

## What the Heck is Going On?

### *Toxic...Pt.1*

We're starting a new series today about toxic churches. And of course, when you're of a certain generation you can't help but throw in a little vintage Britney Spears – don't YouTube the video kids, it's too hot to handle! But forget “free Britney”, I want to talk about “free the church”. Cause we're in trouble. There have always been scandals in the church. Believe me, I was in High School when the two most famous ministers in my denomination at the time – Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert – made magazine covers and late-night monologues.

And I don't know if it's because of the new social media or new social movements like #MeToo, but it just seems to be a gusher of them one right after the other these days. The last decade has seen the unveiling of the massive sex abuse scandal and coverup in the Catholic Church. Protestants clucked at it until *The Houston Chronicle* broke a massive story demonstrating that the Southern Baptist Church might have been even worse.

I was forwarded an article from my former hometown newspaper just last week reporting that a pastor in my own denomination had been arrested for giving a teenager meth and raping her *at church*. I don't know

him, but it's certainly not the first scandal in my own tribe. And then there are the stories that made national news.

Beloved Christian apologist and teacher, Ravi Zacharias was accused by hundreds of women - many at the spas he *owned*, which by the way, if I suddenly start buying up massage parlors, ask questions - of inappropriate sexual conduct and even rape. He and his organization fiercely denied all allegations and he appeared to duck it with a “could have been more careful” explanation. But then he died in 2020 and subsequent investigations revealed the truth was even worse than initially reported. His ministry ceases to exist today. I have his books on my shelves.

I'm listening to a podcast right now about the collapse of Mars Hill Church in Seattle – a story I followed intensely while it was happening. The founding pastor, Mark Driscoll, was big in church planting circles when we were starting SWFF. He was fired in 2015, not for any sexual misconduct, but for abusing his power as pastor and being a dictatorial jerk. And I can tell you that's pretty rare in pastoral circles. Not *being* one, but being held accountable for it. We had a member of SWFF move out there to serve on staff and it was devastating. And now this church of 5,000 does not exist. I have his books on my shelves.

I never really liked Driscoll – I don't like bullies – but this next one hurt. Bill Hybels founded Willow Creek Church in Chicago in the late 1970's and pioneered the concept of church for the unchurched. I attended a leadership conference there in the late 1990's that literally changed my life and direction in ministry. SWFF was a member of the Willow Creek Association. I say "was" because it ceased to exist last year after dozens of allegations of sexual harassment – covering years of ministry – came to light just months before Bill's upcoming celebrated retirement. There was no celebration. I have a *lot* of his books on my shelves.

One of the men that publicly backed up the allegations against Bill was his former associate pastor, John Ortberg. Ortberg was always my favorite at Willow because he was the theologian. We've used his materials in Connect Groups several times around here. One year ago *today*, he resigned his church after it was discovered that he knew his son was a self-professed pedophile and yet continued to allow him to work in the church's children's ministry, taking efforts to hide the fact from the elders. I literally have *all* of his books in my shelves.

Even worse than the sins themselves, in every one of these cases, the organizational leaders of the church or ministry used coercive tactics to hide the truth about their rogue leader, shame the victims and publicly discredit anyone who tried to make the truth known.

There are a lot of bodies left in the wake of toxic church culture recently.

And those are the stories that make the news. I could tell you of dozens more just within my own sphere of influence. As I've watched so many of my mentors and friends collapse in recent years, I've been playing a game that I call "Last Hero Standing." It's not a fun game. And it leads me to the thesis question for the series, Just What the Heck is Going On?!

I know this may not sound like an uplifting series, but I believe with all my heart it's a very important one. I have been wanting to talk with you about this for some time. It's taken a lot of prayer and soul searching to figure out just how to do it. But before we get to the "what" and the "how", let's ask the "why?" Why talk about this?

I've got three reasons: one is for *you*, one is for *me* and one is for *them*. First of all I want all of *you* to know what a healthy church culture looks like. For some of you, this is your first church and, like a parent in a good home sending their child off to college for the first time, you need to know that not everyone is as nice as we are. My daughter spent her first year away at college last year – she's back home at UT now! – but while she was away she decided to visit a different church every week.

She had a strong Christian group on campus – Chi Alpha – for discipleship, and knew she’d be back here in a few months, so instead of plugging into a local congregation she decided to take advantage of the opportunity of being in the DFW metroplex where you have some of the greatest churches in the nation, of a variety of stripes.

And it really opened her eyes to how wonderful and diverse the Body of Christ is – because she just knew SWFF. But there were a few that after her visit she would call me and I could hear how wide her eyes were, “Dad! That was cuckoo- katchu!” Made her appreciate her dad’s philosophy of ministry a bit more!

So, as much as I hope you all stay in our church family for a long, long time, the odds of *all* of us dying in the church are pretty slim. Unless the building catches fire some Sunday morning. That’s so dark! But people get transferred, families move, seasons change. The heart of a shepherd can’t be about just keeping the sheep in this pasture, but making sure the sheep are as healthy as they can be no matter what the future brings. So I want you to know what to look for in the eventually that you have to look for a new church one day.

Second, I’m doing this for *me*. The Bible is clear that all of us should regularly examine our hearts. Martin Luther’s first rule was, “All of life is repentance.” King David prayed in **Psalms 139:23-24**, “*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*” We should *all* memorize that prayer, but it’s even more vital for leaders. David needed this prayer even more as King in the palace than he did as a shepherd out in the fields.

In fallen human beings, the nature of authority has a corrupting influence. Back when I was in college and working at the Capital as an aide to a State Representative, our office was invited by an energy company to tour the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant. The second unit was under construction and we stood in a spot where, once they flipped the switch - even one time - no human being would be able to stand there again for a hundred years. In the active plant, we looked down into a deep pool and saw the blue glow of the spent reactor rods far down below.

So on our way out, we all had to pass through a radiation scan to make sure we didn’t get anything on us. And I...and I *alone*...made it go beep. And my boss was like, “*Anthony*, what did you do?” Even back then, I was the curious one, poking around in the corners to figure out what everything meant. So I had to go through a more specific machine and it revealed the radiation was coming from my left wrist. They wanded me down and said, “You’re fine.”

As it turned out, I had not done anything wrong – Thank you, Nancy! – but my new wristwatch was giving off trace amounts of radiation. Apparently, that’s not uncommon in certain types of watches. I asked them if that was dangerous, and the radiation specialist said, “Well, if you wore it every day for 200 years, you might develop wrist cancer.” Ok, low risk, but still disconcerting.

Here’s why I tell you that story; it’s become something of a driving metaphor for me. There’s a little book I have read every year for the past 23 years by a Catholic Priest titled, “*In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*”. And here’s why I read it; I’ve read a lot of leadership books in my life. As a pastor, you can’t just know theology, you have to know how to manage a staff and cast vision and shape organizational culture and all kinds of stuff.

But I have found that those leadership books leave trace amounts of a deadly radiation in my soul. Because leadership, by its very nature, is about power. And as the saying goes, “Power corrupts and absolutely power corrupts absolutely.” And I’ve just seen that happen in so many leaders - some of whom I love and respect - who are *way* better leaders than me, that I would be foolish not to take those warning signs seriously.

I’m going to be 50 in two months, so I’ll grant you this may be some mid-life introspection, but I’m dragging you to the examination with me. For years, my favorite poem has been one by Stephen Crane – you may know him for *The Red Badge of Courage* – But he wrote:

A man feared that he might find an assassin;  
Another that he might find a victim.  
One was more wise than the other.

When I was a younger man in ministry, I was afraid some abusive pastor might kill me – my career, my heart, my spirit – it happens. But as I have gotten older, I am much more concerned that I might be the one to do the killing. When we hired Pastor Connor a year ago, in his first full-time ministry position, I was *much* more concerned that I might damage him as a young minister, than that his youth might hurt the church. Much more.

Pastoral leadership is a sacred trust and I want to do it right. Of course, I *don’t* always; and being authentic about that is probably the best way to ensure that a wayward spark doesn’t become a forest fire. I think accountability is important. The Church Administrator has the number of the denominational official above me to call should I ever harass her or cross any moral or ethical line that she might witness. I do that with every new hire.

So part of this series – specifically next week – is going to teach you how to spot toxic pastors. You have to know the warning signs. While creating a healthy church culture depends on all of us in the body working and seeking God together, the reality is, there's one person that has the ability to blow that up more quickly than anybody else...and that's me. If I *didn't* recognize that, you should be worried.

But the third reason that I am doing a series on toxic Christianity – and honestly, the most important – is not for you, or me, but for *them*. The ones who are not yet a part of the family of God. Men and women created in the image of God, their Heavenly Father who wants more than anything to have a relationship with them. And people avoid that relationship for a lot of reasons – but one of the saddest is when they see the abusive dysfunction of that family and simply want nothing to do with it.

Have you seen the bumper stickers? “Jesus, protect me from your followers.” I believe the church is *the* hope of the world. I have dedicated my life to that belief. When Jesus ascended back up into heaven, he left behind as the PR firm of the Kingdom of God...us. The church. And make no mistake, the world is watching. Jesus said, **(John 13:35 NLT)**, “*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*”

I do not for a moment want to downplay the pain to the victims of abusive and toxic church culture, but perhaps the worst thing about church scandals is the damage it does to the image of God in the world. People are already looking for reasons to disbelieve the gospel. Woe unto us if we hand them a reason because of unchecked sin.

So that's why I feel the need to do a whole series on this. Sometimes in talking *to* the church, it's important to talk *about* the church. Yes, it's possible to get too introspective and lose sight of our mission to the community, but we can't accomplish that mission if we're not healthy. It's like my body. I can't go around worried about my health constantly – that's hypochondria – because I won't be any good to anybody. But if I don't have a physical every now and again – if I *ignore* my own health, I'm going to eventually break down, and then I won't be any good to anybody either.

So we are going to spend a month or so talking about church health. Specifically we're talking the health – or lack there of – of a church's *culture*. Let me give you a textbook anthropology definition of culture and we'll clarify it from there. Culture is the patterns of learned and shared behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. It's more than just what's on paper – stated goals and mission statements and such. In fact, it may not even be officially recognized, but you know it when you see it.

Anyone who has been to a Longhorn football game at Royal-Memorial Stadium *and* an Aggie football game at Kyle Field knows those two schools have *very* different cultures. UT's is more laid back – remember when Mack Brown instituted a campaign of “Come Early, Be Loud, Stay Late”? Nobody has to tell A&M fans to be loud. Their football culture is more...fascist?

No, I'm joking, because neither culture is either right or wrong inherently. And this is a Longhorn saying that. No, because individual people are so varied in their personalities and tastes, organizations naturally shape themselves to mirror those varieties. Both to attract people like that, and because that's predominantly who are already in the organization. Would you agree that, in general, soldiers and farmers tend to see the world differently than poets and philosophers? Well, if you understand that, you understand some of the inherent cultural differences between the University of Texas and Texas A&M.

Well churches operate the same way. Some people like high church, some people like more informal church. Some people gravitate to a heavily *thinking* church, and some people prefer more of a *feeling* church. I don't want to put false dichotomies, because we always want to strive for balance, but there's a reason why Pentecostals and Presbyterians aren't the same. I've got advanced degrees with both, believe me, they are different cultures. But both in service of the same Kingdom of God mission – if they are *healthy* cultures that is.

Even within the same denominations. I have a friend who is a fellow Assemblies of God minister. Every year we sign off on the same Statement of 16 Fundamental Truths. We support the same missionaries. But he pastors a Cowboy Church. This morning, they are sitting on hay bales in a barn and the worship leader plays a fiddle – not a violin! They have a cow trough on the stage...and they *baptize* people in it. I've seen it! We have different cultures. But we are both healthy cultures.

When you say you're trying to find “the right” church, what you are talking about more than denominations or creeds, is culture. Not what's written on the wall or the slogan on the t-shirt, but the unwritten rules of what is and *isn't* done. Dynamics of who feels like an “insider”. And while there are certainly a variety of ways to do it right, any culture can become susceptible to toxicity.

I am indebted in this series – especially in structure - to a new book by Scott McKnight, a New Testament professor who I have followed and admired for years. After seeing the same scandals I have, he was motivated to author. “*A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture.*” *TOV* is the Hebrew word for “good” and we'll talk about that later in the series. Listen to what he says about culture:

“The bad news and the good news about culture can be summed up in the same statement: a rooted culture is almost irresistible. If the reinforcing culture is toxic, it becomes systemically corrupted and corrupts the people within it. Like racism, sexism, political ideologies, and success-at-all-cost businesses, a corrupted culture drags everyone down with it. On the other hand, if the reinforcing culture is redemptive and healing and good (tov), it becomes systemically good. A tov church culture will instinctively heal, redeem, and restore.” (17)

Now, who is responsible for a church’s culture? Who shapes it? We all do. Yes, pastors and other leaders exercise a primary voice in shaping and communicating – both in word and action - the church’s narrative, teaching and policies. Ideally they do this in a good way. But the congregation – both individually and collectively – embrace the culture, but also begin to *reshape* the culture as they act in ways for others to see, based on the stated values, until over time a recognizable culture emerges.

McKnight says, “In that sense, everyone in the church is ‘complicit’ in whatever is formed, good or bad.” So you shape the culture and the culture shapes you. You experience this at your work all the time. It doesn’t matter how much money you are making, if your work culture is toxic, you will eventually leave – or become toxic yourself.

I read David Brook’s “*The Second Mountain*” last year and he warns, “Never underestimate the power of the environment you work in to gradually transform who you are. When you choose to work at a certain company, you are turning yourself into the sort of person who works in that company. That’s great if the culture satisfies your very soul. But if it doesn’t, there will be some little piece of yourself that will go unfed and get hungrier and hungrier.” (22) The Holy Spirit just dropped an atom bomb in some of your hearts and you’re going to go home and update your resume!

But the same thing is true of churches. I spent several years as an associate pastor at a mega-church. The thing about a mega-church is they tend to be program driven – so running those programs falls to the staff. I had a prominent church consulate tell me once that no-one in pastoral ministry works harder than the associate pastor of a mega church – the senior pastor carries more of the weight of responsibility – but for sheer horsepower, that’s on the associates. And I can attest to that. There’s more *pressure* on me now, but there was more sheer *exhaustion* on me back then – and I was a lot younger!

So I got pretty good at traveling around and evaluating the underlying culture of some of the largest churches in America. I'd attend a service and look around thinking, "Who's getting kicked in the teeth around here to make this place run like a well-oiled machine?" And I could generally spot them. There are tell-tale signs – a smile that's a little too quick or a little too plastic, very rehearsed answers to every question, no deviation from the party line, a deadness in the eyes.

Now, there was one church – a co-worker and I were actually there to observe their ministry the weekend of 9/11, we got stranded half-way across the country – but we attended services on Sunday and met with some staff members on Monday and we kept saying, "Where are the whips?" And try as we might, we couldn't find any. This was a huge church and everybody we met seemed really healthy.

I actually believe it's one of the healthiest churches I've ever seen. This was a couple of years before we moved to Austin to start SWFF. And we modeled a lot of our organizational structure – *our* culture – after that church. And it has stood the test of time. And the leader of that church, Andy Stanley, continues to be an authentic vulnerable leader who doesn't buy into his own press – at least from what I can tell and I've been watching him closely for 25 years.

And I've never met a former staffer whose said, "Let me tell you the real story." That's one of the reasons he's among my last heroes standing! I pray for him – I really do – because it would break my heart if he fell.

Break my heart, but not my soul. I have learned to take my eyes ultimately off *any* human-being and fix them firmly on Jesus. In the end, I know that Jesus is the only who will never – *could* never – let me down. He is the foundation of my faith and no one else. You have to get to that point also. Including, and maybe *especially*, when it comes to me.

It's like I tell my kids, "I am your earthly father, and I'm doing the best I can. But please do not confuse your earthy father with your Heavenly Father. I know I am your earliest model of what a father looks like, but I am *not* the gold standard. I am a poor copy of the real deal and only He can truly define what a Father should look like. Don't let my flaws, cloud your vision of Our Father who art in heaven."

So a church can go toxic in a couple of ways. No doubt the fastest way is from the leadership. There's an old Italian saying, "The fish stinks from the head down." But it's not the only way. Think of it like a tree. The fastest way for a healthy tree to collapse is if I come along with an axe and chop it down! The lumberjack can kill it fast.



But what if a fungus emerges in just a single branch? If untreated, that disease can spread from branch to branch, limb to limb, until the whole tree is dead and serves no better purpose than firewood. We are all of us responsible for the health of the tree God has given us. The culture of this church.

Thinking about the importance and impact of culture is nothing new. Every reformation movement in church history is about toxic culture every bit as much as toxic theology. The Bible itself is full of examples, both good and bad. “Israel pleased God and all was right in the land. Israel did evil in God’s sight and judgement came upon them.” But in all these stories, the Bible adds an element that is vital to our understanding of cultural formation: namely that The health of a church is shaped by the character of the people who shape the culture.

Our tree analogy is actually very biblical. Jesus often used the illustration of a tree and it’s fruit to teach about the centrality of character and how to tell good character from bad – good culture from bad. For instance in **Matthew 12:33**, when speaking to the leaders of a very toxic church culture in Israel at the time, Jesus said, “*Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.*”

See, you can’t judge the quality of a fruit tree when you plant it. You can’t truly judge the tree until the harvest. When I was a kid, we built a house on several acres – my parents still live there – and we planted an “orchard”, probably 30-40 different fruit trees. And every night my sister and I would be sent out to water those trees.

And they all had the little cards still attached with pictures of plums and cherries and apples, and we’d dream of eating our own fruit off our own trees. Yes, I couldn’t watch my TV shows because I was outside for an hour watering trees. And no, the DVR hasn’t been invented yet. But it would all be worth it with my first bite into my own juicy peach. Would anyone like to guess what percentage of those trees actually bore fruit? Zero! A wasted summer! Not a single sweet fleshy morsel to my parched lips. Bad trees. Maybe bad farmers.

And Jesus felt about the same way towards the “harvest” of his religious opponents. **V.34**, “*You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*” What’s shown on the outside will only ever reflect what is on the inside. When a church faces a scandal or a crisis and all the sudden they act badly – they cover up, they shift blame, they circle the wagons - when you think, “I’m surprised that church or that pastor could act that way, I always thought...” You are seeing the fruit of a toxic culture that was there all along.

Jesus concludes, **V.35**, “*A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.*” Character works from the inside out. In fact, the apostle Paul will famously expound on this idea when he examines character in his letter to the Galatians, by contrasting “the works of the flesh” to the “fruit of the Spirit.” Both of his lists give outward demonstration to what’s actually going on in the heart.

Character always plays an indispensable role in forming, preserving and undergirding a church’s culture. A lack of character in leadership can destroy decades of hard work, vision and growth – in the blink of an eye. And not just church. Mothers and fathers, are you guarding the culture of your home? Teachers, what are you contributing to the culture of your school? Business leaders – especially business *owners* – who is setting the culture of your organization? I don’t just mean outputs – sales figures, branding, widgets manufactured, productivity – for it to last, for it to have a legacy, it’s going to need good character at the center.

These ministries I mentioned at the start; they all did amazing work. That’s why they were notable. They all produced changed lives and changed families. They all did good things for the Kingdom of God...for a season. But in the end, something toxic worked it’s way out from the inside. Character spoiled culture.

Let me read you once more from “*A Church Called Tov*”: “Toxic, flesh driven cultures breed a lust for power, success, celebrity, control through fear, an emphasis on authority, and demands for loyalty. These values may not be explicitly stated, or even outwardly recognized, but as they fester in the heart of a leader, they can’t help but bear bitter fruit, damaging the culture of the church and seeking to destroy anyone who gets in the way.”

But there’s good news; “A Spirit-formed, Christlike culture, on the other hand, nurtures truth, offers healing for the wounded, seeks opportunities to show redemptive grace and love, focuses on serving others rather than being served, and looks for ways to establish justice in the daily paths of life. A Christlike church culture always has its eyes on people because the mission of the church is all about God’s redemptive love for people.” (23)

May it always be said of Southwest Family Fellowship that we avoided the former while living out the latter. This series is about how we – all of us – partner with the Holy Spirit to create that kind of lasting goodness culture. I want to show you explicitly and practically what that looks like. But that will be the last half of the series.

Before we can turn our focus to the positive, we first have to understand the dangers that lead to a toxic culture. Like a doctor, you have to first understand the disease before you prescribe a cure. Next time I want to show the warning signs of a toxic leader – take good notes...for *my* sake...for *our* sake. And then I want us to look closely at a story that I recently came across in a really weird part of the Bible that I think is a warning to any of us with leadership potential. And then after that we're going to talk about what to do when scandal comes to church. You know even if we do everything right, you can't always prevent tragedy from occurring. What's vital is how we handle it when it does.

And then we'll get to the positive stuff. But this matters. It may not be motivational speaking 101, but it does matter. It matters to you. It matters to me. And it matters to a whole lot of people who haven't even been to church yet – and whether they do or don't might just hinge on our culture...and our character.

Look, some of you have straggled in here still bleeding from a toxic church culture from your past. You're amazed you're even *in* church. This may open some wounds for some of us. But we have to risk it. The stakes are high. And I believe the truth is worth pursuing above all.

So I want us to end the first week of this series by taking communion together as a congregation. I want this to be our way – right here at the start – of inviting the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Truth – to have his way in our church. To guide us, to encourage us, to equip us, to correct us...whatever it takes for his fruit to be produced in us. Good fruit. Good character. Good culture.

Let's pray...