

FAITH UNPLUGGED

When the Church Hurt You: How to Keep Following Jesus After Deep Disappointment

Sometimes the people who introduced you to Jesus become the reason you struggle to walk through the church doors. Here's what Scripture says about healing, forgiveness, and finding your way back.

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One of the saddest conversations I've had as a Pastor didn't happen inside a church. It happened during a phone call. A friend called me one afternoon after meeting with a pastor. I could hear the disappointment in his voice before he even told me what had happened. As he shared the conversation, it became clear this wasn't just a disagreement or a misunderstanding. Someone he trusted had responded in a way that left him feeling dismissed, misunderstood, and deeply wounded. There was a long pause. Then he quietly asked, **"Why are Christians like this?"**

That question has stayed with me. Not because I had an easy answer. But because I've heard versions of it far more often than I'd like. Sometimes the question is about a Pastor. Sometimes it's about a church member. Sometimes it's about an entire church. But underneath it is usually a deeper question.

"If these are the people who represent Jesus, what does that say about Jesus?" That's the tragedy of church hurt.

The people who are meant to point us toward Christ can sometimes become the very reason we struggle to see Him clearly.

Over the years, I've watched people quietly disappear from church without anyone realizing they were drowning. Some left after a painful interaction with a Pastor. Others carried wounds from church members who judged them instead of loving them. Still others experienced betrayal, gossip, manipulation, or silence when they needed compassion the most.

If you've spent enough time serving in ministry, you eventually discover that some of the deepest wounds people carry weren't caused by atheists, strangers, or the culture around them.

They were caused by people holding a Bible.

If you're reading this because you've experienced church hurt, I want you to know something before we go any further. I'm not here to defend what happened to you. I'm not going to tell you to "just forgive and move on." I'm not going to pretend that because Christians aren't perfect, your pain somehow matters less.

What happened to you matters. And pretending it didn't hurt isn't spiritual maturity. It's denial.

What Is Church Hurt?

Church hurt is more than having your preferences ignored. It's more than disagreeing with a sermon or wishing the music sounded different. Real church hurt happens when the people who were supposed to reflect the love of Christ instead become the source of deep spiritual, emotional, or relational pain. Maybe a Pastor abused his authority. Maybe leaders protected someone's reputation instead of protecting the people they hurt. Maybe someone used scripture to manipulate you. Maybe the people you worshiped beside every Sunday disappeared when your life fell apart. Maybe gossip spread through the church faster than compassion. Maybe your questions were treated like rebellion instead of invitations for honest conversation.

Whatever your story looks like, the result is often the same.

You don't just lose trust in people. You begin wondering if you can trust God. *That's what makes church hurt different.*

When someone at work betrays you, you usually don't stop believing in your family.

When a friend disappoints you, you don't question whether love itself is real.

But when someone representing Jesus wounds you, it's easy to wonder if Jesus is anything like the people who claimed to follow Him. That confusion can shake your faith in ways few other experiences can.

I Wish This Story Were Rare

I wish I could tell you these stories are unusual. They're not. As a pastor, I've talked with people who were manipulated by leaders they admired. I've listened to people who served faithfully for years only to feel forgotten the moment they were struggling. I've met people who loved Jesus but couldn't bring themselves to walk into another church because every sanctuary reminded them of betrayal. Some eventually found healing. Others quietly drifted away.

Not because they stopped believing in Jesus. Because they couldn't separate Jesus from the people who had hurt them.

But I've also seen the other side.

Years ago, there was a gentleman in one of our churches who had a voice you couldn't miss. Whenever we sang, I could always pick him out because it was deep and strong. One Sunday I realized I hadn't seen him for a couple of weeks. Life had been busy, and honestly, I hadn't noticed right away. So I picked up my phone and called him. He answered, and the first thing he said was, "I'm surprised you noticed." We talked for a while, and I learned that one of his aging parents had passed away. He and his wife had been caring for them, and after they died, they were overwhelmed trying to settle everything that comes afterward.

I never would have known if I hadn't made that call.

That conversation has stayed with me because it reminded me of something important. Sometimes people don't leave because they're angry. Sometimes they quietly disappear because life became unbearably heavy. Sometimes what hurting people need most isn't a perfect sermon or a polished church service. Sometimes they just need someone to notice they're missing. **That's the Church at its best.** Not perfect people. People who pay attention. People who carry one another's burdens. People who remind each other that no one walks through life alone.

You're Not Weak for Feeling This Way

One of the lies church hurt whispers is that a “good Christian” shouldn’t struggle this much. You should forgive faster. Move on sooner. Stop talking about it. Just have more faith.

But wounds don’t heal because someone tells them to.

Imagine breaking your leg and having someone say, “If you trusted God more, you’d already be walking.” We’d never say that about a physical injury.

Yet we often expect spiritual wounds to disappear overnight. Healing usually doesn’t work that way.

Sometimes it takes time. Sometimes it takes wise people. Sometimes it takes counseling.

Sometimes it requires healthy boundaries that were never there before. None of that means your faith is weak. It means you’re human. The good news is that God has never been surprised by human failure. In fact, one of the most encouraging things about scripture is that it never hides it.

Jesus Understands Church Hurt

If you’ve ever wondered whether Jesus understands what you’re feeling, the answer is yes. In fact, some of His strongest words were reserved for religious leaders. Think about that for a moment. The people who frustrated Jesus the most weren’t the people everyone else expected.

It wasn’t the tax collectors.

It wasn’t the prostitutes.

It wasn’t the Roman government.

It was the people who looked the most religious.

They knew the Scriptures.

They attended worship faithfully.

They held positions of influence.

Yet they used their authority to burden people instead of helping them know God.

Jesus didn’t ignore it.

He confronted it.

In Matthew 23, Jesus described them as people who tied up “heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger” (Matthew 23:4, ESV). Later He called them whitewashed tombs. Beautiful on the outside. Empty on the inside.

Those are strong words. Not because Jesus hated religious people. But because He loved the people they were hurting. Sometimes we picture Jesus getting angry at sinners.

Read the Gospels carefully.

More often than not, His compassion was directed toward sinners, while His strongest rebukes were aimed at those who used God’s name to control, shame, or elevate themselves.

That matters. Because if you've been wounded by people who claimed to represent God, Jesus isn't standing on the other side of the argument defending them. He's standing beside the wounded. He always has.

Don't Let Judas Become Your Picture of Jesus

One of the greatest tragedies of church hurt is that it can distort our view of Christ. Imagine if the other disciples had quit following Jesus because Judas betrayed Him. They could have said, "If this is what one of Jesus' followers is like, we're done." But they didn't. They understood something we often forget. Judas represented Judas. He didn't represent Jesus. That's an important distinction. Every church has imperfect people. Every Pastor has blind spots.

Every ministry is led by human beings who still need grace. Some will disappoint us in ordinary ways. Others will fail in devastating ways. Some should never have been trusted with leadership in the first place.

Their failures are real.

The damage they cause is real.

But they do not redefine who Jesus is. Please don't let Judas become your picture of Christ. When Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus restored him. When Thomas doubted, Jesus met him with patience. When the woman caught in adultery expected condemnation, Jesus offered mercy. When children were pushed away, Jesus welcomed them.

Over and over again, Jesus moved toward broken people. Never away from them.

If the version of Christianity you experienced looked nothing like that, it's worth asking whether you've been following Jesus... or simply following people who were wearing His name.

Sometimes We Build Our Faith Around People

This is one of the hardest lessons I've learned in ministry. Sometimes church hurt doesn't destroy our faith. It exposes what our faith was resting on. Without realizing it, we can slowly place people on pedestals. We expect our Pastors to always know the right answer. We expect church leaders to always make wise decisions. We expect Christian friends to never let us down. Those aren't bad desires.

But they're impossible expectations.

No pastor can carry the weight of being your savior. No church can satisfy the deepest needs of your soul.

Only Jesus can do that.

Sometimes God allows our disappointment with people to reveal where our hope has quietly shifted.

That doesn't make what happened good. God never celebrates sin. He never excuses abuse. But He has a remarkable way of meeting us in painful places and gently redirecting our eyes back to Himself.

I've seen people lose confidence in a church only to discover a deeper confidence in Christ.

I've watched believers who once depended entirely on a charismatic leader learn how to open their Bible for themselves. I've seen painful endings become the beginning of a more mature, more resilient faith.

I would never wish that journey on anyone. But I've seen God redeem it more times than I can count.

The Church Is Still Jesus' Idea

This is where many people expect me to say, "You need to get back in church." I'm not going to say that. At least, not yet. Because healing rarely happens through pressure. It happens through trust. If you've been hurt, it may take time before you're ready to walk through another set of church doors.

That's okay.

But don't stay isolated forever. One of Satan's oldest strategies is to wound us through people, then convince us that we no longer need people. That's a dangerous lie. The New Testament never imagines a believer walking alone forever. We need one another. Not because Christians are perfect. But because Jesus designed His Church to be a family of imperfect people learning how to follow a perfect Savior together.

The Church doesn't belong to a pastor.

It doesn't belong to a denomination.

It doesn't even belong to the people sitting in the pews.

It belongs to Jesus.

And despite all of our failures, He hasn't given up on it. Neither should we.

What Forgiveness Is... and What It Isn't

If you've been in church for any length of time, you've probably heard someone say, "You just need to forgive."

That's true. But it's also incomplete. Forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood words in the Christian life. Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending nothing happened. It doesn't mean calling abuse a misunderstanding. It doesn't mean putting yourself back into an unhealthy situation. It doesn't mean immediately trusting someone who has broken your trust.

Forgiveness is releasing your right to revenge.

It's placing justice into God's hands instead of carrying it yourself.

Reconciliation, on the other hand, requires repentance, honesty, and rebuilt trust. Sometimes reconciliation is possible. Sometimes it isn't.

The Bible calls us to forgive. It doesn't call us to ignore wisdom. Jesus forgave freely. He also walked away from people who continually rejected the truth.

He loved everyone. He didn't entrust Himself to everyone.

If you've been told that forgiving means allowing someone to continue hurting you, that isn't biblical forgiveness. That's enabling. God cares too much about both truth and love to ask you to ignore either one.

So... Where Do You Go From Here?

Maybe you're wondering what the next step is.

Not five years from now. Not after you've figured everything out. Today. If that's you, let me offer a few thoughts.

1. Tell God the truth.

One of the beautiful things about scripture is that God never asks us to clean up our emotions before bringing them to Him. Read the Psalms. David questioned. He cried. He lamented. He even asked, "How long, O Lord?" God can handle your honesty. He already knows what's in your heart. Stop trying to sound spiritual. Just tell Him the truth.

2. Separate Jesus from the people who misrepresented Him.

This may take time. When someone wearing the name of Christ wounds us, it's natural to connect the two. But Jesus is not guilty of what others have done in His name. Keep reading the Gospels. Spend time watching how Jesus treats people. Let His character become louder than your memories.

3. Don't heal alone.

One of the cruelest effects of church hurt is isolation. It whispers that trusting anyone again is foolish.

While you don't need to rush back into a crowd, you do need safe people. Maybe that's one mature believer. Maybe it's a Christian counselor. Maybe it's a Pastor from another church who has nothing to gain by impressing you. Healing grows in healthy relationships. It almost never grows in complete isolation.

4. Let your next church earn your trust.

You don't have to pretend everything is okay. You don't have to volunteer the first Sunday. You don't have to sign up for every ministry. Just show up. Listen. Watch. Pay attention to how leaders treat people who disagree with them. Notice whether grace is practiced, not just preached. Healthy churches aren't perfect. They're humble enough to admit when they're wrong.

5. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

More than anything else, this is what I've learned. Churches change. Pastors retire. Friends move away. Leaders disappoint us. Jesus remains the same. If your faith is anchored in Him, disappointment won't destroy it. It may shake it. It may stretch it. It may even deepen it. But it won't destroy it.

A Personal Reflection

After all my time in ministry, I've seen churches at their very best. I've watched believers rally around families who had lost everything. I've seen people quietly pay someone else's rent. I've watched strangers become lifelong friends because they met in a small group. I've seen people encounter Jesus and leave completely changed.

I've also seen churches make painful mistakes. I've seen leaders who should have apologized but didn't. I've watched people leave carrying wounds they never should have received.

Both things are true.

The Church has hurt people. The Church has also been one of God's greatest gifts in my own life. That's why I can't give up on it. Not because churches are always right. But because Jesus hasn't given up on His people. He is still patiently shaping His bride. And He's still healing broken hearts along the way.

Your Story Isn't Over

Maybe you've been carrying church hurt for months. Maybe it's been years. Maybe reading this article stirred up emotions you thought you'd buried. If so, I'm grateful you stayed with me. I don't know exactly what happened to you. I don't know every conversation, every disappointment, or every tear you've cried because of people who should have reflected Christ more faithfully.

But I do know this.

Your pain is real. God sees it. And Jesus understands it. Don't let the people who misrepresented Him have the final word over your faith. Let Jesus speak for Himself. The same Savior who welcomed doubters, restored failures, defended the broken, and who forgave those who nailed Him to a cross still invites wounded people to come to Him. Not because churches are perfect. But because He is.

Your story doesn't have to end with disappointment. By God's grace, it can become a story of healing. And maybe one day, the very place where your faith was wounded will become the place where your compassion for others grows the deepest.