

When the church lets you down

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

February 17, 2015

Dottie was a Steel Magnolia, the sort of strong, beautiful Southern woman whom I always aspired to be like (and somehow always failed). Her relief was palpable when she made the decision to join our church. “After being in a religious environment that was so terrible for women, I’m so happy to find a spiritual home,” she said as I hugged her.

Sometimes people who are past retirement age can make their first major religious decisions for themselves—apart from what their parents expect, apart from what their spouse would endure, apart from what their children want. It brings a sort of elation when it happens.

I met Dottie when I was just starting out as a pastor. The Southern Baptist Church had declared that wives should “graciously submit” to their husbands. There were many women in the Deep South who had been Baptist all of their lives, but this declaration still hit them like a boulder. With those two words, their fate was solidified.

It would look different in different contexts, but for many, women would not be able to pay the bills or have any control over the finances. Some women would be forced to stay at home, far away from the workplace, even when that led to financial ruin. Women were expected to submit, even if their husbands were drunks and needed a spouse who wouldn’t enable them. In the worst cases, women would be forced to stay in abusive relationships. And certainly, women would not be allowed to lead churches.

Dottie had enough. So after a few months of stewing at home on Sunday morning, she found her way to our church, because it was one of the only congregations in town with a woman pastor. My heart still bursts with gratitude as I think about how she supported my burgeoning call with such relish. Her trust allowed me grow into the pastorate.

I have an overarching narrative in my preaching (besides the one that's in the biblical text). I grew up in a conservative church, uncomfortable with damaging theology. When I became part of a progressive denominational church, I found life-giving theology and learned to read the Bible differently. Many times I explain verses in the context of "this is what I was taught this passage was about, but now I realize it means something else."

As a result, the people who joined the church often had the same reaction that Dottie had—whether it was about being a woman, being gay, or simply being able to ask a question, people had this profound relief when they discovered the church that was right for them.

While I welcomed them with open arms, I also had a lurching gut. Because as much as I wanted to pat myself on the back and believe that they would be utterly free of disappointment, I knew that they wouldn't. I would mess up. The church would let them down. Sooner or later, they would find out that they exchanged one set of issues for another.

Of course, I'm not saying that people should never leave one church for another, or that all churches are equally disillusioning. I have never regretted walking out of the church of my youth. My denomination is a beautiful one, with theology that challenges me. They have allowed me to live into the fullness of my calling. I learned grace from my denomination. I will be eternally grateful.

But I do not hold a utopian vision. They have disappointed me. And I know that they will keep letting me down in one way or another. It's horrible, but it's inevitable. Whether we're joining a stodgy denominational church or an emerging movement, it's like any relationship, you try to find the best, healthiest one, and then you just realize that they're going to mess up. You're going to mess up. If they don't disappoint you in this lifetime, then they have surely done something horrifying in history.

Many people walk away from church after being disillusioned. They stop going on Sunday morning, and somehow shedding that one-hour habit on Sunday makes them free from religion.

For me, it's never that easy. I have not been able to walk away from church. I suppose that some people are scientists. Other people are mathematicians. Others are artists. I am religious—in its institutional and spiritual forms. My head swims with

myths and mystery and it would be a dismal, colorless world for me if I ever stopped thinking in that vein.

I think about the Seder meal. I often ate a replica of one as a child, in our church's attempt to try to understand and appreciate our Jewish roots as Christians. We would bite into the bitter herbs to remind us of the rancor of slavery. My glands awakened with the horseradish, as vapors filled my nostrils and tears welled up in my eyes. Then, I would eat the sweet herbs, and all of my senses responded with gratitude. In those two mouthfuls, we tasted the bitterness and sweetness of life. I suppose that savory lesson stuck with me.

We gather, longing for life and love and the taste of something divine. So when the bitterness hits, it is horrid. But the reality is that the church will always let us down. Sometimes the best of ideals will bring out the worst in us. It is tragic. It is painful. And it is true.