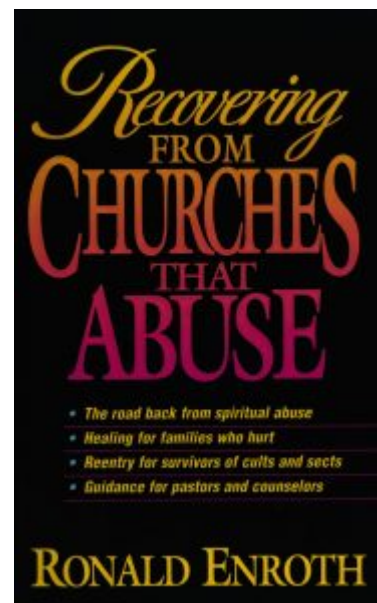


Review: Recovering From Churches That Abuse

Churches can be hurtful. Whether it be the institution, the community, or individuals within them, they can wound, manipulate, damage, and neglect. This is no new thing. *Recovering from Churches That Abuse* was written by Ronald Enroth in the early 1990's. It's been on my bookshelf for almost 20 years, but, for various reasons, I have only now found the right time to read it.



For church leaders the topic of church abusiveness can be painful, awkward, and emotionally complex. It's like reading a book on parenting for those of us who have children. There is a complex mix of feeling the pain of our own childhood and our own imperfect parents, of feeling the pain of our own mistakes and many flaws, and of fear about the fact that more mistakes will likely happen in the future! Similarly, I have been hurt by the church, I have been (along with all my colleagues) a flawed and broken church leader, and sometimes the way ahead seems more fraught than hopeful.

Which gives all the more reason to thoughtfully and deliberately engage with this topic.

Enroth's book may not have been the best place to start. It is anecdotal more than it is analytical, a "life-history approach to illustrate patterns of spiritual and emotional abuse" (page 137). Its focus is on situations where the level of abuse is extreme, blatant, and cult-like. There is some use in seeing dysfunction in the extreme, but it's not always helpful when

reflecting on the “ordinary” hurts of the everyday church.

Nevertheless, there is some wisdom to glean. In what follows, I simply outline the echoes of some of these stories in my own experience, and also the useful insights that Enroth bring.

1) Points of resonance:

Although the anecdotes are often of extreme situations, we can connect them with more “normal” circumstances as well. I have heard some of the language Enroth shares being used by those around me. I have used some of it myself. There are points of resonance.

For instance, Enroth quotes someone as saying “I *woke up* one morning and realized that I had not thought my own thoughts for three years” (page 33). I hear similar from those who may have left a mainstream church that has a strong and particular view of their own mission. It’s the experience of buying into someone else’s mission until it reaches a point where the *secondhand* faith becomes a collapsing foundation. When a mission-driven church doesn’t also exercise the right interplay of freedom and formation and focus on real people, pain results.

Similarly, we read words like this: “One of the things that has been most distressing to me is to see the way the church can discard people the way you throw an old banana peel out of the window with no apparent care for them” (page 33) and language that appeals to God’s will as a means of control or deflection. I’ve seen what it’s like to be on the receiving end of interpretations of God’s will as a means of ameliorating rejection: “I’m so glad you’ve found the place where God actually wanted you to be...”

I’ve reflected in the past about the disillusionment of those who are “done” with churches which are increasingly “self-referential.” Enroth shares stories in which “members will be requested to serve, to become involved, to sign up for a

variety of activities that, upon closer inspection, appear designed to maintain the system" (pages 31-32). I know what it's like for the direction of the church rut to be about "helping the vicar do his job" and nothing more. I understand the painful passivity of those for whom "it is hard to be a part of anything anymore" (page 46).

As I read through Enroth's anecdotes, a thought crossed my mind: There are many situations in which church *members* are not ill-treated, but in which church *staff* come away damaged. It's a point of concern, because there is a growing tendency to "professionalise" vocational work and assess ministry via bureaucratic markers. It's telling that Enroth refers to abusive communities as "performance-based" (page 17, 44) a number of times. I have seen too many church workers broken by impossible performance measures, mediocre remuneration and support, and spiritualised reasons as to why they should grin and bear it.

Indeed, I have sometimes reflected on the fact that the mechanisms for abuse that Enroth's stories reveal (financial dependence, the priority of institutional reputation over personal injustice, spiritualised language to assert authority, and gaslighting condescension as decisions are made for you and not with you), cohere to the relationship between most clergy/pastors and their institution. If these mechanisms are not proactively countered by good oversight, their abusiveness inevitably emerges.

2) Helpful learnings:

Where Enroth *does* provide some analysis, it is helpful.

For instance, he raises the question of "How can we discern an unhealthy, abusive Christian church or fellowship from one that is truly biblical, healthy, and worthy of our involvement?" (page 27ff). His answer references the psychological health of members, of whether or not people are

isolated from families, or discouraged in “independent thinking” and “individual differences of belief and behavior.” We learn of “legalistic churches” exhibiting an often-hypocritical emphasis on “high moral standards” and which allow no external accountability.

Throughout, he also raises aspects of church life in which good things are twisted to achieve bad outcomes.

For instance, there is no doubt that the Scriptures are a source of life, and truth, and a revelation of God’s love, grace, and presence. Yet, from an abusive situation in which “if you questioned Scripture you were made to feel very guilty” (page 22), even the beauty of Scripture can be hidden in pain and trauma. It is similar with some of the precious doctrines of Christian theology, e.g. the Lordship of Christ, the atoning sacrifice of the cross. These can be mishandled into guises of dominance and guilt-inducing wrath.

I am learning to see it for myself. I can tell when words, that have been life-giving for me, walk into clouds of darkness in someone else’s eyes. I have encountered Scripture and the truths of Christian doctrine as refuges, places of safety and sustenance when the church has otherwise left me starving in the dark. For others, they have been instruments of control. As they begin to move towards healing, they can come close to throwing out the baby of truth with the bathwater of pain. Enroth doesn’t give any great insight into how to address this tension, but nevertheless declares:

The survivor must be assured of God’s unfailing grace and be able, in effect, to rediscover the gospel. (Page 43)

We thought we were Christians, but despite years and years of being in Christian groups, neither of us knew Christ at all. Neither of us knew how to depend on Christ. (Page 61)

I have found a number of them who have difficulty with or even an aversion to reading the Bible because it has been

misused by the group to abuse them. Learning the proper application and interpretation of Scripture goes a long way toward healing the wounds of abuse. (Page 66)

Victims must be able not only to rebuild self-esteem and purpose in life, but also renew a personal relationship with God... it is possible to have a rich relationship with God... the victim must be turned "to faith in the living God from faith in a distorted image of him." (Page 67)

Day by day we had to put one foot in front of the other and say, "Jesus, I have been a disciple of my denomination. I have been a disciple of my church. I have been a disciple of my pastor. I want to be your disciple and follow you." (Page 84)

I now have a church where the pastor leads us to Christ, not to himself. (Pages 139-140)

Similarly, another twisted "good" is the concept of spiritual family. For myself, the concept of family is life-giving – a place of refuge, warmth, and formation. I have found that individualism is a lonely place, a form of sterile functionalism in which no one has your back, a capitalist vision of Christianity in which the body only moves together as a collective of coincidentally aligned self-actualised individuals. I resonate with Mike Pilavachi of Soul Survivor who speaks passionately and rightly about the need for church to be family rather than business.

I am learning, however, that even language of "family" can resonate with people's trauma. Dysfunctional families eradicate individual differentiation so that identity is lost. The language of spiritual parenting has also been used to manipulate and control and attaches to the abuses of so-called "shepherding" (page 55, 143). We need to redeem that language with care.

It takes time to work through this language barrier. It is possible to have healthy church family, and to share common goals, and to find oneself as part of a larger whole, and to have appropriate formation and discipline. "The intensity of relationships within an abusive group must be matched by intense relationships in a wholesome setting" (page 65). It requires a context of love, and grace, and warmth, and acceptance. At times it requires some particular leadership skills, which I am aspiring to discover. For those of us who inhabit a leadership, pastoral, or even therapeutic role, we need to understand how the mistrust of us is not personal, but a natural wariness "of allowing another authority figure into their lives" (page 64).

It is useful, therefore, to see how Enroth takes us to some of the pathways that lead to healing and restoration. It involves overcoming a "shame-based identity" (page 37) and mistrust.

By learning to trust again, the victims of abuse also discover that they can tolerate and trust themselves, an important part of the recovery experience (page 40).

Simply by describing this journey, Enroth helps us. I understand what it is like to go through a season of regret over "the lost years" (page 44) of giving away health, wealth, and youth. Similarly, the journey through "anger and rage" (page 128) and bitterness, away from "pointing the finger" (page 78) and talking about "what had happened to me" (page 112), is difficult but necessary. The four stages of "role exit" (page 116ff) of those who leave an abusive situation is illuminating. The summary of "mending" (page 140) is helpful.

They need to understand that their significance is not in what they had, but it is in their relationship with Christ. They have lost a few years, but they have not lost their soul. (Page 130)

In conclusion:

Enroth has helped me listen to my own internal pain. I find something of myself when he quotes Johnson and VanVonderen who write:

There is no test to diagnose spiritual abuse. There are only spiritual clues: lack of joy in the Christian life; tiredness from trying hard to measure up; disillusionment about God and spiritual things; uneasiness, lack of trust, or even fear...; a profound sense of missing your best Friend; cynicism or grief over good news that turned out to be too good to be true. (Pages 138-139)

If nothing else, Enroth has shown that such painful journeys are “far more prevalent and much closer to the evangelical mainstream than many are willing to admit” (page 139).

I remain perplexed and moved. In my real world, I am frequently running into those who have been left bleeding, and who have reached the same end as some of Enroth’s stories: “[W]e will never get what we need from a church. It is going to be our family and the Lord, and we have to get that relationship right. There is not going to be a church suited for people who have our backgrounds...” (Page 99). How to help, how to serve, how to bless, from a church leadership role that looks like what has hurt them before? This remains my question, my conundrum, and my prayer.

Recovery means trusting in the God of grace, the God of endless years. Remember the promise made to Israel in Joel 2:25: “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” (Page 145)

The Marks of the Apostolic – A Mild Critique of Some Fivefold Thinking

In recent years there has been a resurgence in thinking about the so-called “fivefold” “ascension gifts” shape to ministry. It has been furthered by the likes of Alan Hirsch and Mike Breen. It draws on Ephesians 4:11-12 in which Paul refers to five gifts from Christ, “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service...”



In general, despite a growing tendency to reduce it to some sort of personality inventory, fivefold thinking is helpful. I have, for instance, used it as a starting point to unpack what it means to be prophetic.

Here, however, I want to focus on the *apostolic*.

There's a lot to commend in typical fivefold thinking about the apostolic. It will usually draw on the root word of “apostle” and the associated verb “apostello” which means simply “to send” with the nuance (in context) of being sent with purpose: i.e. appointed to go and do something. Hence the disciples who were the direct recipients of Jesus' Great Commission are, rightly, “big-A” Apostles. And so is Paul, who received his appointment directly from the risen Christ later as one “untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8).

This can appropriately be applied to aspects of ministry today. There is something about the apostolic, for instance, that pertains to *movement*. The apostolic stimulates movement and seeks to lead a community into places where it needs to go

but hasn't. Just as the original Apostles took the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, so the contemporary apostolic desires to *extend* the Kingdom of God in some way. In any new venture – church plant, missionary movement, activist community – you will likely find the apostolic at work, hearing the call of some “Macedonian Man” and heading out to answer (Acts 16:9-10).

The apostolic, therefore, is often associated with words like “entrepreneurial” or “visionary.” Mike Breen, answering a blog post question, says, for instance, “*Apostles can't help but start new things.*” A site that expounds Breen's lifeshapes, describes an apostle as a “Vision-keeper for the extension of the church's mission, an entrepreneur/starter... bring strategic skills, risk taking, get things off the ground (church planting?).”

There is some truth to this. But it is also where **I want to push back.**

The apostolic is NOT *primarily* entrepreneurial. In my experience, it's the evangelists who often have the crazy new ideas. Some of them even work!

The apostolic IS *primarily parental*. The original Apostles didn't just break new ground, or go into new territory, they *took the church with them, and birthed and grew whatever was begun.* They bring the body of Christ on the journey, and they hold and cover whatever is formed.

Entrepreneurs can often be the worst at bringing people with them. To be sure, none of us are as friendly as the pastors, but belligerence is not the mark of the apostolic. Neither is a “vision and dump” mentality that says “well, I've started it, now you carry it.” I've even heard excuses made for toxic leadership, “It's OK, some people have had trouble responding to the apostolic in him.” A corrective is needed.

Healthy apostles don't behave like that. They don't behave

like bosses pursuing a vision despite the collateral damage. Yes, they are deliberate, *determined* even. And the movement *is*, often, outward, ground-breaking, map-making, and pioneering. But they take a “family” with them, and they form a household on the way, wherever they have gone. Because that is the point!

I thought it would be useful, therefore, to list some of the characteristics of the apostolic that I see in the pages of Scripture. It’s not an exhaustive list, and I’d love to receive other suggestions.

These are marks of the apostle that I see in Scripture:

The Apostolic Way is PARENTAL.

Paul writes the following to the Corinthians:

*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, **as my dear children**. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus **I became your father through the gospel**. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, **my son**, whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. 1 Corinthians 4:14-17*

The language Paul uses of a father with his children or, (in the case of Timothy), his son, is obvious. His heart isn’t just to direct or dictate, but to *impart*, through relationship. The gospel is something to be modelled and embodied, and therefore imitated, not simply pursued as a function or task. This marks apostolic ministry.

Paul makes it even more explicit when he applies a maternal image to his ministry, as he writes to the Thessalonians:

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but

we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8)

This is why churches and church structures that revolve around programs and pragmatics have a sense of lifelessness to them – a stagnancy even in their busyness and sense of “success”; they have stepped away from the apostolic *sharing of life* to sterile functionalism.

The most apostolic people I know bring movement to the church, not just by *leading* the church, but by *carrying* it. They weep and laugh with it. They are broken by it, delighted by it. They hold it in some place primal, and there they carry it to the Lord and Father of us all. They imitate him, and are therefore worthy of imitation.

This does, however, lead to the second mark:

The Apostolic Way is PAINFUL.

The cost of parenthood is significant. There is great joy and fruitfulness in it, but also great pain. Any parent can tell you that. God, our Father, reveals the truest sense of this. The Apostle John alludes to this constantly:

*“...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God** – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but **born of God.**” (John 1:12-13)*

“...for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

And Paul, writing to the Romans, having spoken of the Holy

Spirit as the Spirit of Adoption, by which we cry out “Abba, Father” then speaks of suffering as something of a family trait:

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.” (Romans 8:17-19)

The apostle’s “imitation” of the Father will lead the apostle, and any church that can rightly be called “apostolic,” on a path of suffering. This is not a defeatist trajectory, rather it is the “mind of Christ” – the *kenotic* (self-emptying) way that Paul speaks of in Philippians 2:1-11. No wonder, when Paul wants to speak of his apostolic power and authority, he sees the madness of leaning on his own strength and learning (2 Corinthians 11:21). Rather, “if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30) so that “Christ’s power may rest on me.” (12:9).

Too often, we look up to a triumphalist form of church leadership. We look to persons who have been successful, who have achieved some empowerment of our organisation, and in them we place our trust. We are not far from accolading the so-called “super-apostles” that had bewitched the Corinthian church. In what I think is the **defining description of apostleship**, in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul pushes back at those who delight in being winners in the Christian world:

*Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that **God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to***

*die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. **Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.** (1 Corinthians 4:8-13)*

I have learned to look for this “scum and refuse” moment in apostolic movements. If it is not there, I am wary. For instance, the apostolic qualification of a contemporary movement like Soul Survivor doesn’t lie in its many achievements (although I surely delight in them!), but in its foundation in the Wasteland.

The most apostolic people I know weep for, and because of, the church. In this sense they share in the sufferings of Christ, and lead the people on the same self-emptying path. Their tears take them to the heart of God. They cry themselves to sleep at night, and know the grace of God new in the morning. That is what makes a movement, and it can’t be generated by any entrepreneurial technique.

Which reveals a final mark of the apostolic:

The Apostolic Way is Compelled, not Controlled.

In some ways, this is just a natural consequence of the “sentness” of the apostolic. A pioneer cannot predict the path ahead. A pioneer cannot take a controlled path around obstacles and difficulties. By definition a pioneer is not following a map, they are *making* the map!

An apostle goes out with the family of God, not with a plan of *control* (“This is what we are going to do.”) but with a plan

of *purpose* ("This is why we are going.") And then they have to roll with whatever comes along. So often it is not what they planned; it is almost beyond them, in a direction where they must rely on the Holy Spirit. They are only strong because they are weak.

Paul's plans for the evangelisation of all of the province of Asia were halted. Instead he and his companions are compelled by the Holy Spirit and find themselves bringing the gospel to Europe (Acts 16:6-10). And throughout Acts, we find a similar sense of Paul being out of control: he is imprisoned, driven by storms, compelled to escape violence. Even what seems like an attempt to free himself from prison by asserting his Roman citizenship only leads to further captivity... but still many opportunities for the gospel. So often, it seems, apostolic movement is more rightly characterised by "a wing and a prayer" than clever, entrepreneurial, goals.

The Apostle Peter, as he is (re)commissioned by Jesus at the end of John's gospel, has a foreshadowing of the manner of his death. Jesus tells him "when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). John tells us that, most specifically, this statement indicates the kind of death that Peter would have. But it also colours the sense of Jesus' very next words: "Follow me."

So often, the apostle finds themselves "being led where you do not want to go." Their plans go out the window, and they learn to return to the Father's heart. There, in the midst of uncertainty, they follow the Spirit of Jesus, who only ever does what he sees the Father doing.

Paul, in his chains, brings the gospel even to members of Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22). Peter, even in his death, glorifies God (John 21:19). It is not the path they may have chosen, but it is the path chosen for them. The apostle leads the apostolic church in embracing the weakness (and

therefore the power) of this way.