Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church

Carol Howard Merritt \ Reviewed by Laurie Reinhart

I recently talked with someone I hadn’t spoken to in some time. His wife had just passed away unexpectedly, and he was still reeling in the shock and confusion. Perhaps because grief has a way of cutting to the chase, he confided that he and his wife had left their church years before. I was surprised because I knew them to have been very involved with the church at one point in their lives, and yet not surprised in that I knew their faith tradition to be—in my estimation, anyway—toxic. I understood their decision to have been one driven by a desire to embrace health and truth, yet I was saddened to realize that in their minds, leaving that particular church meant leaving faith behind completely.

It is a tragic story that is repeated thousands of times: believers leaving Christianity completely when they leave a church or faith tradition that has wounded or abused them. This dynamic is what makes Carol Howard Merritt’s *Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting With a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church* such a welcome book. Merritt writes from the very core of her being as she recounts her journey from being submerged in a toxic, abusive church culture to redeeming her faith by traveling a difficult path to healing. She speaks with the wisdom of a lifetime of accumulated experiences and wrestling with difficult questions. In her words, “I wanted people to discover a safe place where we could speak honestly about all the bitterness caused by the church . . . while finding a way to hold on to the sweetness and wholeness and healing” (p. 9).

Despite her woundedness, she found herself unable to walk away from Christianity. Instead, she chose the difficult path of staying and learning how to hold on to the sweetness while refusing to sugarcoat the dysfunction, abuse, and toxic lies that had scarred her. In so doing, she discovered a major emphasis of her ministry work: helping others heal from the “staggering” suffering people endure in the name of God.

The book begins with a pre-emptive apology; the author invites us to “Hold this book lightly. If you’re coming from a more conservative background, as I did, please don’t think that you have to believe (or not believe) everything that I do to continue reading the pages . . . If I say something cynical or sarcastic about a belief you hold sacred, I apologize.” And *Healing Spiritual Wounds* is difficult reading at times, especially for those from a very conservative background. Merritt tackles meaty topics, such as healing our images of God, getting in touch with emotions we may have learned to deny or hide in the name of God, and learning to love oneself in spite of toxic theology to the contrary. No belief is beyond questioning, and readers will find themselves alternately challenged and relieved.

A chapter on “Redeeming Our Broken Selves” characterizes the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace” as a “damnable message” that emphasizes our utter wretchedness rather than the fact that God is “well pleased” with his children. In the chapter “Reclaiming Our Bodies,” Merritt traces the toxic view of females which Augustine bequeathed to the church centuries ago and which has developed the hard shell of doctrine. She then relates her experiences at Moody Bible Institute where she argues this view still makes its home today. In “Regaining Our Hope,” she challenges the eschatology of churches where beliefs about the rapture undermine believers’ (especially young believers) security and hope in a good God. The chapter on finances as a spiritual issue and its entanglement with a transactional view of our relationship with God is a discussion that begs to be had at many, if not most churches.
This book tackles difficult topics and beliefs in the context of the spiritual harm that they can inflict. The last chapter, titled “Being Born Again,” considers the female witness to God’s work that is missing from much of church history. To be fair, she notes that patriarchal religion is not exclusively a Christian problem. It is here that her journey ends, and she comes home to a new understanding of her faith in which she has found healing. But it is here that we also catch a glimpse of bitterness that has not shown itself until the end of the book, because her portrayal of patriarchal religion degenerates into equating evangelicalism with the “religious right” and portraying evangelicals as a caricature, uniformly opposed to working women, birth control, and gun control, and generally lacking in humanity or common sense. Evangelicalism is far more diverse than the theology of her youth, which she found to be a poisonous stream and believes to be universally toxic.

This is ironic, because a harvest of bitterness is exactly what spiritual abuse yields, whether causing believers to leave faith entirely behind, or to summarily dismiss entire streams of faith traditions. But Merritt's book is, while at times difficult to read, a substantial contribution to an emerging and essential conversation about the damage that twisted faith inflicts on God’s children. Her calling is to bring healing to those damaged by spiritual abuse, and Healing Spiritual Wounds is an important book that deserves to be read.

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LAURIE REINHART is a native of Southern California, where she currently makes her home in Orange County. She serves as Director of Consultant Development and as a Senior Consultant for the Genysys Group, an organization dedicated to helping organizations and individuals see and reach their best futures. Laurie works across sectors, including a focus on church and faith-based organizations. She is a member of the Evangelical Friends Church, where she has served in a variety of lay leadership roles. She currently serves as a coach for emerging leaders for Evangelical Friends Church Southwest.

Ms. Reinhart holds an undergraduate degree from Whittier College, and a master’s degree from Azusa Pacific University in Human and Organizational Development. She serves as an adjunct faculty member for the Azusa Pacific University School of Business and Management, for the Barclay College School of Business.
Healing Spiritual Wounds addresses the church's dichotomous image— as a safe space and as a dangerous place—and provides a way to restore personal faith and connection to God for those who have been hurt or betrayed by established institutions of faith. Merritt lays out a multistage plan for moving from pain to spiritual rebirth, from recovering theological and emotional shards to recovering communal wholeness. Merritt does not sugarcoat the wrongs institutions long seen as trustworthy have inflicted on many innocent victims. (Selected) Published Works: The award-winning author of Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation, Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation, and Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church. Carol is a frequent contributor to books, websites, magazines, and journals. Healing Spiritual Wounds addresses the church's dichotomous image—as a safe space and as a dangerous place—and provides a way to restore personal faith and connection to God for those who have been hurt or betrayed by established institutions of faith. Merritt lays out a multistage plan for moving from pain to spiritual rebirth, from recovering theological and emotional shards to recovering communal wholeness. In her new book, Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church (Harper One, 2017), Carol Howard Merritt tells her own story of moving from the punishing theology of her childhood to a new understanding of love, mercy and forgiveness.