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A pastor's confession

It has been 16 years since the Brevard Baptist Association refused to seat our church messengers at the annual associational meeting. That was like having our church kicked out of the Southern Baptist Convention – the largest Protestant denomination in the USA.

A lot of pain surrounded the break. As a pastor, I did not want to leave the Southern Baptists. My roots went deep. I had graduated from a Baptist university and a Baptist seminary. I had pastored three Baptist churches and had been active in the denomination at all levels. My entire adult life centred around the denomination. The thought of being rejected was almost unbearable.

However, as I look back at my actions and attitudes, I realise I left my fellow Baptists with little choice. I was like a man bent on committing suicide, who is afraid of putting a gun to his head so he does everything possible to make his friends hate him until someone shoots him.

The years preceding that painful schism had been tumultuous. I began my ministerial career as the pastor of a 1,500-member Baptist church in the small town of Greenwood, South Carolina. Even though that church grew numerically, I was spiritually empty. After eight years my world fell apart. The deacons – the official board of the church – accused me of sexual immorality and demanded my resignation.

My wife and five small children followed me back to my home state

of Florida, where I accepted the pastorate of a much smaller church. I didn't adjust well. Full of bitterness, I was determined to 'show them' I was not a failure by proving myself in the areas most Americans acknowledge as success – numerical growth, financial growth and a building programme.

It took 15 months before the new church recognised they had a sawdust-filled dandy as pastor. Again I was fired – on general grounds of distrust. It seemed it was the end of my ministerial career, perhaps my life.

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However a small group of wounded people left the church with me. Together, in a storefront building, we formed a tiny church. We immediately applied for membership in the local association of Baptist churches, which gave us status in the community. But as Vance Havner once quipped, 'It doesn't do much good to change labels on an empty bottle.' My problem was not the wineskin. My problem was the absence of new wine.

Outward success, I have since discovered, can be a man's greatest enemy. Failure can be his greatest friend. For years I had hidden my

emptiness behind the mask of outward success. But when the mask was ripped away by my friends, I had no choice but to admit my failure. Sadly my Baptist associates had no answers for me. Most felt it would be safer to shun me. Yet because we knew nothing else, our little church was determined to hold on to our denominational status.

But there were other voices speaking – voices I had been warned against. These were voices from the Pentecostal camp saying, 'You don't have to remain empty. You can be filled with the Holy Spirit.'

In my former vocabulary those were words of heresy. But my ability (and my desire) to judge the theology of others had disappeared during my personal purging. For the first time since seminary, I began listening to simple laymen who had not been taught the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not for today. These 'unlearned ones' accepted the Bible at face value. I, too, held that position intellectually, but the truths had never been integrated into my personal life nor the churches I had led. Now, through personal suffering and public humiliation, I was finally open to all God had for me.

But there were still some missing elements.

Paul warned of the rasping results of speaking in tongues, prophesying, or performing miracles apart from the soothing balm of love. In my excitement over the discovery of the reality of 1 Corinthians 12 and

14, I forgot about the necessity of manifesting 1 Corinthians 13. Arrogantly and brashly I tried to force my fellow Baptist pastors into my newly-discovered wineskin.

Publicly, from the pulpit in our tiny storefront church and in our church newsletter, I chided them for not recognising the validity of the gifts of the Spirit as the norm of church order, for denying the right of individual Christians to manifest the gifts, for clinging to the old wineskin of congregational authority, for glorifying tradition over biblical theology . . . and for not recognising as valid a dozen other new revelations I had received.

Had these revelations come from a man who did not carry the scars of sin, had they come from someone filled with love, had they come from a successful pastor rather than one who had been disgraced by his own doing, they might have been received. In my case, however, the executive committee of our local Baptist association simply reacted by telling me and our little church we were no longer welcome among the ranks of Southern Baptists.

I was angry. And bitter. After having been fired from two churches for my non-spirituality, I was now fired from the denomination for being too spiritual. They saw both extremes (and I now understand they were right) as the kind of sin which breaks fellowship.

An independent church

I met with the leaders of our little church. We had no choice but to become what I dreaded becoming – an independent church.

Hindsight of course always produces a clearer picture than foresight. I now realise God had a better place for me, and for the Tabernacle church, than I could see at the moment. In fact being dismissed from the association, with the accompanying loss of all denominational status, turned out to be the finest thing which could have happened to us. It opened us to both a community-wide and a worldwide ministry. Set free from the yoke of congregational authority and the accompanying fickleness of committee restraint, I was encouraged

by my local church leaders to communicate the gospel through both writing and speaking around the world. Such a ministry would never have been possible in the old wineskin.

That did not heal the wounds of the past – it simply made the pain bearable. But having no regrets does not mean I do not feel sad when I think of the separation. I am grateful for the honours bestowed on me by some wonderful Pentecostal colleges, for the opportunity to speak to Pentecostal and charismatic groups all over the world – but deep inside I miss my old denomination.

Yet as I examine my deepest longings I realise it is not recognition I crave, but reconciliation. With that realisation has come another discovery: there is a vast difference between reconciliation and restoration. Restoration means returning things to their original state. Reconciliation means making things right. There is a difference.

I am reminded of the time, as a second year student in the seminary, I decided to take piano lessons. I had taken four years of piano as a boy but had dropped out in favour of football and Saturday afternoon cowboy movies. I had continued to play – but using my own style, limiting my keyboard activities to white keys only. Now, married and in graduate school, I decided to learn to do it right.

My piano teacher worked with me for a year before giving up. 'I'll never be able to restore you to the place of beginning again,' she said sadly. The habit patterns had become furrowed into my mind like the grooves on a gramophone record, never to be changed.

Reconciliation is possible

For most of us it is impossible to turn back the clock and have it the way it was. But while restoration may be impossible, we can experience reconciliation.

A couple in our church went through a nasty divorce several years ago. The divorce was her idea. She wanted out of the marriage. Recently she came to one of our pastors saying she wanted her marriage restored. But things had gone too

far. Her former husband had remarried. Yet while restoration was impossible, reconciliation was not out of the question. With the aid of her pastor she started trying to build a relationship with her former husband and the children she deserted. Her ex-husband, suspicious at first, finally responded. While that relationship has not yet been reconciled, it is moving in the right direction. And, thankfully, things have been made right with her children.

Reconciliation in its pure form means to 'settle or resolve an issue and restore harmony.' Restoration, on a horizontal level, is akin to justification on the vertical level. Justification, in a theological sense, calls for the creation of a situation as it was before the break came. As long as there is any memory of the cause of the division, justification is impossible. Theologically, to be justified means it is 'just as if I'd' never sinned.

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Justification, therefore, can never take place on a horizontal level. While man can forgive sin, he cannot forget it. Only God can actually forget the cause of division ('Their sins and their lawless acts I will remember no more' Heb 10.17). That means it is not only possible to be reconciled with God, it is possible to have the old relationship, as seen in its ideal form in the garden of Eden, fully restored.

Horizontal relationships, on the other hand, can never be restored; but Christians can be reconciled to each other. The key to understanding this is the difference between unison and harmony. When a relationship is restored, we sing in unison. When it is reconciled, we sing in harmony.

My friends who went through divorce will never be able to sing the same note. But they are discovering, because they are willing to work at it, that it is possible to have a harmo-

nious relationship – one of friendship, mutual respect and appreciation for each other. Although restoration is out of reach, reconciliation remains a possibility.

To be reconciled there are some necessary steps to be taken. To start with, someone needs to say, 'I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me.' This will not restore old relationships, but it will provide a bridge over which love can flow. And love is the necessary ingredient to create reconciliation.

In my situation with the church in South Carolina I knew I would have to take the initiative. Shortly after receiving the Holy Spirit I began praying, asking God to provide the opportunity. When we had left town I had denied my guilt. Now I wanted to go back, confess, ask forgiveness and testify to God's goodness. I wanted it so badly it became a recurring night-time dream. I would see myself back in my old church, standing in the pulpit looking out at those faces I remembered and loved, asking the people to forgive me.

When the desire became an overwhelming burden, God opened the door for it to take place. I was invited back to Greenwood to speak – not in my old church but by the local chapter of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship. Word spread through the little community that I was going to speak at the American Legion Hall on a Friday night. Many of my old parishioners attended. Despite the pain which had accompanied our departure almost ten years before, we had been deeply loved by most of the people. On the other hand I had finally understood they were not being malicious – they simply did what they had been taught: if your pastor sins, fire him.

That night, before I shared my testimony to the packed crowd, my wife joined me on the platform. We said we wanted to speak personal words to the more than 200 members of our former church who were present. I knew, in that small town, the rest of the membership would get the message before noon the next day. With tears pouring, the two of us confessed our guilt – my immorality, Jackie's bitterness. We

knew as long as there was aught between us none of us could make spiritual progress. The first step toward reconciliation came in our asking our old friends to forgive us.

We were warmly received. In fact, the former chairman of the deacons who had engineered our departure came forward to awkwardly hug our necks. The couple whose marriage I

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had almost destroyed were there. Afterwards I stood to one side with the husband, who had been a close friend before sin broke the fellowship, and watched my wife hugging his wife. Things will never be as they were. There's too many memories – and only God can 'remember no more.' But we are flowing together in harmony. We are reconciled.

Someone must take the lead

The same is possible for the many who are estranged from former churches and denominations, from former loved ones and family members. How can it be done? By someone taking the lead, admitting guilt and asking forgiveness. It will also take a desire on the part of all, combined with mutual respect and an understanding that God desires all his children to play in the same orchestra, even if we play different instruments.

After 16 years as a non-Baptist I no longer entertain the dream of restoration. I have played on the white notes too long. But I do yearn for reconciliation. I want to play in harmony with those in my former denomination. While the note of F and the note of G may sound inharmonious when played side by side, when surrounded by supportive notes the resulting chord has a beautiful sound. Perhaps, as mutual friends begin to say a good word in the right place,

reconciliation can begin.

Many of my associates are ex-denominational pastors and leaders. Some, like myself, were forced out of the denomination because they spoke in tongues. Others left because they were disillusioned with the structure. Some were excommunicated because of open sin in their lives, but have since repented and are now being used of God outside the denomination.

While restoration of these men to their former posts is impossible – indeed, not even desired by most – it is wrong to disassociate ourselves from each other and refuse to hear what God is saying in both camps. Surely we have all grown up enough to begin to major on our contributions, respect our differences, learn from one another and walk together in harmony. Reconciled.

Differences, unforgiven sin, bitter memories, all loom as unclimbable mountains between me and reconciliation. However, when I raise my eyes from the differences, stop listening to the discordant sounds around me, and focus my attention on the conductor, I begin hearing the beautiful sounds of harmony.

Instead of wanting everyone else to play my note, I see myself as a single instrument. Perhaps a french horn. On occasions I play the melody. At other times I play support harmony. Sometimes I don't play at all. Occasionally I play exactly the same note as everyone else in the orchestra. All that, however, is designed by the composer and directed by the conductor. It's only when I grow agitated with the score – or the trombone player behind me – that I go flat.

The concept that I can be right, and my brother who plays a different instrument can be right also, is too big for me to comprehend. But none of us has a corner on truth. The best I can do is focus on the living Christ. My brother or sister who is also focussing on Christ may be playing a different instrument, but as long as we're both in the same key, using the same time signature and keeping our eye on the conductor, we'll make beautiful music together.

That's reconciliation. ▲