

Coffee with Phil. 30. Frustrated with Church

Introduction.

Well, hi and welcome to the podcast. Welcome to my Sunday afternoon. I'm Phil Strong and I'm your host for this podcast, and I'm enjoying my Sunday afternoon coffee in the middle of the day, looking outside and wondering what the rest of the week will hold. But just thought I'd jump into the studio and share some thoughts with you, and I've gotta be saying, you can tell by the heading of this podcast that this could be a little contentious, I would say to you, be careful how you listen to this. I'm hoping this is not a rant, and I've written notes to make sure that I do my best to ensure that it's not a rant, and in fact, to be honest with you, I'm wondering if I'm even going to publish this. So, if you're listening to it, it means we got it across the line and all should be well.

This is a personal confession. This is a window into the heart of a church leader, because Coffee with Phil Episode 30 is called 'Frustrated with Church', and I've gotta couch this a little, I gotta be careful. But like I said, this season of the Coffee with Phil was about me being a little more open, honest, and even transparent, and this is kind of the stuff that I'm processing at the moment, amongst everything else.

So, I thought, what the heck, you know, I'll share it with you. If you care at all about church, as in the body of Christ, the group of believers that gather together in the name of Jesus. If you care at all about the church, then you might want to listen to a few of these. But I'm pretty much gonna let you reflect on what it means for you, because in my notes here I've got all these little circles with the initials PS in them, and I guess that's me talking about me.

So, look, I hope this is reflective in a way that shapes you. But look, as I talk about being frustrated with church what I do not want you to do is to use this as an excuse or a justification to support your own issues and the baggage that you're carrying. Do not tempt me to come and sort you out, because I by no means am I going to endorse, support, or encourage anyone to have a negative attitude towards church.

So, what I'm not saying is I don't love the church. What I'm saying is I'm frustrated with the church, and I think what you might hear today is me really putting the emphasis back on me around what am I going to do about it. So, I'm holding myself accountable to this. I make this public because I have got people who come back to me to discuss some of what I'm talking about, and also I have a group of people that are supporting me on my journey and if they listen to this and they think I'm off the mark or wacko, then they'll definitely be doing something about it. So, let's get into it. I've got one, two, three, four headings, you'll be able to see them in the transcript and the notes that we provide, the show notes are yours for your benefit.

Disconnected and Disengaged.

But let's get into issue number one. What frustrates me as a church leader is people who are disconnected and disengaged, and this is on me, this is as a church leader I really have to put my hand up and say we've done you, if you're a church member, we've done you a huge disservice over the years because we have trained church people to be attendees, to be observers and consumers, to expect something that I call a 'done for you programme'. We've trained people to turn up at a certain time to a certain location, to sit in a certain seat and to watch what happens and assess it to see if they're happy with it.

You know, look we even call it a church service so that you can expect good service and then you can complain if you don't get good service, or in fact, worst case scenario, if we don't meet your needs then you go somewhere else, and oh my gosh, if I had a dollar for every conversation that I've had with someone that says, look, we're moving on because we're really just not feeling like the kids programme suits the season of life we're in, or my needs aren't getting met, I want a different style of teaching, or we just don't like the way you serve the coffee, the service isn't good enough.

And my viewpoint on this, and I actually, what comes to mind, this is one of my notes, but let me just tell you this story. We came back from living overseas at the beginning of 2010. We connected with our church that had a new pastor, well, new to me, been there just over a year. We sat down and said to them, you know, look, this church is our home church, we've been here a long time, but one of the things we've learned in our travels is that God has us on a journey and in a season and we've come to learn that the church we connect with is the church God calls us into, and I told them the story. We were in Florida, and we went along with our friends to their church, and it was very similar to the church we came out of at home, it was modern, and Pentecostal, and dynamic, and the guy gets up to do the communion message and I'm in tears weeping at the, just the beautiful personal message that he shared around the communion table, and then I find out he's not the pastor, he's the graphics guy, but he's on staff, and the message hit the point, for me, just where my heart was at and I was responding, and I was like, 'God, this is beautiful, thank you for calling us into this church', and quite clearly, the spirit of God said to me, 'this is not the church I have for you, you will find the church that I have called you into while you're in this space'. And we ended up in the United Methodist Church, you know, which wasn't modern, wasn't Pentecostal, but was where the Lord called us. And so please don't tell me that the church is not meeting your needs. That's just evidence you haven't talked to the Lord about it.

But, what am I doing to shift this and I'm really, I'm doing my best to reshape how we gather. Whether we're gathering in a large corporate environment, and we're worshipping together, and ministering to the Lord, and seeking to edify each other and grow in partnership. In that space, I'm really trying to make things a little bit more participative, a little bit more around being activated, by being active, and you know, there are some people that like to come to church and watch, and they sit in the same seat, and they look past the back of the head of the person in front of them, and for them that's church, but I'm trying to change the normal. I'm trying to change it.

We've even shifted up things and we have a lot more small gatherings now around a table in people's homes, and we break it down to maybe three or four couples, and just this morning we had a bunch of people in our home and you know, we had some time of fellowship and prayer, but we also had a conversation and my expectation there is that each one has something to bring and add to the conversation that will bless all of us, and so there's a central point, there's a focus. I have some questions that I use as conversation starters, but the point I'm making is, please don't come to my house and expect me to do church for you.

Over-fed and Under-Utilised.

Which leads me to my 2nd frustration, and I've chatted to a couple of friends about this, who are pastors, and not so much as a rant, but more of a download, and we had this chat the other day where we felt like the church is over-fed and under-utilised.

Now hear me when I say this. Look, I love a good preach. I love expounding the word of God. I love motivating people and calling the action. I love working under the annoying, the Holy Spirit to do things that are far beyond my normal strengths, gifts, or talents. I love of a good preach. And the truth is, every time I open the Bible, I discover there's endless content. The Bible is living, and active, and dynamic, and could shape our lives through, and will shape our lives through eternity.

But here's the question if you're a church member, and you've been in the Church more than 5 minutes. I have to say this, do you really need another sermon? Have you not already heard hundreds of sermon? And have you finished applying them? What did you do with the last message you heard? Yeah, I think we've got fat Christians that don't do anything with what we feed them, which makes them over-fed and under-utilised, which might also indicate that they're overweight and out of shape.

Here's what I'm trying to do, and so point this back to me. What am I doing to try and make the church stronger than my limited capacity as a church pastor? It's about helping people to understand who they are. What are your gifts? What are your passions? What's the assignment God's given you. Now just even this morning, I was speaking,, challenging questioning, probing in a conversation to say, what is it that God has said to you? And what are you doing with it?

You know Kathy, she was part of the conversation and her language was, you know, around her personal confession. She's like, look, I know what God said to me, I just have to choose to be taking responsibility with what God's said to me.

Because there's no doubt in her mind that she knows. And so, here's my confession. Here's my statement for accountability, is that as a church leader, perhaps my role is to help people to uncover and to invite the Holy Spirit to blow breath on dead bones, dry bones, to bring alive gifts that are laying dormant, that are given by the Holy Spirit for the blessing of the church. We just recently did a study on Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, and the gifts that God gives to the body of Christ is for the edification or the strengthening, so that the body of Christ can be made more complete, and so as the leader of the church, you know, I'm wanting to pray for people, and with people, that God would light them up with what he put inside them and as a result of that we have a church that's active, and in shape, and getting stronger, instead of sitting there fat, eating all the chippies and the cookies. So yeah, here's what I'm doing.

Hiding in Isolation.

Anyway what's number 3? Number 3, this is a tough one for me because I don't always get access, in so far as being able to fix this one, but one of the things that's frustrating for me, and I look around the church on a Sunday and I wonder 'Where, so and so. I haven't seen them for a while', and you reach out to them and they say 'oh, you know, we've just decided we could have a season at home for a while', or 'we're quite busy on the weekend, but you know we'll dial in online, we'll watch the, we'll watch the replay', and what I find as I explore that further is usually people are upset with church, in some way, and so they're staying away, and in the rare instance that I get to discuss that, 'cause usually that's a hiding, that's not up for discussion, that's hiding away.

But sometimes it's bitterness. There's an offence, someone said something or did something that caused an offence, or there's a hurt, you know, perhaps someone was treated harshly, or they felt like they weren't honoured, or they were dishonoured in some way, and cut out of a ministry, or a team, treated poorly. Maybe there's shame.

I have discovered. I got given this advice from a friend of mine who's a much more experienced Pastor than me. He said 'look', he says 'when people go through difficult seasons and you help them through that season, they sometimes succumb to the shame that the enemy lumps on them, and they'd hide away from you because you know their dark secrets' and that causes me, obviously, a whole lot of discomfort and pain because I wouldn't be helping these people if I didn't love them, and I didn't love them, I wouldn't help them. So, shame, but shame keeps people hiding. Or they're just downright angry. They just haven't got tools and mechanisms to process the emotions, and so they stay away.

You know, we haven't helped with that, you know through technology and our desire to reach more people. We now have church online. We have YouTube, and we have podcasts, so like this, and they're great, because they create another channel for us to connect with people.

But I've discovered as one of the outcomes, out of the COVID isolation and mandated season that we had here, is an online church does not allow for personal connection, personal relationship, and personal fellowship. It doesn't matter that you sit at home and watch church and you enjoy it, and in fact you. Like I have been blessed by some sermons from pastors in other cities and other countries with regards to online messages. But I would never ever, ever say that that replaces my personal connection, my personal relationship, and my personal fellowship with my church family.

And so what am I doing about that? What am I doing to call people into a place where they can have that personal connection? And one of the things that I think really, I suppose is a draw card, it's not me for certain reasons that are obvious to all of us, but the Holy Spirit, you know that we would have a place where people can personally encounter the Holy Spirit, through others, and you don't get that at home. Look, I've been blessed by preaching, and blessed by the Holy Spirit as I've responded to messages I've heard on a podcast.

But the praying for each other. You know, we had a session at Church recently in a gathering we had, and I said, 'look, we're just gonna stop this right now, and I just want you to gather with two or three people that are round about you, try not to use your family as the ones that you speak with, or pray with. But I want you to pray with a couple of people about this. I feel like I've said enough. I don't wanna say anymore. I want the Holy Spirit to be the one that draws you into a dance with him, and I think when you pray with each other that's gonna happen' and I just let go, and I had a friend say to me afterwards, she said, 'look', she said 'I never would have normally spoken with those people that I ended up praying with, but she said it was such a blessing to have them share in my journey and agree to pray with me in that journey, and as a result of it', she said 'I came away just feeling so much lighter, but I felt like I was part of something that was bigger than myself, and I wasn't doing it alone'.

And you know, I'm pretty confident that she wouldn't have had that feedback if I just preached for another 40 minutes so, as some of us pastors like to do. And so, you know, I'm just saying that to be, challenging you I guess. If you're someone that hides in isolation because you're upset, you're tired, or you can't be bothered, or you've got some unresolved issues, I'd say get out of your jammies, get into the car, and get along to a gathering, and you know in our context that could also mean just a small gathering in someone's home. You don't have to be in the in the bigger, larger group, but Koinonia is the Greek word that's used in the Bible for that, that dynamic life we do with each other where we share in the meal of Christ being, you know, communion celebrate together. Where we Minister to God through worship, and blessing him, and lifting him up in our midst, and we gather around his word, the word, and we feed on it like the bread of life that it is, and through conversation with each other we are made better, we are made stronger, we are sustained, and we are strengthened because we are feeding on the word of God, not as babes with milk, as the Bible said, but more like a meal. And that's what Koinonia is to me, it's the body being together, and that's what church is, whether you're in a large group, or small group, and I'm really motivated as a church leader to create wonderful opportunities for people to experience that.

Let go and let God.

The 4th and final frustration is definitely 100% about me, and I've got the heading here on my notes that just says let go and let God. As a leader that has a vision, as someone who's driven toward outcomes, who is highly motivated, but probably highly intense, there's high levels of intensity with regards to my personal expectations of myself, and the outcomes that I'm seeking to see for the greater good of the church. We say, Lord, may your Kingdom come, may your will be done, and then I roll up my sleeves and say, well, how am I going to make that happen? As if I'm God.

And so for me, the frustration, and it's a personal frustration, I'm letting you in behind the curtain, and I look, I've realised I can't control outcomes. I can have the best vision, and plan, and strategy. I can have the highest hope and I can pray, but then I usually go too far and I think I can control the outcomes. I think I can determine what happens through whom with whom, and when, and so here's what I'm saying. I can't control outcomes, and I should not expect to.

The other part of that, the Lord's really been challenging me on, and there'll be a couple of you that judge me for this, but I've had to come to confess to myself and others, that are people are not pawns. They're not play pieces I get to move around at my own free will. I don't control outcomes. I don't control their movements and I shouldn't seek to tie people to my vision for my own gain. People are family, churches, family, everyone's on a journey. The Lord is not just the Lord of the church, but he's the Lord of our lives, and I really, I'm seeking to change a lot of my internal mindset, my paradigm, and my expectations. I think I've been wrongly motivated sometimes with how I have supported people on their journey, and so that's my confession, and I'm saying that the answer is to let go and let God.

I would also say one of my learnings here is that God's timing is perfect even though I am impatient. And just recently, you know, I've had a conversation with the Lord around how much I need to slow down in my anticipated timeline, in order to see the fullness of his work. And if I worship God in my limitations, and the slowed down lifestyle that he is calling me into. If I worship God in my limitations, in a slowed down spirituality, then he can do far greater things than I ever could in my hurried, rushed, driven state. And this is about me saying 'Lord only you can do the miraculous and not me'. And I'd rather have something that was dynamic and filled with the life of the spirit, than something that was built by the work of my hands.

And one of the things I'm finding with that is prayer has been really powerful and coming into agreement with a couple of people around what God's saying through his word and putting it before the Lord as a confession and then leaving it before the Lord, and trusting him with it.

So, first one, disconnected and disengaged. What am I doing around that? I'm drawing people into a different space. That's not just a done for you service. Number two, people that are over-fed and under-utilised and suppose I'm taking responsibility to draw people into a conversation where they might be excited again about what God said, and what God's given them, and then drawing people into a place of fellowship, out of isolation, and finally letting go and trusting God to do his work.

Conclusion

So as I bring this to a conclusion, I would just reinforce the point that this is my problem, that I have to own. My frustration is my problem. I am not blaming anyone. I am not judging anyone. I'm not treating people different because of the way that I am perceiving their circumstances. But I'm trusting God that he's with them on their journey as much as he is with me on my journey.

As I was reflecting on this in making notes to try and ensure that I wouldn't have a rant, and a complain session, and I hope it hasn't come across that way. But I realised, you know, that Jesus gave his life for us as a willing sacrifice, but also as an example. And then I recall the words of Paul in Ephesians chapter 5, when he says 'Jesus gave his life for the church, so too must husbands lay down their lives for their wives,' in order that you know they would be edified, and I guess the parallel for me is with regards to that is, you know, as a leader, then I should also give my life as an offering.

Biblically speaking, not to start a sermon, but just to remind myself of this, as I listen to it again I'm sure I'll be reminded that I have said to you that the church leader must lay his life down, as the apostle Paul did. And in Romans Chapter 9, Paul's lamenting about his fellow brothers, the Jews, who had I suppose, despised the Christ and set themselves apart from what the work of Christ, and the work of the spirit of Christ, and he says this, in Romans 9 verse three, says I wish that I myself were accursed from Christ, separated from Christ, for my brethren, my countrymen, according to the flesh. And he's saying, look, I would be separated if it would save them. He would give his life for eternity as a sacrifice. In second Corinthians, also, you know very, very famous passage, and then in second it's 11 verse 28, Paul's talking about his sufferings. He says this, he says, 'besides the other things'. So, he's talked about being beaten, and stoned, and shipwrecked, and in the deep, and in the waters, and unsafe with robbers, and being attacked by all sorts of things, people and places. And he says all of this 'I was sleepless. I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was cold and naked', he says 'besides all those things. What comes upon me daily is my deep concern for all the churches. Regardless of our life, regardless of my life, my desire for comfort as a leader, what comes upon me most is the concern for the brethren, and as I close, I leave that as my statement. My confession of faith and my confession of the need for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be upon me that I would use my frustrations to spur me deeper into the sufferings of Christ, that I might give my life as a ransom for those that God's called me to serve, and I hope this opens something up for you, and as always, I look forward to a conversation that may ensue. You're welcome to have Coffee with Phil if that's something that's possible. May the Lord truly be with you this week, as I would hope that he is also with me as I continue my journey.

Hey, thanks for joining Coffee with Phil, this is episode 30, and don't forget to send this off to someone that might be interested. You can follow on Apple. You can follow on Spotify, Google Play, or wherever you get your podcast. Make sure you check out the notes, the transcript is there for your benefit. Hey, have a good day and I look forward to catching up with you real soon.