

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

WHAT ABOUT CHURCH HURT AND HYPOCRISY? | DECONSTRUCT | RECONSTRUCT

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Well, it is a really big weekend and, no, I'm not talking about the Colts opener. Alright? This past Friday night we had our second campus Vision Night at our Carmel campus. We had a packed house and just an incredible evening looking back at God's faithfulness to us in our past so that way we can ask the question, "God, what do You want to do in us and through us next?"

The very next campus Vision Night will be this evening at our Downtown campus at 6 p.m. So, Downtown crew, looking forward to being with you here in just a few short hours.

Those of you at our Midtown, Fishers, Northwest campuses the dates of your campus Vision Night are behind me. So mark that down. Make it a priority to be here. If you can't get here on the night of your campus Vision Night, just go to another one because the content is exactly the same. You don't need to RSVP. Kids' programming is available.

And maybe the most important reason of all, you get a free t-shirt if you come. These t-shirts won't be available until later in the fall, but if you come to a Vision Night, then you'll get one and you will get it for free. Alright?

Well, if you've got a Bible go ahead and head over to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2. 1 Thessalonians 2 is where we are going to be today as we wrap up this series of messages that we've been in.

Earlier this summer my oldest daughter's boyfriend was over at our house and we were all hanging out on the back porch. And we were going to watch a movie. We didn't know what to watch. And somebody said that they had never seen Mel Gibson's movie Braveheart before. And in that moment I just thought, "I am failing you as a Dad."

So we turned it on and we watched it. And I was reminded how much I love that movie, it's my favorite movie of all time. There are a bunch of memorable scenes in it, but there is this one scene that I think is the most memorable. And some of you who have seen the movie will know what I'm talking about.

William Wallace befriends a guy by the name Robert the Bruce, who is the king of the Scots. And he is inspired by Wallace and what he is doing. But he doesn't quite have the courage that William Wallace has.

Wallace comes to him and says, "You're the only one who can unite the Scottish clans together to overcome the English." And he really wants to do this, but he's got some



pretty corrupt people around him. So they convince him to betray William Wallace on the battlefield.

There is this scene where the two of them square off. Wallace has no idea that it's his friend—he's got full armor on—and he gets the better of him. He's on top of him and he's getting ready to take his life, and that's when Robert the Bruce yells out, "It's me." And he takes off his helmet.

Then there is this scene where Mel Gibson drops to his knees. Maybe you remember it, and he's got this look on his face. He's ready to die because he realized in that moment that he's been betrayed by a friend.

And I would venture to say that part of the reason that scene is so powerful is that we can all relate to it. There has been a moment in all of our lives where we've been in relationship with someone. Not an acquaintance, but somebody we know pretty well and we love, and we trust, and we thought the feelings were mutual. Then that person ended up wounding or hurting you, whether it was intentional or not. And it's a deep, deep betrayal. And it set us back.

Now, as we are wrapping up this series today, if you're just now joining us, we've been in this series looking at a handful of issues that just kind of get the gears of deconstruction moving in our lives. And today I want to wrap up by talking about something that actually has been around for a long time, but the term is relatively new.

And, as a pastor, I'm hearing more and more of this term. It's a reason that people are giving for either walking away from church or deconstructing their faith all together. It's called church hurt. And it's an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of experiences in which somebody was wounded, betrayed, or had trust broken by someone within or who was representing the church.

There is a guy by the name of Jerome Gay who wrote a book on church hurt and he provides this definition. He says:

"Church hurt refers to the pain inflicted by religious institutions, its people, and/or its leadership—pain that distances sufferers from their communities and sometimes from God."

So maybe you were all excited about your faith and you jumped in to serve somewhere in a church but then as time went on you began to feel like you'd been taken advantage of and you got burned out and nobody seemed to care.

Maybe you felt shamed, shunned, or gossiped about when you went through an unwanted divorce or maybe a reoccurring addiction resurfaced in your life and instead of having loving people come around you and walk with you through that, you felt isolated.

Maybe you felt disillusioned and betrayed when a widespread church scandal got exposed or the secret life of a celebrity pastor got revealed.

Maybe somebody used his position of authority in your life in ways to control or manipulate you for selfish gain.

Church hurt

And as a result of this you just kind of pushed away from people, pushed away from the church and you sort of view every organization or every leader or every pastor through the lens of cynicism and suspension because of your hurt.

As a pastor, I not only see this a lot, but I can also feel this in the environment in which we live. And I understand the ramifications of what we're dealing with and what is at stake.

My predecessor was a guy by the name of Howard Brammer. He served here as the pastor faithfully for nearly a quarter of a century. And I'll never forget when I was getting ready to officially step into this role, he pulled me aside behind closed doors. I'll never forget what he said to me. He said, "Aaron, it takes years to build trust but just a moment to break it." And when trust gets broken, spirits get crushed.

I think that is what the author of Proverbs is getting at in chapter 18, verse 14 when he writes:

"The human spirit can endure a sick body," we can endure a lot, "but who can bear a crushed spirit?" Proverbs 18:14 (NLT)

An auto immune disease is something that I don't know that many of you wrestle with. What happens is the body's natural defense system can't tell the difference between normal, healthy cells and foreign cells. So the body attacks normal cells.

And I would say that church hurt is the spiritual auto immune disease within the body of Christ where the body of Christ starts attacking itself and we begin to see other believers as enemies instead of family.

Paul describes this in Galatians, chapter 5 when he says:

"For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another." Galatians 5:14-15 (NLT)

And as a result of this very real hurt, what can happen is we can reduce who God is to the worst actions of a few of His people, leading some of us to walk away from the church for good or to deconstruct our faith all together. It's a little bit like Dorothy when she travels to Oz and gets a glimpse of what is behind the curtain, and disillusioned with that we click our heels and we say, "I'm going to do this on my own. I love Jesus, just not the church."

Oftentimes somebody's confusion or disillusionment with God is not theological, it's relational. And as a result of being hurt by people we can kind of push back and we're very, very cautious about entering into another relationship again.

When I was growing up my sister and I had two cats. My cat was named Cheese. Her cat's name was Midnight. A third stray cat showed up one day and this cat, it was very clear, had been abused because it would never let us anywhere near it. So we named him Timmy Timid, you know Timmy Timid. And we had this cat around our house for years. We could never get close to him.

I've met a lot of people like that who have been hurt and abused by others so there is just this invisible wall that goes up. They just keep their distance from others. And I just want you to know that while that is so understandable, that is not what you were made for. You were made for so much more.

I mentioned a few minutes ago that church hurt has been around for a long time, but the term is relatively new. But Paul actually seems to be writing to describe his own experience with church hurt in his letter to the Thessalonians. And that's our passage today. I want to read 10 verses out of this letter. Listen to Paul's description of the hurt that he has experienced as well as the people he is writing to. He says this in verse 1:

"You yourselves know, dear brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not a failure. You know how badly we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we suffered there. Yet our God gave us the courage to declare his Good News to you boldly, in spite of great opposition. So you can see we were not preaching with any deceit or impure motives or trickery.

"For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts. Never once did we try to win you with flattery, as you well know. And God is our witness that we were not pretending to be your friends just to get your money! As for human praise, we have never sought it from you or anyone else.

"As apostles of Christ we certainly had a right to make some demands of you, but instead we were like children among you. Or we were like a mother feeding and caring for her own children. We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too.

"Don't you remember, dear brothers and sisters, how hard we worked among you? Night and day we toiled to earn a living so that we would not be a burden to any of you as we preached God's Good News to you. You yourselves are our witnesses—and so is God—that we were devout and honest and faultless toward all of you believers."

Now, what is going on here? Well, the background of this passage is that Paul is recounting to them how badly he'd been mistreated in Philippi. In the book of Acts we see all of this recorded there. Paul is traveling around on something called a missionary journey. He would come to a city, he would meet some people, he would lead them to Christ and start a church and then he would move on.

And when he arrived in the city of Philippi, he notices that there is a servant girl who is possessed by a demon. And so Paul casts the demon out of her, which you would think

would be a good thing. But as it turns out, they didn't receive it as a good thing because the owners of the servant girl were using her as income because the demon was telling people's fortunes and they were charging for it.

Once Paul got rid of the demon their source of income dried up so they started a riot against Paul, they threw him in prison. He was a Roman citizen, so it turned out that they can't throw him in prison. So they release him and he moves on to Thessalonica.

And there the Jewish crowd responds to the gospel and the religious leaders are so jealous of this and they are so threatened by it that it says in Acts, chapter 17 that they cry out and they say, "These men," referring to Paul and his companions, "have turned the world upside down," in the worst possible way of that term, "and now they've come here to do the same."

What they were doing is they were actually leveraging the hurt that some of the people had experienced in this city. And what was going on in the Greco-Roman world is just like today. There were false teachers and swindlers and people pretending to be something that they were not. And they would come into a community and they would cheat people out of money, they would teach their false ideas, they would take advantage of the people's trust, they would sleep with their women. And then they would move on leaving all of this wreckage and hurt behind them.

So now these insecure, religious leaders are basically pointing to Paul and saying, "He's no different. He's just a false teacher here to take advantage of you." They were taking advantage of the people's hurt and they were hurting Paul in the process. So Paul's response to the Thessalonians here is that he points out three things:

He explains his MOTIVES

He explains his METHODS

He explains his MISSION

Paul is trying to do a little bit of clean-up. He's trying to patch things up. And he explains his motives. In other words, "Here's the heart behind why I'm doing what I'm doing." And then he explains his methods. He says, "This is how I'm doing what I'm doing. And finally, he explains his mission, the reason why he is doing what he is doing. And we really see his heart, his pastoral heart, in this passage.

In fact, John Stott actually says—regarding this passage—says:

"This passage reveals more about the heart, soul and emotion of Paul than any other passage in the New Testament."

So, here's where I want to go with this. When we are talking about being hurt by others there are a couple of things that I want us to know. First of all, because we are relational beings and we, by the way, are all flawed, broken, sinful people, that means that when we enter into a relationship, we are all susceptible to being hurt and we are all capable of hurting others.

And when it comes to trying to bring some healing to that and trying to figure out how we move on we've got to begin with this framework here that Paul provides. We've got to go to motives, we've got to methods, we've got to mission. That's the framework. I want to dial in on some of that.

We need to acknowledge it is real

Whenever we've got to address hurt of any kind, the first place to begin is to acknowledge how real it is. And that's what I want to do today. For those of you who are here, or listening, or tuning in online and you're like, "I've been hit with the shrapnel of church hurt," I just want you to know that I believe you, and that is very, very real.

In fact, in Matthew, chapter 22, Jesus was asked onetime about what the greatest commandment was. And His answer was this. He goes, "The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength." Love God. And then He says, "The second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself."

So He summarizes the entire law in these two commands. Love God. Love People. In other words, you will fulfill the entire law if you can do those two things perfectly. But the big, big problem with that is that I don't know of anybody who can. I certainly can't. I can't love God perfectly and I can't love people perfectly.

That introduces the possibility of hurt. And the only thing worse than denying our possible role in someone else's hurt is to diminish someone else's experience of hurt. We don't want to sweep it under the rug. We don't want to get defensive. We don't want to tell somebody, "Hey, just get over it and move on." That's not helpful. It causes more harm to the hurt.

When somebody has been hurt, it's almost like... My counselor puts it like this. He says, "If there has been an offense, if there has been a hurt, you've got to do the necessary clean-up in order to heal from that and move on."

You can't bypass the clean-up. It's kind of like when you drop something and it shattered or you've spilt some kind of juice all over the kitchen floor. You can't just go, "Well, let's ignore it and it will go away." No, it's going to get sticky and eventually start to smell.

And we all have that relationally in our life. We can't just overlook the offense or the brokenness, we've got to do some necessary clean-up, which means that somebody has to be heard, has to be seen. And if there is abuse that has occurred or there has been some sort of injustice, that needs to be addressed and it needs to be handled.

Unfortunately, and I wish this wasn't the case, but unfortunately it is—when it comes to ministry, when it comes to churches, there are wolves in sheep's clothing who cause intentional pain. So being heard and understood and correcting some of that injustice and seeking forgiveness (and if possible reconciliation) are necessary steps in the clean-up toward healing.

Now, with that said, let me say this. Reconciliation with the person of the group that has hurt you may not be possible. Maybe that group or that person is no longer in your life or they are no longer around. Maybe that person doesn't think that he's done anything wrong. From his perspective he's like, "I don't see what I did wrong," so he refuses to meet with you. Maybe he just denies any sort of wrong doing.

This is where forgiveness becomes not only important but absolutely critical, and a powerful and necessary step in the process of healing. Your forgiving them is absolutely critical even if reconciliation is not possible.

Speaking from experience, whenever I've been hurt or offended or betrayed, I don't know about you guys, but if the other person isn't around or he doesn't seem to care, he doesn't think he's done anything wrong, oftentimes I've been fooled into thinking, "Well, the only card I've got left to play is anger or bitterness or thoughts of revenge."

Do you know what I'm talking about? Just imagining that his breaks go out and he goes over a cliff and screams to his death. It makes you feel so good and you're just holding onto that. And you say, "I'm going to hold on to that bitterness and revenge to make him pay." And in reality, who's paying? You are.

In reality you're thinking that by holding onto bitterness and revenge you're keeping him locked up in a prison cell, when in reality you're the one looking out from behind the bars. And he probably doesn't even realize you're hurting. Maybe, even worse, he doesn't even care. Or maybe he's just not sure how to change things. And that's when you need to forgive so that you can be set free, because you'll never heal until you're set free.

I remember... I'm going to get to this in a minute, church hurt is two-way. Pastors experience church hurt as well, just maybe for a different set of reasons. And there was a season in my life where I was experiencing a lot of church hurt. I'd taken a few shots of criticism. I got blamed for some things that weren't my fault. I just invested and poured into people so much and then they left the church. And they took a few jabs at me on the way out the door.

I was burned out. I was kind of in a low spot. And I sat down with a counselor. He slid a piece of paper right in front of me and he said, "Aaron, I want you to write down the names of every person who has ever hurt or offended you." And I thought, "Oh, man. We're going to be here all day, brother."

So I pulled out my pen. And here's the thing that surprised me. I thought I was going to fill the page when in reality I just wrote a few names. It wasn't as many as I thought. The offenses had expanded in my mind. And as I wrote those names, he looked at the list and he goes, "You need to release and forgive every one of them even if reconciliation isn't possible."

My good friend, Steven Carter, some of you might recognize that name, Steve's been here to preach before. Steve was unfortunately in the middle of this churchwide

scandal. He was in leadership but he was not aware of what was going on until it all got revealed.

He was sort of in the middle of a lot of that. And I remember sitting around a campfire with Steve a couple of years ago and I said, "Hey, Steve, how have you..." If you know Steve he's such a sweet, soft-hearted, pastoral kind of a guy. And I said, "Steve, why is it that you haven't given up on the church? You've seen some of the worst. Why is it that you've got such a sweet spirit?"

I'll never forget what he said to me. He goes, "Aaron, I realized that it wasn't the church that hurt me, it was a few misguided people within the church who hurt me."

There is a difference. We've got to acknowledge what is real and we need to pursue forgiveness (even if the other party doesn't deserve forgiveness or want forgiveness) so that we can be healed.

Here's the second thing:

We need to acknowledge what it is not

Now I want my tone to be very pastoral and kind here because I realize that for some of you, church hurt is raw right now because you've just come through it. It's kind of like that operation board game. I know that I might bump up against a little bit of a nerve. So I want to say this very kindly and very pastorally, but I think it's crucial that I do.

There is a lady by the name of Natalie Runion and in her work *Raised to Stay After Church Hurt* she puts it like this. I wrote it down. She says, "Just as none of us ever want to be wolves in sheep's clothing, we also never want to be sheep who cry wolf."

Here's what church hurt is not. I just wrote down a few things.

Church hurt is not:

Church hurt first of all is not:

Disagreement

Just because we make a decision that you don't agree with, that's not church hurt. Now, we can do it in a disagreeable way, maybe a hurtful way, in the wrong tone. But disagreement, in and of itself is not church hurt.

Confrontation

Maybe I've been confronted. It's in the moments where I have grown the most, spiritually and emotionally, when somebody loved me enough to tell me the truth, "You're kind of acting like a fool." And that is hurt, but that has been pain for my good and it doesn't mean that I've been harmed. The book of Proverbs says, "The wounds from a friend can be trusted."

Several years ago I was out in the lobby between services meeting and talking to people and this lady walked up to me and she asked if I would pray for her. So I said,

“Absolutely.” So we prayed, which meant that we needed to violate each other’s personal space just a little bit.

We were just a little bit closer than you would probably be if you were just having a conversation with somebody.

So we get done, I prayed for her and she said, “Thanks.” And then she walked away. About 30 seconds later she walked back and she handed me a breath mint. She didn’t even say a word. She just handed me a breath mint and walked away. And I was like, “Ouch. But thank you.” That’s wounds from a friend. It doesn’t mean that I should be offended.

Here’s another one:

Accountability

You know, somebody holding me accountable to a standard and loving me enough to come back around and ask the tough question, I mean that’s certainly uncomfortable, but that doesn’t mean that I should be offended.

Being told no

Maybe you have this idea. You want the church to try this program or you tried out for the team and you didn’t make it. And you were told, “No.” And maybe you got offended by that.

I have another. This is not on the screen, but you know when the pastor doesn’t know your name. That’s not really church hurt in and of itself. Now if I’ve met you 10 times, maybe, but not in and of itself. I debated whether I wanted to share this story but it went okay in the first two services. So we’ll see how it goes in this one. Alright?

Several years ago, it was when my kids were really, really little. We were in Saturday night services and I was preaching all day Sunday. And we were having a church dinner, kind of like a picnic thing in the yard out here. We had food trucks all over. It was August and it was really, really hot.

What you need to understand is that my wife, when our kids were really, really little, pretty much Saturday nights and Sundays she was a single mom, because she had to get the kids out the door and I wasn’t around because I was doing this. Sunday night she walked up to me with the kids and she’s tired from being with them all day. And she looks at me and she goes, “Feed your children.” And I was like, “Yes, ma’am.” You know?

She tapped me in and now I’m not Pastor Aaron anymore, I’m Dad. So, I’ve got my kids. I’m giving my wife a break. And they are whining and complaining and they are hot and they are hungry. So, I’m trying to navigate through the crowd in the church yard to the food trucks to get them some food. And there was this family that comes up to me and they were brand new to the church, “We just moved here from another state. We’ve been watching online. We’re so excited to be here. So excited to meet you.”



And I really did want to meet them but I've got some crying kids. My attention was kind of divided so I wasn't able to talk to them like I would have liked. And man, they got so offended. I got this scathing email the following week, "You know what? We were so offended that you didn't really act like you wanted to meet us. You didn't really talk to us. And honestly, you don't appear to be the guy that you are."

I apologized to them and tried give them a little bit of context for what was around all of that. And it simply wasn't enough. I remember the next time I saw them they just kind of gave me the cold shoulder.

We can be so easily offended. And offence is the bait of Satan. It's the pandemic of the people of God. We have an enemy who wants you to be offended and he wants you to stay offended so that you might miss all of the opportunities that God wants to use to bring healing and growth into your life.

Recognize the real enemy

See, we've got to recognize who the real enemy is. And I want to be really careful bringing this up because I don't want to over spiritualize this or let narcissistic leaders who are full of themselves off of the hook. That's not what I am saying. But there is an enemy and it's not a human being. There is an enemy behind the scenes trying to divide us and trying to keep us offended. So he does everything that he can to kill and steal and destroy.

His play is never to collapse the church from pressure or persecution on the outside because he knows what history tells us. Every time the church has been persecuted or there has been pressure from outside society the church just grows stronger and more influential in its impact. No, what he does is he gets behind the scenes and he divides us from within. He'll just get you offended.

Back in 2020 in the midst of our greatest crisis—and I'm talking about the big C church here—I think that we had a few bright spots during that year, but I think we largely missed so many opportunities that God wanted to use to work through us because we were divided over secondary issues that weren't that important and we turned on each other.

So we've got to recognize our real enemy. But here's the most important thing. We've got to:

Recognize the real Savior

So much hurt takes place in our lives when we put a flawed human being on a pedestal that they never should have been put on to begin with.

And it's always a mind trip for me how Jesus spent three years with these 12 disciples. He did everything that he could to teach them and to model for them servant leadership. And then at the final exam they all flunked.



The night before His arrest and crucifixion they can't even stay awake with Him to pray. And Judas gets the blame for the most overt betrayal, but all of them betrayed Him. Then Jesus resurrects from the dead. He comes back and appears to them for quite a few days. And then He ascended into heaven and He basically handed the keys to the church over to them. And He's like, "Hey, the Spirit of God will be with you.

And I'm thinking, man, if I'm Jesus and I'd just experienced that much hurt from some of my very best friends I'd be like, "Okay, guys. We're doing another three-year tour. We're going to get these lessons ingrained into you. But instead, Jesus entrusted the church to a group of unproven, flawed human beings. He's been doing it ever since.

You just read through the pages of Scripture to see that God uses flawed, broken, ordinary people. I'm so thankful that He does because that gives all of us the hope that God might use each one of us. But that also means that you shouldn't worship the person God uses. You worship the God of that person. Your eyes are fixed upon Jesus.

Listen. I don't want any of you to come to this church because of me or any other pastor. I want you coming to this church because your eyes are fixed upon Jesus. So, what we see in just a casual reading of the New Testament is that the church has never been a problem free zone. There have always been problems in it.

In fact, we wouldn't have much of the New Testament if it weren't for church hurt. Because you've got these people writing these letters to churches and they are trying to clean up some of the messes and they are trying to bring their eyes back up toward Jesus. As human beings we are called to leave something holy. And since we are not holy in and of ourselves it is inevitable that, given enough time, we're going to mess things up.

Leaders and pastors are flawed and very human. I've spent a lot of time with pastors and some have unresolved issues and trauma in their lives and instead of dealing with that in healthy ways, they went into ministry to earn the approval of a father that they never got. Or they were given a platform prematurely and they didn't have the character to sustain their influence and it absolutely crushed them.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that elevates charisma over character and prioritizes public performance over personal integrity, till there is a mess up and then they are pounced on. That's just a recipe for disaster.

You know, some people feel entitled to a position just because they feel called to it. And we've got to be really, really careful with that word *called*. Now please hear me. I'm not discrediting calling. God calls men and women to serve. But we've also got to be careful that we don't use it sort of like an override, "No, I have to do this because God called me to this."

Oftentimes when I have young people reach out to me and just say, "You know, I feel called into ministry. How do I do what you do? And how do I get started in all of this



thing,” what I’ve noticed, not with all but with some, there almost like this sense of entitlement. Like, “Aaron, how do I get up there and do what you do next week?”

It’s almost like they are entitled to something in their 20s that some people have bled for in their 40s. And now I sound like the crotchety old guy who says, “I used to walk up hill to school, both ways, in the snow.”

But you know when I got my start, I did not get my start on this platform. I got my start leading a seventh grade, middle school, girls’ discipleship group. I almost lost my faith doing that, but I was absolutely needed during that time.

So whenever I have young people come to me and they are like, “Hey, I feel called to this ministry. Where should I get started.” Here’s the thing. I want to fan that flame. I want to say, “Man, if God is calling you to that, what can I do to help.” But here’s the question that I always ask, “Why do you want to do this? Why do you feel called?” That’s the question of motive.

By the way, I would ask that of all of us today, whether you’re in full-time ministry or not—maybe it’s your company that you’re leading in, or you manage people, or you’re leading a small group—whatever it is, what’s your motivation to do what you do? Is it to get accolades? Is it to get at-a-boys. Is it to have people to affirm you? To earn the approval of a mom or a dad that you never got? Because if you do that, you’ll end up getting into this position that your character hasn’t been formed for, and that’s when people get hurt.

By the way, can I just say that I know that I am standing on a platform, with lights shining on me, this is not as glamorous as it appears to be. Right? The distance I’ve found from pedestal to punching bag isn’t very far.

I want to read some stats here. Fortunately, I don’t consider... I can’t relate to these stats because, honestly, even though I’ve had some moments and we’re not a perfect church, you guys just make it a joy to serve. I love being your pastor. But that’s the exception, not the norm.

National statistics say this—75 percent of pastors describe themselves as extremely stressed, 70 percent say that they are depressed and that their self-esteem has dropped since entering the ministry, half would leave if they could but they don’t know what they would do for a living if they could so they stay, 80 percent feel ministry undermines family life, 80 percent of ministry spouses feel unappreciated.

Now, the reason why I throw that out is not for you to feel sorry for pastors. But those statistics are so high and so alarming that if those are our shepherds, and they are leading from a place of depression and low self-esteem and burn out then that means that they are not going to make very healthy decisions. That’s how people get hurt.

I will never forget having a mentor say to me when I first got into ministry, he said, “Aaron, you’re going to need to develop the courage of a lion because you’re going to

have to make some unpopular decisions at times that people won't understand, but you've got to make the decisions anyway. Courage of a lion. And you've got to have the skin of a rhino because you're going to take shots from people whether you deserve them or not. So you have to develop a thick skin."

And then he said this. I will never forget, "Even though you need the courage of a lion and the skin of a rhino, you need to keep your heart as soft as a teddy bear because what can happen is your courage turns into abrasiveness, your skin becomes calloused, and that's when your heart becomes as hard as stone. And that's how people get hurt."

So, can I just ask this today? Why should you not give up on the church? Why should you be a part of a church family? People will say to me, at times, "Hey, I can be a Christian and not go to church." And I would say, "Technically, you're right." Because your salvation is not tied to your church attendance. You are saved by grace through faith through the finished work of Jesus alone. Period.

God is not up in heaven putting a little gold star on your attendance chart saying, "Well, they were there this week. I guess I'll let them in one day." It's not tied to your salvation. You can love Jesus and not the church. So why should you be a part of it?

Formation

And I just want to summarize it all into one word *formation*. The primary purpose of being a part of a church is the formation of your character into the image and likeness of Jesus. The primary purpose of the church is not producing content.

I know that, because of technology, this is not the only place that you can get content. And I know that most of you don't. You're receiving content from other places. The reason why I know this is because you tell me, like, "Your sermon was pretty good this week, but man, that Steven Furtick, he really lit it up this last weekend. And I'm like, "Move to Charlotte. If you like him that much, move to Charlotte."

I know some of you are on like your 16th Beth Moore Bible study. Alright? It's just like you're podcasting all over the place. The reason why you are part of a church is not content. You can get a lot better content than what I could ever produce and don't you dare say *amen* to that. Just keep that to yourself.

The purpose of the church is not felt needs, like, "Oh, man. We're just going to go to church because the coffee is so good there." Or, "We just love the worship." Or, "The Kids' Ministry." Or, "We just love waiting in the parking lot, trying to get out." It's not felt needs.

So what is the purpose of the church? Here's the thing. You can stay online, you can do an online mentoring thing, you can read all kinds of spiritual books and you can fill your Spotify list with worship music. You might grow your head knowledge, you might even have some soft feels, but you won't be formed because formation requires relationship.

Formation requires community. Formation requires friction, which might mean the potential that you could possibly be hurt.

C.S. Lewis put it this way. He goes, "If the church is not making disciples, then all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible, are a waste of time."

Christianity is not an autonomous religion. Jesus is forming a family and a community, not a group of individuals with private faith.

And guys, I will actually be held accountable for that. I'll be held accountable to any sort of abuse or injustice that might happen. I'll be held accountable to people's experience here. But I'll also be held accountable for your formation.

I wish that weren't so. But Hebrews 13:17 says otherwise. It's a verse that will likely make both of us uncomfortable, just for different reasons. Here's what it says in verse 17:

"Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say." I know that that is not a bumper sticker that any of you will ever put on your car. Here's why. It's not because they're great, not because they've got life all figured out, or they are just phenomenal human beings, but because *"Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to, who? To God. Yeah, right there.*

Some of you are like, "Man, you don't understand. That leader got away with abuse. That leader got away with injustice. That leader got away with being a narcissistic jerk." No they didn't. God will hold them accountable. And then he says:

"Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit." Hebrews 13:17 (NLT)

Now, with me reading that verse, let me just say this. That verse should never, ever be used as a trump card to give anybody a reason to mistreat other people.

What that verse is saying is that on Judgment Day my one on one with Jesus is going to involve this question. He's going to look at me and He's going to say, "Aaron, what was the spiritual condition of the people that I entrusted to you at Traders Point? What was their formation? Did you encourage them to be formed into the image and likeness of Me, which meant that, at times, you needed to teach some things that they didn't want to hear, which meant that you needed to come around them and lovingly guide and shepherd them."

Can I just tell you that I'm honestly not looking forward to that question on Judgment Day? That is such a heavy verse and it is a heavy burden.

Our lives are not shaped by content, they are shaped by relationship. It's the way that we grow. So can I just say this to you? If you've been hurt, I am so sorry that you have been hurt. You shouldn't have been hurt. I want to urge you to not isolate yourself, but to enter back into relationship when you are ready.

Some of you, I know, came to a big church because you wanted to stay anonymous because of church hurt. And I would just say, “Man, you are so welcome here. Sit in the back row. Take all of the time you need. Come late. Leave early. Do whatever you need to do. But at some point can I urge you to put the jersey back on and get on the field? Jump into a group and begin to serve once again and to not allow bitterness to consume your heart.

Listen. If you only come to church with a mindset of, “What am I going to get out of this?” It is just a matter of time before you aren’t getting much. Man, any time that I show up at church and I’m overly nervous about how things are going to go or how the sermon is going to go...

All it takes... I can get 99 words of encouragement and one critical comment. You want to know the one thing that I remember all week long? The one critical comment. That’s just how it works—you can be encouraged all day long; you hear one critical comment...

So when I get all pent up, “How are things going to go today?” I take a deep breath before I get out of my car, I walk in and say, “God, it doesn’t matter how things go today, it doesn’t matter how the sermon goes. Let me encourage people and give them hope.”

I shift my mindset and that is why I don’t get tired of doing this. That’s why I don’t feel burned out or overly discouraged because I’ve taken the focus off of myself and put it onto other people.

So, I want to encourage you to enter back into relationship. I want to encourage you to get into that process of formation. And I would just unapologetically contend that you need a church community around you for that process to take place.

Saying, “I’ll follow Jesus on my own. It’s just better that way. I don’t have to deal with the hassle of people.” That’s a lot like me saying to my wife, Lindsay, “You know what? I really don’t like our arguments and stuff. Our marriage just works so much better when you’re not around.” That’s just not going to fly. And yet, that’s the logic that we use to talk about Jesus and His church.

I know a lot of times people are critical of systems and structures and metrics and organization. Now when those things become the end, yes and absolutely. However, to throw out all spiritual leadership equals ecclesiastical chaos. And if you think damage happens in structure, you should see the damage that happens in a free-for-all. All you are left with is power dynamics and personalities.

So the church is not:

Autocracy: will do it however I want

And it’s certainly not:

Abdication: will do it however you want

It’s:



Accountability: Posture of humility, transparency, vulnerability, teachability

We lead the church with accountability, meaning a posture of humility, and transparency, and vulnerability and teachability as we point people—not to a pastor, not to a leader—to Jesus who set the example for us.

Jesus' motivation was love, Jesus' method was washing people's smelly feet, Jesus' mission was to seek and to save. And we take our cues from Him, which, by the way, His church hurt enables us to be forgiven, cleansed, and healed.

In Isaiah, chapter 53, the prophet is prophesizing the crucifixion of Jesus. It sounds a lot like hurt. It says there, "He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief."

We turned our backs on Him and looked the other way. He was despised and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses He carried; it was our sorrows that weighed Him down. He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.

Today I can't think of a more fitting thing to do to wrap a message on hurt and a series on deconstruction than for us to take communion together as a church family. Across all campuses and locations. And maybe if you are watching online you can find something to participate with us in this. But I just want to encourage you to grab your communion cup and to commune with your heavenly Father, with Jesus, who was willing to be hurt so that we could quite possibly experience healing.

So I want to encourage you to take the piece of bread that represents His body broken for you. Take this in remembrance of Jesus. Scripture says the cleansing of sin is not possible without the shedding of blood from a perfect lamb. Jesus was our perfect, spotless Lamb. His blood was shed so that we could be cleansed.

Father, we come to You today and we thank You that Jesus was not above being put into a vulnerable spot where He might be betrayed, wounded, and hurt for our sake. So, God, we want to copy His motivation, we want to copy His methods. We want to be on mission with Him.

God, I know that there are a number of people who have been hurt by others, who have been hurt by people they never should have been hurt by. I ask today that Your Holy Spirit would meet with them right in that seat that they are sitting in, maybe meet them right in their living room, or kitchen, or on the treadmill or their car as they are in traffic listening to this message, that they would have a divine moment with You.

A moment when they realize that they need to let go of the bitterness and the anger and the wounding that is keeping them in a prison cell of their own making, but to step into forgiveness that You've made available to them by way of the cross, even if reconciliation on this side of eternity is not possible.

So, God, allow us to step into that so that we can be healed and so that we can keep our eyes fixed upon You as we seek to bring hope to a very hurting world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

