



Leaving

AN UNHEALTHY CHURCH...

How to Survive Transition Trauma

BY J. LEBRON MCBRIDE

Editor's Note: Since we published "Getting Over a Bad Church Experience" (Plain Truth, Jan/Feb 2006), many readers have asked for more information specifically addressing emotional and social issues people face as they leave an unhealthy church or even a heretical cult. The problems of disagreeing with and leaving the community become increasingly daunting as friends and loved ones pull away in order to protect their own identities, esteem and offices in the dysfunctional group culture. LeBron McBride drew from his own experience of leaving an unhealthy church as well as from his clinical experience in family therapy as he wrote his new book, *Living Faithfully with Disappointment in the Church*, published by The Haworth Press. This article is drawn in part from this book.

Just as a diamond has more than one sparkle, so theological transitions have more than one dimension. Most people who come to new theological understandings do so by diligent study and reflection; they soak in their new discoveries like sponges absorbing water. Usually people come to intellectual insights that are freeing, resonating with their new spiritual convictions.

However, in the whirlwind of the stimulation and excitement of their new discoveries, people often neglect a vital piece of the transition puzzle. Far too often, sincere persons are unprepared for the emotional impact of a theological awakening, especially when they have been intertwined in a toxic and controlling church. In fact, the emotional conflict may prove almost unbearable. People may get lost in a devastating transitional wilderness where life feels barren and desolate and the fierce monsters of loneliness, grief, anger, depression, anxiety and other powerful emotions show their fangs and appear ready to devour them.

Toxic Churches and Their Psychological Walls

This article will address the intense emotional and psychological dimension that may accompany a transition in belief and church identity. Oftentimes toxic churches have, over time, built psychological walls beyond which are wasteland moats around their closed systems. In attempting to leave the system, one has to maneuver among emotional predators to find true freedom.

For example, teachings stating that a certain church is the only true church, the remnant or last day church are psychological barriers that can be difficult to destroy. Further, destructive churches often develop very strong myths among the members that if they leave the organization, they will be eternally cursed or damned and will not survive spiritually.

When a church's theology supports a closed system and limited or no interaction with "out-

PHOTO BY MARY WEGNER—PTM

THE PLAIN TRUTH

siders” who worship differently or who have the “mark of the beast” or some other apocalyptic “mark,” many fear the wilderness that lies outside that church is too threatening to risk experiencing. Anyone who once accepted such teachings or has been brainwashed by them should not minimize the powerful addiction to the church they ensure. These tactics make it very difficult for members to explore options intellectually and emotionally. Again, even when one does somehow break free enough to come to new intellectual and spiritual understanding, the psychological impact of abandoning those teachings may be what sneaks up and destabilizes the person. Those who do venture out of an unhealthy church do best if they know of the psychological and emotional dangers ahead.

Breaking Attachments

Human beings are social creatures with profound needs of attachment. When we break an attachment to another or even to a church, we usually suffer deep emotional agony. Many dynamics may influence the extent of this suffering: How long the relationship has been in place, how important it has been, what our support network is like post-attachment, what we believe about the attachment, how many areas of our lives the break in attachment impacts and so on. Therefore, we cannot always judge for ourselves how profoundly the break-up may impact us; much less should we judge how others react to a similar severance.

A foundational principle in our dealings with people who leave particular churches, therefore, should be that we not judge each other regarding the timing nor the amount of struggle involved. Although people on similar wilderness journeys from toxic churches have much in common, complications vary enough that a simplistic “one size fits all” type of understanding will not be equally helpful to everyone.

Each individual, no matter where in the process of an exodus, must assess carefully and walk by

faith while being true to self as well as honest with God.

One model for understanding the severing of an attachment to a church is that of divorce. From working as a family therapist, I know from experience how varied reactions to divorce can be.

People can usually expect a roller coaster of emotions during a marital break-up, often vacillating from sheer panic to calm assurance that one can survive. Profound ambivalence is often present; people make emotional progress and then move back again. Clean, fast, simple and easy breaks in attachments are unusual for caring persons, whether that break is with a spouse or with a church into which one has fully invested oneself.

Continuing with the model of divorce, think of a spouse that has an abusive partner and compare this relationship to a member of an abusive church. It may, in such cases, be very clear intellectually that one needs to divorce in order to survive emotionally and physically, but emotionally the person may feel confused. Often the abusive partner has used myths much like the ones already mentioned in relationship to abusive churches in an effort to convince the abused spouse that she cannot survive without him. The abuser may have told the victim such things as: “You will never survive without me,” or “No one would have you but me.”

Cognitive Dissonance

There is a psychological term called *cognitive dissonance* that describes our internal tension and struggle when we simultaneously hold conflicting beliefs or attitudes, or when our beliefs contradict our behavior. For example, if a person believes that divorce is wrong and honors the marriage vows but simultaneously realizes that staying in an abusive marriage endangers one’s children or oneself, the resulting conflict is cognitive dissonance. The reality of the abuse may be clearly evident, but the intellectual belief about the permanence of marriage and the emotional at-

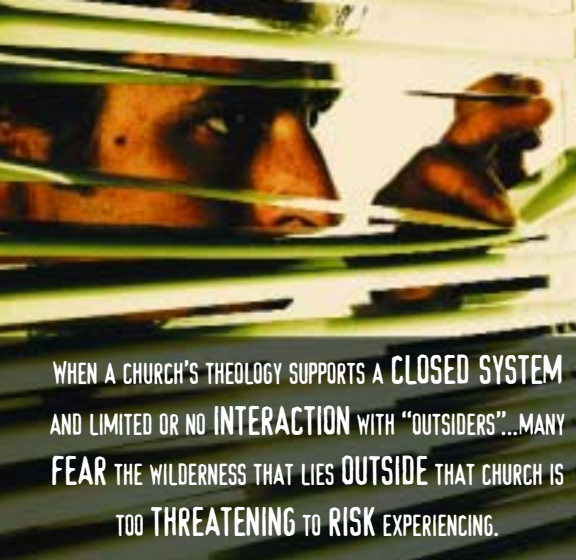


tachment to the spouse may cause the person great internal struggle and confusion.

Or to take another example, one may change a religious practice out of a new biblical understanding, but the old familiar pattern may result in the new religious practice feeling awkward for awhile. Often when there is change in our beliefs, we go through a wilderness experience of emotional ambivalence before our minds and hearts are integrated regarding the belief.

As the shattering of one’s assumptions and beliefs gains in momentum, so does a shattering of the foundation of one’s security or of life itself. God may appear absent. Former friends may abandon or reject. If one is employed by the organization, career and income may be lost. Like an addict that goes into physical withdrawal, so a person leaving the attachment and womb of a toxic religion often has emotional withdrawal. Some even return to their religious addiction in order to get relief. These people can be the saddest cases of all because the cognitive dissonance of such a return ensures that they have no peace—or they go numb to their spiritual experience and become robots going through motions of religious life that have no meaning.

There is a better way. The road best traveled is walking through the wilderness toward the promised land of healing. It is not an easy journey, and it is filled with



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dangers, but it is well worth the agonizing struggle of the wilderness to find the promised land of freedom and wholeness.

Considerations When Making a Theological Transition

Do not minimize the stress. In stress theory there is the concept of a "pile-up" of stressors, and I know of few instances where the pile-up of stress is any higher than when exiting some churches. The stress is not just in one area of life but is pervasive across most domains of living. There can be horrific stress because of the breakdown of a person's support system, social network, family life, mental theological framework, emotional securities, personal history, worldview, in some cases financial and career investment and so on. For a time a comfort zone is nowhere to be found.

Even persons who are very stable can only take so much, and when stress is so intrusive to so many areas of life there is much at risk. When you survey the wasteland you must cross to get to a better spiritual and emotional land, prepare as best you can and beware of these dangers and risks. Otherwise, you will certainly be blindsided by the wilderness temptations and confrontations. For many, it will not be a short or simple journey.

I have known some who continued to feel guilty for years even though they knew for certain they were at a different point theological and their former way was empty

for them. Guilt can be true guilt or false guilt. In cases such as this, one is not dealing with true guilt for a wrong done but with the residual effects of a conscience that has been carefully indoctrinated and is, therefore, overly active with a guilt that is false. I think this is especially true for those who were indoctrinated as children, so beware.

Allow grief and realize that persons grieve in various ways—there is no one correct manner in which to grieve. When there is loss, grief is normal, not abnormal. Our society has popularized certain stages of grief, thus promoting a belief that if you go through the various steps, grief will be completed. However, in real life grief is emotionally all over the place and is rarely a neat progression of steps.

It is so important not to expect a neat and tidy grief package and to remember that anyone who cares deeply may grieve deeply when there is loss. Grief reveals past attachment and caring and will, most likely, wax and wane and subside for awhile before coming forth with a new vengeance. Some grief lasts a lifetime; however, time normally does bring relief. A person may experience some losses long after leaving a destructive church. For example, being part of a special group, the group identity, the apparent closeness of the group, the like-mindedness and so on—although largely false perceptions—are powerful losses.

The loss of family and friends can be traumatic; being cut off suddenly and dramatically can cause a questioning of trust and the validity of all relationships. It is important to remember that those cutting themselves off are responding to their own insecurities and inability to tolerate anything that threatens their fragile belief structure. This self-induced separation may be the most obvious illustration of the bankruptcy of their religion at a deeper level. Truth is not so easily shaken and disturbed. The unfortunate reality is that many times there is nothing you can do

to bring any closure to such relationships, and persons who do cut themselves off in this manner often have to demonize you to give themselves an excuse for their behavior.

Don't let criticism and negativity overcome you; move toward the positive. One of the worst things that can occur is that we can take on the characteristics of our theological adversaries and become just as negative and controlling as they are. It takes grace to accept persons where they are, and it may help if we remember our own past and that we were in the same place at one point. One of the marks of psychological and spiritual maturity is the ability to move to a different understanding without rejecting those who remain at the former level of understanding.

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Accept that ambiguity is much more a part of faith than you have previously been taught.

There is not a clear-cut answer for every theological question we have. Questions and honest doubt are parts of genuine faith. Most toxic organizations have an "answer" to everything, but you have to accept their presuppositions in order to believe them. I am not sure where it originated, but the quote—"Why is it that the religious institutions that say they have all the answers, never allow any questions?"—holds great insight. Ponder it.

One has to ask if certainty in all areas is really valid or necessary. It appears to me that living with paradox and not being anxious about it is a hallmark of psychological health.

Put your focus on Christ and his acceptance of you and your journey. Christ accepted the disciples and shared communion with them shortly before they abandoned him. Their faith was imperfect and in transition, yet Christ accepted them and continued to work with them. He will do no less with you. Christ is much more graceful than what you have internalized from the teaching of your toxic church. He is with you even when it doesn't

feel he is, and he will bring you through the wilderness, for he has been there and knows the way.

Remember the importance of forgiveness, but acknowledge that forgiveness may not be immediate and may not bring positive feelings. Just as Christ has forgiven and continues to forgive us, so we seek to forgive others. But it may take time to forgive a religious institution that you feel has harmed you.

Even when you choose to forgive, the hurt and pain may remain; forgiveness is not a magical wand that removes all negative feelings. Our acceptance before God is not based upon the perfection or imperfection of our personal forgiveness. If it were, our forgiveness would become a demand of works righteousness.

Ultimately, the only way we can forgive an entity that never apologizes is by turning over to God our "right" to get even. We are accepted and God continues to work with us in that acceptance in spite of our continued imperfection in forgiveness or in anything else. Perfectionism is an example of the all-or-nothing, black-or-white thinking that sometimes remains with us from toxic religion. It is unrealistic, and God's grace reaches us even in the struggles of our daily lives.

Seek balance in all areas of life. Not one of us is truly balanced, and giving attention to the spiritual, social, physical and mental areas of life is vital, especially when we are under stress. Do not neglect the importance of physical exercise to assist with emotional agitation and depression. Avoid extremes. Eat well and find outlets and hobbies that take you away from the intensity of the religious struggles you have been exposed to in your transition. An obsession with theological issues without balance becomes an insane approach to living.

Take a long and meditative look at the foundational Christian concepts such as grace, forgiveness, acceptance and God's infinite love. If you continue to study only minute details of obscure theology,

your relationship with God will not develop. If you constantly feed on negatives your faith will be starved. You need, most of all, to develop your relationship with Christ and find solace and healing in his care for you. Careful reflection on the great principles and concepts of Christianity will pay great psychological and emotional dividends.

Conclusion

It is truly a myth that you cannot survive an exodus from a toxic church. There may indeed be emotional trauma as you make the break into the wilderness once you leave, but even Christ himself spent some time in the wilderness. The temptations of the wilderness are great. The fierceness of the emotional predators that attack you can be devastating. However, once you have made it beyond the wilderness, you will recognize how Christ sustained you even during your weakest moments. You will wonder how you previously got so caught up in all the theological briars and thickets of the old system. You will begin to relish the new-found freedom to commune with Christ without all the distractions of a toxic belief system sticking and jabbing its sharp thorns into your psyche. Best of all, you will find that Christ is the Promised Land beyond the wilderness that brings rest to your soul! □

The above is an abbreviated version of material first printed in Proclamation! Nov/Dec 2005. Reprinted with permission. Portions of this article are from Faithfully Living with Disappointment in the Church by J. LeBron McBride, Ph.D., © 2005 by the Haworth Press, Inc. Binghamton, NY. Used by Permission. Book is available at www.haworthpress.com or by calling 1-800-429-6784.

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The Good Samaritan wants your help!

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus calls us to be there for those who have been spiritually mugged, beaten and left for dead—to help him minister to those wounded by "bad news religion"—to bring them to a safe place where they can get the care they need.

Every day, PTM helps thousands of people get through bad church experiences. Some are on their way out of cults—some are ready to escape from abusive, authoritarian churches—some simply don't know where to turn. PTM is there for them. We provide resources, encouragement and even online church services. If you've been helped by PTM—why not help others? Your prayers and regular financial support will help bring comfort and healing of the gospel to thousands of hurting people like these:

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Your messages never fail to inspire. I think that I am affected from the many years I was captive of a bad version of Christianity. Please keep reminding me that God loves me.—Illinois

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