

SOMETIMES,  
CHURCH HURTS

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# INTRODUCTION

Hanging in my office is a painting I inherited from my grandfather. It is an obscure piece of art that I can find nothing about the picture nor the artist. Pablo Valero painted this masterpiece that hangs above my computer desk. Centered on the canvas is a white lamb with arrows piercing him all over. Blood is dripping from its body which creates a pool on the ground beneath. In small letters on each arrow are written a variety of sins. There are different things that tragically affect Christ's church: envy, petty-mindedness, sensitivity, false accusations, unjustified criticism, spite, revenge, impatience, vindictiveness, insincerity, and conclusions without facts. There are many more sins written that pierced this lamb, but it is the words written on the top and on the bottom that truly tell the tale.

At the top, it quotes a portion of John 1:29, "Behold the Lamb of God." The lamb in this picture is none other than Jesus Christ. What is

written on the bottom gives us insight into what these sins do to the Lamb of God. It reads from *Zechariah 13:6*, “*I was wounded in the house of my friends.*” Therefore, every arrow that pierces someone in the body of Christ, pierces our Savior. When we hurt, He hurts.

Just like Jesus was wounded in the House of His friends, so it is with us as believers. We, too, can be wounded in the House of God. Every sin mentioned above is a real threat to each one of us and many times it comes from our closest relationships.

I would love to know the story behind Pablo Valero’s painting and how he came up with each of the sins labeled on the arrows. Something deep inside me says that he has a story; that somewhere, he faced many of these things in his own life. There is an inscription at the bottom of this picture that reveals that it was promoted by a large denominational association. It is a real possibility that what is painted in this picture is the result of hurts that had been received at the hands of other believers. It happens and this is why you hold this book in your hands.

When I began in ministry, I had dreams of pastoring being simple and easy. I get to preach and pray. What an awesome job! Doing what God

has called me to do. I wasn't saved until I was nineteen and even though I attended church most of my life, I never paid attention to anything in church. I didn't know the "inside story".

I embarked on my pastoral journey when I was twenty-four. I had the privilege to pastor a small congregation in a little southeast Texas country town, but I had no idea how to pastor a church. I didn't go to bible college, nor did I have a long legacy of ministry in my family from which to learn the tricks of the trade.

I learned two ways: from my mistakes and by the Holy Spirit. I tried to follow His leading but much of my experience came from trial and error, and let's face it, just plain being thrown in the middle of a mess. When a pastor looks into a calling to a church, the church generally never divulges the history or the conflict. I have found that pastors doctor up their resumes to make themselves look good and churches tend to do the same. Pastors want a church and churches want a pastor.

I tell you this because I never looked for the opportunity to go to a troubled church but God allowed me to and I am thankful to have been used by Him in the healing process. Nearly two decades later, I look back on our ministry in four churches

and have fond memories of congregations that have found healing from the wounds caused by other believers.

All four churches that we have pastored, at different times, had various struggles and not every situation was the same. In every church there was a common denominator - conflict. People don't always get along with one another. While, many church hurts are not intentional, they are often responses to our own pain. Some things that happen in a congregation are just indications of deeper problems in the church or in individual lives. The wounds of God's house are sometimes at the hand of clergy, while other times, it is at the hand of laypeople. Regrettably, innocent bystanders are caught in the cross-fire and they experience church like they never thought possible.

Over the years, my wife and I have learned quite a few things about putting the pieces back together again. We didn't enter these situations as experts coming in to fix the problem. We entered blindly without knowledge of the full scale of what went on before we arrived. In the course of our ministry, though, we have learned that God's Word has all the answers to dealing with these issues. There are principles that God has given in His Word that, if

followed, will bring tremendous victory and healing to those who are wounded in the House of God. God's Word transcends across any boundary and can be used effectively in every church in every place. God's Word is not just for a particular situation. It is the answer for all things.

In the pages of this book, there are some very pointed issues that are dealt with. I challenge you to read with an open heart and an open mind. Often, the hurts cannot be healed unless we search the core of our own hearts. Allow God to open you like a book and read the pages of your heart. When you agree to that, you make yourself available to be healed of the wounds that afflict you.

No matter where you have been, or what you have faced, God has a healing for your heart and I know you will find it! As you read this, you will discover that what you have experienced is normal. Honestly, I have come to realize that *Sometimes, Church Hurts*.

# 1

## GOD'S GREAT CHURCH

In 1991, I answered God's call. It was a call that was real and distinct and I can still take you to that place and show you how it happened. Never had I heard God speak to me as clear as He did that day. It was a holy moment!

My wife, Sonya, was working that evening so I decided to spend some time in prayer. I had only been a believer for several months and I wanted more of God in my life. Never had the thought of ministry entered my mind. I just wanted to serve the Lord any way I could, but preaching wasn't something that I considered my call.

That night as I prayed, I heard within my heart the voice of God for the first time of my young Christian life. It was clear and precise. God simply said, "I want you to preach my Gospel." That was it. Nothing more but certainly nothing less. Instantly, I felt an unction to preach the Gospel of

Jesus Christ. At that moment, I took on a burden that I believe is shared with the heart of God, a burden for His great church.

There is no greater institution on earth than the church of Jesus Christ. There is not another organism that does as much good as God's great church. Through the years, God's people have promoted the gospel to the entire world. It is this movement that is among the first responders of tragedies and natural disasters. God's great church is a living being that blesses humanity with the gift of love and compassion.

It is also a family that embraces people from all social statuses and all walks of life. It is a tight knit family that centers around the heart of God and His work. We, as God's people, are striving to be made into His likeness and to follow His Word and His ways. This is the church I love. This is my burden.

Like any family, there are problems. Sadly, the church sometimes has issues. In the purest sense, the church is how God intended to extend the message of the Cross. It is His intent to lead men, women, boys and girls to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This must be our primary goal. This is the hope of the world. However, when we take our focus off of that mission and pursue other things,

the church struggles. The church will face opposition, not from without, but from within.

The Word of God is clear that when we are on God's true mission, persecution will come. Truth is never swallowed easily and so it will create tension with the world around us. Therefore, that persecution doesn't come from within the church. It comes from the outside, but when our eyes start to be centered on our own needs and wants within Christ's body, church becomes a place of disunity, friction and hurt. Here is where my burden lies.

My deep love for God's church and the unity of the believers drives me. I believe my heart is shared with the heart of God. This very thing is displayed in the writings of the apostles. They wanted unity and knew this was the only way to see a move of God. Unity was the only way that God's great church could stand. The main way that the church can withstand pressure from the outside is that it remains strong from the inside. The apostles understood this principle and promoted harmony in the body of Christ.

There is no greater display of the burden of the apostles than the great man of God, Paul. He was saved from a religious background. He was known as the Pharisee of all Pharisees. In fact, he was the persecutor of the church from the outside. It was

Paul who sought to destroy God's church, but he couldn't do it. The church was too strong within to be torn down from the outside.

Finally, Paul encountered the Messiah and became a follower of Christ. His life radically changed. He was called to preach and teach the Gospel and he went all in. Paul became the greatest of all apostles. He went on to write two thirds of the New Testament before he was martyred. He, too, had a burden for God's great church.

Paul had suffered much for the sake of the Gospel. Throughout his life, he endured hardships that most of us will never face. Yet, he remained steadfast. In his writing to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul shared about the burdens that he had borne:

*II Corinthians 11:23-28, "in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. <sup>24</sup> From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; <sup>26</sup> in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; <sup>27</sup> in weariness and toil, in*

*sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—<sup>28</sup> besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.”*

This list of things that Paul had faced reveals the immense suffering that he had dealt with for the Gospel’s sake. However, there is one phrase that arrests my attention, *“besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.”* What I glean from this is that Paul is saying, “The suffering I faced physically is nothing compared to the concern I have for these churches.” In essence, he is saying that his burden for the church is far greater than any physical suffering.

Why would Paul take this approach? Because he understood that the church was the agent that would change the world. The church has the responsibility to lift up Jesus Christ and make Him known but this is where we often fail. Paul understood what was at stake here. Our mission can be compromised when we do not focus on what we know is God’s call for His people. Paul was burdened for the churches he had charge of because he knew that people can veer off on the wrong path.

The early church was facing, not only persecution, but false teachers had cropped up in the body seeking to lead people astray with a contrary gospel. Already in the Corinthian church, division had set in. Although it might seem noble, some were followers of Peter, some Apollos and some followed after Paul. Personalities were driving the church, when the number one personality, Jesus Christ was being missed. The church was only a few decades old and already division was evident. Paul was driven by this concern. This is why he addressed it in his letters to these churches.

Yet, despite all that, God's great church is still alive. It is still a living organism making an impact some nearly 2,000 years later. It is a testimony to what Jesus said, "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against My church." The reason we are still alive is because God's Spirit is still alive and is raising up a people who are still concerned about seeing His church make an impact. This is my burden.

Though the church is still going forward, there are some churches that are barely hanging on to life. The issues of division and church hurts have become so real that people leave with open wounds and the church suffers. I have witnessed it with my own eyes. I have watched as people walk

away from a church they knew for 50 years having to start over because they can't bear the pain any longer.

God's great church will press on. It will never die and it is still worth the risk of us being vulnerable to hurt. The problem is not with God but rather with flawed people. We have a large section of books in every Christian bookstore on how to get along with your spouse and children, and how to build strong families. Yet, the largest, most diverse family we know has very few books about how to get along. There should be books discussing how the Family of God is to get along. There should be a section in the bookstore on how to take God's great church and make it stronger through trust and relationships.

I have heard it said for many years, "Strong families make strong churches." But I have found that we can have strong families in churches that do not get along with other strong families. Yes, we must focus on the family; however, we must also emphasize building strong relationships in the Body of Christ.

In our generation, we don't need another theological reformation; we need a reformation of love for one another and strong relationships. We need to focus on Christ's mission and lay aside our

differences. The church's greatest days are ahead. I believe there is a new reformation on the way, a reformation of a unified church impacting the world for Jesus Christ. Will you be a part of this great movement? The church of Jesus Christ is this world's greatest hope.

Before we dive into some pretty heavy discussions, I want you to take a moment to pray that God would grant you open ears and an open heart to this message. The language can be tough at times, but please understand the burden of my heart. It is not meant in anyway to be critical or harsh. I have a passion to see us build a church that will be without spot or wrinkle so that when Christ comes, He will receive His glorious church.

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We would love to hear from you!