



## The Emotionally Healthy Church

by Peter Scazzero

Emotional health and spiritual health are inseparable. Peter Scazzero learned this truth the hard way, through personal experience. As the pastor of a large, multi-ethnic church in New York City, he came face to face with the reality that discipleship must include addressing the emotional brokenness that is a part of every member of his congregation, including himself. His experience of imbalanced spirituality combined with the spiritual busyness of ministry eventually led him to discover that he had not allowed Jesus to penetrate to the core of his person and meet his deepest needs. Scazzero shares his personal journey and the way it impacted his marriage and the church he led. His remarkable honesty provides the basis for the book and the new strategy of discipleship he advocates. The impact of this leader's transformation on his church provides the example of the starting point for churches and ministries seeking to embrace these truths. He shares his wisdom and provides practical ways to move forward by addressing:

- Discipleship's Missing Link
- Biblical Basis for a New Paradigm of Discipleship
- Six Principles of an Emotionally Healthy Church
- Where We Go From Here

### **Discipleship's Missing Link**

Current discipleship models do not address the issues of emotional and relational maturity that make up the core of human experience. Therefore, many Christians look just like those outside the church and have the same types of broken and failed relationships as unbelievers. Christians may be considered “spiritually mature” while not truly reaching emotional adulthood. The current discipleship models do not address this unbalanced spirituality.

The training provided in essential areas of discipleship, such as prayer and Bible study, needs to be supplemented by a new model based on Jesus’ life. Here one can see what spiritual maturity looks like as it relates to emotional health, especially in loving other people. The church is God’s instrument in showing His love to the world. It is also one of God’s tools in developing spiritual and emotional maturity in His people. Integrating emotional maturity with a focus on loving well into discipleship is key to meeting the purpose God has for the church, to be a reflection of His love to the world.

### *As Go the Leaders, So Goes the Church*

Leaders are essential to the life and health of their churches or ministries. In fact, they are the starting point and greatest influencers when it comes to spiritual and emotional health. The leader’s internal life has more to do with successful spiritual leadership than do his knowledge, gifts or experience.

Peter Scazzero and his wife Gerri began this journey to maturity when they hit bottom in their relationship. For years, they had been workaholics for God focused on the church they had planted and their ministry there for almost a decade. Gerri was burnt out to the point where she confronted her husband and told him she was leaving the church. This was the wakeup call he needed to address the hurt and depression caused by a church split he had been quietly experiencing. The tension and continuous demands of their large church body turned ministry to duty. They did not know how to handle their own negative emotions, and they were both dying inside.

With the truth of what his marriage and ministry had become staring him straight in the face, Pete and Gerri began the process of healing and maturity that became the six principles for emotional health in the context of spiritual maturity. They found that their church began benefiting from this process. It spilled out to the staff, then the elder board, and eventually to the rest of the leadership. They realized that this path applied to one’s personal life but also to the corporate life of the church. The process of emotional maturity became the basis for their new understanding of discipleship. It begins with leaders so that their lives may reinforce their message. However, God wants to penetrate and heal the lives of His people, not just the leaders. This book is the fruit of their experience.

### **Biblical Basis for a New Paradigm of Discipleship**

Jesus is the model for how His followers should live and minister. This is universally understood as the basis for all discipleship models. However, these models fail to realize that Jesus does not push his emotional life off to the side. He was a human being who dealt with the spiritual, emotional, physical and social aspects of His life. Jesus was a whole person. He freely expressed His emotions. In the same way, His followers must address every aspect of their humanity, not just the spiritual. One cannot be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

To become more like Jesus and begin the process of spiritual and emotional maturity, a Christian must know his own heart, soul, and mind. Only then can we worship God with all of who we are. The inventory of spiritual/emotional maturity is a tool to begin knowing one's own heart and soul in a practical and personal way.

### *Emotional/Spiritual Health Inventory*

Part A focuses on general formation and discipleship. Part B addresses the emotional components of discipleship. Five to ten questions narrow in on the emotional component by addressing the six principles developed in the book:

- Principle 1: Look beneath the surface.
- Principle 2: Break the power of the past.
- Principle 3: Live in brokenness and vulnerability.
- Principle 4: Receive the gift of limits.
- Principle 5: Embrace grieving and loss.
- Principle 6: Make incarnation your model for loving well.

The questions are about behaviors and attitudes and one answers on a scale from 1 (not very true) to 4 (very true). The scores for Part A and Principles 1-6 are calculated separately with the results chart measuring the seven sections separately. The chart designates that answers fall on a range that assigns the participant as an emotional adult, adolescent, child, or infant in the seven individual sections. The participant may be an emotional adult in the aspect addressed by Part A's general formation and discipleship but also be an emotional infant in living in brokenness and vulnerability (principle 3).

An emotional infant looks for others to take care of them. They are primarily concerned about their needs and often use others as objects to meet their needs. They are unaware of how their behavior affects others and thus can only rarely empathize with them. They are perceived as inconsiderate and self-centered.

Emotional children are happy when they are receiving all of the things they want and need. When adversity strikes, they come undone emotionally. Disappointment, stress, tragedy and anger are dealt with by complaining and either throwing a tantrum, withdrawing or manipulating.

Emotional adolescents know the appropriate behavior for mature society but are overly defensive when confronted with constructive criticism. They must also prove the guilt of the other party when in a conflict, even if they do admit some fault. It is difficult for them to really listen to another's pain, disappointments, or needs because they often become preoccupied with themselves.

Emotional adults know that no one can perfectly meet their relational needs and do not expect that from the people in their lives. They are able to love others without criticizing and judging. They take responsibility for their own actions and feelings. They can communicate their beliefs and values to those who disagree with them and do not become antagonistic. Because they are fully aware of their own emotions, they can easily empathize with others and meet them at their feelings and needs.

## **Six Principles of an Emotionally Healthy Church**

### *Principle 1: Look beneath the Surface*

People are like icebergs. Most of who they are lies deep beneath the surface. Beginning the process toward emotional maturity requires looking deeply into one's own heart. Taking this step requires stepping out of a comfort zone that is built to avoid dealing with the unpleasantness in the heart and in life. It is painful because it requires unmasking who one is and standing exposed before God. Doing the hard work of looking deep inside is usually a result of pain that cannot be ignored in one's life.

There are four practical steps to going beneath the surface of the current self:

1. Developing an awareness of what one is feeling and doing.

Taking a mental note about what one is experiencing emotionally is something that comes more easily to some than to others. For some, paying attention to their physical body's reactions in situations is a good starting point. This should be followed up by looking at what the body is trying to say about one's feelings right now. The purpose is to become self-aware not self-absorbed. Allowing God to transform the whole iceberg means that one must be aware of the layers below the surface.

2. Asking the "Why" or "What's going on" question.

Finding out the triggers and motivations behind emotions and actions is uncomfortable. Asking the "why" questions takes awareness to the level of analysis. What is behind the initial feeling or reaction is revealing the hidden parts, especially when it comes to such emotions as jealousy, hate, fear, or anger.

3. Linking the Gospel and emotional health.

There is ugliness and wickedness in the hidden parts of the heart. Seeing this can be overwhelming. However, the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cover over the depth and width of the darkness in the heart of man. The Gospel shows the power and love of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins by reflecting back how truly and utterly sinful man is. There is safety and freedom to explore the disturbing parts in realizing that God really knows His child and yet deeply loves all of her. His love and grace are freely given and not dependent on what one does or does not do.

4. Getting rid of the "glittering image."

The "glittering image" is the public person that is presented to everyone. Christians are especially prone to presenting this "glittering image" because of the expectation of perfection that has pervaded the church. Getting rid of it means having the humility to be one's true self, warts and all. It also means renouncing the tendency to present oneself as whole and complete and acknowledging that one is a work in progress.

*Principle 2: Break the Power of the Past*

The past molds and shapes the person one is today. For most people, the family they grew up in has had the most impact on who they are presently. Because of the sin that exists in all people, every family has been damaged. The Bible and personal experience show that sin is passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, it is important to understand one's family to break free from these sinful and destructive patterns. Five practical steps shed light on how to break the power of the past.

1. Identifying how your family shaped you.

A helpful tool for this step is a genogram. It is a way of drawing a family tree that looks at information about family members and their relationships. It should cover two to three generations. To dig deeper on how the past may be influencing the present, it is beneficial to ask certain questions. Questions regarding how conflict was handled, what gender roles and authority looked like, how feelings were discussed, how spirituality was expressed and other questions on family relationships, money, the impact of ethnicity help bring light on this significant aspect of who one is.

## 2. Discerning the major influences in your life.

There are other major influences and events that shape a person other than their family. These can include ideas or belief systems, such as evangelical Christianity. Events, good or bad, also leave an imprint on a person. A divorce or other type of loss, a friendship, a drastic move, any type of abuse, or an addiction can mold a person. It is important to address these issues and how they impact the present self, positively and negatively.

## 3. Becoming re-parented through the church.

When the gift of salvation is accepted, the Bible uses the imagery of being adopted into God's family. A Christian's identity is now determined by the blood of Jesus not by the blood of one's biological family. His family includes all of the brothers and sisters in the local church. This is the new spiritual family where re-parenting takes place. The re-parenting process is based on how the Father has instructed His children through the Scriptures and takes place in community. Each child of God is to be alert to instruction and evaluate how God's way is different from the way one was brought up. It is also important to note that although God forgives the past, He does not erase it. The Father heals brokenness but He allows the weakness and scars to remain.

## 4. Leading a church family like my own family.

Leaders are impacted by the leadership style of their families to such an extent that they take on that style with their followers. The same dynamic begins to appear in a church or small group as the one that existed in the leader's family growing up. It is important for leaders to realize this and to let God use both the positives and the negatives of their past to serve and lead.

## 5. Remember how many people are at the table.

Just like leaders, all of the people involved in a ministry bring their own set of emotional history from their families. This will impact their interactions and the decisions made in the ministry. Leaders may become overwhelmed at this realization. However, their main role is to be a model of transformation and to encourage an environment where people address their own issues.

### *Principle 3: Live in Brokenness and Vulnerability*

One of the most important ways God uses to help His children grow in spiritual authority and leadership is through brokenness and weakness. Emotionally healthy churches are made of people who know and admit their vulnerability and their struggles. Living with this knowledge creates people who are dependent on God and humble toward their brothers and sisters. Creating and encouraging an environment based on brokenness and dependence requires several key steps.

### 1. Developing a theology of weakness.

When Adam and Eve disobey God in the Garden of Eden, sin enters the world. The curse of sin unleashed by God causes pain and misunderstanding in human relationships. The purpose of the curse is to reveal to man his helplessness and his need for a Savior. However, each individual must recognize his or her own brokenness and incompleteness and choose Christ. The life and ministry that flow from this choice are to be characterized by humility and vulnerability. Holy living and fruitful service cannot be achieved through one's own gifts and abilities but through the power of Christ as he indwells His people. The Apostle Paul is an example for all Christians to realize the sufficiency of God's grace and power in weakness.

### 2. Accepting your gift of a handicap.

Contrary to the wisdom of the world, weaknesses and failure are keys to good leadership. These things help a leader acknowledge, like the Apostle Paul, that he or she cannot lead out of his or her own strength and power. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" helped him grow in his understanding and love of the Gospel and in his service for God's people. God's gift of a handicap is to develop His people into the servant-leaders He desires.

### 3. Transitioning to a church based on weakness.

It begins with the leaders. By sharing their weaknesses freely and speaking of God's mercy, leaders create an environment of humility and teachability. People find it easier to relate to a helper who is genuine and honest than to one who is stoic and projects perfection. Followers find it easier to share their own brokenness and address their deeper issues. Spiritual and emotional progress is made as God uses the community of believers and His word to heal.

### 4. Following the prodigal son as the model.

The prodigal son returned home to his father humbled and broken. This brokenness and neediness is what the Christian life should look like. The Christian needs to intentionally remember his lostness to depend on his Father. Living in this reality is the only way to grasp the Gospel and enjoy the Father's love. Yet it is easy for Christians to become the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. When one loses sight of their lostness, they can appear to be near God but actually be very far from Him. The third person in the parable is the father. He shows unconditional love. God wants His church to incarnate the unconditional love He showed them and become like the father in the parable. People will then be drawn to God's children as they were to Jesus, and this love will transform the giver and the receiver.

#### *Principle 4: Receive the Gift of Limits*

People who understand that God has given them limits, and what those limitations are, are emotionally healthy. They can serve Him with joy and contentment through the talents God has given them because they do not try do everything. These characteristics are true of the emotionally healthy church as well. Limits are embraced and the expectation and pressure to be like another church are absent.

It is particularly difficult to understand limits and implement boundaries for leaders who are in especially needy areas. However, acknowledging and respecting limits and boundaries are skills that any leader needs to learn so that he can be a long-term lover of God and others.



Five steps help a church and its leadership to understand the principle of limits.

1. Questioning the church without limits.

Mature churches can identify opportunities and choose not to take advantage of all of them. God has given His church limits, limited time, limited resources, and limited energy. Numerical growth is not always God's will for every local church. An exhausting pace and exhausted workers are not the sacrifices that God wants. He wants disciples that are growing in depth not just in number.

2. Recognizing that Jesus embraced human limits.

The temptation of Jesus in the desert reveals His acceptance of the limitations God has given him as a human being. The first temptation was to satisfy the immediate human need for food, yet Jesus accepted that God was not meeting that need at that time. He did not succumb to Satan's taunts and turn the rocks into bread or have manna from heaven appear. The second temptation addressed the limitation of timing. It was not the right time for Jesus to show the people that He truly is the Son of God. He would have immediately had a large following but not by adhering to the timing set by His Father. The third temptation was a shortcut to Jesus' future reign in God's kingdom by sidestepping the suffering of the cross. As a man, Jesus had the limitations of a physical body that can experience great pain. By obeying the way set before Him by the Father, Jesus could pray at the end of his life that He accomplished the work that was given Him to do. This obedience and acceptance of limitations is the example the Lord left for His people.

3. Learning to discern my limitations.

There are six clear ways to discover one's limitations. The things that should be considered are: personality, season of life, life situation, emotional and intellectual capacities, negative emotions, and scars and wounds from family of origin. Personality includes addressing extroversion/introversion, creativity, risk-taking, and the desire for structure as key to understanding personality. Seasons of life include family needs and responsibilities, financial standing, studying, and also times of grieving and waiting. Life situation addresses age and health, experience level and maturity, and marital status. Emotional, physical and intellectual capacities are God-given gifts and should be assessed honestly with the help of close friends and family. Negative emotions signal that something is not right internally and should be used to evaluate oneself. Old scars and wounds from the family where one grew up serve as limitation that need to increase dependency on God and sensitivity to other.

4. Integrating the gift of limits into the church.

Understanding limits and integrating them in the life of the church begins with the church leaders. Taking personal time for family and personal refreshment, not letting invasive and complaining members set the agenda, and allowing people to say "no" to service opportunities are necessary to emotionally healthy church leadership. Once these behaviors have been adapted by church leaders, it is important to start teaching the importance of boundaries and the concepts of togetherness yet separateness.

5. Watching God work through limitations.

It is important to note that at times God will go beyond a person's limitations in supernatural ways. Yet it is important to remember that most often God accomplishes His purposes by people living within their

boundaries and limitations. An emotionally healthy church has radical faith that God will carry on His saving work through their limits for His glory and the good of His people.

*Principle 5: Embrace Grieving and Loss*

It is important to embrace grieving and loss because it is the way to maturity. It develops maturity if one is honest and open before God and others. Loss is a normal part of life that today's culture tries to avoid, dull, and attempt to brush off as quickly as possible. Therefore, it is important to teach the church the importance of going through the grieving process and learning how to grieve in a way that provides healing and maturity.

There are three phases in learning how to grieve. The first is paying attention as part of the grieving process. David is a biblical example who paid attention to loss and disappointment. His many Psalms are filled with the real emotions of grieving and acceptance of the reality that life can be hard. However, David remains faithful by remembering the Lord's steadfast love. He honestly wrestles with the truths that life is full of pain and God is good and loving. Jesus also sets an example for His people on how to grieve. He dealt with the sorrow over losing Lazarus and the state of Jerusalem by weeping openly. Jesus was honest about his losses and disappointments yet was prayerful in His response.

Phase two is living in the confusing in-between. This is the time when it is difficult to understand God and His plans. One feels disoriented and lost which oftentimes leads to rebellion. However, this waiting period is a time to find oneself. Remaining faithful during these bewildering in-betweens must rest on the truth that God uses all things for the benefit of His people and for His glory.

The third phase is allowing the old to birth the new. The new that arises out of the grieving process includes becoming compassionate as the Father is, greater understanding for the widow and the poor, a clearer understanding of the essentials of life, freedom from having to impress others, greater humility and vulnerability, placing God at the center of life and reject superficial pursuits, becoming kinder and understanding that true communicating can be found in accepting brokenness.

*Principle 6: Make Incarnation Your Model for Loving Well*

Christ's followers are to intentionally follow the model He set before them. This is imperative to the emotionally healthy church because it means emotionally healthy Christians. In Jesus' incarnation, there are three dynamics to follow in loving others like He did: entering another's world, holding on to yourself, and hanging between two worlds. Learning to incarnate is the final principle because it assumes that progress is being made on the other five. To the extent one is maturing in the first five principles is the degree to which they will be able to incarnate in another person's world.

1. Living out the first dynamic: Entering another's world

The most crucial element of loving people is listening. Jesus listened to people, gave them His full attention. The Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 is an example of active listening. It is important to teach people how to listen intentionally through reflective listening, validation and exploring. Reflective listening is trying to reflect accurately that the other is saying and trying to use his or her own words. Validation is taking the other's perspective and understanding where they are coming from with humility. Exploring is asking questions and setting aside the need to respond, defend, or correct the other person.



## 2. Living out the second dynamic: Holding on to yourself

It is important to hold on to oneself as one enters another's world. This means affirming, appreciating and paying attention to one's own culture, feelings, beliefs, history and convictions. This dynamic is key to responding lovingly and maturely when others push and challenge one's desires, values and goals. This is how biblical conflict resolution takes place. This is what allows leaders to lead people to new places.

## 3. Living out the third dynamic: Hanging between two worlds

Jesus hung between heaven and earth on a cross to show God's love to humanity. His followers pay the cost of showing love to the world by sacrificing time, energy, and disruption in their world. Christians hang between their own world and the world of another person but must remain faithful to who they are while entering the world of the other. This will result in life and fruit in their lives and in the lives of others.

The church's priority must be on loving well. Supernatural love is the sign of the Spirit at work because it required a supernatural work of grace in the heart. God desires disciples who love well. This love expressed through His people will show the world the incarnate love they need to see to believe. It starts with the individual, the leader. It will spread to the church and to the world.

### **Where We Go from Here**

Growing to become more like Christ means shedding the old, hard, protective shell and letting God lead to a new place in Him. It is not an easy process but one that provides rewards in this life and into eternity. Maturity in Christ must include emotional health. An environment that focuses on maturity and emotional health can be set through preaching. However, the church leader must set an example by allowing God to work in his or her life. Through interactions with others, the church body soon begins to change as well. The tools necessary to accomplish this work are mentoring, patience, and prayer. Mentors are needed to help others grow spiritually, emotionally, and socially. A mentor is essentially a mother or father in the faith. However, it is important to remember that the mentor is only one piece of the person's development in Christ. Patience is essential. The process of helping people grow takes years. It is a long, slow process as people go through the ups and downs of growing. Yet loving people well means loving them patiently. The power of prayer and the necessity of the Holy Spirit is the tool through which all growth is possible. Jesus and Paul prayed often and fervently for the people they were discipling. The example is clear.



## **From the Pastor's Perspective**

The thing I like most about *The Emotionally Healthy Church* is that it deals with reality, something we too often don't do in the church. Reality is that God created us as emotional beings, and we ignore that at our peril. In reacting to a therapeutic culture, where feelings can be the only important measure of truth or reality, we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We dare not exalt feelings as the final arbiter of truth; we also dare not ignore them as if they weren't important. If we do that, we end up not addressing the truth about how God made us.

One extreme can justify anything be an appeal to our emotions or feelings; the other extreme dismisses them completely and puts all the emphasis on our ability to make choices, regardless of how we feel or what emotional issues may be present. My observation is that neither of those approaches works well, because neither of them is addressing the reality of how God made us. Any approach to spiritual growth that doesn't acknowledge and address both sides of the coin is ultimately doomed to fail.

Scazzero's approach to the issue of emotional health is tremendously valuable to anyone in ministry, even if you don't adopt his whole approach to discipleship. He deals with reality—we all have limits; we are all broken in some way; we will all experience grief at some time. It's too easy for us to ignore those things with simple spiritual platitudes, which in the end bring no comfort or change or help, to us or the people we lead.

How many pastors struggle with burn-out? Could embracing the idea that God Himself has given us limits begin to set some people free from the need to continually be on the go, ministering to people all the time? People with legitimate needs? But the reality is that if we don't accept our limits, pretty soon they will force their will on us, and we will crash or burn out, and that is bad for everyone.

Likewise, how many of us slip subtly into a performance orientation, pretending that we have it all together when we don't? Learning to live in brokenness can set us free from that. And rather than trying to "avoid the negative" of not pretending, we can "practice the positive" of accepting our weaknesses. We know Paul said "power is perfected in weakness" but I suspect few of us like that. Learning not just to like it but to embrace it is incredibly freeing.

Our churches are going to reflect their leaders. I encourage you to make it a point to look at, and take care of, your own emotional health. Even if you don't adopt Scazzero's whole approach, your health will eventually trickle into your whole church.