

# THE CULTURE OF MISTRUST AND THE CHALLENGE FACING THE CHURCH

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**BEFORE I WENT ON HOLIDAY FOR THREE WEEKS, THE LAST PATIENT I SAW IN MY NHS CLINIC LEFT THE ROOM SOBBING AND UPSET; SHE COULD NOT TRUST WHAT I SAID – THAT I WOULD COME BACK AND CONTINUE TO SEE HER.** A bit over the top? Maybe, but for many like her, sexually abused in the first few months of life, trust is a word she is only now, in her forties, learning. Although I had promised – God willing! – that I would be back to see her, it was hard for her to believe; there is no template, or “schema”,<sup>1</sup> within her personality with which my words connect.

Happily, for most of us, trust is a less extreme issue, but we all know the pain of betrayal by a friend, the frustration of feeling let down by someone that promised to do something for us or the cynical reaction when yet another public figure does not deliver what he or she promised.

So what is trust? How does it develop and what happens to our relationships, and our society, when trust is not a “given” any more?

## WHAT IS TRUST?

I am reminded of a game I played as a child. A group of us would stand in a small, tight circle and a brave soul in the middle kept their eyes closed and fell backwards, believing, trusting, that someone would catch them and gently pass them around the circle.

To me, that is a good definition of trust: to totally rely on someone else, when you are helpless; to be vulnerable and abandon yourself, relying on what you know of them, with the expectation that they will not let you down, or drop you.

We could play that game, generally without too many accidents, because we were friends, and trust develops out of friendship when you get to know someone, and take the risks of intimacy. In the words of Dori, the fish who is Nemo’s friend in the film *Finding Nemo*, “trust is what friends do”. Where there is no trust there can be no sharing of oneself and vulnerability. Instead, mistrust breeds suspicion and isolation.

## HOW DOES TRUST NORMALLY DEVELOP?

The place where we learn trust is where we grow up. Erickson, a psychoanalyst, suggested that how a child solves the problems at any one of eight stages, determines how adequate a person they will become later and how well they will cope later with new problems. The first stage is dealing with the crisis of trust versus mistrust, which Erickson describes as being between birth and the first year of life.<sup>2</sup>

## Church fellowships ... need to adjust their expectations of people and help them take small steps in rebuilding relationships.

Essentially a child learns that “another” can be relied upon, trusted. When mum or dad gives information, it proves to be true so one can trust their judgement, and this process is reinforced throughout their early years. For example, when dad says that if you go out in the rain without a coat you will get wet, the child soon discovers that to be true. Similarly, our middle son learnt the hard way that the grill was hot and would burn him.

When a child has a good foundation of trusting relationships with others, he or she builds up a picture of the world as somewhere safe, where they can trust others and be trusted, where they can connect and feel connected. The child is then prepared to face the outside world where one hopes these experiences will be reinforced – that people do what they say, can be relied upon, and personal boundaries will be honoured and their trust of others will be reciprocated.

Sadly, however, these days such hopes are often not fulfilled. We live in an age where, increasingly, “if it feels good, do it” prevails, regardless of the cost to others. Relationships are thus frequently damaged and trust undermined in the longer term.

### SO WHAT EFFECT IS THIS CULTURE HAVING ON RELATIONSHIPS?

If people have not learnt to trust in childhood because they have not felt safe, or have on frequent occasions been let down and had the trust they have placed in others squandered, people will feel increasingly vulnerable and fragile. They will also be less willing to give of themselves in relationships for fear that they will be hurt again. Consequently, people develop implicit rules to live by, to protect themselves against the pain of broken trust. You may recognise some of them.

1. *Do not get close to people.* They will hurt you and let you down, so keep them at arm’s length. In the youth sub-culture this has even been formalised into dating terminology: you can “see” someone, instead of “going out” with them, which means that it’s not a problem if you fancy a fling with someone else at the same time. In other words, by not having any expectations of relying on someone you can avoid the risks and potential pain of trusting a partner to be faithful.

2. *Do not believe anything anyone says.* People are expected to be creative, tell white lies, bend their words, be economical with the truth and, although it is not politically correct to say so, they lie, so you cannot believe anything and therefore cannot trust them. This

is also reflected in a society that increasingly uses ID cards to prove you are who you say you are.

3. *Be on your guard. Trust no one.* Anyone could stab you in the back, sadly even literally. People develop “all or nothing” thinking and do not have a healthy “trust continuum” for different people.<sup>3</sup> This lack of trust means there will be a physiological effect in terms of an increase in tension and arousal levels most of the time, with more adrenalin pumping around, because you need to be hyper-vigilant of everyone and be ready to defend yourself. Verbal and physical violence tends to be a first course of action rather than hearing another’s point of view.

4. *Isolate yourself. Do not interact on a real level.* Instead, use superficial measures to interact with others and do not take risks to really get to know someone and develop deeper relationships. Rather, it is safer to reinforce the tribal mentality of sticking with those you know and demonise the “other” who is not like me, and stick to knowledge based on stereotypes, such as the type of music someone listens to or what they wear. This alleviates the need to assess someone as a unique individual, but is a way to have some superficial interaction. In addition, do not offer your services and potential commitment to anyone, because you may get hurt or rejected if you trust them.

5. *Expect to be disappointed and depressed when relationships do not come up to your surprisingly high expectations.* Such attitudes can be reinforced by stories in the newspapers: for example, a celebrity’s infidelity or a politician’s betrayal of trust.

6. *Blame others. Do not take responsibility for your own feelings or predicaments.* When things go wrong, project the pain and hurt onto others. The healthy alternative of feeling your pain and dealing with it, and then sharing it with others is not a possibility. If you do take the risk of being vulnerable with someone, they may walk away when faced with reality. An alternative is to rage at others or bottle it up and use alcohol, loud music or spend lots of money to distract yourself. If you have money, you could pay for a therapist or try yet another self-help technique. There is always the option to cut yourself, a behaviour that is concerning in its increase among teenagers, as a way to numb the hurt of having no one you can trust with your own pain.

### THE CHALLENGE!

With scandals of sexual and spiritual abuse from leaders, the Church does not seem trustworthy either.

### NOTES

1. For a look at Schema Focused Cognitive Therapy see Jeffrey Young, *Reinventing Your Life: How to Break Free from Negative Life Patterns* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1994). This is a good starter – one I suggest to clients. (The term “life-trap” is used interchangeably with the word “schema”.)

2. Other psychologists believe the eight stages overlap, and some deficiencies at different stages can be compensated for later.

3. By a “trust continuum” this suggests that an individual will place various people in their circle at different points on an imaginary line. For example, I would place my GP at a different point to my postman, representing a higher level of trust in my doctor, and both of these would be at a lower level of trust than I would place in my husband.

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► Worse still is the widespread belief held by many that deep down, God cannot be trusted either. We preach him to be our Father, our friend and our brother. However, when many people are increasingly betrayed and let down by those closest to them, the ones they trust, is it really any wonder that they doubt God and question him when life is tough.

The Evangelical Alliance in the UK has launched its TRUST campaign as part of its ongoing focus looking at values in society, and it plans to include looking at the topic of trust in churches. It is timely, as contrary to the view often portrayed in the media, the Church is a community that has the power of the gospel to transform lives on the basis of trust – trust in a God who will never let them down – and so a potential to bring hope to a world that desperately needs something or someone, to trust in.

To address the questions posed above, the Church needs to teach biblical truth about Jesus: he is God and the perfect friend and brother. We need to teach that our relationship with him is not about him making everything alright in the here and now, but about him building his kingdom in and through us, which will involve radical surgery and pain and suffering and some heavy questions!

In addition, church leaders need to operate out of open, truthful, vulnerable and accountable relationships, for example, using mentors and spiritual directors. They need to work out of a model of servant leadership that is different to the advert I saw in a magazine in the USA: “I used be a pastor of a local church, now I am an international spiritual leader – come hear me speak”! Leaders need to be heard to say sorry and admit when they do not know the answer.

Church fellowships also need to adjust their expectations of people and help them take small steps in rebuilding relationships and even learning how to trust, which for some will not be easy. We need to be patient with one another and encourage openness and accountability, providing opportunities to develop trusting relationships within a safe place.

None of this is easy as it will mean going against the tide, but we need to rise to the challenge and give the world an opportunity to see that there is another way to live. That is to trust in God and learn to trust each other and, in so doing, to become more like the people our Creator intended us to be. ■