

Chapter 2

Church Life Beyond Bitterness

“You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good...”
(Gen. 50:20)

Although no corroborative records are likely to exist, it is probable that many thousands of disillusioned Christians have departed the Local Church Movement. This doesn't exactly sound like headline news. People every day become disappointed with churches and leave them, so what is the difference? The answer is that few Christians who casually change their place of meeting were assured that the group they were leaving was the sole move of God, the one true recovered church in a world brimming with religious Babylon. It is doubtful that anyone leaving some innocuous little congregation was told that their group alone would consummate the New Jerusalem and close the age. Those who depart typical denominations everyday looking for greener pastures, were not likely to have been indoctrinated over years of time with the thought that they were the unique overcomers who alone possessed the ministry of the age. It is also unlikely that these Christians were warned that upon leaving their congregation, the Lord might punish them with personal calamities and then at the judgment seat of Christ cast them into the outer darkness. Obviously, leaving the community church down the street and leaving a Local Church are two very different things.

A powerful disillusionment can occur where people were assured that they were blessed with superior revelation and whose congregations were the only places the Lord would call “the church.” After years spent building up faith in Local Church ideology, emotional distress of some magnitude is certain to occur in the lives of those departing it. People whom I have known spoke of experiences ranging from outrage at being cheated, to mild disillusionment, to (tragically) suicidal depression.

The situational complications are just as daunting. In many cases, those exiting the Local Church Movement have loved ones still loyal to the system who are remaining inside of it. Family relations can suffer strain to the breaking point. In fact, some families have dealt with the issues involved by either avoiding conversations on spiritual topics or by no longer speaking to one another at all. Painful drama even more frequently invades the church itself. Ministers who once supplied spiritual nourishment to their congregations now find themselves at odds with the people they served, the trust relationship soured due to suspicions that he is no longer “one with the ministry.” Or, alternately, groups who were supplied by certain ministers now find themselves on the outs with them, labeled “dissenters,” “opposers,” or “divisive ones” because they are no longer perceived as being “one with the ministry.” Without doubt, there has been enough suffering to go around.

The danger of bitterness

In light of so many bad experiences, a basic challenge lies in not falling prey to bitterness. Paul warned us to continue “looking carefully...lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15). This is all the more urgent where people perceive that years of their lives

have been irretrievably spent obeying and promoting something that has curdled right before their eyes.

Reactions of anger or disgust are going to be predictable, even—dare I say it?—normal. When the Bible says, “Be angry and do not sin” (Eph. 4:26a) it implies a distinction between anger and sin. They are not necessarily equivalent. Check the volatile emotions that Jesus and Paul felt toward the religious authorities of their time and then ask yourself what they would have said to a bland admonition like “Drop it. Just love them anyway.” In other words, feel nothing, say nothing to anyone. Don’t be negative. This spiritual-sounding advice may be appropriate on some occasions, but utilized by a ministerial organization it easily becomes a self-serving tool for damage control.

Anger is not the problem. Knowing where to stop it is. That is why we are also told, “do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (Eph. 4:26b). Negative feelings need limitation. Now strictly speaking, bitterness is not the same as anger. It is hurt or anger that has overcooked. It is the fruit of pain-related emotions that were never effectively curtailed.

After a person abides in outrage for so long, a strange sort of psychological damage can occur. For one thing, bitterness can transform a person’s outlook into swampy pessimism. Life will be lived on a vivid rewind to the past, almost endlessly rehearsing the failures and infidelities of others. This allows barely enough emotional energy to be left over for even anemic considerations of the future. It is unavoidable. A backward-oriented focus all but prohibits spiritual advancement, much like trying to drive a car with eyes firmly planted on the rearview mirror.

We must beware. At risk is our potentially promising spiritual future. Caught in post-game analysis we could forget to actually play the game itself. And this, as they say, is “the whole shooting match.” Regardless of how brazen the behavior of ministry

agents was or all the “he said’s, she said’s” in the world, everything comes down to whether or not we are currently involved with God in His New Testament purpose. We have been told to “disciple the nations” (Matt. 28:19), “announce forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24) and “be zealous unto the building up of the church” (1 Cor. 14:17). We are supposed to be hands-on people, not idle, mean-spirited critics.

Unchecked negative associations could go as far as tainting our sentiments toward the Bible itself (i.e. feeling that 1 Corinthians 15:45 is an “LSM verse”) or against Christian fellowship in general (i.e. feeling that no group of Christians anywhere can be trusted). A worst case scenario might lead some believers to dispense with Jesus altogether. Sadly, I’ve seen this happen. When Christ is confounded with the injurious blunders of a religious group, suddenly there is no place left for the disheartened to turn. All is hopeless. Even Jesus seems guilty. Thus a safe distance should always be reckoned between the organizations of men and the Lord Himself. Christ does not exclusively belong to anyone’s ministry. No one has the market cornered on Him. This is reminiscent of His warning about those who claim a special access to or knowledge of His presence: “If they say to you...Behold, He is in the inner rooms, do not believe it” (Matt. 24:26). No Christian activity has ever successfully caged Christ within its program.

In the final analysis, we risk too much by stewing in the pain of past experiences. Our only option is to move forward. However, doing so means that plumbing of the heart will invariably be needed. Thankfully, there are provisions we can access and things we can do to deal with the onset of bitterness.

Personal Revelation— Understanding Why God Let It All Happen

Perhaps nothing is more profoundly comforting to the troubled heart than a deep appreciation of the Hand that hurts in order to heal. At some point down the road of his life, Joseph found this kind of personal consolation by reconciling the deceitful, hateful, things done against him with the Lord's determined purpose. He told his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Admittedly, all things working together for good is not a new concept to seasoned Christians. Neither is the idea of transformation while in the crucible of suffering. Since these are such well traveled paths, I am going to set them aside for a moment as true, but focus upon another, less talked about concept—that of pain as a provocative measure, divinely allowed to motivate obedience.

When men intuitively know that God approves or disapproves of something, they are often still reluctant to make 180-degree turns. For example, "Even among the rulers many believed in Him [Christ], but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue" (John 12:42). These people knew the negative buzz about Jesus was wrong. Still, they felt that Judaism was too valuable to leave or just too frightening to live without. Even those who did make public professions of faith found the prospect of a life void of Judaism somehow objectionable. This was why after more than a decade in the faith, the elders of the church in Jerusalem were still saying, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20).

These Christians might have told themselves, "Whoa, let's not go too far. Don't get overly carried away. After all, there's still good things about Judaism.

It might be legal and somewhat dead and full of hypocritical behavior, but we don't want to be like the Gentiles, do we?" I have heard these same sentiments aired out by Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies, members of abusive Protestant free groups, and of course, those involved in the Local Church Movement. What will God do for people whose lives have become an exercise of tolerating one new low after another—when they are wedged in neutral, knowing the flock has become a rank religious camp, yet never finding the motivation to leave it? With each new damning realization of the establishment, more sheepish excuses are made to cover it. Even thousands of persuasive words fail to make a dent, as they are immediately diluted with "Yes, I agree that things are wrong, but..."

Enter the blind man of John chapter 9. If God had not intervened, he might have been this type of person, stuck in the same sort of twilight. Being newly healed by the Lord, he had no intention of quitting the synagogue. He probably suspected that having received his sight, he would become a very active, model member of it. But the Lord Jesus had further plans because—"he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). Thus, in short order, the man found himself outside the synagogue. However, the Lord did not lead this sheep out by simply telling him to depart from it. Instead, freedom came through all things working together—unrighteousness, arrogance, and religious darkness. The "unfair" circumstances came together like cogs in a machine and the man found himself on the outside of the camp, with Jesus.

It is doubtful that the man would have left on his own. Had he not been ill-treated, he might have continued in the synagogue indefinitely and perhaps contentedly (of course, with hidden reservations) as a believer in a place that was not pleasing to the Lord. Such is the nature of men. They see no reason to dwell on the discrepancies of a group that at least makes a

show of accepting and valuing them. Furthermore, they would not even consider the possibility of departure because of friends or family ties existing within the group. They will not go, even if the group has ceased to fulfill its scriptural mission, if spiritual life has long since departed, or if communal attitudes begin to starkly contradict the teachings of the Bible. Where these conditions exist, members may flatly deny them, finding it too painful to contemplate the possibility of corruption in something for so long touted as "God's move on the earth." While the saint in question has not been personally hurt or grossly disgusted, his great self-interest will not let him make any trouble for himself.

As a principle however, when discomfort becomes personal, we find it easier to listen and to seek. We become thoughtful; we question things we never would have questioned before. Without suffering we all can get away with neutral positions, playing it safe and to a certain extent, closing our eyes. Men are even capable of recruiting spiritual principles into the effort of justifying wrong. "I know this and that could be better," they say, "But I just need to take my opinions to the cross." No doubt there are times to do that, but when the Lord is telling us to leave or to speak up and we don't do it, talk about the cross is just a smoke screen for rebellion. And when the smoke gets thick enough, God will do something to blow it away. This is where pain becomes a favored divine instrument. Let it come home to roost and the religious platitudes will be left on the curb. Where teachings alone failed to do the job, distress opens eyes and motivates us to act faithfully.

Viewing our potentially embittering past, we should see not only those who did the wrong, but the invisible hand behind them all. Yes, in an effort to control, slander, and conceal, they meant evil, but in an effort to lead us out of a ministry fold, "God meant it for good." If you were hurt in the process, then apply a healing balm to your soul by remembering the Lord's

kindness. When it was time to get out, He showed you the door. When you hesitated, He “helped” you to take it.

Finding grace

A secret of survival in the Christian life is to sometimes “...Find grace for timely help” (Heb. 4:16). This is not the common supply of joy in Christian living but a particular search for a very specific, desperate need. Whether the grace found is the simple assuring sense of the Lord’s benevolent presence or some very practical item, comfort and a sweetened heart is the usual outcome.

“The throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16a) is, of course, the ultimate source of all grace. The exercise of coming forward to it naturally involves dialogue with God. Here is where lessons of sincerity must be learned. Prayers pickled in terminology will not have a greater connectivity to God than regular, heartfelt sentiments. The Lord does not give special audience to conversations loaded with words like “consummation,” “recovery,” “the body,” or “the ministry.” Nor does He necessarily wait to hear religiously appropriate phraseology like “Saturate and permeate every fiber of my being.”

Now and then, New Testament folks need to take a lesson from their Old Testament antecedents—in this case, David, who was the owner of a sometimes sloppy, crude prayer life that was so valued by God that He largely preserved it in the book of Psalms. The complaints, anger, sorrow and cursing recorded there demonstrate the Lord’s almost total disregard for any type of religious correctness and His delight in bare-fisted honesty.

In the past, vigorous efforts have been made to dissect the Psalms and teach them as a body of doctrinal information. Many of the Psalms that wouldn’t lend themselves to that use were then simply assigned a

place as “lower” or “natural.” But genuinely vulnerable prayers make for poor systematic theology. The Psalms never originally emerged as outline material. They are a record of godly men’s personal transactions with the Lord—joy, disappointments, complaints, anger, fear. One scholar even calculated that the “lower” sentiments comprise a full 70% or more of the book. If this is any indication of a typical life with God, we can expect to be having a lot of “wintry” talks with Him.

Extreme honesty of this kind might not sound like, “Lord, I still love those brothers. Bless them” but in seasons of weakness, “Lord give them what they have coming to them.” We gasp at such blatantly dark words, yet in principle, David uttered them to God and probably while playing a harp. Compared to the command to pray for our enemies, they sound natural. Compared to the more prophetic Psalms they appear “low.” Yet, where no one complained and poured out the bitterness of soul more than David did, nobody among mortal men praised God more than he did, either. It seemed that David kept finding grace and his slumps kept turning into mountaintops. In fact, his heights were inexorably linked to his depths. Grace, it seems, will not fill the valley of death until we seek God there in a state of absolute honesty.

Keeping our chin up, sanitizing our prayers, trying to sound like good, decent Christians will result in boredom perhaps, but not the exhilaration of Davidic worship. It is when we are laid out, fully exposed to God in unadorned speech, yelling maybe, or crying, cursing or sighing, that the warmth of grace has any chance to melt away bitterness.

Receiving Fellowship and Counsel

A seething inward condition may need more than being alone in a room with God. Sometimes the conduit

of grace is another person. It is like the story of a little girl who was afraid of the dark and cried out for her parents. “Go to sleep,” they said from the other room. “The Lord is with you.” She laid there for a few moments and then said back, “I know, but I need someone with skin on!” This is often the quandary of Christians who are navigating their way out of a religious maze. They need to know that others understand and can relate with what they are undergoing. The greatest suffering, is perhaps wondering if you are “the lone gunman on the grassy knoll”—the weird one, satanic, blind, and negative who is a “destroyer of God’s building,” while all the rest of “the Body” contentedly marches on in lock-step to consummate the New Jerusalem. Comfort can come through interactions with Christians who have experienced (or are experiencing) the same difficult, problematic things. We need others. God knows this and that was part of His provisional idea when He brought the Body of Christ into existence.

A lot was said earlier about forgetting the past and moving forward. This should not be confused with continuing on in isolated silence, pretending that nothing bad has happened. There are definite benefits attached to reviewing the past. Otherwise, you may repeat it, or, if it has not gotten an adequate flushing out of your heart, it might remain within, negatively affecting other areas of your life. What kind of rearward considerations ought we to healthily have of the Local Church Movement? How about, “What was that, anyway?” Talking this out and venting to others is a form of psychological and spiritual therapy. A friend of mine referred to it recently as vomiting. His tongue-in-cheek characterization makes sense, because when a person is terribly nauseated, vomiting is exactly what is needed. Just keep in mind that the important point in this process is to know where to stop. No one wants to be around a vomit machine.

There are, however, situations requiring a longer time of recuperation. Departing any inflexible religious system can occasionally trigger grave residual damage. Marriages or parental duties, for instance, may have been under such a strain and neglected for so long, that suddenly spouses will level years of pent-up hostilities at each other. Religious browbeating, rebuking, and condemning may have occurred in the home. On another note, some departing members simply experience a deep sense of resignation, seriously doubting whether the matter of the church is even worth their effort anymore. If that is the case, more structured help may need to be sought out.

Proficient Christian counseling can provide this, where spiritual and practical solutions to personal impasses are often reached. Some fine Christian counselors are retained on the staff of larger Christian groups and they are frequently inexpensive. This may not sound like a viable solution to those still somewhat influenced by the Local Church superiority complex (that is, the belief that everything we needed could be found within Local Church borders). In the past it was a given that neither fallen Christianity nor its programs had anything to offer. However, just as was written on so many banners and shouted back and forth in so many meetings, there really is only “one Body.” The Lord has filled it with all kinds of helps, services, and shepherds. It does not reflect poorly upon the group of Christians you are meeting with if you seek help in another place. Neither does it mean that you must abandon those you’re with and begin going to church meetings over there. As I grew up, uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins helped me at various times but I never felt that I needed to pack my bags, leave my immediate family and move in with them. Perhaps we should also view the church in this way—as “the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10) and less as a set of competing religious entities.

Grace through others can be particularly effective in vanquishing destructive forms of bitterness. The multiple tributaries of sympathy and understanding that they provide often add refreshment during the turbulent season of exodus.

Freeing the Bible from a Canonized Interpretation

Sometime during the long avalanche of ministry tapes, books, and messages, the idea began to grow in Local Church circles that the Bible had a canonized interpretation. Nearly every passage and theme had a definite systematized explanation. These were put to music, memorized, quoted, placed on banners, and later turned into “shibboleths,” a language of theological utterances whose regurgitation became proofs of loyalty (c.f. Jud. 12:6). Slowly, real unanswered questions disappeared and where any seemed to arise, a footnote or commentary would quickly dispatch them. In the wake of confident, hermetically sealed interpretations, the Bible began to look as though it had been mastered and exhausted. Anything that anyone needed to know could be found in the “Green Volumes” or “the Gold Bar” or “the High Peak Truths.” Few if any noticed that the principle of “Ye search the scriptures” had become “Ye search the ministry.” As a result, the “plain old Bible” faded from prominence as the sole rule of faith and conduct. Supplanting it was an “interpreted Word”—sprinklings of scripture accompanied with dense ministry teachings. Now the Bible, as it sits in the hands of today’s Local Church Movement, largely functions as proof texts for Living Stream teaching and as a platform to present that ministry’s doctrinal views.

However, as the hymn writer said, “The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.” Wherever that is the case, fresh joy and a renewed sense of mission takes place. Believers who were disappointed with organizational failures become as

enthusiastic little children again, anticipating the “good steak” of revelatory experiences.

Arriving back at this blessed condition is not nearly as difficult as we might think. First of all, it involves understanding that interpretations, speculations, and personal views are different from hard Bible truth. Some teachings are derivations from scripture which are not necessarily the intended meaning of the Holy Spirit. Because they rest on a base of subjectivity and personal opinion, they can be argued, and of course, can be wrong. At times, these ideas are thought-provoking, and creative. They can open a door into deeper understanding. However, apart from the plain sense of scripture, none of them should be treated as divine fiat.

For instance, what do the palm tree engravings on the wall of the Old Testament temple really mean? The petals on the lampstand flowers? The kidneys of the burnt offering? And how about the significance of biblical numbers and all of their combinations? (Is the number seven made of three plus four or five plus two or six plus one?) What does each combination mean? Wandering outside the fixed system of interpretation offered by the Living Stream Ministry, you will find more than a few Bible scholars offering different ideas. When Barnabas parted company from Paul in the New Testament, did it really signify that he was done with God’s move on the earth? Does the book of Acts record a faulty pattern because all the workers on the earth did not line up under Paul? Was Apollos really a factor of division and confusion in the early church? These are all conclusions reached based upon speculation, not incontrovertible fact.

The problem with speculative theology is that when the Devil comes along, asking “Has God said...?” many saints not only confirm it but add the extra, speculative element that they have been assured is also the truth. Based on an accumulation of these special

views and thoughts, they have burned bridges, taken stands, alienated others, and undergone tremendous personal sufferings for the sake of things that the Lord never really required of them. It may take decades for them to finally wake up and realize that much of what governed their lives was someone else's private convictions.

All of this means going back to simple but serious Bible study and carefully handling the Word, line by line, in the flow of its native context. A search of this kind does not look for deep hidden meanings but asks the childlike, "What does the Bible say?" A related but equally valuable question might be "What does the Bible not say?" The fresh light proceeding out of such a fundamental exercise can feel every bit as powerful as Martin Luther's experience of "seeing" justification by faith during the Protestant Reformation. Luther did not invent the idea of justification by faith; he merely saw what Paul wrote with the same primary understanding as Paul intended.

There is nothing wrong with temporarily borrowing a meaning from the Bible out of context to establish a confirmed truth elsewhere in its pages. Nor is there anything wrong with tracing themes or comparing verses throughout the scriptures. Neither of these approaches, though, are the initial step to deciphering core meanings. A competent quest for Bible truth does not begin with ignoring immediate context or hitching together thoughts from Genesis to Revelation. Any coherent document has a flow of logic, a chronologically developing thought and meaning firstly proceeds out of that.

The "pure word" concept has from time to time been bitterly mocked by the Local Church Movement. Sincere but mislead voices ask, "How could you possibly get anything profound from the Word without 'the Ministry?'" I would be the first to testify of the value in others' writings (see the next chapter). We are living on

the far side of 2,000 years of Christian thought and biblical scrutiny. There is no need to pretend otherwise and go about reinventing the wheel. But neither should we become so formed in thought that we second guess the Bible and tell it what it ought to say, as though it were a ventriloquist's dummy.

As a warning, while handling the Word, we will find that sources we are disinclined to follow sometimes got it right. Their understanding in certain doctrinal specifics was correct. This calls for a sense of fairness. Just because someone with overly narrow, legalistic attitudes taught something, doesn't mean that what he taught was necessarily wrong.

Christians departing the Local Church Movement who are overly biased sometimes feel that they must dismantle everything they previously learned and label it as error. This type of search and destroy operation may have serious consequences where a person is driven by emotion rather than calm discernment. The attitudes of the organization and its emphases and policies might have been terribly skewed, but zealously discarding everything that bore an LSM imprimatur will result in the loss of some actual truths. Obviously then, objective balance is the order of the day as we search the scriptures.

For our own protection, we should make sure that our commitments lie with things that the Bible clearly, openly commands and reveals. If cherished interpretations will only emerge after being coaxed out of a mosaic of verses pieced together, or while resting on a foundation of speculative views, then we had better rethink what is being called truth.

In a very real sense, if we want the truth to set us free from insipid religious living, then we must first set the truth free from the shackles of institutionalized interpretations. The Bible yields spiritual blessings to those who handle its facts, not to those who read it through the lens of esoteric preconceptions. It releases

us from the gall of bitterness by igniting a sense of sweetness, freshness, and wonder from within, while simultaneously relieving the pressure of unnecessarily burdening concepts. Also expect that the Word will challenge us in ways we never felt before—in areas that our previous Movement culture had dismissed as “low” and relegated to “fallen Christianity.” Yet even in these new uncomfortable areas of conviction, we will find the refreshing principle of “What I say to you, I say to all” (Mk. 13:37) and no longer excuse away what we don’t like as belonging to an inferior class of Christians.

Reinstating the Authority of the Lord Jesus

The Bible fairly bristles with phraseology about hearing the Lord’s voice and obeying Him. A great example is “Those who are lead by the Spirit, these are the Sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). Such thoughts look beautiful in outlines and sound great in conferences, but were lost in translation among LSM Churches, where it became abundantly clear that traditions, flows, precedent, books, and “blended brothers” determined what the churches were to do. The trickle-down effect produced lethargic local leading brothers who always seemed to be “lead by the Lord” in accordance with influences from the Movement’s upper echelons. Naturally, once this was the pattern of the lead sheep, the rest of the flock numbly followed suit.

The New Testament never lays down the pattern of a bookstore, a publisher, an incorporated ministry, a ministerial headquarters, an influential church, a super-apostle, an oracle, a minister of the age, or representatives of a man’s ministry having any inherent authority over all the local assemblies. Instead, both in the direction of the church and in the individual lives of the saints, the Lord Jesus has the first and last say-so. This does not nullify the fact that churches have legitimate spiritual leadership within

them (more about this will be covered in a later chapter). The principle here is to establish that ultimately Christians must be accountable to their Lord. Each man and woman redeemed by Jesus Christ owes allegiance to Him.

Once members of the church encourage one another to live this way, the Christian existence will tend to become exhilarating. It will be a life spent at the throne, where not only commands are coming out, but an entire river—"A river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1). Those who jump into this river of personal obedience to God will find that their subsequent invigoration will tend to lift them up above bitter past church matters. They will ride the rapids where there is spray, the smell of water, and lots of forward movement.

Be Done With What "They" Are Saying

Over the years, volleys of religious anathemas have been launched at those departing the LSM fold. In melodramatic fashion anyone perceived as an opponent of the Ministry agenda was (and is) often characterized in the darkest possible terms. Witness to this is borne in slanderous books and websites about specific persons and their alleged sins against the cause. Factor in negative public innuendoes, global campaigns, and local rumors and it will become clear that the Local Church Movement spends enormous amounts of energy trying to annihilate foes, mainly through the force of negative words. In the midst of it, the victims are unfortunately all too inquisitive about the sinister spin being placed upon them. It is human nature to want to know what terrible things others are saying about us even if we are personally revolted by what we hear. This is similar to the morbid curiosity people have with carnival freak shows.

And the info seems to leak in from everywhere: the internet, e-mails, the latest reports from trainings, negative letters, and the dirt from phone calls. None of the talk will be good or even fair, but neither should that come as a surprise. Accusatory tirades are very effective in winning majority support in an organization. They will always be the tool of choice in an atmosphere where leaders must vindicate themselves at all costs while utterly crushing any difference of opinion.

Therefore, expectations of a fair trial in absentia before LSM-influenced audiences are completely unrealistic. Knowing this, we can dispense with hopes of being understood and go on to the more important task of protecting our inward condition from becoming embittered.

For starters, disconnect yourself from that world. Delete emails. Tell well-meaning zealots not to bother you anymore. Of course, complete insulation will not be possible in all cases, especially if you have relatives still in the Movement, but you can neutralize considerably how much maligning chatter that you hear. You will not be missing anything. Judgmental gossip from the bowels of the Movement will never improve your spiritual life level. It will only create hate within you for others. After sapping huge stores of emotional energy, it is doubtful that you would even want to follow the Lord at all. Those manipulative emails, “burdened” phone calls, and the bizarre, fanatical insertions into youth Xanga sites and face books should be seen exactly for what they are: messages of death. Distancing ourselves from that realm of ugly words will cool our emotions and slow the downward spiral into bitterness.

Getting Busy with the Things You Have Been Commissioned to Do

Nehemiah described his great work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem as simultaneously negative and positive: “Those who built on the wall and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon” (Neh. 4:17). The typical experience of building up the church is also a dual one— “the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil. 1:7). However, it is all too common for the saint to find himself only holding a sword. He constantly fights but has no time to build. His outlook easily changes from hope for the future to an endless combativeness. As a means of diffusing this troubled state, nothing surpasses the benefits of being occupied with constructive efforts in the kingdom of God. This generates excitement by granting the sense that God has not vacated our lives. He is still strongly at work.

In my own experience during darker days, I made sure that I was always discipling someone—no, not talking to them about “the situation,” but pursuing the Lord with them through Bible study, traveling to new places, figuring out new ways to reach others in the gospel, and praying. I also wrote a few books and conducted workshops to train brothers to minister in the meetings. If the dust began to settle, I would give conferences anywhere I was welcomed. I eventually found myself too busy to abide in outrage or anger. After all, God was using me! The other elders of the church here also did the same thing. Together, we spent time fellowshiping what the saints needed as well as visiting Christians in town and commiserating with them over what they were doing. We prayed and planned and carried things out. Despite a slowly developing division in our church, which brought us all

a certain constant level of suffering, morale still steadily hovered at a high point and why wouldn't it?— God was using us! At times we were forced to discuss and implement measures to deal with the newest LSM-generated strategy against the churches in our area, yet we were typically excited about things we felt led to do, like neighborhood outreach opportunities, weekday Lord's Tables, young couple's Bible studies, morning classes for non-working saints, new improvements to our meeting place, picnics, coffee houses, and special events that would meet the present needs of the church (everything from parenting to debunking The DaVinci Code). In the meantime we arrived at two very important conclusions: 1. Pondering the negative antics of Ministry enthusiasts to the point that it became our focus did nothing but infuriate us. 2. As long as the positive direction of the church was kept at the hub of our fellowship, we always found the steam to accomplish new things and be happy about them.

Quite unintentionally our mindset can be like the citizens of some old totalitarian regime. Suddenly freedom sweeps in, creating new opportunities everywhere. What are we to do? By default we could continue to meet and rehearse the wrongs of the former system. Engrossed in our bitterness, we could keep doing that for years, turning a blind eye to newly opened doors and remaining dismissive of fresh possibilities. However, we do not have to live that way. There is such a thing as life beyond wounds inflicted by the Local Church Movement. A new mindset, an honest relationship with God, an open Bible, and supportive fellowship with one another can deliver grace that acts every bit like a spiritual antacid. In the encouraging wake of these things, the future and hope quotient among us will then definitely be on the increase.