

continued from front

But let's flip the script. What if you were the one running late for coffee? I am sure you would have a solid reason that makes sense to you. The bus was late. Your kid forgot their lunch at home and you had to drive it to school for them, which put you behind. External forces, not poor character, explain your lateness. Do you see the difference? When we understand this cognitive bias, it makes it so much easier to show grace to our late friend. After all, we would hope that our friend would give us the benefit of the doubt if the situation was reversed.

We can (and must) apply the idea of fundamental attribution error to church hurts too. It has been said, "Do not attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence." A bit harsh, I know. Let's tweak this statement just a little to say, "Do not attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by ignorance, misunderstanding, tiredness, or triggers." The truth is that the vast majority of harms, even the ones that happen within church contexts, are delivered with relative innocence. Now, that doesn't mean they aren't painful. If I accidentally trip you and you break your arm on the sidewalk, it hurts every bit as bad as if I had pushed you deliberately. In the same way, please don't hear me say that your emotional pain isn't real. Frankly, you might be on the floor right now with a metaphorical broken arm. We aren't arguing about the painfulness of our wounds, just the intentions of the ones who inflict them.

This principle makes sense when it comes to physical wounds. But the good news is that when trying to heal our hearts from emotional wounds, getting clarity about our harmer's intent will help us to heal more quickly and more

fully. Here are some questions to ponder on your own or even to ask the person who hurt you:

- Why did they actually say or do what they did to you?
- Can you know for certain what their motivation was, or is it possible you have "filled in" some of the unknowns in the story?
- How was the painful thing they said or did related to a wound from your past?

Just as Proverbs 18:17 says, "the first to state his case seems right," we too almost always create a case against the person who has hurt us. It's human nature. We tell a story in which they are the "bad guy." But here is my challenge to you: choose to also be the proverbial second person who comes to cross-examine. Test yourself. Challenge your own assumptions and consider the situation from the other person's point of view. Your feelings are always valid, but it is possible that distorted facts (or historical hurts) are fueling some of them.

No one is the villain in their own narrative. Virtually no one in the church wakes up and thinks to themselves, "Who do I get to hurt today?" This is also true of the person who hurt you. Needless to say, that if you are being mistreated by someone in your ministry, please reach out and get help. It is never okay for you to be abused within God's family, or anywhere else.

You might also be thinking, "Why is it on me to change my thinking when she is the one who wounded me? It sounds like you are defending other people's abusive behavior." This is an absolutely valid point. The truth is that this response is not fair. It is not "just" in the earthly sense.

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CONNECTING DISCIPLES IN CHURCHES AROUND THE WORLD



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May 14, 2024 • Dr. Sean St. Jean – Vancouver, Canada

"The first to state his case seems right until another comes and cross-examines him." – Proverbs 18:17

If you have been a disciple of Jesus for any length of time, chances are that you have been hurt by a brother or sister in Christ. Maybe that person was a peer. Maybe a leader or someone you've led. It might have happened decades ago during your campus ministry days, or the hurt may have been inflicted last week. As I explained in my first article in this series, Satan invariably attempts to capitalize on these wounds to sell us a lie.

And you may not know it, but there's a good chance that at some point on the journey, you've hurt people too. Given that we are all sinners living in a fallen world, is that any surprise? Just as with our physical bodies, our hearts accrue damage over time. This mostly takes the form of many little nicks and scratches, likely some major sprains and bruises, and maybe even a life-threatening injury. My counseling practice is filled with people suffering from all kinds of these church-related heart wounds, and this is the topic of my recent book, *Spiritual Trauma: A Guide for Healing Your Heart from Church Hurts*.

Yet what makes these emotional and mental wounds even worse is a commonly experienced cognitive bias called "fundamental attribution error." Okay, now stay with me! I know that this term is a mouthful, but the concept is not hard to understand. What's more, understanding this trait of human nature will give you a powerful tool to help you to recover from the spiritual hurts and even mistreatment you've suffered. Fundamental attribution error is simply our human tendency to attribute others' failings to some flaw in their character, while attributing our own failings to external events outside of our control.

Let's say that you have agreed to meet a friend for coffee and they are running late. As you sit there tapping your fingers on the table, chin in hand, you might be tempted to attribute their lateness to carelessness or a lack of discipline on their part, especially if this isn't the first time they've kept you waiting. Or even worse, maybe they just didn't seem to care that much about you. Maybe they think it's a chore to meet with you and they find you boring. We can invent all kinds of explanatory narratives, can't we?

