

1

The Real Problem

Two Sufferers

To start from a point that many of us will recognise, I want to describe two fictitious but authentic characters, composed from real people, whose conditions we will encounter throughout the rest of the book. You might identify strands of your own experience in one or both of them.

The girl

Abi was up against it from the beginning.

Her church was a classic den of legalism. Surrounded from her youth by spiritual policemen and judges, she never learned about another way to be a Christian – a way of grace, a way of resting in Christ. All the standards – true, false, good, bad, spiritual, ‘worldly’ – were set for her by these men. The spoken and unspoken lists of do’s and don’ts, with which her Christian life was defined, came from them. From them and through the rest of the fellowship, came the codes that unlocked so-called spiritual progress and assurance. From them came the rungs by which she was supposed to climb to God and find acceptance with him.

Abi didn't know that spiritual chauvinism and biblically ignorant pseudo-piety had robbed her of the innocence of her child-like heart. She had never heard of spiritual abuse and didn't know that it had scarred her emotions and her spirit. She thought that it was normal, this repressive cloud of dominance. She thought that the joyless life was the only holy one and that guilt was what you were saved for as well as from. The gospel as good news had always left her slightly bewildered. What on earth was good about this kind of life? The other girls in the office had more fun and most of them were nicer than her friends (was that really the word?) at church. The wonders of God's love for her and the soaring joys of worship with other believers were alien to her: the unknown language of a foreign and suspect land.

For years she had tried hard and then harder to make the thing work, to be loved and to find the warmth of loving. One summer mission had lifted the clouds and the glow of that bright fellowship had stayed with her into the dankness of autumn. Yet it too had gone. She'd been told later that some of the team had been 'worldly'. She'd thought that too at the time, but she'd noticed that it hadn't seemed to stop them enjoying God and each other. They were even better at witnessing than she was, with their make-up and their new clothes. She'd never felt inferior with them then, just happy. But one November evening after the Bible Study, in the car outside her house, her elder had shown her the real nature of the experience, had guided her into a correct understanding of their faults, had made her feel familiarly dowdy, inside and out. She would never have thought of the word, but after the sincere monologue she went intimidated into the house and into something called sanctity. She felt safe. Safe as a prisoner returned to her cell. Safe from the big bad world outside. She even smiled at the unsmilingly righteous wardens the following Sunday morning.

Safe, until she met Ed at work. Ed, who was witty and courteous but who also enjoyed a beer. Ed, who was doing well and

The Real Problem

3

was quiet and polite. Ed who listened as she witnessed and who didn't mind her going to church; he even went along with her. Ed, who took her bowling and then for a take-away, to the cinema and back to his flat. Ed, whose parents were so pleasant and whose parents' house was so tastefully done. Ed, who enjoyed her company and never made points to her but asked her questions about herself. Ed, who kissed her tenderly and not like the clumsy oaf at the youth fellowship. Ed, who took her out on Sunday afternoons and who didn't seem to feel guilty about missing the evening service. Ed, who read novels and listened to jazz and knew about wine. Ed, who opened her up to a world that was forbidden out of fear and ignorance but which seemed just too fascinating and fulfilling to be a flesh-pot. Ed, who made her feel loved; who was very patient about her reluctance to go to bed with him. Ed who proposed and got his 'Yes!' Ed, who unknowingly unlocked her heart and released her from a cage to which she never returned. And Ed, who never understood the void in Abi's heart nor the longing for God with which she silently ached nor the wistful guilt that came and went at Easter nor the sudden, fierce determination to take the children to the local Sunday School. Ed, who never realised that Abi missed the baby and sometimes the bathwater.

The man

He toiled at his Christianity.

Mark's church had been started by folk who were unbearably unhappy with the kind of fellowship that Abi belonged to. Frustrated by the obvious legalism and its formalities, dissatisfied with the restrictive and joyless life that it had produced, they had set up a new church. Not for them the dead hand of legalism.

But that was twenty years ago, fourteen years before Mark had become a Christian and had started going along there with his friends. Now the new patterns had become old ones. The

clean slate had become overwritten with many traditions. The church was still seen as very new by the denominational churches around, but it had become set in its ways. Mark loved the music and the style. He loved the informality of the dress-code. He had made good friends there and knew that he owed a great deal to its leaders.

But he toiled, and he didn't know why. He knew that there were people who did things very differently elsewhere and who, despite the warnings from the Pastor, seemed in fact to have the Spirit at work in their churches too. He knew people from supposedly 'dead' churches in a denomination that was reported to have 'Ichabod' written over it, who were relaxed and lively, biblically informed and evangelistically-minded. Why did they seem at ease being a Christian, and why did he seem to have to work hard to belong? Why were his questions about the other Christians never answered? Why was he warned against having coffee with the ex-elder from his own church who had been anathematised and with whose daughter he was good friends? What had that ex-elder done wrong? All he had seemed to do, when Mark boiled it down, was disagree with the Pastor. Why did Mark feel that he was getting a 'look' from the front if he wasn't raising his hands like nearly everyone else did when they sang? Why did he feel that, try as he might, he wasn't really accepted? And why was he made to feel that this was a matter of not being 'where he should have been with the Lord'?

His naturally inquisitive mind had worried increasingly at the jigsaw pieces of his discontent until one spring day when all those pieces fell into place. No-one said anything, no-one wrote anything to him. It simply and instantly all came while he was walking the dog. The veil had been pulled back and Mark saw the real character of what was going on. He was being measured every time he was in the house-group, or the church, or anywhere in the company of any layer of the leadership. It was as if he was constantly being gauged to see if he

The Real Problem

5

came up to scratch on a long list of criteria that the leadership had devised. It was being done all the time.

What struck him on that early evening walk, when the curtain had been blown back, were the gauges that he was being measured with. Attendance was a pretty large gauge. Meetings per week were clocked and recorded. There were meters for length of prayer, type of Bible, clothes and voice-tone. His use – or in Mark's case, non-use – of clichés was being measured; his questioning mind, which he expressed in an innocent search for the truth, was constantly registering on another gauge – he was regarded as a potential trouble-maker, unyielding to the leadership and to God. Now he saw that never speaking in tongues publicly had placed huge, flashing neon questions over his head: 'Was this man really a Christian?' 'If so, has he quenched the Spirit?'

An ironic smile had flitted momentarily over Mark's face when he realised all this. He had been trying for months to tell himself that it wasn't really like this, that he didn't go to a church where the tradition of the leaders had assumed the status of the word of God. At least he didn't have to go on pretending to himself that the leadership wasn't really like that. But inside he felt sick.

Born again by the Spirit of God one balmy June evening on the terraces of a local football club, Mark had succumbed to the all too human desire to be accepted by taking on the likeness of what was around him. He hadn't known then that he was conforming to an image that was parochial. He hadn't known that elsewhere were Christians who lived in an atmosphere so different that it was almost a different world. But he had known what he had needed to do to fit and belong. Instinctively he knew what would give him a good score on all those gauges, even though no-one had ever mentioned them. Inflections, witty put downs, hints and innuendoes, the right books and songs, serving on the right team at church: they all gave him clear signals as to how to make the grade and fit in. Untaught