

When You Are Ready To Try Again: Going Back to Church

by Jeff VanVonderen

When we were born we had no idea what was in store for us in our physical family. And we had nothing to say about the behaviors, character traits, or priorities of our biological family. None of us could choose what our family would be like.

But what if it weren't impossible? What if we did have a choice? What if, prior to actually becoming part of a family, we were given some choice in the matter and some guidelines that would help us look for a healthy family? We do have this kind of opportunity when it comes to our church family. We do have a choice. And guidelines do exist. The New Testament tells us some of the things we can expect in our spiritual family, among them support from one another, love, and a place to be in process.

Based on those guidelines, here are some questions that I would ask about any family I was considering becoming a member of:

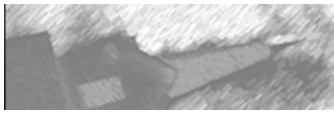
- Do people in this family care about things that really matter?
- Do people in this family respond to people's mistakes with grace and patience?
- Are the people in this family gentle and giving?
- Or are they mean, caring only about themselves?
- Is telling the truth in this family more important than image management?
- Does honesty get sacrificed in the service of maintaining a superficial, false peace?
- After being with this family for a while, do I have a growing dependence on the work of Jesus? Do I revel more and more in his love?
- Or do I feel emotionally and spiritually heavier as time goes on, and less qualified to be a family member?

I hope that you have gained permission to be in a healing process. And I hope you have had a glimpse of what is yours as a son or daughter of a God who loves you and is patient with that process. I now want to give you some practical criteria that will aid you in your search for a church in which and through which you can become a functioning member of the body of Christ.

Avoiding Hurtful Churches

In *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, David Johnson and I identified common characteristics of spiritually abusive systems. When these traits are present they make the relationships in that spiritual family hurtful. I would like to use those characteristics of graceless churches as a starting point from which to venture into a discussion of the characteristics of grace-full churches.

In hurtful churches you find the following seven characteristics:



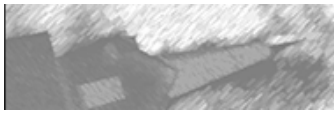
1. Power-posturing. Those in leadership positions spend a lot of time and energy reminding others of their authority. Authority is used to boss and control members of God's family.
2. Performance preoccupation. How people act is more important than what's really going on in their lives. People aren't what is loved and accepted. Behavior is the most important thing.
3. Unspoken rules. How relationships function is governed by rules that aren't said out loud, but in many cases these unspoken rules have more weight than the out-loud rules or even Scripture. The most powerful and damaging of all the unspoken rules is the "can't talk" rule. This rule keeps the truth quiet because the problem itself isn't treated as the problem; talking about it is treated as the problem. People who notice problems and confront them are labeled divisive and disloyal. People shut up and call it unity.
4. Lack of balance. There are disproportionate focuses and values placed on certain areas of the Christian life. For instance, you must agree that certain gifts of the Spirit aren't for today or you're labeled "unstable" or "deceived." In other churches, if you lack certain spiritual gifts or don't exercise the gifts in ways accepted by the group, you are considered a second-class Christian.
5. Spiritual paranoia. There is a sense that people, resources, and relationships outside the system are unsafe.
6. Misplaced loyalty. A sense of loyalty is built toward programs, things, and people, rather than toward Jesus.
7. Secretiveness. Certain information is deemed suitable only for those within the church or only for certain people within the church.

Finding a Grace-full Church

It's unlikely that one church would exhibit all seven of the characteristics I have just mentioned. Conversely, it's likely that even in a healthy church you could find one of these traits, or some inkling of these dynamics from time to time. But wherever even one of these dynamics is present in God's family people are apt to get hurt. And without exception, churches with a "can't talk" rule will be extremely hurtful to their members. In these places problems can't be confronted or resolved because you become "the problem" for talking about the problem. Consequently, the offenders are isolated from accountability, and the ones hurt are isolated from healing. There is no chance for the healing that true unity in Christ brings.

The characteristics of grace-full, healthy churches are the opposite of those I've described in the preceding list. The degree to which the following characteristics are found in a church is the degree to which members of God's family can grow in honest, healthy relationships with one another and God. These dynamics best characterize grace-full churches:

1. Authority and power are used to serve, equip, and empower others.



In Matthew 23, Jesus says that the greater leader is the one who is the servant. This is the distinguishing mark of leaders in the kingdom of God. Likewise, in Ephesians 5 Paul describes the "head" as the person who treats the life of another as more important than his own. The kingdom of God is the only place where you find these definitions. It's as if Jesus and Paul are handing us a dictionary to help us understand what things mean in the kingdom. You can find bloodthirsty CEOs in corporate America. In legalistic religious families you can find tyrannical heads and leaders. In emerging nations you can find despotic leaders who call the shots and punish anyone who disagrees. But not so in the kingdom. People who use their authority to these ends in the kingdom have no authority, at least not from God.

True spiritual authority isn't taken or asserted. It doesn't come because you hold a titled position, receive a degree, or get a salary. It is given by God for the purpose of shepherding God's flock. In grace-full churches, those with authority use it to serve, build, and liberate the members of God's family. They do not use it to manipulate or control.

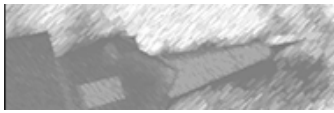
Respect for authority isn't demanded by getting puffed up or loud, or by using God's Word as a sledgehammer. A person who has to spend a lot of time reminding people of his or her authority--and as much energy demanding that people yield to that authority--does so because they have no real authority. True authority is noticed. In Matthew 7 the gospel writer says of the Lord that when he had finished teaching, the crowd was amazed at what he had said. Why? "He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes"¹--that is, those who had the title and who demanded respect for their position but had no authority.

What a rebuke this is to many Christian leaders. I received a letter from some parents in Florida whose children were sexually abused by a man in their church. The pastors (who were also leaders in their church-operated Christian school) used their position to quiet and even drive away anyone who tried to hold this man accountable or to get the children help. After all, if someone needs help for being abused, someone else must be doing the abusing. These leaders were only concerned with protecting their image in the community. They were worried that people would leave and that giving would drop. Besides, the perpetrator was related to a teacher in their school. They weren't willing to risk losing the teacher. Even worse, they demanded respect from these hurting parents for their actions, and used religious rhetoric and Bible verses to pressure and shame them for wanting outside help.

Rather than demanding our respect for their authority, those with true authority, who use it for the reasons God gave it, command our respect with their faith, integrity and consistency. In 1 Peter 5:2-3 Peter tells leaders to "shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted [literally, the inheritance--that's you!] to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."

2. Believers are fighting the "good fight of faith."

Ask yourself whether you're being encouraged to depend more on Jesus to walk more fully in your spiritual inheritance. Or is the message just, "Try harder this coming week to be a good Christian" or, "Do such-and-such in order to live up to the spiritual standard"? These questions



represent my own little test. I have frequent opportunities to visit various churches as I travel, and seldom do I go away from the morning service or Sunday school class or Wednesday evening fellowship without knowing where a church stands on these matters.

Embrace teaching when it encourages you to embrace Jesus. Then you will be around believers participating in the same struggle you are--the fight of faith. Try-hard messages indicate that people fight to live by their own religious self-effort, by worship of the will. This kind of church is a religious version of the world's systems, which also withhold love and acceptance until our behavior measures up. Yes, you may be welcomed with open arms as a visitor, but as a member your walk with God will most likely be wide open for the scrutiny and criticism of all who "know" what your spirituality should look like.

Not one of us is above accountability. But frankly, our relationship with Jesus is too precious to allow it to be dragged through the mud. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 Paul says, "But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord."

We should listen to the exhortations or confrontations of others when they encourage us toward spiritual freedom in Christ. But the only approval we need to be concerned about is God's--and we have that because of Jesus. In fact, even when those who scrutinize our performance are wrong, it is still Jesus' actions toward us that validate us, not our personal innocence.

At this point, I must issue a disclaimer: I'm not saying that obedience isn't important. It is. I'm not saying that right behaviors don't matter. They do. But our "works" must be a result of faith. Holy living flows out of hearts dependent upon God.

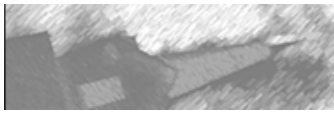
In Colossians 2:6 Paul says, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." You didn't come to God with a list of your accomplishments in order to earn his approval. You came by faith, depending on his power to move you from death into life. Live your life dependent on that same power to conform you to the image of his Son.

In Philippians 3 Paul issues strong warnings to believers to watch out for those who would hold up religious behavior as the means to righteousness. In fact, he calls "enemies of the cross" those who add anything to the cross of Christ as a means to God's acceptance. Why? Because they perpetuate the idea that the cross isn't enough. Beware of them and the churches they attend.

3. Rules are spoken about out loud, and they are biblical.

In a grace-full church, God's rules are important. But God's rules are to serve the ones he loves and to help their lives and relationships work better. He didn't give the rules as a means of earning his approval. He gave his Son so that we may receive his acceptance, and his Son is a gift to us.

Consider these two scenarios. Just after you cross the Highway 70 bridge from Minnesota into Wisconsin, there is a sign that reads: "BUCKLE YOUR SEAT BELTS--IT'S OUR LAW!" In other



words, do it or else! But this can be said in a different way. Because I wasn't raised in a seat belt-conscious era, I often forget to buckle my seat belt. But my daughter Erin is acutely aware of the wisdom in doing that, thanks to driver's education and the media. Every time she gets into the car with me she buckles her own seat belt and then looks over at me and says, "Papa, buckle your seat belt." Both Erin and the State of Wisconsin are right, because I could die if my seat belt isn't buckled at the time of an accident. But Erin's exhortation comes in the context of a relationship. She loves me and has my best interest in mind, so she prescribes a behavior. That's why God gave his rules, and that's the spirit in which we should approach them.

When a rule is broken, it is the behavior that healthy people reject, not the person. Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." While God might hate some of our behaviors, he still accepts us. The rest of Romans 8 is testimony to the fact that nothing and no one can separate us from his love. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our behavior. Legalism condemns the believer and calls God's acceptance into question.

Even in the case of church discipline (1 Corinthians 5) there are two goals in removing a person from the fellowship. The first is to protect the sheep from someone who is unrepentant and is having a negative influence on the flock. The second is to benefit the person and even attempt to bring him back into Christ and into fellowship (see 2 Corinthians 2).

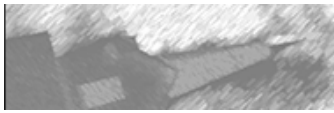
Not only are God's rules there to benefit us and our relationships, but they are based on Scripture and apply equally to everyone. Don't confuse traditions or people's obsessive/compulsive religious habits with scriptural precepts. And if a rule favors a certain person (the spouse of a leader, for example, or people who have been there the longest, or the loudest people in the church business meeting), or if a rule is too silly or rigid to say out loud, it shouldn't be a rule. It is wrong to hold people accountable for rules they didn't know were operating, especially rules that are too goofy to write down and pass around.

4. There is deference to the true Head of the Church, his agenda, and his methods.

People are wounded in churches where more authority or wisdom is ascribed to people just because they have an education or to people who "don't need one" because they get all their teaching right from the Holy Spirit. Or because they exercise certain gifts of the Spirit--or don't, because they are dispensationally "enlightened." Or because they are related to a religious celebrity through whom God is doing mighty works, while others are treated as spiritual third cousins, once removed.

In grace-full churches, gifts of the Spirit are appreciated as gifts. Even religious training is looked at as a gift. And people are gifts to the church from God, placed there just as he sees fit. Everyone needs everyone else, and greater honor is intentionally directed toward those whose actions or positions don't naturally draw honor in their direction (1 Corinthians 12).

Grace-full churches belong to God, not to people. People are simply stewards, table waiters, of the resources God provides, and not owners. I once attended a conference where the speaker posed this question: "Can the true Head of the Church do anything he wants to at your church?" It hit me like a ton of bricks. Because at that time my answer was no. Jesus couldn't change the



agenda for the missions budget. He couldn't have a different opinion from that of the people who started the church. He couldn't show up in any ways that we couldn't control or explain. He couldn't even change the order of service if he wanted to.

Just because we do things in God's name doesn't mean God is doing it or is even in it. To write "Church" on the door or stationery sometimes results in a case of mistaken identity. If we insist on our church being our church, we risk hearing Jesus say, "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (Matthew 23:38). Literally, "I leave to you the house of you." If Jesus has left your church, is that a place you really want to be?

5. Our safety is in Christ, and so diversity is welcomed.

"Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world." Even as an immature, mostly inappropriate, and unregenerate adolescent I used to think, "If we're as right as we think we are, how come we're hiding in this church building? Why is it necessary to avoid everyone?" In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, Paul speaks with clarity to the matter of thinking that our safety is in staying away from people outside our group. Because our safety is in Christ, who lives on the inside, we don't have to avoid those on the outside--which, as Paul reminds us, isn't possible anyway. In Hebrews 13:5-6, we are reminded that Jesus himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," so that we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?" (Ps. 118:6).

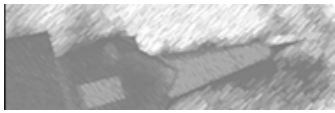
An outgrowth of finding our safety in Christ within us is that we can welcome and associate with a diverse group of believers. I recently spoke with a woman who moved with her husband back into the area where his family lived. They began attending the family's church and initially felt welcome. As time went on, however, they were taught that this church was the only true church. Since this church's baptism was the only one that counted, this couple would need to be rebaptized in order to be accepted into full fellowship. Also, visitors and nonmembers weren't allowed to take communion. They could watch from the balcony.

If a church's so-called safety is in doctrines, traditions, and stepping inside church walls, then you will always be asked to divide from other members of God's family. The reasons can be almost anything. Some churches divide you from others based on whether a day in Genesis was a 24-hour day; whether Jesus is coming back before, during, or after the tribulation; the length of people's hair; whether hymns or choruses are sung; or issues of religious politics too numerous to mention.

If the personal relationship with Christ that made you a member of his body doesn't qualify you for acceptance in a local manifestation of that body, or if you have to go through another spiritual "rinse" cycle in order to be accepted, what would make you want to stay in such a system?

6. Loyalty to Christ and his kingdom takes precedence.

Two statements that Jesus said are pertinent here: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37) and, "No one can serve



two masters" (Matt. 6:24). Pastors, programs, denominations, doctrine--these are all resources from the Source, given to serve us so that we in turn can serve others. While it may be appropriate to affiliate, gravitate, commiserate, congregate, or cooperate, it is never okay to elevate, capitulate to, or be found prostrate before anyone but the Lord. One of the outgrowths of tenacious loyalty to Jesus is unity with other believers. People are brought together when they depend upon their common Source, and they become involved in the common cause of building his kingdom.

7. Honesty and openness are present.

In safe, grace-full churches, honesty matters. Being able to notice and talk about reality matters more than how things look. Finding the truth is more important than being right. Secrets cannot survive in an environment of truth and honesty. In fact, they aren't necessary.

There is a difference between issues that are private and confidential and those that are a secret. There are things that aren't the business of the entire church, such as how you or another person struggles with a certain problem.

While your income isn't any business of the pastor, his or her salary is your business. And the way you conduct that business is through competent, wise, faithful people to whom the financial affairs have been delegated. Neither are the salaries of the church staff a secret--but in my opinion, they should be kept private. There are certainly many church matters that should be kept confidential and not made matters of public discussion. But watch out if what is private is also kept secret from those who legitimately hold responsibility.

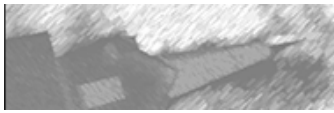
Learning to trust again

I would like to share one more tool you can add to your relationship toolbox. I believe it will be helpful to you as you embark upon or continue in your search for a healthy church. The following lists are from Pat Springle's excellent book *Trusting*, in which he helps us learn who and how to trust again.²

It is foolish to:

- Trust people who consistently wound you
- Believe people who consistently give double messages
- Think that intimidating people have your best interests in mind
- See people as all good or all bad
- Withdraw from all people because some have hurt you
- Try to figure things out by yourself
- Seek advice from foolish people
- Avoid conflict at all costs
- Stir up conflict
- Be too self-disclosing in order to earn others' love or pity

It is wise to:



- Call on God and wise people for help
- Be cautious about trusting people
- Slowly elevate your level of trust in others as they prove their trustworthiness
- Be honest with most people about your feelings and desires
- Withhold your feelings and desires from abusive people
- Be realistic about the growth process of learning to trust perceptively
- Forgive and love, but not necessarily trust, others
- Expect conflict when you are honest
- Learn to communicate clearly and calmly with all kinds of people who mistrust
- Realize that even trustworthy people will sometimes fail you

The writer of Hebrews tells us that it's important to "...forsake not the assembling of ourselves together." This is not about the ritual of going to a certain geographical location with a certain group of people at certain times during the week. This is about relationships that build God's people and spread his kingdom. My goal in this article has been to present some things to remember when looking for a safe church, one that is building the right kingdom.

When the actions and attitudes of God's family members toward one another breach the "family contract" found in the New Testament, people experience the fine print of the Christian life. Believers feel hurt, disappointment, disillusionment, and fear in trying again. Outside the church, the world that so desperately needs to find life in Jesus thinks the church is irrelevant.

When we live consistently with who we are and what we have as his people, those of us in God's family experience what he has promised us. The world then might even respond to the working of Jesus' body the way people responded to the work of Jesus: "They were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this'" (Mark 2:12). Please try again. Though you have suffered and lost, there is a lot to gain--for you, for the lost around you, and for the whole family of God.

1 All scripture quotations in this article are from the New American Standard Bible, (c) The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.

2 Pat Springle, *Trusting* (Highland Books, 1995).