

The Case for a Grief Ministry

One of the benefits of living in the time period that we do is the opportunity to spread the gospel through numerous avenues of ministry. Obviously nothing replaces old fashioned preaching and one-to-one sharing of the story of Christ. However, it's the many "ministry arms" of the local church that have multiplied those opportunities. In addition, because of our advanced, modern society our churches are able to offer an unlimited number of ministries to our own members. We've established elementary and secondary schools, colleges, camps, bus ministries, kids clubs, senior's ministries, special needs ministries, nursing home ministries, boy's and girl's homes, men and women's recovery ministries, food pantries, radio/TV ministries ... the list is endless. All it takes is a calling from God, a willing servant and a local church. And yet, even with all that our churches are involved in there is an area of great opportunity ... and desperate need ... that few churches are taking advantage of. That is the area of a church grief ministry.

At first mention, many would simply reply they recognize that grief is a definite factor affecting the lives of many of our members, as well as, the lives of the lost that we are striving to reach. Many would also state that grief is best handled with preaching, Bible study, prayer and occasional counseling if necessary. It's obvious that all of these methods definitely assist the bereaved as they travel the road through grief. However, I would like to propose for the reader's consideration some further aspects concerning the subject of grief both inside our churches and within our culture. To begin with we first need to look at the many misconceptions about grief.

Definition of Grief

A general consensus about the definition of grief is that it is the natural reaction to a significant loss. In reality grief is much, much more than a "natural reaction". Grief may be the outward symptom, but the damage that is inflicted is actually an internal injury. I will explain in more detail through the rest of this article, but the truth is that grief can affect our lives as much ... and at times even more ... than any other event we may ever experience.

Misunderstanding of the Effects of Grief

Grief may very well be the most ignored and least understood "injury" and yet still have the most devastating effect on our lives. Consider the following scenarios.

Scenario one ... You and your family are traveling together in the same vehicle and the unexpected happens. You're involved in a major accident. You are the only one hurt but the result of your injuries is the loss of a leg. Your recovery calls for weeks/months of medical procedures then weeks/months of physical therapy. After that comes job retraining and undoubtedly several years of readjusting to a different lifestyle. Family, friends and co-workers all pitch in to help in any way they can. In most cases insurance covers much of the medical costs. Additionally you are flooded with contributions from friends, church members and even people you don't even know. In short, other Christians, churches and society itself all rally around you to provide what support they can.

Now consider scenario two. You and your family are traveling together in the same vehicle and the unexpected happens. You're involved in a major accident. This time you're not injured. Instead, one of your children is killed. Your "recovery" consists of flowers, calls of condolences from friends and co-workers, a visit from your pastor ... and meetings with the staff from the funeral home. Then, after three to four days, the funeral is over. Friends and co-workers have gone back to their normal lives. Your pastor has switched his focus back to his usual responsibilities with the church ... and your boss expects you to return to work and perform as usual.

Next we must answer the questions - Which scenario "hurts" the most, has the most devastating effect on our lives and yet gets the least amount of support? Which scenario creates the most questions as to "why" and "how will I ever recover"? Keep these scenarios in mind and we'll come back to them shortly.

Lack of Support for the Bereaved and Grieving

It's obvious that in our modern society and modern day churches we don't allow for grief to interrupt our lives. We try to ignore it as much as possible. We hope and pray that it doesn't target our family. Then when we encounter those who have been attacked by this enemy we have no idea how to relate to them so we never bring up their loss. We try to carry on as if life is the same and expect the bereaved to do the same. Simply stated, grief can be one of our cruelest and most debilitating enemies and yet we devote so little resources to conquer it. Our secular culture addresses grief mostly as an "emotional" condition that carries with it the stigma of mental instability. In other words if you are having problems quickly getting back to life after a traumatic grief event then the issue is a definite flaw on your part and you need to get it together. Our churches, for the most part, treat grief strictly as a spiritual issue. The conversation goes something like this. "Well my brother, just trust in God. He'll get you through this." Or maybe, "All you need is a little more faith!" Unfortunately there have even been instances when those that are grieving have been "unofficially" characterized as having a lack of faith and thus are guilty of the sin of not trusting in God. The truth is that grief is more than emotional and it's more than spiritual. Grief is also a *physical* and *mental* issue.

What about the children

Grief in children is an area that is tragically overlooked by most of society and almost all of our churches. If there is a lack of support for grieving adults then there is practically no support for grieving children and teens. Yet, a child is affected as much by grief as any adult. Children simply handle grief differently. Their outward reactions to grief are different than adults, but they suffer just the same. If we treat our grieving brothers and sisters in Christ with a "Just have more faith" type of response then how do we treat children that are grieving? I'm afraid the answer far too many times is "He's just being a rebel" or "You need to get your kids under control when you're at church!" When it comes to children and teens we don't even treat grief as a spiritual issue. In fact, for the most part, we don't recognize that grief in children even exists!

Consider This

Grief has no feelings but pain. It shows no emotion but heartache. It attacks the old, the young, the weak and the strong. It descends upon the rich, the poor, the good and the bad. It shows no favoritism. It gives no warning. Grief arrives in many forms. It may be the death of a loved one, the betrayal of a trust, the destruction of a relationship or the loss of a lifestyle. The effects of grief are comparable to wounds inflicted by any physical, emotional or mental injury. It attacks our memory, our feelings and even the joints and muscles of our body. Then, just when we've hit bottom physically and emotionally, spiritual confusion sets in. Doubts begin to arise about the truths we've always believed in. Why did this happen? Is God really good like I've always believed? The questions are overwhelming and the answers seemingly never come. I really hesitate to state this but in my research over the past eighteen years I've found that the secular world and even many liberal churches have addressed the grief issue far better than have our independent Baptist churches. If you would permit me to be quite candid ... "*Brethren this must not be!*"

Treatment of the Grieving

Let's go back to the two scenarios that were described above. In scenario one we would obviously treat the injured person with the proper medical procedures and with prayer. Thus we apply *both physical and spiritual* treatment to the situation. However in scenario two we only apply spiritual treatment such as prayer and Christian empathy. I think we'd all agree that scenario two is far more devastating yet we apply so little attention to treatment and recovery. Why is this? Although there exists multiple reasons for such responses please allow me to mention just three.

We don't understand the overall effects that grief has on us.

Grief attacks its victims spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally. That's why you can get sick at your stomach, become "weak in the knees", suffer memory loss, think unimaginable thoughts and even doubt some of the spiritual truths that you've believed in for years. If losing a leg (Scenario 1) is much less devastating than

losing a child (Scenario 2) then why don't we treat it that way? We would never think of treating the loss of a leg with only spiritual methods yet we treat the loss of a child with only prayers and spiritual comfort. Grief is more than a spiritual issue and thus we must address it as such.

We don't know how to relate to those who are grieving.

We don't know what to say ... or ... we say the wrong things. We feel uncomfortable, uneasy and doubtful about using the right words and making the right gestures. The end result then is that we end up *ignoring* the person who is grieving rather than risking an uncomfortable or unwanted situation. To *not* fellowship with someone in grief only adds to the injury that they are already enduring.

We don't know how to develop and operate a grief ministry.

Our churches are well experienced in operating the various ministries that the Lord has called us to. We conduct conferences, write books and provide college courses on practically every ministry imaginable. However, when it comes to ministering to the grieving we usually relegate that issue to the subject of Christian counseling. Thus it is treated only as a spiritual issue and not the multi-faceted problem that it really is.

The purpose of this article is to motivate us all to consider the need, opportunity and the blessing that a grief ministry has to offer. Obviously the answer is to get our churches involved in ministering to the grieving. As with any ministry endeavor it must be carried out with the proper motivation, with properly trained people and with the guidance and blessings of the Lord. There is a great need within our own membership and an untouched mission opportunity to "a people within a people". Is God calling you ... or your church ... to get involved in a *Grief Ministry*?