

Getting My Former Church Out of Me!

BY
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My religious journey is a long, complicated story. Our former church was heavy-handed, manipulative, harsh and controlling. It also fostered extremely close relationships with the church members, so we weren't willing to see the truth for many years...to do so would have meant leaving all of them, the whole community.

I came to my former church as a severe bulimic. Up until then I had been bulimic for all of my adult life. I had been to five separate in-patient 30-day treatment centers, had tried several antidepressants and had worked with countless therapists. I was ready to give up. The church took me in and ministered to me and my family.

They loved my husband immediately, and began grooming him to one day take over the ministry. They appealed to his need for others' approval and built him up, even encouraging him to go to seminary and putting us in charge of a small group at church (we did not feel ready, and protested, but were strongly encouraged to do it).

They tried their best to heal me, but nothing worked. Their attempts to fix me were all surface-oriented, behavior-modification techniques that were like putting band-aids on cancer. They would shame me when I failed, and accused me of being rebellious against them; I felt like a complete failure.

An "Outside" Ministry

I then heard about an "outside" ministry that relied on the Lord to reveal his truth, which set people free. We weren't really allowed to seek "outside" ministry, but I was desperate, so I went. I was free from bulimia within three weeks, and I have been 100 percent healed ever since (that was in 2000).

I came back to my church, so excited to be free! My priest and his wife did *not* meet my announcement with enthusiasm. They doubted my healing and spoke against the other ministry. I told everyone who would listen that I'd been healed, and many of the other church members attended that "outside" ministry to receive their own healings.

I was then accused of splitting the church, of having a *Jezebel spirit*, of being rebellious and of slandering my priest and his wife. They tried to turn my husband against me (he was now ordained and was serving under their authority, so he was torn). They forbade me from speaking of my healing to anyone at that church. After several months of this struggle, I stayed away from the church for a while, even though my husband and children continued to attend.

Eventually, I couldn't take the isolation, and I came crawling back to them, owning all the fault, saying that I'd been in "transference," and asking their forgiveness. They received me back, but conditionally. I was put on *probation* (this was implied, never spoken), and I frequently received corrections from them. At times, I was forced to listen to a list of all the things wrong with me: Rebellious, controlling, cold-hearted, manipulative, selfish, self-centered, attention-seeking, bad wife, bad mother, disloyal, an underminer of authority, etc. Most of this came from my priest's wife, who had become his mouthpiece after he had a heart attack (we were actually blamed for his heart attack as well).

We remained in this church for nine years, and we were in the inner circle of clergy. We saw numerous people come and go. We were always given the official version of why they had left: They weren't spiritual enough; they were rebellious; they couldn't handle going deeper into holiness; they were *unclean* and God removed them; they were never really a part of our special, unique, elite group—they couldn't handle our special relationship with God and wanted to settle for "church as usual." And without exception, we were told to have nothing to do with the ones who'd left—so that we wouldn't have *those* spirits come upon us as well. Some of them were my close friends, and the parents of my children's friends. But I obedi-

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ently wrote them off, yet all the while I kept wondering just what the "other side of the story" really was.

Our priest used mind-games against us—often pitting one of us against others. He would say outrageous things and then later deny he'd said such a thing. He'd say that we were imagining things—that spirits lived in the air between his mouth and our ears who "twisted" his words. Whenever a problem arose with him or his wife, we were accused of being the problem.

On many occasions they would call my husband, or pull him aside and warn him against me, telling him that I was using and manipulating him, trying to turn him against them and the church. They addressed him as "son" (knowing full well that he needed a father's affirmation), but never once addressed me as "daughter." They told him, as well as me directly, that I was the liability in his life—that I was holding him back from progressing in his calling (he was an ordained deacon, but not yet a priest).

Saved...or Not?

During this time, they changed their belief about salvation, moving from the Protestant understanding to a more Catholic understanding. They had me read books which taught that salvation is a process, not an event, and that one can never know if one has salvation—that only God can know for sure. After a year of trying to digest this new understanding (and over two years of being on *probation* and believing that there was so much wrong with me), something happened. My priest asked in front of a class one day, "How many of you know that you're saved—raise your hands!" I was stupefied. He'd just spent a year trying to convince

me that no one can know if they're saved. I didn't raise my hand, since I'd been in confusion about my salvation for so long.

He looked at me and asked what the problem was. I tried to explain my confusion. My priest's wife began poking my leg, saying "Shhhh, don't start." My priest became more and more angry, and said, "I'm your priest, and if I say you're saved, you are. I'm speaking on behalf of God for you."

I was astonished at his words, and I said, with as much respect as I could muster, "I'm sorry, but I can't take a chance on getting into heaven based on your say-so." He lost control...he was livid! He dismissed me with a sharp gesture, and addressed the rest of the class, "Forget her! As for the rest of you, those who can believe me, I assure you that you all are saved."

I was crying at this point—humiliated, confused and angry at his injustice. My priest's wife grabbed my arm and took me into another room, saying, "You undermined his authority in front of all those people! How dare you!" She then went on to tell me all the things that were wrong with me.

Another woman, someone I had previously considered a good friend, came in and said, "The Lord has told me that you are making understanding an idol. You have to quit trying to understand everything and just believe what you're told by God's Anointed."

I went home so defeated. I even sent them an email, asking forgiveness for attacking his authority, and asking for clarification about salvation. I received a jovial, joking email back, effectively saying that it was "no big deal" and that God was giving new revelation about salvation. The whole incident was dismissed, and no one in that class ever came to my defense, except for one woman who later said she'd been terrified at his anger and thought he was about to have another heart attack (that woman has since left the church as well).

Shortly thereafter, I experienced my second miscarriage in only seven months. After the first one, I was helped through the grieving process by others in the church. But I didn't even know I was pregnant again until after I'd miscarried the second time.

My priest's wife told me that since we didn't take their advice, we were therefore in rebellion, and the second miscarriage was seen as a type of punishment. No sympathy or consolation was offered, other than, "God takes away deformed babies."

Realizing Something Was Very Wrong

Those two incidents opened my eyes to the fact that something was very wrong in our church. My husband's eyes had been opened a year earlier, but every time he tried to speak of it, I'd hush him and tell him that we had to just obey and trust God to work through our spiritual leaders. We were told regularly to submit (which meant be in complete agreement as well), and to "touch not God's anointed."

Asking questions was a sign of challenging authority. We were expected to conform to their ideas about how Christians ought to act, think, feel, look, dress, speak... be. Everything about my own personality (analytical thinking style, creative expressions in art, style of relating) was deemed as defective, and I was told to "die to self" regularly. I was often compared to other women—they were more submissive, better wives and mothers, more spiritual—what was wrong with me?

We began to notice that people in our church were keeping their distance from us; I'd smile and say "hi," and they would avert their gaze. Or they would just turn away as we approached. Then one of our friends (who was also on her way out of the church, unbeknownst to them) told us that she'd been warned by our priest's wife to "watch out for" me.

Due to baggage from each of our pasts, our marriage was suffering. I

felt emotionally detached from my husband, unable to give or receive affection which led to me denying him sexually. My husband continued to love and desire me, but my rejection hurt him; he reacted out of his pain with criticisms and fault-finding.

We had no genuine intimacy for 17 years of our marriage (though we went through the motions—obviously, we had seven children!). We had given up on having anything other than an unfulfilling, joyless life together (divorce was never an option).

Then a marvelous thing happened: After 17 years of despising sex and feeling no love, I suddenly desired my husband. I realized that it was more than physical, that I'd suddenly fallen in love with my husband all over again—only more powerfully than in the early years of our courtship.

A few weeks later, my husband received a call informing him that he was to attend an official Bishop's Council meeting the next day. We called several people to pray for us, and he attended the meeting.

I was described in the meeting as a sex-crazed, obsessive-compulsive, out-of-control woman. My husband was told that his "house was out of order" and that he didn't deserve to be a deacon. He was told by the priest, "I warned you about her six years ago!" The archbishop said, "Don't be fooled...

A woman I had previously considered a good friend said, "The Lord has told me that you are making understanding an idol. You have to quit trying to understand everything and just believe what you're told by God's Anointed."

she's using sex to manipulate and control you."

He was told that we had to leave our church and our entire denomination until such time as I could be brought under control, and we could then seek reconciliation and counseling. My husband left in a daze, but by the time he arrived

home, he realized that they'd been wrong, and that he didn't want his wife under control—he quite enjoyed the freedom that God had brought me into. Ironically, our home had never been more in order—we were in love, working as a team, our children were thriving, secure in knowing their parents were committed to each other.

Several days later, we received calls from church friends, asking us about "the meeting last night." We knew nothing about the meeting, but we were informed that it was called to discuss us. We, obviously, were not invited. The church met, and our priest told everyone his version about why we were leaving the church.

By the end of the meeting, many were crying and they were told to have nothing to do with us—including my children's best (and only) friends. Even close friends, who already knew the problems in our church still turned against us. That's the power of influence our former priest has on his flock.

We've been devastated by this. We've lost all of our friends, our church, our community. Lies have been told about us, and we haven't been able to hear them or to defend ourselves.

Leaving—Seeking Healing and Forgiveness

We're seeking healing, forgiveness toward those who've hurt us—and deprogramming! This won't go away quickly—it's one thing to get out of a church; it's another thing entirely to get the church out of you!

It has now been many months since we left that church.

We're preparing to move from the area, to a new home, a new community and a new church that the Lord has planned for us—one that he will reveal and lead us to. Our family is more than thriving—it's flourishing. Our marriage has never been more united, more strong or more fun!

The Lord has taken us through an incredible and amazing journey of growth—teaching us about himself, about his church, the universal body of Christ and insights about ourselves that we didn't fathom before. Blinders have been replaced with wide-eyed wonderment, as we take it all in. He's moving us beyond and above all that we used to know, believe and understand. He's truly *out of the box!*

But rather than believing the illusion that we've somehow arrived, we sense that we're at the very edge of a new beginning, an eternal journey that transcends all barriers previously experienced.

To this day, our connections with the people of our former church have been scarce...not once have we seen or heard from the priest and his wife, nor anyone else in leadership. We've had only two chance run-ins with others who were formerly close friends. The encounters were awkward on their part and freeing for us—there was no shame involved. Just a sadness for what could have been. And yet, not a day goes by that we don't express gratitude to our Lord for releasing us from that environment and belief system—we didn't know that there was so much more!

We continue to love them, to pray for their healing and to pray that their eyes would be opened, not for our sakes, but for theirs. We also pray that that church would not increase in numbers until such time as true healing does take place. They're no more evil than any of us...but they are indeed wounded, and I long for those wounds to be tended to.

I have never loved God more, never been so aware of his presence and his guidance, never been in a place of trusting him so fully. I gladly and eagerly follow him into the next chapter of our lives...let the great adventure continue! □

Dena Brehm and her husband homeschool their seven children. She has been learning about grace versus legalism and lives in amazement at how wonderful the grace-infused Christian life can be.