**What Makes a Church Toxic?**

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3 Pitfalls that Growing Churches Can Avoid | **By Philip Yancey**

*Church pastors who lead with grace and vision are more likely to experience sustained growth. By helping people unite under Christ, they can confront fear, exclusion, and rigidity, while leading their congregations to health and spiritual maturity.*

When I discuss my recent memoir, *Where the Light Fell*, often I use the phrase *toxic church* to describe the extreme form of Southern fundamentalism I grew up under. I joke that I’ve been “in recovery,” a process of detoxing, ever since.

“Tell me,” asked one podcast interviewer, “What makes a church toxic?” Three characteristics immediately came to mind.

**Fear**

Memories of church from my youth summon up feelings of fear and shame. It was hard to hear the gospel as good news when most sermons centered on sin and hell. Over the decades, churches have played on many fears: a Catholic president (JFK), Armageddon, communism, the Great Tribulation, Y2K, AIDS, secular humanism, homosexuals, socialism, the New World Order, COVID-19. Some of these fears have proved legitimate, but others border on conspiracy theories.

“Perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). A healthy church does not use scare tactics to manipulate emotions. Nor does it deny that we will face frightening situations. Rather, it directs fearful people toward a trustworthy God. The Psalms and the Prophets demonstrate the pattern clearly: again and again, a people facing catastrophe are reminded of a God who is not anxious. “Be still and know that I am God,” Psalm 46 advises, even when nations are in uproar and mountains are quaking.

Yes, we should battle injustice and respond to tragedy, but from a position of calm compassion. The world is still reeling from a pandemic that has affected nearly everyone on the planet. I have talked to pastors who describe congregations torn apart by anger and fear over vaccines and masks. Is this the best we can do in representing the One whom the apostle Paul describes as “the God of all comfort, the Father of compassion”?

**Exclusion**

My boyhood church in Atlanta stationed deacons at the door to turn away as “troublemakers” any people of color who tried to attend. Thank God, our society has moved beyond that kind of overt, legalized racism — and yet bias persists in other forms.

The apostle Paul, once a Pharisee who would not deign to touch a Gentile, slave, or woman, laid down this firm principle after his conversion: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In one fell swoop, he dismantled the walls separating race, class, and gender. Nonetheless, the church has never stopped struggling with these very issues.

“If you want to grow in love, the way to do it is not likely going to be by attending more Bible studies or prayer meetings; it will happen by getting close to people who are not like you,” writes the Canadian pastor Lee Beach. Grace gets tested when we find ourselves confronted with people who are different from us. Do we welcome them? I think of the people attracted to — and received by — Jesus: “heretics” (Samaritan women), foreigners (a Roman officer), outcasts (prostitutes, tax collectors, the disabled, those with leprosy).

I know of no churches who would actively exclude someone of a different race or social class, but I know many churches that just “happen” to comprise people of the same class, race, and political persuasion. What kind of welcome would a homeless person or immigrant receive in such a congregation? Perhaps in reaction to my racist upbringing, now when I walk into a new church, the more its members resemble each other, and resemble me, the more uncomfortable I feel.

**Rigidity**

Church rigidity can take many forms. In extreme cases, an authoritarian pastor can create a near-cultic atmosphere. A series of popular podcasts produced by *Christianity Today* traces the rise and fall of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, which Mark Driscoll led to explosive growth, only to see it implode under his abusive style. A psychologist friend of mine who has studied pastors estimates that 80 percent of them have strong narcissistic tendencies. Why not? We elevate them, literally, on platforms, and assign them the lofty task of telling us what to believe and how to behave.

All too often, narcissistic leaders focus on minor points of doctrine and miss the main message, of God’s boundless love for estranged human beings. John’s gospel describes Jesus as “full of grace and truth.” Rigid churches tilt heavily toward the “truth” side of that balance scale, often piling on rules of behavior that the Bible never mentions.

Once again, the apostle Paul shows a more flexible style. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” he declared to the Galatians, vehemently opposing those who insisted that Jesus-followers undergo the Jewish practice of circumcision. Yet he voluntarily took a strict ritual vow (Acts 18, 21) in order to identify with Jewish believers. Similarly, depending on the spiritual maturity of the church he was addressing, he modified his counsel on such issues as pagan holidays and eating meat that had been offered to idols.

Paul summarized his approach: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” He knew which theological and ethical issues to emphasize and which ones to minimize. Rigidity over minor disagreements, he viewed as a serious threat to church unity. The existence of some [41,000 denominations in the world](https://www.learnreligions.com/christianity-statistics-700533) indicates that not everyone has followed Paul’s style.

**Characteristics of a Healthy Church**

In the last full night with his disciples, Jesus set out a formula for healthy church leadership (John 13-17). First, he got up from the meal and washed their feet, much to their discomfort. He demonstrated that good leaders don’t cling to privilege narcissistically. Quite the opposite: they serve the very ones they lead.

Next, Jesus gave a paramount command that overcomes exclusion: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Finally, he prayed for unity — not only for the disciples but for everyone in history who would follow him. Nothing would bear a more powerful witness to his message. In his prayer, Jesus said, “Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Service, love, unity — Jesus named these as primary marks of his followers.

Have you ever asked a stranger, “When I say the word “Christian” or “evangelical,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?” I have, and not once, not once, have I heard anyone answer with one of those three words.

Worshipers gather together, not as spectators to be entertained, but as active participants. While toxins work their way into the church seemingly without effort, a healthy church will require the vigilance of all its members.

Meanwhile, the real audience sits outside, waiting to see if we truly represent Jesus through our acts of service, love, and unity.

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