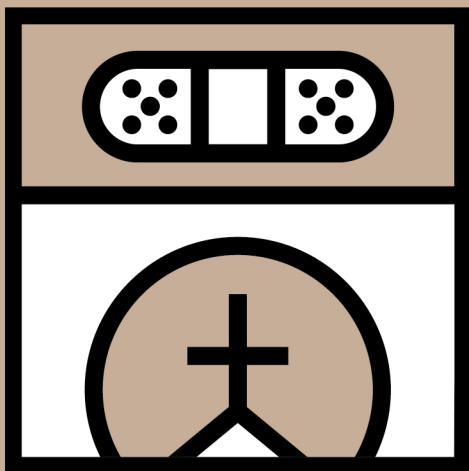


## **IX** 9Marks

# What If I've Been Hurt by My Church?



**Daniel P.  
Miller**

**Church Questions**

## **Endorsements for the Church Questions Series**

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These minibooks are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

**Gloria Furman**, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

**Juan R. Sanchez**, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

“Where can we Christians find reliable answers to our common questions about life together at church—without having to plow through long, expensive books? The Church Questions booklets meet our need with answers that are biblical, thoughtful, and practical. For pastors, this series will prove a trustworthy resource for guiding church members toward deeper wisdom and stronger unity.”

**Ray Ortlund**, President, Renewal Ministries

What If I've  
Been Hurt by  
My Church?

## Church Questions

*Can Women Be Pastors?*, Greg Gilbert

*Does It Matter What I Believe?*, Samuel James

*Does the Gospel Promise Health and Prosperity?*, Sean DeMars

*How Can I Be Sure I'm Saved?*, Jeremy Pierre

*How Can I Get More Out of My Bible Reading?*, Jeremy Kimble

*How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?*,  
Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli

*How Can I Serve My Church?*, Matthew Emadi

*How Can Women Thrive in the Local Church?*, Keri Folmar

*Is God Really Sovereign?*, Conrad Mbewe

*Is Hell Real?*, Dane Ortlund

*What Do Deacons Do?*, Juan Sanchez

*What If I'm Discouraged in My Evangelism?*, Isaac Adams

*What Is the Church's Mission?*, Jonathan Leeman

*What Should I Do Now That I'm a Christian?*, Sam Emadi

*What Should I Look for in a Church?*, Alex Duke

*Who's in Charge of the Church?*, Sam Emadi

*Why Should I Be Baptized?*, Bobby Jamieson

*Why Should I Give to My Church?*, Jamie Dunlop

*Why Should I Join a Church?*, Mark Dever

# What If I've Been Hurt by My Church?

Daniel P. Miller

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*What If I've been Hurt by My Church?*

© 2024 by 9Marks

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover image and design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2024

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9144-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9146-4

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9145-7

---

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Miller, Daniel P., 1962- author.

Title: What if I've been hurt by my church? / Dan Miller.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2024. | Series: Church questions | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023019756 (print) | LCCN 2023019757 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433591440 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433591457 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433591464 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Clergy—Professional ethics. | Clergy—Sexual behavior. | Sex crimes.

Classification: LCC BV4501.2 .M4729 2024 (print) | LCC BV4501.2 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/92—dc23/eng/20231011

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023019756>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023019757>

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP		33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called . . . bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1–3







Healthy churches full of growing saints are breathtaking to behold. God designed churches to protect and build up believers in the faith. And when churches do this job rightly, brothers and sisters spiritually united in Christ can exult in this exquisite gift.

But local churches can also hurt us.

Despite God's glorious purposes, our relationship with the redeemed community can leave us reeling, feeling betrayed, disillusioned, or worse. Maybe you identify with Charles Spurgeon: "The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul

can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour.”<sup>1</sup>

In some cases, the source of church pain is interpersonal. A church member offends you with a biting comment or selfish decision. You feel invisible in the church family that once embraced you so warmly. The trust that a ministry leader previously extended to you inexplicably evaporates. A pastor’s cool disregard seems reserved for you. Your once-joyful trust in the elders is soured by suspicion.

In other cases, you may feel hurt by some aspect of the church’s ministry. A recasting of the church’s priorities seems to uproot years of your devoted service to Jesus. A ministry is shuttered against your earnest protestations. The church’s financial support of a beloved missionary is terminated. A fruitful gospel partnership ends in bitter dysfunction. Financial struggles become a distasteful emphasis. The church changes course in a way that strikes you as a betrayal of its history, if not a betrayal of Christ. The atmosphere of spiritual zeal that once thrilled your soul in the assembly withers

to the point where gathering for worship now proves painful.

Every ministry-engaged member who has walked in fellowship with a local church for any length of time could add a number of examples to these overlapping categories of relational pain.

Amid pain and suffering, we need to remember that we can find hope only in the all-sufficient wisdom of God's revealed word, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the edifying support of Christ's church.

At the outset of this book, let me make something clear. Some Christians have suffered inexpressible pain from sexual or spiritual abuse by church leaders who wield their power in godless, soul-crushing ways. This book is *not* designed to speak to those issues. If that describes your situation, I believe you will find edification in this book as you traverse such dark valleys. But this book doesn't directly address your unique suffering.

This book is addressed to church members who are suffering heartache as a consequence of

disappointments, sinful choices, and relational offenses. It's also addressed to those who want to help such members.

So the question at hand is both straightforward and difficult: How does God's word counsel us to respond when Christ's body annoys us, frustrates us, or even emotionally wounds us?

The pages that follow respond to that very question. First, we'll learn how to *prepare* for the inevitable disappointment, frustration, and hurt that we'll experience in the local church. Second, we'll consider how to *respond* to hurt when it happens. Finally, we'll consider how to *address our own hearts* in their frustration and hurt.

## **Preparing for Hurt in the Church**

We live in a fallen world. As glorious and wonderful as life in the church is, God's people have not yet been fully delivered from the effects of sin. So we need to learn to set our expectations for life in the church aright. Here are four truths you need to start believing right now to prepare yourself for the inevitable disappoint-

ment and hurt you'll inevitably experience in your church.

*First, every relationship you have in the church is ultimately about the reputation of Jesus Christ.* When I am driven by a Spirit-empowered zeal to exalt Christ as Lord and Savior, I will labor to display his reconciling love in the difficult relationships he ordains for me. Such zeal for Christ's glory must rule my feelings. It must overrule fleshly desires that pull me in other directions. My pain is not all about me. It's ultimately all about Jesus's honor as displayed in the church he died to redeem.

When hurt feelings become more important than Christ's honor in the church, sin is certain to shipwreck our relationships. As Christians, we shouldn't be ruled by our hurt feelings. Instead, we need to cultivate thoughts, words, attitudes, and desires that exalt Jesus. If we allow our feelings, especially hurt feelings, to reign supreme, we will cause damage to his church.

Valuing Christ's glory above our feelings or personal comforts is hard. Our self-oriented culture trains us to put ourselves first, especially

when we're in pain. Of course, we shouldn't muzzle our feelings. We must learn to acknowledge and deal with them forthrightly, as we'll consider in a moment. Still, throughout that process, don't ever lose sight of the larger agenda: glorifying Christ and seeing his kingdom exalted. The glory of Jesus displayed in his church must remain our primary ambition amid any pain we endure—even pain in the church.

*Second, personal offenses are inevitable in a fallen world.* Living in a Genesis 3 world doesn't mean we should dismiss or fatalistically resign ourselves to any offense others may inflict. But it does mean that we—unlike the typical politician, media operative, psychologist, celebrity, or national citizen—believe in human depravity. We should therefore anticipate the ways depravity will make our lives difficult.

People will sinfully offend you. Your feelings will get ruffled if not pierced through by the words, decisions, and deeds of others. When this happens, don't be shocked. Nothing strange is happening. Don't buy the lie that your hurt is somehow unique. It's not (1 Cor. 10:13).

You don't plan a summer picnic with friends and then fall into deep depression if the gathering is rained out. You knew it could happen. It's a bummer, but you adjust your plans. Similarly, we shouldn't despair when sinners sin. We shouldn't despair when weak people prove inadequate in ways that negatively affect us. Suffering pain due to the failures of others is a given in our fallen world. We should never react to the sins of others as if we missed this memo.

Realizing the inevitability of hurt feelings in a cursed world doesn't solve that hurt, of course. But it might soften the blow just a bit. It might adjust your expectations and help deliver you from the downward spiral of outrage or shock that someone dared hurt your feelings. The world will not end. You will suffer offense again. But God's grace will help you journey forward in a manner that proves Jesus is indeed your Savior and soul's ultimate delight. Wherever and whenever you encounter sin in your community, know that there and then grace abounds.

*Third, suffering offense presents a God-ordained opportunity to mature in Christ. Stop*



and ask yourself, What might be God's purpose in your suffering, according to Scripture? God has a plan for our suffering—he's sovereign over it. Surely, Jesus didn't ordain suffering in your life to give you the opportunity to vent your outrage, retaliate, gossip, spiral into depression, or withdraw from others in self-pitying resignation and wounded pride.

Instead, God promises in the Bible that everything he ordains for you—even suffering—serves to mature your faith for his glory and for your ultimate joy (Rom. 5:3–5; 8:28–29; Heb. 12:7–11; James 1:2–4). This promise applies not only to times of general misfortune but equally to occasions when you suffer offense.

*Fourth, human emotions are easily twisted by sin.* Emotions are not evil. They are good gifts from God. The Creator, whose image we bear, displays a wide array of holy emotions (Gen. 6:5–6; Num. 11:1; Ps. 2:4; Hos. 11:7–9; Zeph. 3:17; John 11:35) and calls us to do likewise (Josh. 1:9; Ps. 100:1; Isa. 22:12; Eph. 4:26; Phil. 4:4).

At the same time, our emotions have been corrupted by sin. They can sabotage us, compromising our fellowship with God and his people.

Our emotional lives are complicated. Even well-meaning Christians disagree on how to think best about and counsel negative emotions. But for our purposes, let's just focus on the fundamentals. Scripture stresses our moral responsibility for our emotional responses (Lev. 19:17–18; Pss. 32:11; 37:4; 106:32–33 with Deut. 32:48–52; Matt. 5:22; Eph. 4:26, 31). However innocently feelings of relational hurt may arise in our hearts, we are morally responsible for how we respond to and display that pain. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that often our immediate reactions to offense are rooted in sinful desires lurking in the dark recesses of our hearts.

By way of qualification, acknowledging that sin corrupts our emotions doesn't dismiss or delimit the genuine suffering that a believer may experience. Feeling hurt isn't wrong. What matters is how we respond to those feelings. Being hurt by others doesn't exempt us from moral

accountability. Even in the gloom, there is always a visible path leading to righteousness.

By implication, it's never wise to grant diplomatic immunity to any of our emotional responses to relational hurt. We may lack the power to control every aspect of every emotional reaction that other people's words or actions ignite in us. But we are responsible for rightly responding to those reactions and repenting whenever they prove sinful.

These four foundations—the priority of Christ's glory, the inevitability of relational turmoil, God's promise to edify us through trials, and our moral responsibility to steward our emotions—provide the convictions we need to respond rightly to offenses we suffer in our churches.

### **Responding Biblically to Feelings of Hurt and Frustration**

Now that we've got the foundations in place, let's talk about how to respond to personal offenses in the church.