

WHEN YOU'VE BEEN HURT BY THE CHURCH

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 295 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have a guest that we've actually had on the show before, Aimee Byrd. Aimee was a guest on Episode 179 where we talked about her new book at that time called *The Sexual Reformation*. And I will put a link to that in the show notes. But Aimee has actually written so many books, and I'm just going to go through some of them. Well, I'll go through all of them right now, and we'll put links to all of these books in the show notes.

But she's written, and I didn't realize, Aimee, that you had written so many books, but I was going on Amazon like, oh my gosh, you've been busy. She wrote, *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, which, that looked like maybe your biggest book. Did that get the biggest reaction?

AIMEE: Yeah. It's also my most controversial book, so you know how that goes.

NATALIE: You know, isn't that the truth? If you bring up a controversial topic, then everyone wants to hear what you have to say about it.

AIMEE: I really didn't think it would be as controversial as it was, so it's very interesting.

NATALIE: I think the title is very provocative.

AIMEE: That's true.

NATALIE: Yeah. So if you're listening and you don't know why the title is provocative, we're not going to get into it right now, but some of you will be like, "Oh, yeah." So a book called *Why Can't We Be Friends?*, *No Little Women*, *Theological Fitness*, *Housewife Theologian*. I'm noticing a theme kind of throughout your writing. Do you want to kind of summarize what you like to write about?

AIMEE: Well, really it was my own struggle as an adult in the church and the loneliness of being a thinking woman. So *Housewife Theologian* was my first book where I was like, "Man, maybe if we had a tool for women to talk about why theology is important, maybe women will care more and maybe pastors will invest in us more." And each book then was another layer from that. And I cringe a little bit when you name some of these books because I'd like to go back and revise some of the earlier ones a bit because it has been a learning experience writing these books and putting them out in the world.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's interesting because I think sometimes we have this desire to create change in the church, and we think that the way that we're going to do it is by influencing the leaders, and that's not the way at all.

AIMEE: Right. You're so right about that. But it's interesting because I feel like when I first started writing about investing in women, the message was very accepted, encouraged even, and it's, "Oh, this is great."

And in my reformed church circles, I start getting invited to all the women's retreats. I'm doing the women's conferences and the women's retreats, and it's just kind of weird that we're all to the side here—we're kind of sidearm from the rest of the church. This really wasn't what I had in mind. Not that women's studies in the church can't be really great. I've been in part of a wonderful Bible study for women once. While it has its value, this seemed to be a way to be like, "Yes, great. Women should be learning, too. Let's put them over here."

NATALIE: Which has been happening all throughout history in every area.

AIMEE: Yeah, that's when I got in trouble, though, was when I started writing into the, "Why are we off to the side every year and anytime that we're mixed in with the men, it's to make the casseroles and watch the children?"

NATALIE: Right. Even as you're talking, though, I'm thinking, that was the church, though. Where you were being relegated to, they were pushing you out of something that wasn't the church. They were pushing you really into the church.

AIMEE: That's very interesting observation because I found such a community of women who weren't small talkers, and so many women from different churches had reached out to me during all of that. No Little Woman was a direct plea to church leaders. So it's very frustrating. These women didn't want to be troublemakers, so everybody's super careful about how they make the requests and how they word everything.

NATALIE: It's so sad. Well, you wrote a new book, which is what we're going to talk about today, and it's called *The Hope in Our Scars*. I'll just hold it up in case anyone's watching this on YouTube. This is actually what you said in your bio, you said, "Aimee writes about the things she hoped to talk about in church," but as she found out, we can't talk about these things there.

Except that, like I said, I think there's a discussion to be had about what is the church,

and I think that's what we're going to get into really. Because you're going to share a little bit about your experience going through spiritual abuse and how that experience actually birthed this book. And so anyway, I just want to welcome you back to the Flying Free Podcast.

AIMEE: Thank you. It's always such a pleasure to talk to you and after having read your last book, Natalie, I just feel even like I know you a little better and just have some kindred spirit with you.

NATALIE: Yeah, I feel the same way about you. Okay, so why don't you just tell us a little bit about your story and how it led to writing your book?

AIMEE: Yeah, so I kind of started my story, I called myself kind of an accidental author because that was not my ambition in life, but I really got married young. My parents were divorced, my husband's parents were divorced, and we're thinking, "How do we do this right? How do we get this right? What's the whole Christian life supposed to look like for us?"

And I was presented with biblical womanhood in the conservative Baptist and Presbyterian churches that we went to. And that sounds wonderful. "That's what I want to be: a biblical woman." So I'm reading all the resources and I got married at twenty-one. I wasn't raised with this hyper-sexual weirdness, so it was odd to me, some of the things that were written in there, but I thought, "These are people like John Piper and Wayne Grudem—these big names—Lig Duncan, you know, so who am I? I'm this dumb twenty-one-year-old who's trying to learn." So I accepted it at face value at first even though some parts of it are like, "Well, this isn't really for me, but we'll move on."

And so I began writing into some of the things that I was stubbing my toe on in the church. Like, "Why Can't We Be Friends?" is an argument for friendship between the sexes. My husband is an elementary school teacher in the public school. He works with a lot of women. So ongoing conversations in our marriage—he doesn't have some kind of option to live in an insular bubble with other men in suits who went to school together with just men and learn from only men and work with only men. And so I think we learned some really good things. Plus, I was a public school kid and so was he, so I feel like we just learned how to treat people with dignity.

So why was this such a struggle in the church as I'm getting invited to speaking engagements and conferences where there are a mixture of men and women? Because I was kind of writing into the gap of the academy and the pew, I felt like, and that's where I was. It's like, do you have to go to seminary to grow as a disciple? Why can't we

learn in the church? So I really tried to go upstairs and have a conversation and then go back downstairs where I felt like my people were and have a conversation.

And I got invited to a lot of academic things. And so here I'm finding myself at one point at a dinner in Philadelphia at night in the rain. I had to park several blocks away in a sketchy place. And as everybody's dispersing, it's a co-ed dinner, some of them were there with their spouses and some weren't. I walk out the back door with two male friends of mine, and it's raining, like I said—it's dark out. They had gotten close parking spaces. One of them offered me his umbrella to take. Neither of them offered me a ride. So I was like, "Hell no, I'm not taking your umbrella and making you feel good about giving that to me while I'm not safe walking in the rain at night down two alleys."

So as I'm walking up one of those alleys, I'm just thinking of how angry my husband would be if he knew that people who could have given me a ride, my friends, didn't because of something like the Billy Graham rule.

NATALIE: So tell everyone what that is.

AIMEE: The Billy Graham rule is just basically Billy Graham and another evangelist decided to make some rules to help them on the road because they were away from home more than they were home. And so one of the rules he made to avoid temptation was not to eat alone with a woman. There were a couple other little things that he wouldn't do with a woman. And so now that kind of got blown out of proportion into "All Christian leaders need to follow this rule—seminary students. Women can't get in your car and you can't have any meetings with women." I'm hearing from young women in seminary saying that their professors won't have the office hours with them like everybody else gets because they're women. And it's just ridiculous.

So that was kind of a book of common sense to me, like, put some theology behind common sense on how we look at one another as brothers and sisters, which is what Paul calls the church more than anything else. And that's when I started getting some heavy critique totally mischaracterizing what I'm writing, bad faith critique, out of fear that "Byrd is encouraging men to have candlelight dinners with women who aren't their wives."

NATALIE: Unbelievable.

AIMEE: Stupid, yeah. And I take faithfulness in marriage very seriously, so that was offensive to me. But from there, I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to write into what is going on in these complementarian circles, this biblical manhood and womanhood movement?" I

went back and I re-read that book that they put together in the beginning of the movement over thirty years ago, which was *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* with all the contributors.

NATALIE: And it's a tome, by the way.

AIMEE: Oh yeah. It's huge.

NATALIE: It's gargantuan.

AIMEE: It used to be called the Big Blue Book.

NATALIE: And everyone had one in on their bookshelf if you're a good person.

AIMEE: And I'm looking at it this time going, "Holy moly—how is this stuff publishable?" Weird stuff, like John Piper explaining to men that, "If you're looking for directions out in a neighborhood in your car and all you can find is a housewife how to ask her without receiving direct and personal guidance because that would be an assault to your manhood," and "Women shouldn't be muscular, they should be soft." Weird stuff like how to hold your wife's purse for her without looking feminine. What?

But not only that, there was severe error that I'd already started uncovering with Rachel Miller on the Trinity, that they're teaching that the Son in His very essence is subordinate to the Father's authority, which is just anti-Nicene and unorthodox.

And then they're using that, somehow transferring that to men and women that, just like we're equal with men in our being, however, our roles... Which, they use "role" like it's ontological, like it's our being. We're submissive to men. So there wasn't anything positive about being a female. It was all about puffing up male leadership.

And so I'm like, "I need to really write a critique into this, but not just that—I want to critique this, but I want an invitation to something much more rich, biblical theology," because they're just doing this kind of Biblicist, take out these proof texts kind of thing, and maybe some systematic theology. But I wanted to look, what is the story that we're learning throughout scripture here?

So that's when I wrote *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, and I really wanted to look at the male and female voice in scripture, a function of that, and how we see that progressing throughout the Word. I wanted to look at the nature of discipleship and what it looks like in the church now, and then I also wanted to go back

to this, kind of expand some more on our privilege and our responsibility as brothers and sisters in church. So this book was written about being like a lay person, a disciple in the church. It wasn't about church leadership. I'm just talking about men and women worshiping together and what should that look like?

And whew, let me tell you. And I wrote this book within the parameters of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Confessions, the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is a pretty tightly bound confession. I stayed within those confessions and theologically and...

NATALIE: You were being a good girl.

AIMEE: I was being a good girl in some ways, but in other ways, Natalie, not so much because you can't do that.

NATALIE: What's so weird is that all you're doing is you're presenting what the New Testament presents as a blueprint for brothers and sisters in Christ. That's all you were doing. But that is so antithetical to what is being taught in modern Christianity, or in some circles, I should say, of modern Christianity, that there was definitely kickback from that.

AIMEE: Oh man, so a whole group formed on Facebook that was like over 1,100 members, and many of them were church leaders. The administrators were leaders in my denomination, but leaders in different Presbyterian and Baptist churches mainly, but also some ACNA and some other things like that—Anglican Church in North America.

And oh my goodness, someone who had been in the group and was not feeling comfortable with what they had seen it progress to messaged me. I didn't even know this woman. She was in her mid 60s and she messaged me and she said, "I am in this group called Geneva Commons," which I was well aware of the group at this point because they were harassing me on Twitter and other things, and I had a little bit of a history with them.

She said, "I think you need to see what they're saying about you." And she actually wanted to give me like her Facebook credentials so that I could go in as her and just look. She felt like she couldn't explain how bad it was. And I'm like, "I just don't feel comfortable doing that. Can you send me a few screenshots?" I'm thinking I'm going to get like a handful of troubling screenshots, you know? Oh my goodness, she starts sending—and bless this woman's heart, I'm not great with technology, but she was

another level. She's taking the screenshots from her phone to her computer screen and sending them.

NATALIE: Oh, that's hilarious.

AIMEE: Morning to night, I'm getting hundreds of screenshots. The threads were like hundreds, and they're just coming in, coming in. These people are getting up early in the morning, and it wasn't just me they were talking about. It was very racist, very homophobic, very sexist. So they were going after other people as well.

But I was like their favorite at the time, their favorite punching bag. "Why doesn't she shut up and make us a sandwich?" They're taking pictures of me and like picking apart my looks that I'm looking too masculine. They are plotting to sabotage my Amazon page with one star reviews. They made jokes about meeting up at a retreat that I would be speaking at, which I was about to be speaking at when I saw this. But before that, and I didn't know this... And this retreat was for my denomination. It was the 20th anniversary of the retreat for women in my denomination. And they called the leaders of the retreat, they called the churches that were involved, the pastors, warning them, "Gird thy loins, beware of this dangerous Jezebel. You've invited a false teacher to teach your women."

And so then that caused a huge stir. I didn't know they called my pastor—they're trying to find out, "What have we done?" I had no idea all this controversy was happening. And I'm about to drive to this retreat, which is in the middle of nowhere, and they might even be there. They were like, "If her husband really loves her, he'd shut her up."

They started calling ahead of all my speaking engagements, causing trouble, punishing anybody who hosted me. So this is affecting my vocation, this is affecting my safety. They're harassing me like crazy online but with anonymous accounts, but in here you see their names. So very interesting.

So one of my elders was in that group of my own church, which is only a church of 175 people. So this elder had eaten dinner at our home. He was my son's youth leader. We had dinner at one another's homes. He was our small group leader. He was actually the elder assigned to our family for shepherding. He wasn't saying the nasty things, but he was lurking.

This huge thread where they took my Why Can't We Be Friends book cover and changed it and defaced it to Why Can't We Be Naked, then they took the clothes off of the characters in the front and fuzzied it, put it all over the internet with anonymous

accounts, thought it was hilarious. You could see it in Geneva Commons, them showing, "Look what we've done," and "Ha ha ha," and all these jokes.

NATALIE: This is wicked. Aimee, this is pure wickedness. This is satanic wickedness.

AIMEE: It was downright vile. They use memes of me as like a transgender woman.

NATALIE: I don't understand. I honestly can't wrap my brain around how people like this think that they are being like Jesus Christ. This is the opposite.

AIMEE: These are pastors and elders.

NATALIE: That's who's leading these churches.

AIMEE: Some of these people I've collaborated with on projects I've worked with. I'd spoken at their churches—like different things. And I knew some of these people. And so my elder, he would pop in, like somebody would ask a question about OPC ecclesiology, church government question. And he was, it'd be like the 60th comment. So he's read all those, and then he pops in, gives an answer about OPC church government, and then exits. Doesn't rebuke anyone, doesn't warn me, doesn't tell me.

I'm just thinking "What in the..." It was a deep sense of betrayal. So I'm going through taking this to my pastor and having to go through this at my local church level with the people I love, and then I get fired from the podcast I'm on right when the book comes out because they demanded that I answer nine questions from an anonymous group of men on their board, and they publicly did this.

NATALIE: What podcast was that again? I remember listening to that.

AIMEE: I was a part of The Mortification of Spin, which was a part of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. Technically, they said they didn't fire me. I was a contractor that they didn't want to come back.

NATALIE: Hello.

AIMEE: So they told me they would be graceful upon my exit.

NATALIE: Unbelievable.

AIMEE: That's an interesting way to let you go. Yeah, I'd done that for seven years.

Friends that I thought I had all of a sudden are ghosting me, I'm getting cancelled, I'm getting blacklisted on all the areas where I used to speak, all for writing this book.

And then I have this group that I uncover because somebody actually put together a whole website exposing them and it's Geneva Commons screenshots or screenshots from Geneva Commons. So there they are, in their own words, saying these things. And they're far worse than what I've even shared. Some of it is sexual language, just disgusting.

So I shared that on my blog at the time, and I just kind of put the picture of a screenshot and then a Bible verse about qualifications for an elder, you know what I mean? And just like, let it speak for itself without any commentary. And that kind of went viral. And so then it's like, my denomination has to decide, are they going to do anything about this?

And same with the other denominations. And I went through a process of over two years trying to just in my own denomination address this, and it was terribly traumatizing. Each step was worse than before in trying to address this elder in my church. There were a good group of men who wanted to help me who knew this is just disgusting, including my other elders, but they had no training in trauma care. I didn't at the time. I'm figuring this out as I go, but I'm educating myself as I'm going through this because I'm like, "What is happening to me? I need the language here."

I'm going to these meetings where I'm having to do the whole Matthew 18 thing with this elder who has power over me while he's gaslighting me the whole time and I don't have anyone backing me up, anyone taking notes or anything like that. I went to a presbytery meeting, like the government in the OPC is you have your elders in your local church, but then you have a regional presbytery of government, and those are elders from different churches and pastors. And then you have The General Assembly once a year, which is the highest court of all the churches in the country.

So I was at a presbytery meeting where my book was made fun of by the man in authority up front. I'm not allowed to speak, by the way. I'm referred to as "that lady" a couple of times. I'm sitting right there. Jokes were being made about me and people were laughing by the person in authority up front during a trial. Or, it wasn't a trial itself. It was deciding whether or not these charges were going to be sustained that elder that was in Geneva Commons had charged my whole elders and pastor for the way they handled it. It was like the victim gets turned into the offender kind of thing and the offenders the victim and every single thing you hear about, and it was terrible.

Each step of the way I was not cared for well, and I'm learning more and more about the system and how they are here to protect the system and the men in power over anything else. I always thought I had thick skin—that's why I felt like I could write something like this, and I was ready for the criticism in the sense of real critique of my work.

NATALIE: Right, because then you could have a conversation, you come to a table and have a intelligent, rational conversation about stuff, and using the Bible, using historical things that have been written.

AIMEE: Yeah, and even saying, "Within these bounds, we can have some disagreements, and that's okay." But the name calling and the plotting to try to ruin my character.

NATALIE: They have no biblical basis. They have no basis in history. They have none. They're abusers, so all they have is a clobber.

AIMEE: They're calling me the great whore of Babylon. These things were being said about me publicly.

NATALIE: So stupid.

AIMEE: Articles were written about how I'm the queen of the feminist army, or the general of the feminist army in the OPC. YouTube videos were made by other pastors calling me a barking dog. I was called a raging wolf.

There was a sermon preached by one of these guys as a guest preacher in someone else's church. This man preaches on Psalm 139, and you want to know what the title of the sermon is? "The Perfect Hatred of God." And the whole sermon he decides to make about God's perfect hatred for feminists. This is after he just wrote the article about how I'm the general of the feminist army. So basically it was like, "God hates Aimee Byrd."

NATALIE: Well, projecting his own hatred... They're fomenting. It's like a boiling cauldron of hatred, just fomenting there in the thing. There's no place for it to go out. They don't know how to manage their emotions or their own hatred and their own shame, and so they're just spewing it out.

AIMEE: Can you imagine being in that congregation? I can't imagine sitting under a sermon like that and thinking, "What?" Even if you don't know anything about Aimee Byrd, how is this the sermon from Psalm 139? How is this godly?

NATALIE: Well, the reason why these people are in power is because people continue to listen to them and pay tithes to their churches and go to their institutions. If they withdrew... And I think they are—I think people are starting to leave, and we will talk about like, where do you go if you can't go to a church full of hate?

AIMEE: Yeah. Well, I thought I was in a church of love. I loved the people at my church. My husband and I were very involved serving there and we did so much there and we loved it.

NATALIE: It's conditional on what you believe.

AIMEE: So to go to these people for help and to realize that you're not going to get it, that you're not safe at your own church, my body started keeping the score. I started experiencing brain fog like I'd never experienced before. I went hiking for four hours with a girlfriend and came back to the parking lot and realized my car was still running the whole time. That's scary stuff. You're like, "I can't even trust myself right now to keep my car locked and off." Everything was just crazy. And so that's when I realized, "This is trauma." And if I used those words, these people would come after me and like, "Oh my gosh, Aimee Byrd's whining about abuse. This isn't abuse. Have thicker skin."

So it was just maddening, and this was church. And so, yeah, I definitely was wounded pretty good and clobbered. I just felt clobbered. "What am I going to do?" Like, it just makes you ask the big questions over again. Is God who I thought He was? Where do I belong? What do I believe? Yeah. So that's what led me to write *The Hope in Our Scars* because I did find Christ intimately present with me through this.

And there's a lot of really good books written on deconstruction right now. I think they're very important and I'm so glad that people are telling their stories. I've had to do a bit of that myself, a good bit of that myself. But I wanted to write not about this kind of sentimentalized hope that people want to talk about, but the gritty, dark side, really, of hope and also the beauty that can come out of it.

And so for all those who are kind of like, "What do I do now? What do I believe? What is church?" all these questions, that's what I'm kind of writing into it. It's not the, "You need to stay in church," or the, "You need to get out of church," but like, "What about all these people asking questions right now?" That's where I was, and that's where I am still, in a lot of ways.

NATALIE: Yeah. I wanted to just read a quote towards the beginning of your book. You wrote, "It's an extreme betrayal and violation of trust when the shepherds accountable

before God to love and care for the sheep leave you exposed to abuse, and then use the process of church order to keep you under it. It makes you wonder what these 'men of God' really believe about love, about power, about community, and belonging."

So it makes you wonder what they believe, but then it also makes you step back and go, "Well, what do I believe now?" I recently did a podcast episode where I talked a little bit about deconstruction and how there are so many deconstruction books out there, but not all deconstruction books are equal as far as like, some are just dumping stories and there's a lot of hurt and pain in those stories and they can leave you feeling a little bit, when you're done reading it, feeling a little bit depleted and like hopeless, maybe, and I hate that feeling.

I've had so much hopelessness in my life, I just don't want more of that, but I'm still in that place where yes, I've also gone through a lot of pain, but there's hope to be had, and I want to look for that and keep searching for it and grabbing hold of the pocket... I think you mentioned in your book that you are the kind of person who's always looking for Christ even in everyday things. Where is Christ showing up even in just the littlest things, like your child picking a flower for you? Little things like that when our brain is scanning the horizon for those things, we will find those things if we believe that that's there for us.

I think that those things are there for all of us because God is so generous to us and His love is so lavish, but when we are stuck in a place where our faith... I just heard this story—it comes from the Mirror Bible. They were in some other country and they found a eagle that had been in a zoo for ten years, and they were going to let it go. So they brought it out to the wilderness or whatever and they were opening the cage and they could not get the eagle to come out of the cage and fly. But after a few hours, another eagle was flying up in the air and it made an eagle call, and this eagle came out of the cage and just flew up to meet it because it heard the call of the other eagle.

And that's what Christ did for us. He gave the call. He said, "Your identity, who you are, is not that person in the cage," but you have to believe it. There has to be this moment of belief or faith where you say, "Ah, that's it. That's what I am," and then you recognize that.

AIMEE: Hope is disruptive. It's not sentimental. It's disruptive and it calls things into question. It calls the very present that you have made commitments into question. And it kind of invites you to look again. And so you can look again at the same picture but see something else and that is invitation.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think what we hope in or what our hope is, that's what gets called into question. Even you going to your church in a plea and other people who have gone to their churches in a plea for help, our hope, really, we found out later, "Well, I really hoped in my church, that my church connected to God and my church was going to be an ambassador of Christ to me." And that was like a false hope because that fell through.

AIMEE: Yeah. It's very scary. I had to call a lot of my own things into question, like, "What attracted me to that denomination? What attracted me to that church?" And I feel like I wanted this sense of certainty. I wanted this sense of security. And I didn't realize how much of a persona it was, like, "If we can get all these doctrines precisely right," and I thought that doctrinal precision would actually lead to sanctification.

And seeing these leaders in the church, one of the biggest, shocking, disillusioning things—because this is all disillusionment—is to see how immature these leaders were. And I used to say spiritually immature, but it's definitely spiritually immature, but emotionally babies, and I'm not just talking about the ones coming after me—I'm talking about the ones that I went to for help just emotionally were stunted in their growth and just basic maturity stuff.

And that made me realize, "Okay, this is also part of the reason why you can't handle women." They had like the middle school mentality. So that was so disillusioning to me, but then I realized God is so much bigger than this system that He's being put in. So it was a good disruption.

I think that disillusionment was a severe mercy in a lot of ways because I don't know what it would have taken for me to get out of that. And it was a pride—there was like a sense of elitism, I think, in that denomination. Hope, Walter Brueggemann talks about how subversive hope is, and he talks about how the present is both much darker and much more glorious than we want it to be or than how we look at it, and it can't be co-opted by the managers of this age. And I think that's what the church is trying to do in a lot of ways, not just that denomination or my church—co-opting God and managing.

NATALIE: Yes. There's a little story that I heard somewhere at some point in my life about two little boys in a bedroom. They share a bedroom, a bunk bed, and their parents give them a rule. And the rule is once you're in bed, you can't turn on the light. You need to keep the light out. You can see parents, like, "Lights out, we go to bed, and we don't get out of bed either. Don't get out of bed. Don't turn the light on." These churches have these, we like the rules because they tell us what to do and they keep us safe. Like, "Now I know what to do."

But then what happens when the little brother falls out of bed and he's crying and he can't find his way and can't figure it out and doesn't know and he needs help? Does the other child say, "Well, I'm going to follow the rule," or does he have enough self-awareness and enough emotional intelligence to say, "Well, this is a situation in which we need to break the rule for the sake of love to help someone get back into bed. What was the rule there for in the first place? It was so that we could get our rest. But how is this little boy getting his rest if he's on the floor crying? So let's help him get his rest by breaking the rule in order to do that."

AIMEE: Right, exactly. There's no trust. There's no trust for regular people to be able to have that kind of freedom and belonging to grow that God gives us.

NATALIE: Yes. Well, and I think that life on earth is messy and people are messy, and sometimes we don't like that. We don't like to see it in ourselves.

AIMEE: Parenting. I wanted to raise my kids right and them to turn out a certain way. It was the formula, almost. There is this prosperity gospel in it, as much as we turned our noses up to the prosperity gospel. It was still put the quarter in and get the gumball out kind of theology.

NATALIE: Exactly. So anyway, now we're all realizing, "Okay, that didn't work." I think you even use the word of "severe mercy" in your book.

AIMEE: Yeah, it's the title of another book, which is really good.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think it is a severe mercy because I think until we really embrace ourselves, our inner mess—because God does—we're never really going to be able to truly embrace the messes of other people and love them right where they're at. If those leaders had any emotional intelligence, self-awareness, Christ's love within them, ability to see themselves and embrace their own shame and really have faith and trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ, their reaction to you would've been one of, "Tell me more. This is very interesting. Let's have a conversation."

They might maybe not agree, but still be willing to have a conversation with you, maybe draw some other women in. It just would have been a completely different response. But their whole theology is not set up that way, and so they're really stuck in cages as well. The door is open to them also, but they're stuck in a cage and they feel safe and secure in that cage, so they're going to scream and yell at anyone who's flying. Instead of meeting them up there and flying free themselves, they're going to scream and yell obscenities at them, because that's where they're at in their own lives, and it's really

sad.

AIMEE: I mean, I found how impossible it is to get a leader in the church to apologize, to admit to harm. And if they did, like where my elders apologized in some parts through the church court process, it was weaponized against them. It's the opposite of the gospel. It's the opposite of the Christian message. It was so strange. And I'm sitting in that presbytery meeting watching these pastors and elders behave as kind of "bad lawyers," parsing the book of church order for two and a half hours. And there was no love and there was no Christ. And it was kind of like a "come to Jesus" moment for me because I'm like, "You're not here," with all these spiritual leaders. "This place is dark."

My husband and I got in the car afterwards and both of us wanted to stand up and object and say something because I literally was being mocked and we weren't allowed to. And our pastor had charges against him, so we thought if we do anything, it's going to fare badly for him because that was a huge theme. It's just like, leaders get punished for supporting me. And we got in the car and we're like, "We should have said something." And I'm like, "Yeah, but we weren't like even able to," and Matt looks at me and he goes, "What are they going to do, throw us in OPC jail?"

NATALIE: Yeah, I know. I was just going to ask you, I get that because I understand that feeling like that they have power over you and they can ruin your life. But once I got out and had a few years under my belt of living in the real world, I realized, "Oh my gosh, it was just like a little sandbox and they're playing games. They're pretending to be..."

AIMEE: That's what I mean. It was like they were in costumes and we're following these ridiculous rules. And I know there has to be order—in any courtroom or whatever, there has to be order.

NATALIE: This isn't a courtroom. This is a church.

AIMEE: How do you not hear from the victim themselves? That's ridiculous.

NATALIE: Okay, I really have a hard time understanding how... I don't know why people in that sandbox don't just go, "What am I doing in this sandbox? I'm going to go to the beach. I'm going to go play on the beach. There's thousands and thousands of miles of beach for me to play on. I don't have to be in this sandbox with these six-year-old boys."

AIMEE: We don't realize the water that you're swimming in. I had all of these leaders also within the denomination, older ones who are about to retire kind of thing, who were fighting for my calls and they kept hoping that we could have change and all this

stuff. I was trying to get third party investigators in and all this stuff. And I'm meeting with a therapist who specialized in spiritual abuse. And he says to me, "Aimee, why do you think that you have to be a missionary in your own church?"

NATALIE: Yeah, good question. What'd you say?

AIMEE: That was it for me. That's when I realized, "I need to get the heck out of here. Church is not supposed to be the mission field. I'm supposed to be in a place where me and my family are nurtured and worshiping God and growing and flourishing. And that's not it," so that was a defining moment for me.

And like you said, once you step out of it, then you're like, "What in the world?" But you have to process that. It takes a long time. And that's what I try to help to do in *The Hope in Our Scars* too is to say, "Looking at our wounds and naming what's happened, that is an act of hope. Naming the darkness is an important act of hope because that helps kind of reveal what our longings are. What it is that was harmed—what was taken in this? Because things are not as they should be, obviously."

And that's where I just think, I'm sad. I'm sad for these leaders. I'm sad for these churches that are caught up in these kinds of systems because there's so much beauty in God's Word and there's so much beauty in each person. And I went to a book in scripture that people might think is a little weird—I felt ministered to me through trauma—and that is the *Song of Songs*.

NATALIE: Yeah, I was actually just going to bring that up.

AIMEE: Yeah, because I think poetry was very important to me at the time because beauty is a huge part of healing. And so you've got this book right in the middle of scripture, and it's this allegory of Christ's love for His bride and in the individual soul of every believer. And that's the way that song has been interpreted all the way up until like the 19th century. And it used to be one of the more popular books in the Bible to preach from and to learn from, and there are so many echoes. It's almost telling the whole story of scripture in this love story.

So the cool thing is, though, here I am going through my voice being silenced, ashamed for being a woman, and you have the woman's voice is dominant in this song. And she opens the song, she closes the song. She says what she wants and she's inmodest about it, and she names her abuse. She names the harm. She names harm from spiritual leaders, too. She gets clobbered. There's two night scenes where she's like looking for God but she can't find him.

Oh man. I can totally feel that, right? How often are we like, "Where are you God?" And so I feel like she directs our desires. She gives us the words, "Oh, I can speak to God like this. He wants me to," and in His voice, He's calling her out from the clefts of the rock, and He's saying, "Let me see your face. Let me hear your voice because your face is lovely and your voice is sweet." And that's what God is saying. I really felt those words from Christ to me, and it's evangelical, really. "Share about who I am, share about my love."

You have this picture in Exodus where Moses wants to see God's face, and God kind of grants showing him His backside because he can't see God's face and live, and that brought so much glory to Him that He had to veil it. And here we have the incarnate Christ figure in this allegory calling His bride to see His face. "You can now look at my face because of Jesus," and I just think that's so beautiful, "And now I want to hear your voice."

So there's so much in there, but I really felt what the church fathers and mothers used to say that, "If you want to find Christ in the most intimate way in his word, go to the Song of Songs." They call it the holy of holies of scripture.

NATALIE: Wow, that's so beautiful. I loved how you brought out the experiences that she had that so many of us have experienced. It's so healing to see that in the Bible because these spiritual abusers will use the Bible to actually say the opposite things, and it's not true. And it's so comforting to know God is not putting His stamp of approval on what these people are doing, these people who are victimizing other people. Really, people in leadership and power roles victimizing the people underneath them. It's really sad.

AIMEE: It is. We all know the opposite of what Christ was preaching in His ministry. So that's what I wanted to do is really point to beauty and to healing and not a formula of, "And now you'll feel better and find the perfect church." I'm pretty honest about my own search in there, which is a hard one. And I think it's okay for us to lament the state of the church right now.

NATALIE: Yeah. So speaking of that, you kind of described a lot of different types of churches that you've tried and you're just kind of wandering through. I'm wondering where you're at right now, and also I wanted to read five statements that you said about a church that we need and maybe have a discussion about where to find that church or where that church is.

You said at the very end, you described a church that we need as, "A church that sees

what is real, a church that sees Christ, a church that sees Christ in you, a church that sees Christ in the earthy otherness of every other, and a church that sees beauty, goodness, and truth." So where is that church in your opinion, just based on what you've gone through and where you're at?

AIMEE: I don't know. I feel like we can talk about the church in the corporate sense, which I'm still looking for. My family is going to a Methodist church right now that's right down the road from us. We're not really Methodists and we haven't joined this church, but we've been going for a while and there are some things we really love about it and then there's some things that we really wish were different about it. So we're just being very slow, but we really don't know where else to go right now.

The churches that we've been visiting have been so caught up in Christian nationalism or just the whole complementarian thing and the patriarchy. Or a big trend right now, it's churches, like non-denominational, a lot of them who are reaching out to the deconstructing—yay—but they're following like a popular teaching now by Andy Stanley to kind of unhitch yourself from the Old Testament. And so there's just little substance going on there and it feels like almost what Mike Bird says, "You're going for a concert and a TED talk." No liturgy. We were starving for some liturgy. And the Old Testament, I'm just sitting here talking about Song of Songs, it's important to me. I think that there are rich gems in the Old Testament.

So we decided we wanted something within driving area, like twenty minutes, because I think church should be within twenty minutes. And a pastor friend of mine of a denomination that isn't near me said, "Why don't you try some of the mainline churches? You're going to get the liturgy there." So we started at this Methodist church and it's a woman pastor, so it was my first experience with a woman pastor. She's pretty young. She's mid-thirties. She's got young toddlers.

The first time we went there, she was on maternity leave. She had three months maternity leave, which I just thought, "Wow, this church is running pretty decent without the pastor," which to me showed that, "Okay, she's okay handing out power." When she came the first day, it was the most amazing thing. I walk in and she's got her three-month-old kind of attached to her on one of the carriers. And I thought, "Oh, isn't that adorable? I wonder when she's going to take the baby off so she can get to work." And the service gets started and baby's still there, baby Wilbur. And next thing you know, she's doing the call to worship with the baby still attached to her. And then she does the children's time and she's rocking baby Wilbur a little bit during that if he gets fussy. And then lo and behold, this woman gets behind the pulpit to preach with a baby.

And can I tell you, Natalie, it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen because I think so often in egalitarian churches the problem is, "Oh yeah, women can do what men can do, but we expect you to do it like the men." And this was something very different. I'm thinking about back in the day with women just having a baby and attaching themselves to pick cotton in the cotton field. But this was choice. This is power right here, that she is... You see the men who never would hold a baby while they're preaching. They have somebody else watching their children so they can do the most important thing, right?

And here, I felt like she just said, "Hold my beer." But not, because even then somebody else is holding your beer for you. It was just amazing. And so it was just such power and beauty to me. The sermon was beautiful. It wasn't distracting at all in that sense. She didn't keep doing that, but that day she did that, and the kids are very much a part of the service. And so that's one thing I learned right away that just blew me away.

Another thing I learned was the first time they had communion, she was still on maternity leave. The guest preacher called for whoever was going to be serving communion that day. Everyone's looking around, they weren't there. And the mom in front of me looked down at her ten-year-old daughter and said, "Come on, they need somebody."

I came from a denomination where only men and only the elders served communion. And here is a woman and her daughter, a woman and her child. And we walked up and this little girl says, "This is Christ's body broken for you," and I believed it. I was like, "How dare me to not think the Holy Spirit can work through the voice of this child?" It was so beautiful.

So there are some wonderful things going on there too—I think I have a lot of unlearning to do still, so that's where God has us hanging out. You know, we're not connecting. It's an older church. We're in a big age gap there. We're invited to a lot of programs, but we're not personally invited to things like coffee or something like that—happy hour, dinner. So that's odd to me.

NATALIE: Does that congregation do that kind of thing?

AIMEE: I think that there are a lot of people who have been married for fifty years and longer. Whoa, I'd love to tap into that. But what I'm finding is they grew up together in that church and they're there for each other. They're a great community. And they probably think someone in their late forties doesn't want anything to do with them, but I very much do.

And then there's some younger families who I think are just caught up and busy. They're in their little programs together. We've been so vulnerable that we really haven't connected in the programming type stuff. We definitely need more personal invitations. And we used to be the ones to give them all, invite to our house and host everything. Right now we just need to hang out.

So in our friendships, in the looking and listening for Christ in the everyday, there's pieces of church there too, right? So much learning going on. And I think both are important, so I think it's important to answer the call to worship if you can with other people, even when it's not all the things that I put there. Even if it's to lament some about that.

But I do think and totally understand if you're so wounded and you can't make church right now, God is bigger. He's not this transactional thing where you showed up on Sunday so you get a golden check mark and a golden star. I don't think that's what it's about. So I definitely have a lot of different attitudes about that now. I'm finding it in the struggles with some of my friends who are losing their faith—having those conversations, talking about beauty and meaningfulness with them, and having to do that in ways that you're not spiritually bypassing what they're going through.

NATALIE: It's challenging when you don't have those snap answers that you used to have.

AIMEE: Yeah, but then it makes you listen, it makes you empathize. And I think that's where you're finding Christ is in that humility. So not in the spiritual language that we like to use to feel like, "I just perfectly witnessed to this person." I feel a lot different about apologetics now and those kind of things. So I feel like I'm learning and looking.

NATALIE: That's where I'm at too.

AIMEE: Church is where Christ is.

NATALIE: Yeah, I was going to say, it's sort of two different things. One is the Church of Christ, which is just the global church, is just made of people that choose to follow Christ, have chosen to answer the call and go flying, and we're doing that right now. We're the church right now. I'm thinking of, there are women listening to this in their cars or their kitchens or their bedrooms or their office spaces, listening to this podcast, and their hearts are—it's like a spiritual thing—their hearts are joining with ours in this desire for Christ and the desire to be united and to be one, so that's happening.

We can't see it, it's not like a visual thing, but then there's also the church that we... And there is something to be said for community where, I mean, it's healthy. It's just healthy for humans to have a community and to have community around that mutual love for Christ and remembering what Christ did for us and encouraging one another and building each other up, which is what our entire desire was for that originally with the other churches.

AIMEE: And we need one another to read the Word, I think. We need each other's eyes and ears.

NATALIE: And yeah, to get more of the layers and nuances out of it.

AIMEE: Absolutely. And I love the sacrament of communion. I just think that there's something mystical happening there. And this is something Christ is doing and giving and nurturing us with. So it isn't something that I'm bringing so much as just my desire to experience that and to be fed in that and to be given Christ. I think that there's something really awesome in the true sense of the word.

NATALIE: Yeah. So I have a question for you. Well, it's kind of on topic, but it's what you just said. I was thinking about that actually, the sacrament of communion, for example, because I am not going to church right now and so then I'm not doing that right now. I was wondering what Jesus meant. Did He mean for us to go and do this specific ritual, or is that something that we chose to do, or what was the heart behind it?

Was it to break bread with one another and to remember Christ as we break bread with each other and to do that on a regular basis so that we are always just circulating that love and that devotion to Christ, or do we need to do it in a sacrament, and what about people who don't... We're in America, so I'm always thinking about the world through my own American eyes, but what about countries where they can't get together or they don't have that privilege of being able to get together to do special little things like that or have someone...

You mentioned you love liturgy. My husband grew up Catholic so he loves that, all of that ritual and liturgy as well. But what about people who can't have that, and they're still the Church of Christ as well, so how do we... I don't know—what are your thoughts about that?

AIMEE: I think, man, that's something to really study that I would love to get into more. When you look at the early church and early interpretations of Christ's Last Supper and then the institution of communion, you see that there were love feasts. People are

meeting in their homes and they're having love feasts, and communion was done during the love feast. So what we're doing now, especially post-COVID in a lot of churches—they're still using the little packets, even—but what we're doing now is so different than how it was to begin with, so I think that's something to look at right there and what you're saying, definitely.

I mean, why we pray before a meal is we're recognizing and inviting the presence of Christ at the table with us. But it's also, I think, an act of hope to that day when the first thing we're going to do is we're going to feast. We're going to feast. And so I do think there's something mystical happening, and I hate to use like the institution of the supper, but in the presentation of it, in the words that Christ said when He presented the bread and wine, and then you see it in the Emmaus walk too, it's when He breaks the bread is when they are able to recognize Him.

And so I think that there's this invitation for us to look for and recognize Christ amongst us together and that we should be eating together. And it's such a somber event now, communion, which, obviously we want to take seriously what we're doing, but it's a celebratory thing. Christ, in some mystical sense, I believe is giving us Himself. He talks about, "Unless you eat of my body and drink from my blood, you will not have life." And I just think there's something mystical happening here.

So the church services in the early church for like the first 1500 years was centered on communion, on Eucharist. And it was mystery. And then we get into all these debates about, "Is Christ really in the bread, and what is really happening here? Is it just a memorial or a remembrance, or is there something actually happening? And can the crumbs drop on the floor?" and all these things.

And then the next thing you know, during the Reformation, the pulpit becomes the center of worship and the preached word. And it wasn't that way. Not that preaching wasn't long and being done and seriously a part of the service, but all of a sudden the communion gets moved to the side. And so much of the power gets taken out of it too, because it's now centered on this man who's serving it and all of that.

So I do think we have a lot of questions to ask there and what would that mean in an informal way, especially when you see Christ saying, "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I'm with them," there's a lot of things to talk about there, and the fact that so many of these churches were house churches to begin with. But that would be a great thing to really get into, I think.

NATALIE: Yeah. So what are your thoughts, too, then, about people who meet online,

who have found pockets of community but maybe not in their neighborhoods or in their cities? What are your thoughts?

AIMEE: Obviously it's great to find something, right? If you can't find it in your neighborhood, then good for you for keeping looking. And we have this technology now, that's fabulous. So I'm not anti by any means, but I do think that there is a longing for embodiment face-to-face. There's something in that, and if you can find something like that, I think that there's more to it.

But at the same time, I will say, I found some of my strongest community online as well that's helped me heal, that's helped me get through things. So maybe try to balance those things out some the best that you can.

NATALIE: Yeah. Have you and your husband ever thought about like starting something or do you feel like, "Oh, it's just so overwhelming"?

AIMEE: I've been asked this question. I didn't go to seminary. I'm not a pastor.

NATALIE: That wasn't required back in church history.

AIMEE: I guess I would love to know Greek and those kinds of things. So I don't know that that is really my calling. I've always felt strongly that my calling is to speak for the people who are in the pew, per se. I'm fascinated with pastors. I have many friends who are pastors. I love my friendships with them. I read books for pastors for some reason because I find them to be very enriching.

NATALIE: But you don't feel called to be a pastor?

AIMEE: Yeah, I don't feel like that's where God's leading me. I kind of have an existential crisis after each book because I'm like, "Am I even going to keep writing?" I don't know. "Am I going to do something else?" So I don't know right now. We're kind of in a, "What's going on here?"

NATALIE: Yeah. I want to let you know that I appreciate you being willing to come on here, to continue to write. That's vulnerable to write when you don't... I mean, at least in Christian circles, I feel like we have to write when we have everything all tied up in a nice, neat bow, and then we can present this like, "Here's the answer. I really struggled for a while, but then I found the answer, and here it is."

AIMEE: Yeah, this is a vulnerable book, for sure.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's a little open-ended at the end. And this conversation, honestly, is open-ended. I don't think you've landed anywhere yet, but at least what you're doing is you're coming to the table and saying, "Hey, this is where I'm at, and I'm willing to be honest about it and I'm willing to have conversations about it."

And then what I think you are going to find and probably already have found is that there are so many people in that place and they're not looking for someone who has answers. And I don't think there are answers for so many things. I think we're meant to live in this space of not having answers so that we can trust that God has us no matter what.

AIMEE: I know, it's like we really have to have faith, right?

NATALIE: Yes, exactly. That's what faith is. It's believing and trusting in something that we don't know, we don't have the answers for, we don't know for sure. And when you talk about even the sacraments being mysterious, it's like, what's happening in this dimension, in this three or four, however many dimensions that the scientists now say that we're in, in this area, and then there's this veil we can't see, and there's this unseen, spiritual thing happening at the exact same time...

AIMEE: I think God gives us little glimpses. And that's what I'm looking for all the time are those little glimpses. And that's why I love to read the contemplative writers—stuff I liked in my early 20s that I thought, "Oh no, I'm getting too into the mystical side of things and I need to be more certain," and now I'm coming full circle back to the wonder and imagination that is so exciting and God revealing Himself in those things. And even in the groaning, there's tons of groaning, tons of laments still, for sure.

NATALIE: I personally think that is where the church is.

AIMEE: I call it the Underground in the book, right?

NATALIE: Yeah, the Underground, or I think of it as being like the wilderness. We all got kicked out of the city walls and now we're out in the wilderness and we've got these campfires all around, just gathering around and loving Jesus.

AIMEE: The church has always been alternative community.

NATALIE: It has—the true church has always been, you're right. Well, Aimee, thank you so much for coming back on the podcast and sharing all of your vulnerability. This was an amazing conversation, I think lots of people are going to be able to relate. And also

just thank you for writing this book, *The Hope in Our Scars*, and we will put a link to that in the show notes and where people can find you.

AIMEE: Such a delight to talk to you again, Natalie, as always.