

The Church Must Change

By Barrington H. Brennen

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Last week's newspaper headline about domestic violence on the rise in The Bahamas, which indicated that three out of four persons are affected, is sad but not surprising to me. We boast of being a country where Christianity dominates and about 80 to 90 percent of residents attend church service at least once a month. Is church attendance making a difference? Every week it seems as though a new splinter group from some domination or larger church is started. We have a proliferation of churches but not the growing and sharing of compassionate love. It seems as though the "faith" that is spreading is toxic and not healing.

It also appears to me that far too many people are using church for a "fix-me-upper" and not for long lasting in-depth transformation and inspiration. This is feeding right into many pastors' egos and the need for power and control. Too many go to church each week for an emotional high. In other words, they are so needy or wounded that they are vulnerable to any false doctrine, especially when it "sounds good" or makes them "feel good." Then in the long run they find themselves trapped into a web of spiritual abuse that leaves them confused, troubled, and often disillusioned.

More so, too many pastors are standing before hundreds each week massaging their own egos and need for attention. It is a powerful feeling having hundreds of people look up to you. It is my opinion that all of this, combined with rigid traditional beliefs, is making many churches toxic communities where individuals' rigid traditional family values are being reinforced and not challenged. The result is an increase of domestic violence, child abuse, and intimate partner abuse.

More than a decade ago, I shared with you in this column my concerns about the increase of domestic violence. I also suggested that male domination and spiritual leaders' insistence to propagate marital headship rather than marital partnership was toxic. I shared just a few weeks ago in another article that research now tells us that one of the top ten stumbling blocks for couples is "we have problems sharing leadership equally." The research also indicates that where both partners in marriage are perceived as equalitarian (equal voice, vote, and power), more than 82% of the couples are happy. On the other hand, where both partners are perceived to be traditional (fix on set roles and functions), over 82% are unhappy.

Christian theologians, through their erroneous interpretations of biblical teachings, have laid the foundation for marital discord that often leads to unhappiness, abuse, divorce, and sometimes death. The church is to blame.

TOO MUCH BIBLE

Once again, I want to remind you of what I wrote more than ten years ago. I quoted from Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend's book, "12 Christian Beliefs that Can Drive You Crazy." Here are their findings. It is shocking.

"Christians who had been raised with minimal Bible training were less injured by these false assumptions—supposedly biblical teachings—than Christians with extensive Bible training. In other words, Christians who know their Bibles the best are often injured the most."

Before you come to any conclusion, read their explanation of these findings: "When the person's allegiance to the scripture was combined with dangerous teachings, much pain often resulted."

Certainly we can say that one cannot have too much Bible or be too spiritual. However, what it is saying is that when persons read the Bible with preset, rigid, traditional beliefs, the more they read it, the more toxic and abusive their faith becomes.

There are educated pastors who tell their female congregants that they should “not usurp the authority of their husbands.” There are not so educated pastors who say that “a woman can only have authority if it is given to her by a man.” Neither of these beliefs is true. They are clearly nullified in Genesis 1:28 “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” God gave both man and woman equal authority over the earth and not one over the other. Sin disrupted the harmony and balance of power that existed in the original marital relationship. One of the reasons Christ came and died on the cross is to heal our brokenness and restore harmony in our marital relationship. He came to “restore in us the image of God.” He came to ensure that both men and women will have equal voice, vote and power, not only in politics, community government, but more so, in marriage. Would God have given Adam and Eve authority over the earth and at the same time given to him more authority than Eve in their relationship, when she was created, like him above the animals? This kind of practice would lower Eve to the level of animals she was made to dominate. Think about it.

IS YOUR FAITH TOXIC?

The teaching of male dominance is an example of toxic faith. I wonder how many of us are aware of our spiritual toxicity. Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book “Toxic Faith, Experiencing Healing from Painful Spiritual Abuse” list the forms and variations of toxic faith. They are: compulsive religious activity, laziness, giving to get, self-obsession, extreme intolerance, addiction to a religious high. I will explore these issues in another article.

What makes toxic faith so difficult to understand? When dealing with compulsions or addictions, there is the issue of moderation. If one is an alcoholic, the goal is to either abstain or to use alcohol in moderation. We are to eat certain foods in moderation and abstain from others. Faith is not that way.

“True faith, real and pure faith, cannot be practiced in moderation. One cannot trust God too much or seek God too much. Persons whose faith has grown to encompass every aspect of life are spiritual giants to be modeled. On the other hand, a little faith—a faith that knows only a bit about God—is a form of toxic faith.” *Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton*

Toxic faith prevents one from searching deep into the word of God and one’s life with an open mind. It makes one depend on someone else to guide one’s life more than the Creator. If one can break away from this poisonous faith, there will be a beginning of hope and a prevention or avoidance of abuse in all its forms.

I believe Christians who are most vulnerable to toxic faith are those who are taught that screaming, shouting, and platform theatricals are God’s ways of talking to them. You can hear this in their own shouting back, waving of white handkerchiefs, jumping up and down, and screaming. When the service is over, they are exhausted. They came to church to get their “fix” for the week. But have they truly questioned? Have they truly listened and understood? Was there something to listen to and to understand? Or was it just shallow words, sprinkled with a few Bible texts?

CHANGE THE THINKING

Domestic violence can be reduced greatly in our country if the churches do the following: (1) Reexamine their teachings and develop a balanced theology of marriage, family life, and reconciliation. (2) Admit that domestic violence exists. (3) Stop protecting the perpetrator and not believing the victim. (4)

Develop compassion. The church must be a place where members feel safe to share and where they will not be used and abused.

Since, in my opinion, far too many people in The Bahamas are experiencing a toxic faith, domestic violence will continue to increase. Many of our spiritual leaders need to “detoxify.” Until they cease preaching and teaching male dominance, we will have more victims of abuse. Instead of hearing the words “in charge” and “head” in the context of marriage, let us hear the words “partnership,” “companionship,” “harmony,” “mutuality,” and “equality.” Theology without a social conscience is dangerous. Then and only then, will domestic violence be reduced in our country.

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