

# INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO CHURCHES

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Once upon a time, there were two churches. To the casual observer, they were very similar. Both sought excellence in their weekend worship services. Both were passionate about the authority of the Bible. Both were committed to reaching the lost. But a tragedy would define their differences.

## **The Two Churches**

Church one we will call the “Church of Painful Openness.” This church encouraged self-reflection, healing, and the need for accountability. Poking and prodding were common experiences in their leadership meetings. Church of Painful Openness loved their senior pastor and had instituted an aggressive annual review process for personal development. Their pastor was a leader among peers in leadership discussions and the environment was one where the whole team made decisions. Openness and honesty were key values through every area of the church.

Church two we will call the “Church of Awkward Avoidance.” This church found emotional struggles off limits. They believed that if people would simply pray in private, things would get better. Church of Awkward Avoidance had a blind trust in its senior pastor and rarely questioned his vision, strategy, or hiring decisions. Their pastor, they believed, was God’s representative and was not to be questioned in leadership meetings.

### **Warning Signs**

These two churches were similar to the casual observer, but one tragedy would reveal their systemic weaknesses. That tragedy would be the discovery of infidelity by their Senior Pastor. Both churches would be shaken and heart-broken weeping at the failure. Their respective responses to their tragedy, however, would show just how different they were.

#### *The Church of Painful Openness*

It happened like this at the Church of Painful Openness: People got busy. John and Vicky had done a beautiful job leading a thriving youth group. But they moved away. John had accepted another position out of state. There wasn’t enough money in the budget to hire someone, and no qualified volunteers stepped forward. So, Pastor Paul took on the role of youth pastor in addition to all his other duties. Ralph, who chaired the board, took his wife on a six-month dream vacation to Europe. With Ralph gone, Pastor Paul busy, and everybody’s summer vacation schedules so hectic, the board decided to take four months off and resume meeting in October. Mr. Anderson passed away, and the family requested weekly visits from the church for Mrs. Anderson who could no longer attend services. Of course, that fell on Pastor Paul. And for some reason, the counseling load doubled.

Pastor Paul and his wife Veronica were used to the stresses of ministry, and usually managed to carve out time for their marriage and for their two children, Meg and Josh. But the youth group meeting now fell on their date night, and by the time Pastor Paul got home at night he was physically and emotionally exhausted.

“Something’s gotta give,” Veronica told him. “You can’t keep up this pace.” The roof needed repair, and Josh was getting into trouble at school. Nothing major, but these things needed attention, and Pastor Paul just didn’t have the margin to deal with them. Conversations grew tense. Tempers were short. Arguments flared, and there seemed to be no relief in sight.

“I don’t think I know this man that I’m married to,” Veronica confided to her best friend Sandi. Sandi lived five hundred miles away, and she was the one Veronica could turn to. “I keep trying to get him to listen, but he’s like a zombie. I think he’s functioning on three or four hours of sleep a night.”

Pastor Paul’s sermons were usually warm and encouraging, but lately they had taken on a more strident tone. Deacon Murray liked the new preaching style. “Gotta put the fear of the Lord in folks,” he said. But others weren’t so sure.

Amid all of this, Meredith entered Pastor Paul’s life. She was an occasional attender at the Church of Painful Openness. Now that her husband was leaving her for someone else, she needed someone to turn to for comfort. *She chose Pastor Paul.*

He understood her. Unlike her husband, he was warm and empathetic. Their counseling sessions started out at a half hour once a week. Then twice a week. Three times a week. Pastor

Paul suggested she come in after Sally, his secretary, had left for the day. He didn't want Sally getting the wrong idea.

The nice thing about Meredith is she listened to him. Veronica was getting harder and harder to get along with. She didn't understand the stress he was under. But somehow, Meredith did. Somehow, they were right for each other. She was like a soul mate.

Pastor Paul can't remember when he first kissed her. She was so hungry for affection and wasn't getting any at home. Surely a brotherly hug and kiss would be medicine to her soul. It was medicine for them both. About four weeks into the counseling, they just stopped counseling altogether and went straight for the affection they both longed for.

The dam inside broke. Pastor Paul felt like a kid in love for the first time. He canceled his weekly visit with Mrs. Anderson, and didn't bother going home.

At 9:00 p.m., Pastor Paul's wife Veronica started to get concerned. By eleven o'clock, she was frantic. She called Sally, but the church secretary wasn't aware of any late-night obligations on Pastor Paul's schedule.

At midnight, she called the police. After that, she sat by the phone praying, fearing the worst.

At 2:30 a.m., she got a call. Officer Frank, who attended the church, was working the night shift.

"Yes," he told Veronica, "I found Pastor Paul's car." It was parked at a local motel. Pastor Paul was alive and well—but their marriage was not.

*The Church of Awkward Avoidance*

It was a similar, yet different, story at the Church of Awkward Avoidance. Pastor Al kept up appearances because that's what you do at church—especially if you're the pastor.

Things were not well at home. Twice in the last month, Terri had threatened to leave him. "You're so in love with your stupid church, and you don't care two cents about your family. If you don't make some changes," she shrieked, "I'm packing my bags, taking the kids, and going home to Mom."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He had heard that one before. I should have never taken her to that marriage seminar. She hasn't been happy ever since.

"You two fighting again?" Amber, their fourteen-year-old asked.

"None of your business," Pastor Albert replied.

"What else would you expect in this house?" Amber's twin brother Andy piped up.

*Typical sullen teenager*, thought Pastor Albert.

"You think you can take in these pants?" Pastor Albert asked his wife, ignoring her outburst.

"You gotta be kidding," Terri said, her hands on her hips.

"You want my pants to fall off when I'm preaching?" he replied.

"Wear a belt," she said, and then turned around, walked into the bedroom, and slammed the door.

"Forget it," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. Let's see. Margie used to sew for people before her husband was

killed in that car accident last summer. Maybe she would do this for me. After all, I am her pastor.

The visit with Margie was a breath of fresh air. Of course, she would be happy to take care of this, and any other clothes that needed altering. Must be nice—losing weight.

“But aren’t you hungry? Could I make you a sandwich?”

“No, no,” he lied, but she saw through it and made him a sandwich anyway.

“No trouble,” she reassured him.

Such a pleasant and beautiful young woman—five years younger than Terri. Too bad she didn’t have someone.

Pastor Albert was already ten minutes late for the board meeting when he looked at the time.

“Oh, my goodness,” he said. “I totally lost track of the time.”

“I did too,” she said smiling and looking into his eyes. “I did too.”

On the way to the board meeting, he couldn’t get Margie out of his mind. He mentally went through his wardrobe, and smiled. *Yes, he told himself, I’ll definitely be back.*

The board meeting was worse than usual. Everybody knew that Tom was trying to take over the church. *Just because he owns that dealership and has more money than anybody in the church, he thinks he owns the place,* Pastor Al thought as he sat there fuming.

Finally, he could take it no longer.

“Look,” he said, “whether we build this addition or not, what we do for outreach, what songs we sing on Sunday morning—none

of that is going to matter if we're not going to be a church that follows the Bible.”

“What do you mean, Pastor?” Tom asked.

Pastor Albert picked up his Bible and found the passage he was looking for. “My Bible says, ‘Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.’”

That didn't phase Tom at all. “Yeah,” he replied. “Well, I've been looking at the budget numbers. And I know for a fact that this church will not make it if it takes a fifty-thousand-dollar budget cut.”

Tom liked to throw that number around a lot. Everybody knew what it meant. It was the annual giving total from Tom and his family.

In the months that followed, Pastor Albert found himself spending more and more time at Margie's home. His clothes were all fitting better now, even though she had to bring them in twice.

She wondered if maybe he was losing too much weight and took it upon herself to make sure he was properly fed. They had many dinners—candlelight dinners. It felt nice to cook for someone again—her favorite recipes were like old friends she hadn't seen in a long time.

It was amazing how much Pastor Al and Margie had in common. They understood each other. Two lonely souls, adrift, finding comfort in one another's company. They were like brother and sister. No, more than that . . . something much more.

Each time he left, he lingered a little longer on the doorstep, saying goodbye. And then, one night it just happened.

They were in love. They knew it. It was time to stop pretending.

It was Tom who discovered their affair. He had a sense that something was not right. He had tried to speak with Pastor Al, but as usual, the subject was changed and it never went anywhere. But, Tom could not let this sense go on. He smelled something fishy, and since he had recently worked with a private investigator on another matter, he already had the contact he needed to check it out. The private eye had photos within two weeks.

Tom called a secret emergency meeting of the board on Sunday night out at his dealership. Pastor Albert was not invited. He showed the board members the photos. Everyone was heart-broken—not shocked, but deeply and profoundly saddened. They called Pastor Al, asking him to come to the emergency meeting the next night. Pastor Al had a resignation letter in his pocket. He pulled it out and handed it over, then turned and left the room. Everyone was silent and in shock. “Well, I guess we don’t have to fire him now,” said Tom.

What would they do next? Who needed to know? And, what about his wife and kids? How would they be told? Who is going to preach next Sunday?

### **The Aftermath**

As news spread of Pastor Al’s resignation, the leadership of the Church of Awkward Avoidance tried to carry on as usual. The leaders did not want the church to stop functioning, so the weekend services were covered with a few guest speakers on topics they chose. There was no formal mention of Pastor’s

Al's absence—but everyone felt it. There were whispers in the lobby, conversations over lunch after services, and lots of phone conversations in hushed tones. The leaders wanted to have a session about gossip in the church, but decided it would be too messy. “We are ready to move on and find our next pastor.” That line began to be repeated in their leadership meetings. Pastor Al was gone and there was no need to “bring up the past.” They began talking about the search committee and who could sit on that team.

Meanwhile, over at The Church of Painful Openness, the leaders had scheduled a congregational informational meeting by sending out an all-church letter. They commissioned the executive pastor to do some investigative digging to see if there were other issues that may have contributed to Pastor Paul's failure. They wanted to be able to answer the question: Is this the only incident? In addition, they contacted Harvey, their insurance carrier, and were put in touch with legal counsel. The person involved with the pastor was a counselee and there was fear that this left the church open to suit. Thankfully, their insurance coverage had a clause related to clergy misconduct, and so additional dollars were available for potential expenses. The congregational meeting was long, emotional, and very messy. There were tears, some anger, lots more questions than could be actually answered. But in the end, the church was called to prayer and to grace. “We are going to look in the mirror and see what we need to do to make sure we learn from this wrenching tragedy.”

Church of Awkward Openness made a simple unrevealing statement that Pastor had resigned and was moving on. On the following Sunday, they had hired someone to fill the pulpit, never to address the former senior pastor's abrupt absence. He

was there one day, and gone the next. People wondered why, and some even felt abandoned. Others gossiped, imagining the worst scenarios imaginable. Church of Awkward Avoidance never really recovered. Trust in leadership, especially future senior pastors, was never restored. A pervasive understanding was developed that there are some things you just don't talk about. Finances dried up, passion was muted, and routine maintenance became the norm.

Church of Painful Openness, however, took a different path. This path was consistent with the culture of their fellowship. While many felt abandoned and disappointed by the outgoing senior pastor, the leadership gave a clear and concise summary of the discovery and called the pastor to repentance and restoration. The process involved tears, hard conversations, costly counseling, countless meetings, and a determined approach moving forward for the next several years. The church body was called to deepen its roots in prayer. People were challenged to be careful about sin, since anyone could fall.

The restoration process concluded with a return to fellowship of the fallen pastor, and eventually a return to the freedom for him to pursue ministry. This church would later rebuild ministry momentum, reaching many broken people and planting healthy churches in new communities.

### **The Purpose of This Resource**

How could two good churches have such a dramatically different approaches with vastly different outcomes? What could every church do that would be reduce the possibility of moral failure and or follow a path to recover when such catastrophic agony occurs?

This book is about the pathway forward. It is about the systemic processes to help church bodies truly recover from the moral failure of its leaders. We will talk about health and recovery, while also putting into practice accountability that's rooted in grace.

Tragically, moral failure is all too common. Few churches ever really fully recover. Even fewer churches experience restored relationships. The complexity of issues moral failure stirs up seems to have endless layers. But if each layer is wisely managed, you and your church can experience real, genuine healing. That's is the aim of this book.