

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL BURNOUT

## When Church Takes More Than It Gives

2 Corinthians 11:22-30

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In 1632, Galileo published a book challenging the time-honored perception of the universe. Shortly, he was put on trial for heresy. Spared the death sentence, he was condemned to life in prison with no contact to the outside world. He died, blind and alone ten years later. In 1992, 360 years after Galileo's trial, the Church admitted it had treated him wrong. Doesn't it embarrass you sometimes, how wrong the church can be? And doesn't it make you wonder--what they'll be saying about us in another 100 years?

But sometimes, the church's mess-ups are not as high-profile as that one. Sometimes, it's the little things that snowball over time. Hurt feelings, neglect, numbing routine, people let us down. The joy of serving isn't there. Church becomes a chore. Back in 1994, when baseball went on strike and there was no pennant race, no World Series, angry fans rebelled. One sign in Yankee Stadium said it all: "The game is perfect; it's people who mess it up."

When people want to tell me how disappointing church can be, I want to say, "Oh, really! I didn't know that!" Who besides a pastor would know better? The Apostle Paul certainly knew. He is so honest about it here, and other places in our New Testament. Some of the Corinthians had it in for him--they called him weak, cowardly, intrusive, money-grubbing and (most unkind cut of all for a preacher--a lousy preacher!). In 10:10, we find that they were making fun of him, personally attacking him. And all this, after he had done so much for them.

Just read the litany of heartache in our text (v. 23): Imprisonments and floggings (plural); many beatings by a whip by Jewish brothers as well as being beaten by rods via the Roman officials (v. 24). Do you get this? He is treated just as badly by his church (Jews) as by outsiders! The same thing in v. 26: mistreated by Gentiles, but also mistreated by "false brothers and sisters." And then added to all this, the daily care of all the churches (v. 28). The word "care" or "anxiety" means distractions pulling us in many directions. Isn't that the real issue? Church hurt hurts worse, because we lead with our heart. We're all in, emotionally, spiritually, financially, physically. We expect betrayal and hurt out in the world, but not from church. St. Theresa once said, "Having spent the last forty years with saints, I can well see why our Lord chose to spend his time with sinners."

All of this invites the question: What kept Paul going? Why didn't he just throw up his hands and say, "It isn't worth it anymore"? I believe it's because he never saw the church as a human construct. It was the body of Christ; it was God's invention. As bad as it is at times, it's God's only plan! As disgusted as Paul could get with the church, in other places he would describe her as the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-33). Robert Webber once wrote, "There came a time...when I

decided that I was either going to have to give up on all the church, every part of it, or I was going to have to turn and embrace all of her, this glorious and notorious lady, the 'leprous bride of Christ.' I was going to have to give up my heretical hope of having Christ without the church" [*Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, p. 100].

Philip Yancey says something similar in one of his books. We have to forgive the church just like we the mistakes made by parents and siblings in any family (and by the way, the title of that book is instructive: *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived The Church*). What I think he is saying is that we have to get the church off the pedestal and stop having unrealistic expectations about it.

Another thing--Paul learned to play hurt. One of the great stories of any NFL season is how the, at the professional level, by this time of the season, most of those players have learned to play hurt. They are in pain, but they press on. When I read Paul's list of hardships in vv. 22-30, it is brutal. And yet he learned to play hurt. How? Jesus! Many people know Paul's testimony about hearing the voice of Jesus, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect through weakness." But most people don't realize its context was this very conversation he was having about how tough church can be sometimes.

If we have our eyes on people, they will all sooner or later disappoint us. But in Jesus, there is no disappointment. That's why we are Evangelical Christians, meaning we believe a personal (not institutional) relationship with Christ is transformative.

So, we follow Paul's example. We talk about our hurt (that's what Paul is doing in our text). We acknowledge we can't have Christ without also having his bride (warts and all). We learn to play hurt. And we keep our eyes on Jesus!