THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES

FINDING CHRIST IN THE LAND OF CHRISTIANS



Faith OVER FACTIONS

faithoverfactions.com

Faith OVER FACTIONS

For everyone who wanders and feels far from home.

For the ones who left when the noise got too loud, and the ones still sitting in the back row wondering if they belong.

For the solo believer, the doubter, the tired, and the ones who feel alone in a crowded church.

You are not lost. You are on your way home.
You are not the only one. This is for you.

About Faith Over Factions

Faith Over Factions is a place for the spiritually homeless: people who still love Jesus but can't find Him in the noise of institutional religion or partisan faith. Everything here is free. No email address, no paywall, no algorithm deciding what you see.

You'll find reflections, portraits of Christians who resisted when it cost them something, devotionals for unsteady days, and a private Faith Journal for the questions you're not ready to say out loud. We don't take sides in the culture war. We take Jesus at His word and try to follow Him with honesty, humility, and a lot of grace for the stumbling.

Pull up a chair. You're welcome here.

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Sources for the quotations and studies in this guide are listed in the Notes at the back.

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THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES

Finding Christ in the Land of Christians

Scripture quotations are from the New Living Translation unless noted.

Part One: Honest Ground

1. For the One Without a Church Home

Maybe you've sat in a church parking lot with the engine running, watched people walk in, and driven home.

Maybe you were part of a congregation for twenty years. It held your friendships, your calendar and the hallway where your kids grew up. Then you asked one question too many, or the leaders did something you couldn't sit quietly through, and you found out how fast a family can turn into strangers. Nobody called after you left. Or they did call, and it was worse.

Maybe nothing dramatic happened at all. The sermons drifted toward politics. The place got bigger and brighter and louder until you felt like an audience. You missed a few Sundays, then a few months, and one day you realized you hadn't been back in two years and nobody had noticed.

You still love Jesus. You can't find him in the building anymore, or you can't make yourself walk in to look.

Spiritually homeless

There may be thirty churches within ten miles of your house. That can make it harder. Every steeple you drive past is a reminder that everyone else seems to have found a place, and you're still looking.

Faith Over Factions uses a phrase for this: *spiritually homeless*. It describes people who still belong to Jesus and can't find a room to sit down in among the people who carry his name. Some are surrounded by Christians and can't find love. Others want Jesus

badly and still flinch at anything with his name on the sign, because the last place that carried it hurt them.

If that's you, you are in a long line. The earliest followers of Jesus called their faith "the Way" (Acts 9:2), a word for a road. The book of Hebrews, written to believers under pressure, says Abraham and his family "agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth" (Hebrews 11:13). Homesickness has been part of faith for a long time.

Two things you've probably been told

People who leave a church, or can't find one, tend to hear one of two messages.

The first comes from inside. *You can't be a real Christian without a church.* Sometimes it arrives with a verse attached, usually Hebrews 10:25: "And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do." It's said with a raised eyebrow, as if the problem were laziness, and as if the speaker had never wondered why you left.

The second comes from the other direction, and sometimes from inside your own head. *You're better off alone. Church is where faith goes to get managed.* It can sound like freedom, especially if you came out of a place that controlled you.

Each message has a little truth in it, which is why each one sticks. Jesus never made a disciple who followed him alone. He also saved his hardest words for religious leaders who loaded people down and walked away: "They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden" (Matthew 23:4). This guide holds both. Fellowship matters, and you are allowed to take your time finding a safe one.

Where the harm grows

It would be easy to write a guide like this as a long complaint against the church. That would be unfair, and it wouldn't help you.

Most congregations are ordinary places full of ordinary people trying to follow Jesus. Many pastors spend a whole lifetime in ministry, and some of them will tell you honestly that they have never seen the kind of harm some readers of this guide have lived through. They aren't lying. Spiritual abuse isn't spread evenly across the church. It

tends to grow in particular kinds of places: where leaders answer to no one, where loyalty to the leader gets treated as loyalty to God, where questions are called rebellion and leaving is called falling away.

If you came out of a place like that, it can be hard to believe a church could be any different. Some are. Elders who can say no to the pastor, a board that sees the books, a way to report harm to someone outside the chain of command: structures like these exist partly to protect people like you. They can't make a church perfect, but they make it much harder for one person to own it.

A church can also be sound and kind and still not fit you. Some people feel hemmed in by a tightly ordered service; others feel lost without one. That's real. It's also different from harm, and this guide will try to help you tell the two apart.

Jesus did not do this

If you were hurt by people who spoke for Jesus, hear this before anything else: what they did was theirs.

Jesus does not manipulate. He does not shame people into line or bill them for his love. The people who hurt you may have used his name, his book and his words, and the damage is real. But the Shepherd himself was never the one holding the stick.

Scripture says where he can be found when the damage is done: "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed" (Psalm 34:18). Close. The verse says where he already is, and he got there first.

If what happened to you was abuse, of any kind, please talk to someone safe outside that system: a counselor, a doctor, or a pastor in another church you trust. Getting that help is one of the ways God cares for his people, and no failure of faith.

Who this is for

This is for the beleaguered. For people who still love Jesus and haven't found a church home, or lost the one they had. For anyone who was hurt by a leader, a system or a congregation, and for anyone who simply drifted out and never found a way back in. For people who are tired of church shopping. For people who are fine on their own, mostly, and miss something they can't quite name.

And it is for people still in church who love someone who isn't, and want to understand.

What lies ahead

Part One: Honest Ground starts with the oldest church fight in the New Testament. Christians in Corinth were splitting into fan clubs within a generation of the resurrection, and Paul's response still applies.

Part Two: When Shepherds Wound names spiritual abuse plainly, with the prophets' own words for leaders who feed themselves. It also takes care to say what abuse is not, so the word keeps its meaning. Then it turns to healing, which is slower than anyone wants and more real than you may expect.

Part Three: The Family Is Bigger Than You Were Told looks at the whole Church, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. It covers why being alone is harder on faith than it looks, where Christians have gathered when the buildings failed them, and how to tell whether a fellowship is safe.

Part Four: Practice gathers habits from across the Church for taking small steps back toward other believers, at your own pace. One of them starts in the back row near the door.

Each chapter ends with three questions. They're offered, not assigned.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Which of the opening pictures comes closest to your story? Write down the name of the church, or the last church, where you felt at home.
2. Which message have you heard more often: "You can't be a Christian without a church," or "You're better off alone"? Where did you hear it?
3. Psalm 34:18 says the LORD is close to the brokenhearted. What would you say to him today if you believed he was already in the room?

2. “Has Christ Been Divided?”

The church in Corinth was only a few years old when the letters started arriving. Paul had planted it himself during a year and a half in the city, and now he was hundreds of miles away in Ephesus. The news was bad. Members of a household that belonged to a woman named Chloe had come to see him, and they told him the church was coming apart (1 Corinthians 1:11).

Paul doesn’t open with a lecture. He opens with a plea:

> *I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 1:10

Then he names what they were doing:

> *Some of you are saying, “I am a follower of Paul.” Others are saying, “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Peter,” or “I follow only Christ.” Has Christ been divided into factions? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not!*
>
> 1 Corinthians 1:12-13

Four teams

Read the list slowly. Paul’s own name is first. He had founded the church, and some of its members were proud to be his. He wanted none of it. “Was I, Paul, crucified for you?”

Apollos was a gifted teacher who came through Corinth after Paul left, and some people clearly preferred him. Peter was the famous one, the friend of Jesus, the rock. Each group had a hero. Each hero gave the group someone to be better than.

Then there’s the fourth group: “I follow only Christ.” It sounds like the right answer. It may even have been sincere. But Paul puts it on the same list as the others, because a slogan about Jesus can become one more team jersey. The people saying it were using

Christ's name the same way the others used Paul's: to mark who was in and who was out.

That last line deserves some honesty from anyone reading a guide like this. When you've been hurt by a church, "I just follow Jesus" can be a clean, true confession. It can also harden into one more way of feeling superior to the people still sitting in pews. Paul didn't let the "only Christ" group off the hook, and he wouldn't let us off it either.

A little later he gives the Corinthians a gardener's picture of how it all actually works: "I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6). The teachers were coworkers. The growth belonged to God.

Forty-five thousand

You may have heard that there are more than 45,000 Christian denominations in the world. The figure is real. It comes from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, a research center that tracks Christianity worldwide, which reported about 45,000 in 2019 and about 47,300 by mid-2023.

It helps to know how they count. The Center measures denominations country by country. The Catholic Church, for example, is present in more than two hundred countries, so in that tally it counts as more than two hundred "denominations." The same goes for other large bodies. The number is a careful measure of how many separately organized church bodies exist, nation by nation. It doesn't mean Christians hold 45,000 different faiths.

Seen that way, the picture looks more like a family tree. There are a few very large branches, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, each with many smaller ones, and a great number of independent churches that belong to no larger body at all. Some of that branching is healthy. Churches in Kenya and Korea worship in their own languages and answer to their own leaders. Some of it is the Corinthian disease, still spreading.

Conscience and pride

Not every split is a sin. Some Christians have believed, in good conscience, that the gospel itself was at stake and they could not stay. Believers in every tradition still disagree about which of those breaks were necessary, and this guide won't try to settle

the old arguments. Sincere people on more than one side have paid for their convictions.

Other splits are harder to defend. In 1844, American Methodists broke apart at their national conference after a fight over a bishop who held slaves, and the southern churches formed their own denomination the next year. Baptists split the same year, 1845, over whether a slaveholder could be appointed as a missionary. Presbyterians split north and south too, and the last of those breaks came when the Civil War began. In those cases the church drew its lines where the nation's sin was drawn, and those lines lasted far longer than the war.

Most church splits are smaller and quieter: a fight over a building, a pastor who wouldn't share power, a family feud that took half the congregation across town. If you've lived through one, you know how it feels when people who prayed together stop speaking in the grocery store.

Committed to oblivion

The oldest great split runs between East and West. In 1054, representatives of the pope in Rome and the patriarch in Constantinople excommunicated each other. The break had been growing for centuries and took centuries more to harden, and historians argue over how much that single year changed. But the excommunications stood for more than nine hundred years.

On December 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I issued a joint declaration. They said they regretted those sentences of excommunication and removed them "from memory and from the midst of the Church." They committed them, in the declaration's word, "to oblivion."

That didn't end the division. Catholic and Orthodox Christians still don't share Communion. But two church leaders, speaking for hundreds of millions of believers, decided that a curse their predecessors had spoken would not have the last word. It took nine centuries, and it still counts.

A grief worth feeling

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for everyone who would ever believe in him, and he asked "that they will all be one," so that "the world will believe you sent me" (John 17:21). He tied the world's ability to see him to his people's ability to love one another. (*Citizens of Another Kingdom*, another guide in this series, looks at what that prayer means when churches split along party lines.)

If the divisions among Christians grieve you, that grief may be the closest thing you have to the prayer Jesus prayed. You can carry it to him honestly. You don't have to fix the whole church to do it, and you don't have to pretend it doesn't hurt.

Paul never told the Corinthians their fights were fine. He also never told them to leave. He wrote them two long letters, and probably more, and he kept calling them "dear brothers and sisters" while he did.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Paul's list included "I follow only Christ." Is there a slogan you've used, out loud or in your head, to feel better than other Christians? Write it down.
2. Have you lived through a church split, large or small? What did it cost you, and whom did you lose?
3. Name one Christian tradition you know little about. What is one thing you could learn about it this month?

Part Two: When Shepherds Wound

3. Shepherds Who Fed Themselves

In the ancient world, kings were called shepherds. It was a flattering title and a heavy one. A shepherd's whole job was the flock: finding grass and water, carrying the lame, standing between the sheep and whatever wanted to eat them.

The prophet Ezekiel lived in exile in Babylon, after Israel's leaders had led the nation into ruin. In chapter 34 of his book, God tells him to prophesy against those leaders, and the charge is blunt: "What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep?" (Ezekiel 34:2).

Feed yourselves instead of your flocks. That is the oldest temptation of leadership, and it hasn't aged a day. The flock becomes the meal. The people who were supposed to be cared for become the ones who provide: money, labor, applause, loyalty, a platform.

Then God gets specific:

> *You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty.*
>
> Ezekiel 34:4

Read the list again and notice who is on it. The weak, the sick, the injured and the ones who wandered off. Those are exactly the people a self-serving leader finds inconvenient. They cost more than they give, and they slow everything down with their questions. And Ezekiel says the failure didn't stop at neglect. The shepherds ruled them "with harshness and cruelty."

God doesn't answer by firing the flock. He answers by stepping in himself: "I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD" (Ezekiel 34:15). The next verse could serve as a description of everyone reading this chapter: "I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak" (Ezekiel 34:16).

Diotrephes, who loves to be the leader

Controlling leaders showed up in the church early. One of the shortest books in the Bible, the letter we call 3 John, names one.

The writer, who calls himself "the elder," tells his friend Gaius about a man in a congregation he knew: "I wrote to the church about this, but Diotrephes, who loves to be the leader, refuses to have anything to do with us" (3 John 1:9). Then he lists what Diotrephes was doing: making "evil accusations" against the elder, refusing to welcome the traveling teachers, and telling others not to help them. "And when they do help, he puts them out of the church" (3 John 1:10).

The pattern is familiar to anyone who has been inside a controlling church. Diotrephes kept outside voices out. He spread accusations about people who might challenge him. And he punished members who showed kindness to the wrong people by cutting them off from the community.

Notice how the elder responds. He doesn't shrug it off as a personality conflict, and he doesn't tell Gaius to submit quietly. He says he will bring it into the open: "When I come, I will report some of the things he is doing." The Bible itself names a church leader who abused his position. It names him in writing, and it uses his real name.

Three marks

"Spiritual abuse" is a newer phrase, and people use it loosely. Faith Over Factions uses a working definition: spiritual abuse is the use of religious authority, teaching or community to control, coerce or diminish a person for the benefit of a leader or an institution.

Three marks set it apart from ordinary church trouble. It is *patterned*: a way the place runs, as opposed to one bad day or one bad decision. It is *protected by the structure* instead of corrected by it. And it is done *in God's name*, so that pushing back feels like pushing back against God himself. The British researcher Lisa Oakley, who has studied the subject for many years, describes it in similar terms, as "a systematic pattern of controlling and coercive behaviour in a religious context."

How it hides

Spiritual abuse rarely announces itself. It tends to work through control, and it helps to notice what it is trying to control.

Behavior. Faith becomes a checklist, with the leaders' own rules stacked on top of God's. Leaders become untouchable, so questions get called insubordination and concerns get called gossip. Members are discouraged from reading outside sources, seeing a counselor or keeping friendships beyond the group. People who question or leave are cut off, quietly smeared, or prayed about from the platform, the way Diotrephes put people out of the church.

Truth. Verses are pulled out of context to justify control. Someone says "God told me" in order to override your judgment about your own life. You raise a concern, and somehow you become the problem: the facts get rearranged and your motives get questioned. Fear of hell, curses or God's punishment is used to steer behavior that kindness never asked for.

Identity. Shame stops describing what you did and starts defining who you are. Acceptance depends on performance, so you're praised when you serve and give, and invisible when you don't. Over time, the pressure builds so slowly that you stop trusting your own judgment. Each moment seems small. The result is a person who no longer knows what they think without permission.

Resources. Your blessing is said to depend on your giving, especially giving to the leader. Service is measured in hours and visibility, and rest gets treated as backsliding. And when credible harm comes to light, the reflex is to protect the institution. Victims are told to keep it in-house, discouraged from going to the authorities, or asked to sign agreements that buy their silence.

Every church on earth will brush against one or two of these in a bad season. The difference is what happens next: whether the structure corrects it or protects it.

In 2017, Oakley and Justin Humphreys surveyed 1,591 Christians in the United Kingdom about spiritual abuse. Just over a thousand of them, about 63 percent, said they had experienced it. The things they described most often were coercion and control, pressure and manipulation, the misuse of Scripture, and leaders who claimed a "divine" reason for their behavior. The limits matter. To take part, respondents had to have heard

the term already, the answers were self-reported and unverified, and nearly seven in ten respondents were women. The survey can't tell us how common spiritual abuse is across all churches. It does show what the pattern looks like from the inside.

"Do not touch my chosen people"

If you have ever raised a concern about a leader, someone may have answered with an old line in King James English: "Touch not mine anointed." It comes from 1 Chronicles 16:22 and Psalm 105:15. The NLT translates it this way: "Do not touch my chosen people, and do not hurt my prophets."

The translation gives the game away. Both passages are songs about the early days of Israel, when Abraham's family was a small band of wanderers moving among foreign nations. God protected them, and he warned the kings of those nations to keep their hands off. The "anointed" in the song are the vulnerable wanderers. The warning is addressed to the powerful. Read in context, the verse protects the very kind of people it is now used to silence.

Scripture doesn't shield leaders from scrutiny. Paul wrote about the most famous apostle of all, "when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong" (Galatians 2:11). Paul's instructions to Timothy protect elders from careless accusations, "Do not listen to an accusation against an elder unless it is confirmed by two or three witnesses," and they hold elders accountable in the next breath: "Those who sin should be reprimanded in front of the whole church" (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Both halves are there, protection from gossip and accountability for sin.

The thief and the shepherd

Jesus put the difference between a true shepherd and a false one in two sentences: "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life" (John 10:10).

Then he said who he was: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

That gives you a question you can ask about any leader, including the ones you loved. Over the years, who got fed? Did the people under this person's care grow freer and stronger, or did they grow smaller while the leader grew larger? Shepherds lay down

their lives for the sheep. Thieves take whatever the sheep have, and some of them preach beautifully while they do it.

A.W. Tozer, the twentieth-century pastor and writer, put it bluntly:

> *Religious acts done out of low motives are twice evil, evil in themselves and evil because they are done in the name of God. This is equivalent to sinning in the name of the sinless One, lying in the name of the One who cannot lie and hating in the name of the One whose nature is love.*
>
> A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*

Paul gave the opposite test in one line: "For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). If a place leaves people steadily smaller, quieter and more afraid, it is fair to ask whose spirit is running it.

If this chapter describes something you lived through, you don't have to sort it all out alone. A counselor who understands religious trauma, or a pastor from another church you trust, can help you name what happened. Getting that help is one of the ways God cares for his people, and no failure of faith. And if what happened involved sexual abuse, assault or harm to a child, it is a crime. It belongs with the police, not only with church leaders.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Ezekiel lists the weak, the sick, the injured and the lost. Which of those words describes how you were treated, or how you feel now?
2. Think of a leader you trusted. Using Jesus' question from John 10, who got fed? Write one honest sentence.
3. Look at the four kinds of control in this chapter: behavior, truth, identity and resources. Which one did you meet most often? Write down one specific moment.

4. What Abuse Is Not

A word like *abuse* only helps people if it keeps its meaning. If everything uncomfortable counts, then nothing does, and the people who are genuinely being crushed lose the only word they had.

This chapter is about being fair. Fair to yourself, so you can name what happened without second-guessing it forever. And fair to the many pastors and congregations who are doing this well, some of whom have spent a lifetime in ministry without seeing what you saw.

Church hurt and spiritual abuse

Church hurt is a wide term. It covers any wound you received in a church: gossip, cliques, a careless sermon, a friendship that ended badly, a pastor who never learned your name. Those wounds are real, and some of them cut deep.

Spiritual abuse is narrower and more serious. It involves a difference in power, a pattern that repeats, and spiritual authority used as the instrument of harm. All spiritual abuse is church hurt. Most church hurt is not spiritual abuse.

Both deserve care, and both can be good reasons to look for another church. But they call for different responses. Church hurt usually calls for honesty, forgiveness and sometimes a fresh start somewhere else. Spiritual abuse may call for all of that, plus outside help, and sometimes a warning to others.

Conviction and condemnation

The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, and conviction is uncomfortable. Some readers who were raised under control have learned to flinch at any discomfort at all. It helps to know the difference.

Conviction is specific. It names a particular thing, it is hopeful, and it points toward repair. Condemnation is vague and global. It says you are the problem and always will be, and it closes every door. Paul wrote, “So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). There is still conviction. There is no condemnation.

One more test: conviction sends you toward God. Manipulation sends you toward a leader, and leaves you dependent on the person delivering it.

Discipline done rightly

Scripture does describe church discipline, and done rightly, it isn't abuse. Jesus laid out the pattern: "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back" (Matthew 18:15). Only after that come witnesses, and only after that, the church.

Notice the order and the goal. It starts in private, it is patient, and its aim is to win someone back. And as 1 Timothy 5 shows, it applies to leaders as readily as to anyone else.

Discipline that starts in public, skips the private step, falls hardest on people with no power and exempts the people with the most has left the pattern it claims to follow.

Hard words

Some sermons should unsettle you. The prophets were not gentle, and Jesus said things that sent people home angry. A message that stings isn't abusive for stinging.

The question is where it lands. Does the hard word call everyone in the room to the same standard, including the person holding the microphone? Or does it only ever point outward and downward?

A leader who fails

Every pastor will wound someone eventually. Leaders get tired, say careless things and make bad calls. A leader can be wrong, tactless or simply a poor fit for you without being abusive. (Chapter 9 comes back to the difference between harm and fit.)

What marks a healthy leader is what happens after the failure: acknowledgment without spin, repair without conditions, and a willingness to answer to people who can actually say no. Jesus gave his disciples that standard right after two of them asked for the best seats in his kingdom:

> *You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.*
>
> Mark 10:42-45

Peter, who heard that speech, later passed it on to church elders: "Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example" (1 Peter 5:3). Many leaders live this out, imperfectly and honestly, for decades.

When a good church does harm

Here is the hardest version to see. A church can run a food pantry, preach sound doctrine and love people sincerely, and still protect a leader who harms people, or run on shame in ways nobody has ever named. Good fruit in one area doesn't cancel harm in another.

So the most useful question isn't whether a church does good things. Most do. The question is what happens when someone raises a concern.

Abused, or just bitter?

Many people who leave a harmful church spend years asking themselves this. The question deserves a gentle note: controlling systems tend to train people to ask it, because self-doubt keeps them quiet.

One honest test is to describe what happened, in plain and factual terms, to someone outside the group who has no stake in the outcome. If the pattern is real, it will usually be visible to them without your interpretation attached. If you can't think of anyone like

that, a counselor who understands religious trauma is a good place to start. And if some bitterness has crept in alongside a real wound, that doesn't erase the wound. Both can be true at once.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Think of a painful church experience. Using this chapter, was it church hurt, spiritual abuse, or some of each? Write one honest sentence.
2. Recall a time you felt convicted and a time you felt condemned. How did each one feel in your body, and where did each one send you?
3. Who is one person outside your old church who could hear your story in plain facts? Write their name.

5. Wounds That Remain

A week after the resurrection, the disciples were together behind a locked door, and this time Thomas was with them. He had missed the first appearance and refused to believe it without seeing the wounds for himself. Jesus came, stood among them, and turned straight to him:

> *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"*
>
> John 20:27

The risen Jesus still had his wounds. His body had passed through death and come out the other side, and the marks of the nails were still in his hands. They were real enough to touch. Whatever resurrection did to him, it didn't erase what had been done to him.

That matters for anyone who has been hurt in a church. Healing may not mean the marks disappear. It may mean they stop bleeding, and someday become part of how you recognize the One who carries them too.

Bandages take time

Psalm 147 describes God this way: "He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

Bandaging is slow work. You clean the wound, you wrap it, and you come back the next day and do it again. Nobody bandages a wound and runs. The verse pictures a God who stays.

People who leave hurtful churches often hear advice that skips all of that. *Just forgive and move on. It's been three years.* Some of it is kindly meant. But wounds of this kind don't keep a calendar.

What recovery actually looks like

Recognizing what happened to you can take an afternoon. Recovering takes much longer, and it helps to know ahead of time that the strange parts are normal.

Expect grief along with the relief. You may have lost more than a church. Your friendships, your calendar, your role, your sense of purpose, the people who would have shown up if you got sick. Leaving can be an act of survival and a bereavement at the same time.

Expect anger to arrive late. Many people feel numb for months, then find themselves furious about something small a year later. That delay is common. It isn't backsliding. If the anger settles in and hardens, that's worth bringing to God and to someone you trust before it becomes bitterness.

Expect some of the machinery of faith to go quiet. Worship music may become unbearable. Prayer may feel like talking to the person who hurt you. Certain verses may tighten your chest. Your body is noticing that these things were used against you. With distance and time, most of them come back, and often they come back cleaner.

Expect trust to return unevenly. You may trust someone too fast and then pull away from everyone. You may visit a church and leave during the second song. You will probably find one safe person before you find a community. That is the ordinary shape of it.

Expect years. Nobody gets to hand you a schedule. If you are still working through something that happened a decade ago, you aren't behind. Healing tends to circle back on itself: a good stretch, then an old fear, then a little more ground than before.

Tears in a bottle

One of the tenderest lines in the Psalms comes from a psalm whose heading ties it to a frightening time in David's life, "the time the Philistines seized him in Gath." In the middle of it, he says to God:

> *You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.*
>
> Psalm 56:8

Nothing in that verse tells David to stop crying. God keeps the tears. He even writes them down.

If you have cried in a church parking lot, or over a group text you were dropped from, or at three in the morning over people you used to sit beside, none of it was wasted and none of it went unseen. God may be the only one who knows how much there was. He has the bottle.

The Shepherd and the shepherds

One of the hardest parts of healing from spiritual harm is untangling God's voice from the voice of the person who hurt you. For years they spoke for him, and some of their words are still in your head. When you pray, you may hear your old pastor answering.

Untangling the two takes time. It helps to go back to the source and read one of the Gospels slowly, as if for the first time. Watch how Jesus actually treats people: the woman at the well, the man by the pool, the children the disciples tried to shoo away, the thief on the cross. When a thought about God makes Jesus sound like your old leader on his worst day, check it against Jesus on any day in the Gospels.

You may find that some of what you were taught was true, and some of it was someone else's fear dressed up as God's word. Keep what is true. You're allowed to set the rest down.

Forgiveness and the door

Sooner or later, someone will tell you that you need to forgive. They may be right. Jesus does call his people to forgive. But the word has often been used to push the wounded back into the room with the person who wounded them, and that is a misuse.

Paul wrote to the Romans, "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). *All that you can.* The phrase admits that peace doesn't depend only on you. The next verse hands the hardest part to God: "Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God" (Romans 12:19).

Paul lived this out. Near the end of his life, writing to Timothy, he said: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm, but the Lord will judge him for what he has done." And then: "Be careful of him, for he fought against everything we said" (2 Timothy 4:14-15). In two sentences Paul names the harm honestly, hands the judgment to God, and warns a friend to stay clear. He forgave in the sense that mattered most, by refusing revenge, and he still put up a fence.

Forgiveness can be slow, and it can start with nothing more than a prayer to be willing. It doesn't require you to trust someone who hasn't changed, to pretend it didn't happen, or to go back. Reconciliation is a beautiful thing, and it needs two people: one who repents and one who is safe.

Leaving is allowed

Some readers carry a quiet fear that leaving was itself a sin. Scripture does call believers to keep meeting together (Hebrews 10:25, which Chapter 8 looks at closely). It never commands loyalty to a particular institution no matter what that institution does. Paul told the Romans to "watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them" (Romans 16:17). And he told the Galatians, who were being pressed back under rules they had been freed from, "So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free" (Galatians 5:1).

Leaving a harmful church can be the first honest step back toward the body of Christ.

The one who goes looking

Jesus told a story about a shepherd with a hundred sheep who lost one. "Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders" (Luke 15:4-5).

In the story, the sheep does nothing at all. It doesn't find its own way back, clean itself up or prove it deserves the trip home. The shepherd does the searching and the carrying, and he's glad to.

If shepherds hurt you, the Shepherd is still out looking. He isn't in a hurry, and he isn't angry that you wandered off from a pen that wasn't safe.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Jesus kept his scars. Which part of recovery in this chapter sounds most like where you are right now: grief, late anger, quiet faith, uneven trust, or the long years? Write down how long it has actually been.
2. When you pray, whose voice do you sometimes hear answering? This week, read one chapter of a Gospel and write down one thing Jesus does there that the voice never would.
3. Paul forgave Alexander and still warned Timothy about him. Is there someone you need to forgive without going back? What fence might you need?

Part Three: The Family Is Bigger Than You Were Told

6. The Hall and the Rooms

During the Second World War, the BBC asked an Oxford literature teacher named C.S. Lewis to give a series of radio talks on the Christian faith. Lewis was an Anglican, and he decided to leave his own church's distinctives out and talk only about what Christians across the traditions held in common. The talks became a book, *Mere Christianity*, published in 1952.

In the preface, Lewis worried that readers would take "mere Christianity" as a new option, a way to be a Christian without belonging to any church in particular. So he offered a picture:

> *It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. … But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.*
>
> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

A place to wait in

People sometimes quote Lewis as if the hall were the point: stand in the middle, belong to Christ, skip the rooms. He meant something gentler and harder than that.

The gentle part first. The hall is a real place, and Lewis expected people to spend time there. Some wait a long while before a door opens, and he had nothing to say against them. If you are in the hall right now, after a bad room or between rooms or before your first one, you're where Lewis expected some people to be. There is no shame in waiting.

Now the harder part. Lewis believed the fires and chairs and meals are in the rooms. Warmth, rest and food happen in a particular place, with particular people, sharing a table. The hall keeps you dry, but it won't feed you for long.

He also gave advice for choosing a door. Keep praying for light, he said, and "above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and paneling." Then he added a word for anyone who finds a room:

> *When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.*
>
> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

In essentials, unity

You may have seen the motto "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." It's often credited to Augustine. It actually comes from a Lutheran pastor and theologian named Peter Meiderlin, writing under the name Rupertus Meldenius in 1626, in the middle of the Thirty Years' War, which set Christian armies against each other across Germany. The famous wording grew out of a longer sentence in his plea for peace among the churches.

The hard part is deciding what counts as essential. Christians have argued about that for a long time, and they still do. But the church faced the question very early, and how it handled it is worth seeing.

In Acts 15, believers were fighting over whether Gentile converts had to keep the law of Moses, including circumcision. It was a real doctrinal dispute, and the leaders took it seriously. They met in Jerusalem, argued it out, listened to Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and searched the Scriptures. Then James gave the decision: "And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19). They wrote a short letter with a few requests, and sent people to deliver it in person.

Doctrine mattered enough to hold a council. Gatekeeping didn't win.

Paul later gave the church in Rome similar advice about the smaller disagreements that divided them, such as what to eat and which days to keep holy: "Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong" (Romans 14:1). He assumed believers would disagree. He just didn't think every disagreement was worth a wall.

Wherever Jesus is

Around the year 110, a bishop named Ignatius of Antioch was taken across Asia Minor under guard, on his way to execution in Rome. Along the way he wrote letters to several churches. In one, to the Christians of Smyrna, he wrote a sentence that is often quoted without its first half:

> *Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal Church.*
>
> Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans* 8

The word translated "universal" is *katholikē*, catholic. This is the earliest known use of the phrase "the catholic Church," and in Ignatius's mouth it meant the whole Church, everywhere, gathered around Christ.

Honesty requires reading the whole sentence. Ignatius was urging Christians to stay close to their bishop and not split off into private groups. He would not have blessed "just me and Jesus." But he also located the Church's center exactly where it belongs: where Jesus is, there is the Church. Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians all claim that sentence, and all of them are right to.

The family of God is much bigger than the one room you were raised in, or the one that hurt you. There are rooms where people chant ancient prayers by candlelight, and rooms where people sing in a rented school gym. There are rooms that sit in silence until someone is moved to speak. The same Jesus is in all of them. You may find him in a room you were once taught to distrust.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Where are you right now: in a room, in the hall, or standing outside the house altogether? Write one sentence about how you got there.
2. Lewis says to choose a door by asking which is true, not by its paint and paneling. What has mattered most to you so far when you choose a church?
3. Name one Christian tradition you were taught to distrust. What would it take for you to visit it once, just to listen?

7. Not Good to Be Alone

In the first chapter of Genesis, God looks at what he has made and calls it good, again and again. Light, sea, land, plants, animals: good. Then in chapter 2, for the first time, something isn't.

> *Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."*
>
> Genesis 2:18

Notice when this comes. Nothing has gone wrong yet: no serpent, no fruit and no shame. The man is living in a perfect garden in perfect fellowship with God, and God himself says something is missing. Being alone was the first "not good" in the Bible, and it showed up before sin did.

That means loneliness is a sign you were made for other people, and no character flaw or lack of faith. The ache you feel on Sunday mornings is part of your design working the way it should.

"I am the only one left"

The prophet Elijah once ran for his life into the wilderness after Queen Jezebel swore to kill him. He ended up at Mount Sinai, alone in a cave, and when God asked what he was doing there, Elijah poured it out:

> *I have zealously served the LORD God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.*
>
> 1 Kings 19:14

God didn't scold him. He gave him work to do and a companion to train, and then he corrected the one thing Elijah had wrong: "Yet I will preserve 7,000 others in Israel who have never bowed down to Baal or kissed him!" (1 Kings 19:18).

Elijah was exhausted and frightened, and he was sure he was alone. He was wrong by seven thousand.

Many spiritually homeless believers feel the way Elijah did. Everyone else seems to have gone along with whatever drove you out, and you're the last one who sees it. It may help to know how many others are out there. Chapter 8 looks at some recent research on Americans who used to go to church and no longer do. There are millions of them, and plenty of them still love Jesus.

The lie of self-sufficiency

Our culture prizes doing it alone. *Be strong. Push through. Don't need anybody.* People who have been hurt by a church often add a vow of their own: *never again.* It makes sense. If the last people you trusted with your soul mishandled it, keeping it to yourself feels like the safe choice.

For a season, it may be. Stepping back to heal is wise, and nobody should rush you. But self-sufficiency has costs of its own, and they build up quietly. Without anyone else around, you rehearse your doubts and hear nobody answer them. You read God's silence as rejection because nobody is near enough to tell you otherwise. And you carry loads that were never meant for one back.

The wisdom writer in Ecclesiastes saw it plainly:

> *Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. … A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*
>
> Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12

Four friends and a roof

Mark tells a story about a crowded house in Capernaum where Jesus was teaching. Then "four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat." They couldn't get through the door, so they climbed up, "dug a hole through the roof above his head," and lowered their friend down in front of Jesus. Then comes this sentence: "Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, 'My child, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:3-5).

Their faith. The man on the mat doesn't say a word in the story before Jesus speaks to him. He couldn't walk in on his own, and he didn't have to. His friends carried him, made a scene, damaged someone's roof, and Jesus honored their faith on his behalf.

There may be seasons when you can't walk into a church on your own, or pray, or believe much of anything. Those may be the seasons to let someone carry a corner of your mat.

Christ in the word of a brother

In the 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer ran a small, illegal seminary for German pastors who refused to bow to the Nazi-controlled church. The Gestapo closed it in 1937. Afterward he wrote down what he had learned about Christians living together, in a short book called *Life Together*. One passage explains why even the most faithful believer needs other believers:

> *Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged … The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother.*
>
> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Bonhoeffer had something simpler than attendance in mind. When one believer says to another, "God has not forgotten you," the words land in a way they can't when you say them to yourself.

What the research says

Science has noticed the cost of being alone, too. In 2010, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith and Bradley Layton combined the results of 148 studies covering about 308,000 people who were followed for an average of seven and a half years. People with stronger social relationships had about a 50 percent greater likelihood of surviving over the course of the studies than people with weaker ones. The authors compared the size of the effect to well-known risks like smoking.

Those studies were observational. They can show that connection and longer life go together, but they can't prove one causes the other, and they measured every kind of social tie, not church. In 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, issued an

advisory on what he called an epidemic of loneliness, noting that about half of American adults report experiencing it.

None of that means you should go back to a place that harmed you. It means the ache is real, it is common, and it is worth taking seriously.

Psalm 68 makes a promise in one line: “God places the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6). The family he places you in may not look like the one you lost. It may be two friends at a kitchen table, or a small congregation you would never have picked. It is still his doing.

If loneliness has slid into something darker, where getting up is hard and hope is thin, please talk to a doctor or a counselor. That is one of the ways God cares for his people, and no failure of faith. If you are thinking about ending your life, call or text 988 in the United States, or reach the crisis line where you live, today.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Genesis calls being alone “not good” before anything had gone wrong. Does that change how you think about your own loneliness? How?
2. Elijah was sure he was the only one left. Who might be one of your seven thousand? Write a name, even if you haven’t spoken in years.
3. Who has carried a corner of your mat? Who might need you to carry a corner of theirs this week?

8. Where Two or Three Gather

Few verses are quoted as often at small prayer meetings as this one: “For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

It’s usually read as a comfort for a low turnout. That reading isn’t wrong, but the verse’s setting makes it richer. It comes at the end of a passage about what to do when another believer sins against you (Matthew 18:15-20): go to them privately, then bring one or two others, then involve the church. Jesus promises his presence right in the middle of a conflict being worked out among a few people who are trying to do it his way.

That is good news for anyone who has been hurt in a church. Jesus doesn’t wait for a large crowd or a perfect gathering. He shows up among two or three ordinary people who are trying to love each other through something hard.

Churches in living rooms

The first Christians didn’t have church buildings. In Jerusalem they gathered at the Temple, and they also “met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity” (Acts 2:46). As the faith spread, congregations met wherever someone had room.

Paul’s letters are full of these house churches. In Rome he greeted Priscilla and Aquila, a couple who had risked their lives for him, and added, “Also give my greetings to the church that meets in their home” (Romans 16:5). He sent greetings to Nympha “and the church that meets in her house” in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15). His letter to Philemon is addressed partly to “the church that meets in your house” (Philemon 1:2). For roughly the first three centuries, most Christians met in homes and other borrowed spaces.

None of this means buildings are bad or that house churches are purer. Many of the safest, kindest congregations in the world meet in buildings with steeples. It does mean that the Church has never depended on a particular kind of room. When the buildings fail you, the Church hasn’t gone anywhere.

Reading Hebrews 10:25 honestly

Chapter 1 mentioned the verse that often gets thrown at people who stop attending. Here it is in full, with the verse before it:

> *Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.*
>
> Hebrews 10:24-25

A few verses later, the writer reminds these readers what they had already been through: “Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things” (Hebrews 10:33). They were believers under pressure, and some of them were drifting away from the gatherings because staying had become costly.

Read that way, the passage is about encouragement. The reason to meet is to “motivate one another to acts of love and good works” and to “encourage one another.” Nothing in it is about filling seats, keeping up attendance numbers or proving loyalty to a pastor. A church that uses this verse to shame wounded people has turned it upside down.

And still, the writer does say it: don’t neglect meeting together. The encouragement he has in mind happens face to face, among people who know each other’s names. A guide like this one can help, and so can a podcast or a website, but none of them can encourage you the way a person sitting across from you can. The verse won’t let anyone off the hook, the shamers or the hermits.

Many shapes of fellowship

If walking into a church building isn’t possible for you yet, fellowship can still take other shapes.

A small group in a home. A few believers around a kitchen table, praying, reading Scripture and sharing a meal, is a very old way of being the Church. It can be safer and more honest than a large crowd. It also needs some of the same safeguards: shared leadership, openness and a way to raise concerns.

One friend. Fellowship can start with one relationship. A believer you trust, met with regularly, can carry a great deal of what a congregation carries.

Online. For people recovering from spiritual harm, or living where healthy churches are scarce, online community can be a real lifeline. It has limits. Nobody online can bring you soup when you're sick or sit with you in a hospital. Think of it as a bridge more than a home.

Serving together. Some people find their way back to fellowship sideways, by working next to other Christians at a food pantry, a shelter or a disaster cleanup. Trust grows slowly when you're carrying boxes together.

You are not the only one

In 2023, Jim Davis and Michael Graham, two former pastors, published *The Great Dechurching*, built on survey research with the political scientists Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe. They defined "dechurched" as people who used to attend church at least monthly and now attend less than once a year. In their first survey, of 1,043 Americans, about 15 percent of adults fit that description, which the authors estimate at roughly 40 million people. A second survey of 4,099 dechurched Americans asked why they left.

Some of the answers were painful. One group the authors call "casualties" left because of conflict or harm. But the most common reasons across the whole group were ordinary ones: people moved, their schedules changed, they didn't feel much love, or they didn't fit in. The authors concluded that the story is more complicated, and often more mundane, than scandal alone.

The usual limits apply. It is one set of surveys, in one country, relying on people's own accounts, and the groupings come from statistical clustering. But it points to something hopeful. A great many people drifted out of church for reasons that a single phone call, a meal or an invitation might still reach.

You may be one of them. You may also be the one who makes the call.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Matthew 18:20 comes in the middle of instructions about conflict. Is there a conflict with another believer you have never been able to work out? What would one small step look like?
2. Which shape of fellowship seems most possible for you right now: a small group, one friend, online, or serving alongside others?
3. Think of one person who drifted out of church the way many people do. When could you reach out to them this week? Write down the day.

9. Signs of a Safe Fellowship

Nobody finds a perfect church. Perfect churches are made of people, and the people keep getting in the way. If you're waiting for a congregation with no flaws, you'll wait in the hall forever.

What you can look for is a *safe* fellowship, where Christ is at the center and the people in charge can be questioned. Another guide in this series, *Finding Discernment in the Age of Noise*, looks at how to test what you hear. This chapter is about testing a community.

Respect and tender care

Near the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul gives a short set of instructions about life together:

> *Dear brothers and sisters, honor those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and give you spiritual guidance. Show them great respect and wholehearted love because of their work. And live peacefully with each other. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone.*
>
> 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14

Both halves matter. Paul expects real respect for leaders who work hard, and anyone who has been hurt by a leader may find that part difficult to read. But the respect is tied to their work, the work of guiding and caring. And in the same breath Paul tells the whole church to encourage the timid, take tender care of the weak and be patient with everyone. A healthy church does both: it honors its leaders, and it handles its most fragile people gently.

A few verses later he adds: "test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). You are allowed to test a church, too.

What safe looks like

No list can capture everything, but these are some of the things that tend to mark a safe fellowship.

The leaders can be questioned. You can ask about a decision, a teaching or the budget and get a straight answer, without being treated as a troublemaker. Leaders answer to someone besides themselves: elders, a board, a denomination or some outside body that can step in.

Jesus is the center. The preaching keeps coming back to Christ, his life, death and resurrection, more than to the pastor, the church's growth or a political cause.

The money is visible. More than one person can see where it goes, and nobody is pressured to give.

Harm gets reported. The church has written policies for protecting children and vulnerable adults, and it tells people they can go to the authorities. When something goes wrong, the leaders bring it into the light instead of managing it quietly.

You can say no. You can decline to volunteer, skip a meeting or take a season off without being guilted or watched.

People who leave are spoken of kindly. Listen to how a church talks about those who have moved on. If former members are described as bitter, rebellious or deceived, pay attention.

Doctrine is a floor. The church teaches clearly, and it treats sound teaching as ground to stand on. Questions are welcome. Disagreements about lesser things are handled the way Paul handled them in Romans 14.

The warning signs are mostly the reverse: secrecy, loyalty tests, a leader above correction, fear about what will happen if you leave, pressure to cut off outside relationships, and Scripture used as a weapon. Chapter 3 describes them in more detail. One warning sign alone doesn't make a church abusive. A pattern does.

Fit and harm

A church can be safe, sound and full of good people and still be a poor fit for you.

Some people come alive in a tightly ordered service, where the prayers are written down and the year follows a calendar that is centuries old. Others feel hemmed in by that kind of structure, even when everything about it is wholesome. Some people love

a loud, warm, crowded congregation where everyone knows everyone's business. Others need a quiet back row and a church that will leave them alone for a while. Your temperament, your history and the season you're in all play a part.

Lewis was right that liking the paint and paneling shouldn't be the first question when you choose a room. Truth comes first. But fit still matters, because you need to be able to stay somewhere long enough to grow.

It helps to ask yourself honestly: *Is this place hurting me, or is it just not suited to me?* Both are real reasons to look elsewhere. Only one of them is a reason to warn other people. Calling a sound church abusive because it chafes isn't fair to the people who love it. And staying in a church that doesn't fit, while blaming yourself for not thriving there, isn't fair to you.

Bringing your wounds with you

If you do try a new fellowship, you will bring your history along. That's all right. It can help to tell a pastor or a trusted member early on, in a sentence or two, that you were hurt in a previous church and may need to go slowly. How they respond will tell you a good deal.

You may also find that some of your alarms go off when nothing is wrong. A raised voice in a sermon, a request to sign up for something, a closed office door: old wounds can make ordinary things feel dangerous. Notice the alarm, take a breath, and test it gently. Over time, a safe place gives your body a chance to learn that it's safe.

And remember Romans 14. The believers in the room next door, who worship differently, vote differently or read a disputed passage differently, are still your brothers and sisters. Accept them, Paul said, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Which sign of a safe fellowship matters most to you after what you've been through? Write it at the top of a page.
2. Think of a church that didn't work out for you. Was it harm, a poor fit, or some of both? Write one honest sentence about each.
3. What is one thing you could tell a new church leader about your story, in two sentences or less?

Part Four: Practice

10. Practices From the Whole Church

Christians have been finding their way back to one another for a very long time. Pilgrims sang on the road to Jerusalem. Monks wrote about friendship. Believers who couldn't agree on much still learned to pray for each other once a year.

The practices below come from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant believers, and from the Scriptures they all share. Think of them as a pantry, not a program. Don't try them all. Choose one and try it for two weeks. If it doesn't fit, set it down and pick another. None of them will find you the perfect church. They may help you take one small step toward other believers, at a pace you can bear.

Practice	Rooted in	Time	Good for
Come by Night	John 3:1-2	One service	Fear of walking back in
A Spiritual Friend	Catholic (Aelred of Rievaulx)	An hour, every few weeks	Isolation
Visit Another Room	Acts 10:28; C.S. Lewis	One service	Suspicion of other Christians
The Shared Table	Acts 2:46	One meal	Loneliness
Pray for the Church Across Town	John 17:21; Week of Prayer for Christian Unity	5 min, weekly	Bitterness toward the Church
Serve Alongside	Matthew 25:35-36	One afternoon	Rebuilding trust slowly
The Road Songs	Psalms 120-134; Orthodox evening prayer	5 min a day, 15 days	The long walk back

Come by Night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a religious leader, and when he finally went to see Jesus, he went at night, perhaps so no one would see him. "After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus" (John 3:2). Jesus didn't make him come back in daylight. He talked with him that night, at length.

If you want to try a church again but the thought of it tightens your chest, plan a careful return. Pick one service. Look the church up beforehand, and if you can, watch a recorded service online so nothing surprises you. Bring a friend if you have one. Sit near the back, close to a door. Give yourself permission to leave early, skip the visitor card and say nothing to anyone. Afterward, write down one thing that felt safe and one thing that didn't. That's all. You don't have to decide anything yet.

A Spiritual Friend

In the twelfth century, Aelred, abbot of the Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx in England, wrote a dialogue called *Spiritual Friendship*. It opens with Aelred and a fellow monk sitting down to talk, and one of its first lines sets the scene: "You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third."

Ask one believer you trust to meet with you every few weeks. Have coffee, take a walk, or talk on the phone. Ask each other how you're really doing. Read a short passage together if you like, and pray for each other before you part. Keep it simple, and keep it honest. Friendship like this is one of the oldest ways Christians have carried each other.

Visit Another Room

Peter grew up believing that a faithful Jew shouldn't enter a Gentile's home. Then God sent him to the house of a Roman officer named Cornelius. Once inside, Peter said, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

Once, as a guest, attend a service in a Christian tradition that isn't yours: a Catholic Mass, an Orthodox Divine Liturgy, a Quaker meeting, a Pentecostal service, or a congregation of another culture or language. Go to listen and learn, not to judge or to join. Notice where you hear the name of Jesus. Afterward, pray for the people you worshiped with. Lewis called this kind of courtesy one of the rules common to the whole house.

Some people go further and spend long seasons among people who believe very differently. It can teach you to love a wide variety of people, and to let Christ show through how you treat them before you ever say a word. It works best when your own

faith is already rooted somewhere else, in Scripture, prayer and a friend or two who share it, because nobody in that room will form it for you. Peter wrote to believers living among neighbors who didn't share their faith: "And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way" (1 Peter 3:15). Most of their explaining happened in how they lived.

The Shared Table

The first believers "met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity" (Acts 2:46). Ordinary meals were part of how they became a family.

Invite one or two believers to share a simple meal. It doesn't need to be fancy, and it doesn't need an agenda. Before you eat, say grace together. While you eat, talk about anything at all. Before everyone leaves, ask whether anyone has something they'd like prayer for. If hosting feels like too much, meet at a diner and split the check.

Pray for the Church Across Town

Since 1908, many Christians have set aside January 18 to 25 as a time of prayer for Christian unity. It began as an eight-day observance proposed by an Episcopal priest, Paul Wattson, who later became Catholic. Today it is observed by Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches around the world, with materials they prepare together.

You don't have to wait for January. Once a week, choose one congregation in your town that isn't yours, maybe even one that hurt you, and pray for it by name. Pray for its pastor, its children and the people sitting alone in the back. If you can't pray for a particular church yet, pray for the people in it who are hurting. Jesus prayed "that they will all be one" (John 17:21). This is one small way of praying along with him.

Serve Alongside

Jesus said the people who fed the hungry, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked and visited the sick and the imprisoned had done it for him (Matthew 25:35-36).

Spend one afternoon serving with Christians you don't worship with: at a food pantry, a shelter, a disaster cleanup, a ministry to people in prison. You don't need to explain your story or join anything. Just work next to them. Trust often grows faster with your hands busy and your eyes on someone else's need.

The Road Songs

In the NLT, each of Psalms 120 to 134 has a heading that begins “A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.” Many scholars think worshipers sang them on the road as they traveled up to the Temple together for the great feasts. One of them begins, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD’” (Psalm 122:1). Another celebrates a family at peace: “How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!” (Psalm 133:1). The Orthodox Church still prays these psalms together as one section of the Psalter, often at evening prayer.

Read one Road Song a day for fifteen days, in order. Read slowly, out loud if you can. Some days the words will match where you are. Other days, especially when a psalm talks about being glad to go to the house of the LORD, they may not. That’s all right. Pilgrims didn’t arrive in a day. Let the songs walk with you at walking pace.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Which one practice will you try for the next two weeks? Write it down, with a day and a time.
2. Which practice did you most want to skip? What might that resistance be telling you?
3. Two weeks from now, come back to this page. What did you notice about other believers, or about yourself, that you hadn’t noticed before?

A Benediction

You may have come to these pages from a parking lot, engine running. You may have come from twenty years in a place that no longer feels like home, or from a long, quiet season of not belonging anywhere.

Nothing in this guide can hand you a church family. But you know some things now that the hurt may have hidden. Jesus did not do this to you. The Shepherd still goes looking for sheep that wandered from unsafe pens, and he carries them home on his shoulders. The family of God is larger than any one room, and you are allowed to wait in the hall until a door opens. When it does, the fires and chairs and meals will be there.

So take one small step, at whatever pace you can manage. And go in peace, carried by the blessing the writer of Hebrews gave to believers who were tired and under pressure:

> *Now may the God of peace—who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, and ratified an eternal covenant with his blood—may he equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ, every good thing that is pleasing to him. All glory to him forever and ever! Amen.*
>
> Hebrews 13:20-21

Notes

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CHAPTER 1

"Spiritually homeless" is the phrase Faith Over Factions uses to describe its readers; see "About Faith Over Factions" at the front of this guide.

Acts 9:2 refers to "followers of the Way"; see also Acts 19:9, 19:23 and 24:14. Hebrews 11:13-16 describes Abraham's family as foreigners and nomads.

CHAPTER 2

Paul's stay of about eighteen months in Corinth is described in Acts 18:1-18, and Apollos's arrival after Paul left in Acts 18:24-19:1. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8). His correspondence with Corinth included more than the two letters in the New Testament; see 1 Corinthians 5:9 and 2 Corinthians 2:4.

Denomination figures are from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, reported in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., ed. Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), and the World Christian Database (mid-2023 figure, as reported by the Lausanne Movement, *State of the Great Commission*, 2024). The Center defines and measures denominations at the country level, so a single church body present in many countries is counted once per country.

On the American church splits over slavery, see "Broken Churches, Broken Nation," *Christian History* 33 (1992). The Methodist Episcopal Church, South was organized in 1845 after the 1844 General Conference; the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845; the Old School Presbyterian Church divided along northern and southern lines in 1861, after earlier divisions in 1837 and 1857.

Common Declaration of Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, December 7, 1965 (Vatican English text). The historical significance of 1054 itself is debated by historians; the estrangement between East and West developed over centuries.

CHAPTER 3

3 John 1:9-10. The letter's author identifies himself only as "the elder" (3 John 1:1). Christian tradition attributes it to the apostle John; some scholars question that attribution.

The working definition of spiritual abuse, the three marks, and the four kinds of control in this chapter and the next are adapted from "Exposing Spiritual Abuse: Identifying Oppressive Religion," Faith Over Factions, faithoverfactions.com/exposing-spiritual-abuse-identifying-oppressive-religion/.

Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Understanding Spiritual Abuse in Christian Communities*, summary report (CCPAS, now thirtyone:eight, 2018), from which the quoted description and the survey figures are taken. The online survey ran January 30 to March 30, 2017; 1,591 people completed it and 1,002 identified as having experienced spiritual abuse (the 63 percent figure is calculated from those numbers). Respondents had to have heard the term "spiritual abuse"; responses were self-identified and unverified; 69 percent of respondents were women.

1 Chronicles 16:8-22; Psalm 105:8-15. The Hebrew word the NLT renders "chosen people" is literally "anointed ones"; "Touch not mine anointed" is the King James Version's wording. Galatians 2:11-14.

A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), chapter 26, "The All-importance of Motive."

CHAPTER 4

"All spiritual abuse is church hurt. Most church hurt is not spiritual abuse" and the tests for conviction, discipline, hard preaching and leaders who fail are adapted from the Faith Over Factions article cited for Chapter 3.

Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Timothy 5:19-20; Mark 10:35-45. 1 Peter is traditionally attributed to the apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:1); some scholars question that attribution.

CHAPTER 5

John 20:24-29. The heading of Psalm 56 in the NLT reads, "For the choir director: A psalm of David, regarding the time the Philistines seized him in Gath." The heading is part of the Hebrew text, though scholars debate when such headings were added.

The expectations for recovery are adapted from the Faith Over Factions article cited for Chapter 3. Romans 16:17-18; Galatians 5:1.

2 Timothy 4:14-15. Whether this Alexander is the same man named in 1 Timothy 1:20 and Acts 19:33 is uncertain.

CHAPTER 6

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952), preface. Quotations are from the standard text of the preface; page numbers vary by edition (in the Touchstone edition, New York, 1996, pp. 11-12). Lewis's remarks about those who wait in the hall are summarized, not quoted.

The motto "In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in utrisque caritas" (with variations) developed from a sentence in Rupertus Meldenius (Peter Meiderlin), *Paraenesis votiva pro pace ecclesiae ad theologos Augustanae Confessionis* (1626). It is often attributed to Augustine, without support in his writings.

Acts 15:1-31; Romans 14:1-15:7.

Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans* 8.2, trans. J.B. Lightfoot, in *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan, 1891). The traditional dating of Ignatius's letters to about AD 107-110 is debated; some scholars place them later. The phrase "Where Christ is, there is the Church," sometimes credited to Augustine, is a shortened form of this sentence.

CHAPTER 7

1 Kings 19:1-18.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), chapter 1, "Community." The Finkenwalde seminary was closed by the Gestapo in 1937; *Life Together* was written in 1938 and published in German in 1939. Wording follows the Doberstein translation as reprinted in Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith and J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review," *PLoS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (2010): e1000316. The analysis combined 148 studies with 308,849 participants followed for an average of 7.5 years. The studies are observational, the results varied widely between studies, and they measured many kinds of social ties, not religious community specifically.

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (2023).

CHAPTER 8

Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 16:3-5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:1-2. The earliest securely identified building adapted for Christian worship, at Dura-Europos in Syria, dates to the mid-third century; before that, Christians met mostly in homes and other borrowed spaces.

Hebrews 10:19-39. The author of Hebrews is not named in the letter.

Jim Davis and Michael Graham, with Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023). Survey design and analysis with Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe. Figures here follow the authors as reported by Religion News Service (September 7, 2023): a first survey of 1,043 American adults and a second of 4,099 dechurched Americans, grouped by statistical clustering. The estimate of about 40 million dechurched adults is the authors' extrapolation from the survey share.

CHAPTER 9

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22. *Finding Discernment in the Age of Noise* is available free at faithoverfactions.com.

CHAPTER 10

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, book 1, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010). Translations of the opening line vary; another familiar rendering reads, "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst."

On the origins of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, see the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, "Key dates in the history of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity." Paul Wattson founded the Church Unity Octave in 1908 as an Episcopal priest and was received into the Catholic Church in 1909. Since 1968 the materials have been prepared jointly with the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order.

On the Songs of Ascents in Orthodox prayer: in the Orthodox division of the Psalter into twenty sections (*kathismata*), Psalms 120-134 (119-133 in the Greek numbering) form the eighteenth, read at weekday Vespers through much of the year.

Check-In Questions and Prayer Prompts

Take these slowly. Write in the Faith Journal or on the lines below. What matters is that each question gets an honest answer somewhere.

1 Where did you last feel at home among other believers?

Write the name of the church, group or kitchen table, and one thing about it you still miss. Then write one thing that made it hard to stay, or made it impossible.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, I miss having a place. Meet me in the missing, and don't let me give up on your people."

2 What do you need to say out loud about what happened to you?

Using Ezekiel's words from Chapter 3, the weak, the sick, the injured and the lost, write what was done and how it left you. Chapter 4 can help you tell church hurt from spiritual abuse. You don't have to forgive anyone on this page. If it was abuse, write down one safe person you could tell.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Good Shepherd, some of your shepherds hurt me. Bandage what they broke, and help me tell your voice from theirs."

3 Where are you standing in the house: in a room, in the hall, or outside?

Lewis said the hall is a place to wait in, and the fires and chairs and meals are in the rooms. Write what you need before you could try a door, and which door you might try first.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Jesus, I'm tired of waiting and afraid of the doors. Keep me warm in the hall until you show me where to go."

4 Who could carry a corner of your mat, and whose mat could you carry?

Write one name for each. Then write one small thing you could do this week: a text, a phone call, a cup of coffee, an invitation.

PRAYER PROMPT

"God, you said it isn't good to be alone. Give me courage to let someone in, and to show up for someone else."

5 Which practice from Chapter 10 will you try for the next two weeks?

Write it down with a day and a time, like a careful visit to one service or a meal with one friend. In two weeks, write what you noticed about other believers and about yourself.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, I can't walk the whole road back today. Help me take one step, and walk it with me."

A Blessing for the Road

May the God who sees the wanderer find you wherever you are tonight.

May Christ, who never needed you to have it all together, meet you in the questions you're still carrying.

May the Spirit steady your feet when the noise gets loud, and quiet your heart when the world won't.

Go gently. Tell the truth. Love the ones in front of you.

And when you fall, and you will, may grace be the first thing you find when you get back up.

You're Always Welcome Here

If this helped, don't carry it alone. Write your answers in the Faith Journal, free and private. Share this with someone who's wandering. And come find us at faithoverfactions.com, on Substack, Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram.

Faith Journal

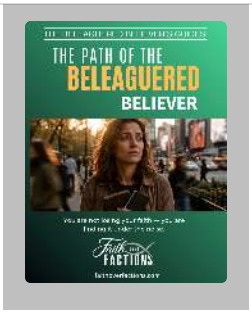
This piece online

The porch light is always on.

Take Something for the Road

You don't have to walk this alone, and you don't have to pay to keep going. Here are a few companions for the journey. All eight are free. No email address, no catch.

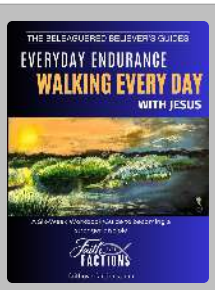
THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES



The Path of the Beleaguered Believer

"You are not losing your faith, you are finding it under the noise." For the one who keeps getting up.

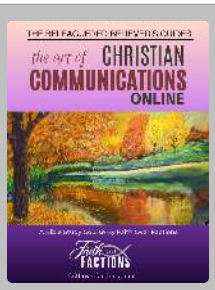
FREE DOWNLOAD



Everyday Endurance

Walking every day with Jesus: a six-week workbook for becoming a stronger disciple.

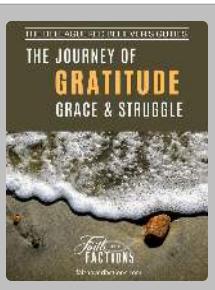
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The Art of Christian Communications Online

A Bible study course on speaking truth with grace when the internet won't.

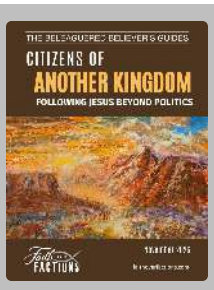
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The Journey of Gratitude, Grace & Struggle

You don't have to feel grateful to begin. You only have to turn toward the One who hasn't left.

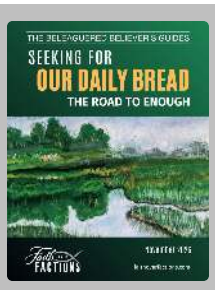
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Citizens of Another Kingdom

Jesus is Lord, and nobody else gets the title. For the one whose church picked a side.

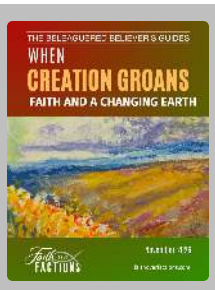
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Seeking for Our Daily Bread

Faith, debt and enough. For the one who was told to just trust God.

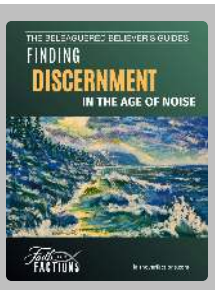
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When Creation Groans

The earth is the LORD's. For the one who was told it's all going to burn.

FREE DOWNLOAD



Finding Discernment in the Age of Noise

Test what you hear, starting with yourself. For the one who was lied to in church.

FREE DOWNLOAD

And a Quiet Place to Write It All Down

The Faith Journal is a private space for the questions in these pages, the prayers you mean, and the faith that doesn't fit neatly anymore. Write honestly. Share prayer requests only when you're ready. Free, private by default, no comment threads, no algorithm.

Grace and peace for the road.

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