might have to endure because of this?

**e. Help them consider what to look for in a new community<sup>1</sup>**

- i. Do the worship services and the fellowship of the body proclaim the love of Christ?
- ii. Does the leadership ask for feedback, admit mistakes, confess sin, ask for prayer, and take correction well?
- iii. How desperately does this church need their pastor? Is there a good structure in place to give him room to take time off, to easily get responsibilities covered? If he gets sick, how are his responsibilities cared for?
- iv. Does the preacher share appropriate personal weakness from the pulpit that draws attention to God's grace?
- v. What does the pastor's community look like? Do pastors have brothers in Christ who encourage, disciple, and strengthen them in their faith?
- vi. What is in place to protect a pastor's marriage? Who encourages and checks in on the pastor's marriage?
- vii. Do the pastors feel the freedom to lead with joy because of the encouragement of the church family?
- viii. How will my family be disciplined both formally and informally? Can you describe the small group culture? What does church membership look like at this church and why is it important?
- ix. When someone has a burden of sin or suffering in their life, how do they receive care from the church? What does that care typically look like?
- x. How do the elders maintain an awareness of the sheep? How do they navigate true needs versus loud needs?

*“Christian community is built, not found... If you're willing to take the initiative, build relationships, and care for others even when it's boring, repetitive, or messy—and if you can expect this journey to count by years and not months—you will find yourself in a true and living community (Rom. 12:9–21).” ~ Jeremy Linneman<sup>2</sup>*

**IV. Continue to let your light shine**

- i. Pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:44)
- ii. Open your heart toward those who hurt you (2Cor 6:11-13)
- iii. Show kindness to the ungrateful and evil (Luke 6:35)
- iv. Consider ways you can be a peacemaker (Phil 4:3)

<sup>1</sup> Other resources for considering what to look for in a church: *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever (revised ed., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); *The Church: Glorious Body, Radiant Bride* by Mark G. Johnston (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2018); *A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church* by Megan Hill (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> “We’re Hurt, and Healed, in Community” by Jeremy Linneman (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hurt-healed-community/>) Accessed on 6/18/2024.

## APPENDIX 1 – LAMENTS FROM CHURCH HURT

**A lament over being forsaken.** 2 Tim 4:16 – “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.”

*Father, last month I lost my job. But it was not just a job for me, it was the calling you placed on my life. You gave me the privilege of pastoring a flock for six years. I was so in love with your gospel work. Everyone in my home church affirmed me and sent me out. Then I got to serve your people, grow alongside them, when suddenly, a leader with more power than me created a plan to remove me from ministry, lied to me about a new ministry position, and when I confronted him, he even smiled at his own clever plan. I couldn't stay there, I'm too angry and hurt. I couldn't say anything because I didn't want to harm your church, there are people there who are sincerely proclaiming your gospel and your peace. How can I speak up about the sin I suffered? Now I'm terrified of the future, afraid of churches, afraid of talking badly about a church I love, afraid that my love of ministry has no outlet, afraid of what my people will say, afraid of what my family will say, how could you let this happen to me? I just wanted to please you. Why did you put me in a position to be hurt? You are a God of justice, bring this sin to light, make just one person in that church reach out with understanding and compassion to me. You are a God of redemption, restore my life from the shame I carry as I leave without any clear reason. Please help me. You alone are my strength.*

**A lament over being betrayed by a friend.** Psalm 55:12-14, “For it is not an enemy who taunts me— then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me— then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng.” 20-22, “My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords. Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”

*Father, I feel utterly lost. My friends who had been willing to listen to me and knew everything about me, suddenly weaponized this precious knowledge and used it to attack my character. They slandered, gossiped, and lied about me. I tried to talk about a struggle, I took the step of vulnerability, and rather than help all I experience is condemnation. Now when I come into the doors of church on a Sunday, I can feel the greeters forcing a smile, I can see people keeping their distance. I don't know where to go or who to trust. I just want this to be over. I want to scream that it's all a lie, I want people to believe me, I want genuine help with the struggles in my heart, but where can I go with my shame, my struggles, and the pain I feel over all that's happened. You alone can hear me, please help.*

**A lament over unresolved conflict in the church.** Phil 4:2-3. When conflicts between members, between ministries, or between groups within a church grow it does great harm not only to the members within the body, but it harms the gospel. This is why Paul pleads in his letter to the Philippians for Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind (Philippians 4:2). And he reminds them of their past gospel ministry as well as the reality that their names are in the book of life (4:3). But the pain of such division, distraction, stumbling, and loss of witness to the outside world is a great grief.

*Father, I don't even know what the word community means anymore. This difference between Christians became a disagreement, and when it became public on social media it created a war. This war has devastated the community that I love, everyone is pushed to pick a side, even our leaders have been caught up in it. Why is this happening? Where is the simple beauty of the body of Christ gathering to worship Christ and encourage one another? Why did you allow that to be taken away? Bring this to an end Father, restore our fellowship, stop the bleeding in this body, make us whole again.*

**A lament over shepherds who harm the sheep.** Perhaps they did not address sin the way Eli minimized the sin of his sons and failed to protect the people from their theft and debauchery (1Sam 2). Perhaps they are false teachers like the

Scribes and Pharisees. As Christ characterizes them in Mark 7:7-8, “in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” We know that this teaching was a tactic used by the Pharisees to oppressively control the Jewish people, using the banner of bible teacher to lead people away from God toward their own selfish kingdom (Luke 11, Matt 23).

*How long O Lord will you allow men to defame your name. They use phrases like “rightly dividing the Word” to make us a community that fights with one another over who is right, rather than a community of worshippers who love you who alone is right and true. The talk about theology, about books they are writing, about the Greek and the Hebrew, but they never talk about you and your precious Son. Their shepherding is cold, empty, heartless, and the counsel is cruel. Sin is treated with hostility and shame, rather than patience. The gospel message is lost, in the endless theological nuances that smother the simple faith that has been passed down. We don’t know how to love, we don’t know how to forgive, we don’t know how to pray, we don’t know how to serve, we just endlessly find new ways to be right and exacting about the smallest corner of theology because the greatest threat seems to be the potential for being wrong about some small speck of theology. We long for your son to be magnified, give us wisdom to know if we should leave this church and where we can go.*

SHAME COUNSELING ASSIGNMENTS (lots of overlap with church hurt):

