

Perception gap: Two tales, one church

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

Two church members came in to talk to me on the same day. The first said the church had betrayed her, limited her, injured her. She described the church as indifferent, cowardly and sick. The second member said the same church was her lifeline and her salvation, her family and her divine appointment.

I have been in ministry for 38 years and have heard variations of this situation over the decades, but this was the first time that the prongs of contrasting opinions skewered me on the same day. How in the world could two Christian women see the same church in such different light?

The first, whom we will call Jane, is 55 and married, with two children grown and out of the house. Neither child has married; both are on successful career tracks. Jane was a successful financial consultant until the recent economic collapse, but now she's out of work. Her husband had an up-and-down career as an entrepreneurial businessman. They went through a long dry period until he landed a high-paying job. They had been members of East Bay Community Church for eight years.

Her husband thrived in the church, but she told me she'd been shunted aside from serving—marginalized and never invited into leadership. Her passion was discipling women, but after leading a small group for two years she'd been asked to discontinue her ministry.

In spite of appearances, the family was deeply in debt and threatened with bankruptcy. Jane had caught her husband in an infidelity that led to disclosure of a long-term pattern of betrayal. She confided her marriage difficulties to one woman who shared the news with others and set off gossip. She accused the church of being into "avoidance and denial" because no man in the church had confronted her husband. "I am asking for a divorce," Jane said, "but nobody in the church will support me."

The second woman, Suzanne, is in her late twenties and had arrived at the church through a long, “coincidental” series of connections that she ascribes to God’s leading. She had been devastated by a ruptured engagement and a series of lifestyle experiments gone bad. She was unemployed and searching. But she knew people were praying for her and was sure that God had led her to this church.

She came in unannounced one Sunday and was greeted and seated next to a family who almost adopted her on the spot. Her first language was Spanish, and this couple spoke Spanish. Invited into a group of young adults who “prayed her into a job,” she soon found herself on a ministry team reaching out to others. “This church is God’s gift to me, his way of redemption.” She has a close circle of friends and seems to be healing and growing.

What are a pastor and congregation to learn from this contrast in opinions? Is East Bay a cold, rejecting church of hypocrites who are not interested in people or their development, much less caring about their tragedies? Or is it a warm, inviting, enfolding, redemptive community of disciples following Jesus and his way?

I have encountered some variation of this issue in every church I have served. I’ve heard the following comments made about a church:

- The church is not friendly [*versus*] They reached out to me
- The worship is irrelevant and mechanical [*versus*] The worship is transformational
- I have grown so much here [*versus*] I am not fed here
- A church that preaches the word of God [*versus*] You just don’t preach the word here
- This church is run by an insider group [*versus*] I really appreciate the open, transparent process

All these things were said of one and the same church!

As a pastor, I confess to having experienced all these feelings at one time or another about the churches I have served. I’ve been embraced and rejected, enraptured by worship services but also disgusted. I have sometimes grown but at other times stagnated. I’ve been loved and hated, included and excluded, heard and ignored. I felt thoroughly betrayed by one powerful figure, but at many other times I have

been deeply moved by the faithfulness and honesty of godly people.

Perhaps the church is a kind of Rorschach experience. People see in it what they impute to it and find what they expect to find. Suzanne believed she was led there by God, so every connection was of God and blessed her and confirmed her direction. Because she was positive and open, she attracted positive and open people.

Jane was there because her husband liked the church. She would have preferred something “a little more high church, like the Episcopal Church.” Because she was critical and disgruntled from the start, she gravitated toward those with the same mentality. She had no sense of God placing her at East Bay for a purpose.

But perceptions of church are more than a Rorschach test. Churches have identities. Some are cold, harsh places run by a power elite, seemingly devoid of grace and lacking a vision. Others are truly enfolding, however, and have a clear vision and seek to serve the Lord. Yet, even given these identities, a newcomer may encounter a cold, harsh church and find his place there, while a newcomer in an “enfolding” church may conclude that it is a hard and barren place fit only for jackals.

Perhaps humans and their conflicting experiences in church are like Lego pieces in a hastily assembled Lego project. Some fit well, some fit but look bad, others fall out. Some fit on all points, others on a few. Let me suggest a few tentative and partial answers to that question of “fit.”

First, a church is not monolithic; it is not one thing. There are some in it who may be cool and calculating, and others who are warm and inviting. Whom one meets first is very important. The people Jane knew, for example, seemed more interested in discussing the “biblical basis for divorce” than in Jane herself.

Second, a lot depends on a person’s presenting needs. An apparently wealthy, successful family that does not seem to need grace and care is in many ways hard to relate to, while a single person who openly seeks connections and help may spark an eager response.

Third, timing is key. The church itself undergoes character changes. East Bay had gone through a dark period ten years previously when the senior pastor resigned suddenly and left behind huge tensions and misunderstandings. He had told people they too should leave the church and many did. Blame and recrimination had

colored much of church life for a period of time. By the time Suzanne arrived, however, much had changed. The church had recovered and was far more mission-oriented and joyful in its corporate life. Perhaps she would have had a very negative encounter if she'd arrived ten years ago.

Fourth, people tend to find what they expect—they fulfill their own prophecies. East Bay has a refugee family from Africa. Its members are fully part of the church. With the help of an outside organization, a few people from East Bay met the family members, helped them move and tutored them. When they came to a worship service, they expected churchpeople to welcome them and love them, and that's what happened. On the other hand, a homeless man attended a few times, then asked me for financial help. I was able to help him a few times but finally had to say, "No more. Here are some other avenues of help." He left angry, saying, "Are you acting like Jesus?" He knew rejection would come at some point, as no doubt it always did. Sure enough, he found yet another un-Christlike church.

Fifth, people end up in circles of like-minded people. Hostile people find themselves in angry groupings. Those with a victim mentality find each other, as do hopeful, gracious people. Experiences of church reinforce preconceived perceptions. A woman who comes from a conservative fundamentalist background is pleased with the freedom in Christ experienced at East Bay but is very explicit in saying that the pastor and other leaders "mistreat the scriptures." She sits with a group of like-minded people during worship and Sunday school. East Bay also has a number of missionaries (on furlough, retired or in transition). They too have found each other and believe that the church has done a good job of emphasizing missions.

Sixth, bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Jane's trust was betrayed. It's true that no one had confronted her husband. (Did anyone know enough to do so?) The worship was too informal for her, and maybe she did not get enough support during the difficult divorce proceedings. Even good churches can and do fail their members.

Seventh, people generalize from particular experiences and apply their generalization to the whole church. The church, however, is not an institution so much as a living organism. The church does not let people down per se: people let other people down. The church does not restore and renew people per se, but the Holy Spirit regularly uses us to restore and renew others.

Still, people will always generalize from specific encounters. “This is not a friendly church” may derive from one incident and be extrapolated to the entire congregation. A warm embrace and somebody remembering your name leads you to call this “a warm and friendly church.” One man in the hospital complained bitterly that “the church” never visited him. In truth, about a dozen people stopped by—but no one “official” from the council or the pastor himself. Thus “the church did not care about him.”

Eighth, much depends on what satisfies a person. A number of people at East Bay are minimally involved in church and are apparently very happy with everything. They have no drive toward leadership, no particular philosophy of worship that they need to defend. Others who strongly desire leadership roles have an agenda they push—often for the good, but not always. They are less content and would say the church is “not open to change” or “the church dismisses me and my ideas.” Those in this group experience a high degree of frustration. They push hard but don’t see the change they want.

Ninth, some personalities either perceive things differently or create for themselves different realities. Though I have no data on this, I wonder, for example if INTJs would tend as a group to have a different view of the church than ESFPs? How would “artisans” and “rationals” differ? “Cholerics” and “sanguines”? How about “Type As” and Type Bs”?

Tenth, people identify with the experiences of their friends and family. Their personal experience of the church may have been good, but they hear that their friends’ teenagers are going elsewhere, so they begin to agree when someone says that their own church “does not prioritize youth.” My own mother was badly treated by the pastor of her church. How easy it would be for her or for me to say that the church “disrespects the elderly.”

Encountering a church is like meshing spinning gears. A good synchronization will ensure a smooth change. My father’s old Ford Customline didn’t have synchromesh on first gear. Downshifting into first meant double-clutching. Sometimes gears meshed, but more often there was a terrible grinding sound and a lurch. Some people, either because of personality or a timely call of God, will mesh perfectly and love the new rpm. Others will grind away and teeth will break. Iron filings will ruin the lubricant. Expectations have to mesh with realities and personalities with leadership styles. Initial encounters must be in sync with felt needs.

Beyond all of this, interpretation colors the whole of a new relationship with a church. Is this encounter “from God” or is it a coincidence? Is the new worship style and emphasis on God maturing me, or is it a violation of my theology? Does the gossip teach me anything, or is it just a reflection of a snotty, mean-spirited church?

My plea here is for self-awareness. Yes, we need to find churches that “fit us” and challenge us, that embrace us unconditionally and confront us honestly, that speak truth to us in love. But let’s not move to declarations that the church is this or that. Let’s be humble enough to say, “I felt this way or that” or “This was my experience.” Some may be seeking the kingdom and find only the household of God. Others may need the purity of the Bride but find the people of God. By the grace of God, many who are seeking God will find him in God’s church.