

The Hired Hand! ©

A Biblical Perspective ~ Dr. Lanny Cook

I've had conversations with a multitude of individuals who were offended or completely turned off by certain components of religion. There were many who had a bad experience with someone in the church that happened years earlier, resulting in being disillusioned with any form of religious affiliation. Many times one single experience can turn someone against church attendance completely. At times this happens to individuals who have spent decades in their church, serving, giving and being actively involved. Many times as a new minister comes into the fold, it's not uncommon for misunderstandings and offenses to make their way into the midst of a fellowship. Church offense also happens at times over doctrinal issues when a congregant doesn't agree with a particular teaching or scripture as presented by a pastor. Of course, there are cases where an offense can be attributed to a person's reluctance to correct a conviction evoked through the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is common for many individuals, after being confronted by the Truth of a biblical precept to take offense and place all blame for the problem on the messenger. Rather than redirect their moral compass to align with the leading of the Spirit back onto the straight and narrow path, some folks choose to leave the church without ever looking back and continue down their path toward self-destruction. All the while placing the blame on the church or someone who represents that particular community chapel. But that's not always the case.

There are a myriad of circumstances or situations that can often be offensive to certain individuals in a congregation. Exception can be taken way too often, when the agent in charge of a corporate congregation does not fully embrace the calling of being a true representative of the Lord's mercy and grace. In other words, certain pastors, leaders and/or elders are cleverly working to advance their own personal agenda and have no true commitment to serving or attending to the needs of their appointed flock. There are also situations where the leadership just doesn't want to be bothered with individuals who might be in need of "extra grace," understanding or significant attention. Way too often many of these leaders are just down-right ill-equipped to deal with the divergent situations that arise in the daily lives of their congregants.

Just recently I heard a message by Andy Stanley regarding this troubling reality found within much of the modern church. In his message he shared a scripture which brought extreme, clarity to this issue for me. It is heart wrenching to realize that too many church bodies have

inflicted great harm on way too many individuals who sought inspiration, encouragement and support from a local fellowship. Here's the scripture that turned on the spiritual enlightenment switch in my mind. It's important to read deep into the true context and revelatory proclamation contained within these few short verses. It takes some time to truly digest what Jesus is declaring in this dramatically profound scripture.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” John 10:11-13 NIV

Why are so many churches or their pastors not capable of caring for the sheep when the wolf chooses to attack? Why are so many Christian leaders seemingly incapable of showing grace to those who are going through difficult times? Why are they so inept at dealing with individuals who require an extra portion of grace? It's because they are not the Shepherd. As a whole most of us are not about to lay down our life for even one member of any flock. In other words, church leaders are far from perfect and are just as human as the rest of the world. Only Jesus can answer that call and will never abandon us in the direst times of human suffering. The reality of this world is that everyone has a natural tendency to not only embrace, but embody un-Christ-like behaviors and attitudes toward others. Why? Because we are human and humanity is consumed with a focus on self. That's why, even within the corporate aspect of many ministry organizations, the true mission of the body of Christ, (called to share God's love, grace and mercy with the world) has been over-shadowed with a cloud of self, or what is commonly referred to as narcissism.

Billy Graham in his book, “The Journey” shared this profound statement regarding the dangers we face in this world. Often times, those dangers surface in the place where we seek sanctuary and respite from a callous and secular world. “Don't underestimate the dangers we face along this journey God has set before us. The devil works in many ways—sometimes openly, more often indirectly. But his goal is always the same; to turn us away from God. If he can distract us, or take us down a side road, or discourage us, or get us to yield to temptation—then he has succeeded.”¹ It is evident that if the devil is working to turn us away from God, one of the first places he's going to raise his ugly head is within the church body. His intent is to cause the sheep to scatter. They're so much easier to pick off one by one when their isolated and trying to make it on their own. What has become a glaring atrocity within many local congregations is a response to the hurting that is best described as “shooting their own wounded.”

The sad reality of the damage caused when a hired hand abandons even one soul from their flock is that the damage goes beyond inflicting emotional damage on someone else. It often results in severe spiritual harm to an individual. In fact, it is best described as abuse and in way too many cases the consequences will last a lifetime. For those who have endured spiritual abuse they know the severe, multi-faceted pain and anguish associated with such neglect. The depravity of the damage caused by spiritual abuse is founded on the reality of personal shame. The shame associated with a church or pastor judging someone else is by far the most damaging aspect of spiritual abuse and it is nearly impossible to overcome. A major part of the destructive nature associated with shame come from the judgement and abandonment of a so-called- representative of God. Shame is compounded by the feeling of rejection anytime an individual feels forced to walk away from a fellowship of believers, It's compounded exponentially when an individual is forcefully evicted from the confines of a congregation through the bias-judgement of a self-righteous leader. Spiritual abuse causes devastating and long-lasting damage.

Shannon Thomas shares profound insight into the damage this can cause in her book, "Healing from Hidden Abuse." "Belonging is at the core of our human experience. We are hardwired to need and want to be included. Everyone desires to know that we have people and that our people have us. It is this exact human necessity abusers exploit for gain. A survivor is isolated (whether in physical or emotional distance) from his or her family of origin will experience profound grieving."ⁱⁱ A church family is no different, then a family of origin. In many cases they will actually progress into a close knit surrogate family, closer than anyone else in most adult relationships.

Ms. Thomas also shares this thought regarding the state of the modern church: "Men and women are being harmed in some churches and ministries. More attention needs to be focused on this area. Not so embarrassment can come to the collective Church, but so healing can happen. Harm in the name of God must be called out for what it is: Spiritual Abuse."ⁱⁱⁱ I could not agree with her more. My experience in numerous churches over a 50 year time frame is all the evidence I need to agree with her wholeheartedly! I have seen first-hand the influence of self within the leadership of the modern church in way too many instances. It is a problem that requires immediate attention. It is an issue that needs divine guidance and correction as the spiritual condition of too many lost souls hang in the balance.

Over the years I have lost custody of numerous churches and even left a few that weren't feeding my desire for a deeper relationship with Christ. When I was exiled out of the presence of a church family many years ago, the grief I experienced was more debilitating than anything I had ever experienced. It was more destructive than the tragedy of divorce. It went well beyond the shame associated with being terminated from any job. It was much more grievous than the death of any loved one. Why? Because it was instigated by a self-serving church representative who wasn't equipped to shepherd the flock of their little assignment. Too often the leader of a church is nothing more than a preacher, not a pastor or a shepherd of the flock. In other words, these types of individuals are nothing more than a hired-hand! When an agent of the church treats any individual with a lack of grace or mercy, it is both a form of spiritual abuse, as well as, a form of psychological abuse. Ms. Thomas shares this thought about those types of abuse found within a church fellowship. "I can share without hesitation, psychological abusers are using God as a flying monkey. They do this by hurling accusations at the survivor about what God would want, what God thinks, and what God says about the survivor's attitude towards the toxic leader. Abusive church leadership must minimize God to a puppet that can be moved around at will, and it smells of blasphemy to me."^{iv}

This is often what happens when an agent of the church deals harshly with anyone who goes to them for spiritual guidance, understanding, mercy or grace. Toxic abuse that comes from a pastor can be deadly. Any unjust, calloused judgement doled out by a spiritual leader can be a curse that will last a lifetime. When a so-called servant of God speaks judgement or condemnation over an individual who has already suffered unspeakable forms of either physical or emotional abuse, the wounds may never heal. It causes a victim to question everything about themselves - personally, emotionally, professionally and even spiritually. Within my own personal experience, when I had a preacher tell me I was too broken because of a divorce to ever serve in ministry again, I was devastated beyond comprehension. He placed a level of shame on me that compounded the trauma and pain already inflicted on me by the rejection and betrayal associated with the divorce. His shameful judgement was nearly unbearable. It was comparable to being forced to wear a big scarlet "D" on your jacket or a yellow Star of David on your concentration camp shirt. His damning words and actions were literally a lethal attack on the very essence of my soul.

Sadly, the greatest emotional trauma I ever endured wasn't caused by the rejection associated with divorce or even the termination from a job. It didn't come from the death of a close

friend or even the loss of my father. In fact, the times that I had friends betray me and even bare false witness against me could never compare to the distress endured at the hands of various pastors of churches where I devoted years of service and commitment. What I discovered through my days of attending, volunteering, and even being on the staff payroll of several churches is that the local church in many instances, has the tendency to compound the damage and expedite an individual's suffering. What one church didn't realize as they collectively chastised me through the darkest moments of my life; is that my brokenness didn't disqualify me from ever serving in the ministry again. Rather, it catapulted my desire and ability to serve the Lord in an even greater and more profound capacity. You see, it was my faith in Jesus that perpetuated my recovery through my brokenness. The experience was used to better equip and qualify me to finally be the servant that I was called to be for future service to my Lord. Through it all I experienced God's unconditional mercy and grace.

Experiencing Jesus' redemptive power I finally understood the healing nature of forgiveness. This actually nurtured and expanded my ability to embrace the gift of empathy, and more importantly, share it with others. Through my devastation, I totally submitted my life to the Creator of Life. My eyes opened to the promise and hope associated with looking up instead of constantly seeking answers from within myself. Because of the most traumatic of times, I learned what God's unconditional love is really all about – "Restoration." I was the recipient of the greatest grace and mercy the world has ever known, and it all came through faith in my Savior, Jesus Christ. He alone restored my soul! He is my Redeemer! It was Jesus, not the church that facilitated my redemption. Finally, after all that I'd endured through the emotional and spiritual abuse from those who intended me harm, I was ready and qualified to share the true love of Christ with others who were hurting and lost. I had finally acquired a deep-seated compassion for those who are broken and suffering. My experience helped me realize what is necessary to answer the call to share the love of Jesus. My redemption helped facilitate a deep seated and intimate understanding to the following verses from Paul's letter to the church in Rome:

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."
Romans 12:9-16 NIV

The sad reality of spiritual neglect that sometimes happens within the confines of the church body is that it can be contributed to an organization that is filled with individuals. Sadly, individuals are tainted by “self.” We all are! But we can’t hide behind that excuse. This scripture in Romans can never be realized when there is a focus on “self.” “Self” is contrary to the true calling of every church assembly, as well as, the individual Christian. Self is an influence which contradicts the very essence of God’s love. Only by the power of God’s grace and mercy purchased through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ will we be able to stand against this wicked, relational wrecking ball of destruction. The destructive force of “self.” It needs to happen both individually, as well as collectively as a church body.

So, there you have it. Have you ever been offended or disgusted with a particular church fellowship or individual preacher? Have you ever suffered any form of spiritual abuse or neglect by someone who had an influence in your life or someone you trusted or admired? If you said yes to either of those questions, then all I have to say is “welcome to the club!” I think all of us have earned a t-shirt for that all-inclusive group. This reminds me of a saying that is credited to W. C. Fields. I’m going to paraphrase it here: “I would never belong to any club that would have me as a member.” If you have never endured anything similar to what’s been described in this article, well, let me just say you better thank God and count your blessings!

Don’t let the human frailty found within the collective church stop you from being fed spiritually. Never let someone else stymie your relationship with the Savior. Start reading the Bible. Pick-up a good devotional. Study God’s Word. Get involved in a small group of Christian believers. Start watching some services on-line or even over your cable connection. Go ahead, step out of your comfort zone and try to find a local church to start attending. Just make sure it’s a true reflection of God’s amazing grace, mercy and love. It might take some time and you might have to visit a handful of churches. But you’ll know when you walk through the door if it’s the one God wants you to start attending and getting involved. There really are churches out there that truly reflect and honor the call of service to the hurting and the lost, while building up the saints into Christ-like maturity.

The greatest lesson I pray you take from this article is the importance for you to stay connected to God and never let a church or an individual interfere with your personal walk and relationship with Jesus Christ. When the wolves start howling at the moon, each of us would have

a tendency to turn tail and run for our own protection. Don't let the wolves chase you off from the flock and make you the main entrée at their banquet table of martyred Christians. We're all far from perfect and the truth of the matter is that all the folks here on earth are nothing more than "hired hands." Jesus is the One Who died for you! Jesus is the only One Who will never abandon you or forsake you! Jesus is the Shepherd. Never trust your life to the hired hand. Jesus is the only One Who is worthy of your complete and total trust!

ⁱ Billy Graham, *The Journey*, (W. Publishing Group, a division of Thomas Nelson, Inc. Nashville, TN 2006) p. 99

ⁱⁱ Thomas, *Healing from Hidden Abuse*, p.33

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.37

^{iv} Thomas, *Healing from Hidden Abuse*, p. 93