

THE BRIDE(ZILLA) OF CHRIST

WHAT TO DO
WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE
HURT GOD'S PEOPLE

TED KLUCK &
RONNIE MARTIN



Praise for
The Bride(zilla) of Christ

“I love the way Ted’s and Ronnie’s perspectives and voices play off each other and support each other in this book. They provide honesty, humor, pointed commentary, earnestness, humility, and clarity. As someone who has been hurt by churches and who has doled out more hurt than I probably realize, I found *Bride(zilla)* uncomfortable but incredibly helpful therapy for my soul. Church leaders need this book. Those who have been hurt by churches need it too. I can’t recommend it highly enough.”

—BARNABAS PIPER, author and podcast co-host
of *The Happy Rant* with Ted and Ronnie

“This book was simultaneously all that I hoped and not at all what I expected. Without throwing the church under the bus or minimizing the hurt that can be caused in her midst, Kluck and Martin share their hearts, their scars, and great insights for believers who may be tempted to write off the church for good.”

—ZACHARY BARTELS, author of *The Last Con* and *Playing Saint*; pastor of Judson Baptist Church, Lansing, MI

“Rather than lamenting for a return to the early church through misplaced nostalgia, or recommending magic bullet solutions for the pain in the church, *The Bride(zilla) of Christ* offers insights into the true wounds of consumerism, individualism, and materialism with healing balm of a gracious gospel, community church, and winsome worldview. Ronnie Martin and Ted Kluck bring weighty matters of forgiveness, honesty, and unity in Christ

to the forefront to help solve the crisis of church members wounding one another.”

—DANIEL MONTGOMERY, lead pastor of Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, KY; founder of the Sojourn Network; and author of *Faithmapping*, *PROOF*, and *Leadership Mosaic*

“With pastoral care and passion, Ted Kluck and Ronnie Martin walk us through the joys and sorrows of being a part of the body of Christ. Through this helpful work, they clear the fog from our eyes to see with renewed wonder that the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.”


—MATT BOSWELL, pastor of ministries and worship, Providence Church, Frisco, TX; founder of Doxology & Theology

“Kluck and Martin have taken on a difficult task of addressing hurt within the church and have handled it with vulnerability and grace. They allow the truth of Scripture to be primary and encourage all of us to seek unity and reconciliation within the church.”

—BRAD HOUSE, executive pastor of ministries at Sojourn Community Church; author of *Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support*

“Ted Kluck is one of faith literature’s unsung heroes. Always authentic, always funny, and nothing short of your best friend on every page.”

—BRIAN IVIE, head of storytelling at Arbella Studios



THE BRIDE(ZILLA) OF CHRIST

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CONTENTS

Prologue: I See a Red Door and I Want to Paint It Beige (Ted Kluck)	1
Prologue Continued: Unresolved to Glory (Ronnie Martin).	9
1 Explosions in the Sky: A Fairy Tale (Kluck)	15
2 What's Mine Is (Not) Yours (Martin).	27
3 Types of Hurt (Kluck).	45
4 This Wonderful Wreckage (Martin)	59
5 Jesus Loves You, but I Think You're a Jerk: Good Old-Fashioned Personality Conflicts or Inner and Outer Ring Issues (Kluck).	83
6 Is It Just Me? (Martin)	113
7 I Think Not Having a Gimmick Is Your Gimmick: Authenticity and Institutionalized Hurt (Kluck)	135
8 The Oil and Dew of Unity (Martin)	151
9 Restoration (Kluck)	173
Acknowledgments	195
Notes	197

PROLOGUE

I SEE A RED DOOR AND
I WANT TO PAINT IT BEIGE

Ted Kluck

For most of my adult life I've been in the kinds of churches where whenever a guy is described as "really solid" or "an awesome guy"—this is sort of the ultimate churchy compliment a guy can get—he typically fits a certain personality and personal aesthetic profile. He is really quiet and earnest. By earnest I mean whenever he has an opportunity to be sarcastic or funny or even sort of baseline-observational in a potentially funny way, he never takes it. By quiet I mean he never complains. As far as personal aesthetics go, this is a beige-pants kind of guy. Beige is the least offensive and in fact least noticeable color in all of male fashion. Today's successful church man is a Beige Man.

I've never been this guy. I've never been described as "really solid," because I am, in fact, not really solid if what really solid means is quiet, earnest, and beige. I've been described as funny, sarcastic, talented, entertaining, and even "right on" in terms of

this critique or that critique. Guys like me get invited to parties. Solid, beige guys get asked to serve on committees.

Where I live now, in the South, beige is a way of life. It's the color that goes most effectively with two other ways of life—the dark blue blazer and the regimental tie. These are more than just sartorial choices; they are indicators of the solidness or awesomeness of a particular kind of southern guy. They are the kinds of sartorial choices that say, “Trust me with your investment banking” or “Send your kid to my university.”

I wish I could be more like this. I wish I could be Beige Man.

I say this to set the table for my own personal story of church conflict and also some heavy caveats. When my editor asked me to “open up a vein and bleed out a little” (this is really a thing that gets asked in the process of writing a book!) about my own experiences vis-à-vis church hurt, it occurred to me that I've probably been on the giving end of more hurt than I've received. What he probably expected is a story or two about some kind of explosive church conflict between me and somebody else, or some kind of longstanding offense that made it impossible for me to continue at a given church. These are the things that make for real page-turners. Neither thing happened.

Let me explain. Two churches ago, I experienced a sort of personal and spiritual ground clearing that came as a result of

some long-unaddressed sin. Now, there was nothing especially remarkable about the church, inasmuch as it was your typical neo-Calvinist congregation with all the good and bad that entails: the good being a really sincere and robust love of doctrine, great teaching from the pulpit, sincere worship, and strong lay leadership. That said, we (meaning, in this case, the church in general) were kind of socioeconomically homogeneous (translation: almost everybody did well), highly educated (college-town Calvinists), and, as a result of those two, probably insufferably smug at times. Because we were a neo-Calvinist church in the early to mid-2000s, we also produced and homeschooled children as though our very lives depended on it.

Unfortunately this coincided with a period of extreme failure for me professionally and for my family in general. In this cradle of fertility, we were Infertile Couple. I felt cursed, as though God had decided to remove my DNA from the world forever because He hated me. In this bastion of professional achievement, I wasn't quite getting it done. I lost a very high-profile book deal with the most famous Evangelical on the planet in the mid-2000s. I got placed over a metaphorical barrel financially by another semifamous Evangelical. This hurt real bad and made an already cynical guy (me) almost hopelessly more cynical. Mind you, I was publishing books as though my life depended on it (it kind of did—both financially and egotistically—in a very unhealthy way), but we bought too much

house and our personal finances were a monthly white-knuckle ride.

Instead of learning how to suffer in Christ and taking these problems to the cross in patient and humble dependence, I seethed. Instead of involving my godly friends in authentic prayer and sharing, I allowed bitterness to take root. I looked for validation and pleasure where I shouldn't have. I became even more sarcastic than usual. I was unspeakably jealous of good men who had more (success, children, whatever) than I did. Outwardly, I was still the fun-loving appropriate party guy. Inwardly, I was a mess.

It almost ruined my life.

But then God did a strange thing. He used the selfsame imperfect and sometimes smug church to save my life and my soul. He convicted me with Scripture and a sermon. It was men from that church who took me in, shivering, sobbing, and afraid for my soul, who answered my calls, and who heard my confessions. They graciously forgave and loved me in spite of my sins. They challenged and counseled. They were a fragrance of Christ to me in those hard months as the Holy Spirit was replacing my heart of stone with a heart of flesh.

This is why I am compelled to write to people who have been hurt by the church, making the point that the church (imperfect though she may be) is still a tremendous source of

hope, growth, and comfort. It's a necessary part of the life of a believer.

My story didn't end perfectly, from an earthly perspective. Our finances didn't miraculously change overnight, as is the arc of so many badly done "Christian" films. But God provided. I don't feel amazing each day. I am still wrecked with sadness and regret when I think of my sins, but I am not guilty, because I know that Christ has paid for each one. Sin had left a crimson stain, but He washed it white as snow.

I haven't become Beige Man. I am still a guy who complains and wisecracks too much. But by His grace, God is allowing me to live and move and have my being. He is smoothing off the rough edges and using the church to do it. Today I will sit in a membership interview and tell this story to my new church, not as a means of self-flagellation, but as a means of local accountability and giving God the glory that is His. The glory that exists because He used an imperfect place, the church, to save my life.

PROLOGUE CONTINUED

UNRESOLVED TO GLORY

Ronnie Martin

But what happens when your story is a page-turner? When God uses it to crack the icy, hardened soil around your heart to create jagged and bleeding edges? You gasp for air, you grasp for answers, and you question your future as it unfolds in front of public cries and probing eyes. What happens when you become that person? That person you know or hear about but can't imagine going through what he's going through. Until you go through it.

It was a Friday. My wife, Melissa, and I would be heading north to perform a wedding in a few hours. After months of prayer, counsel, and very little peace of mind, an agonizing decision had been made. They say church planting is not for the faint of heart, so I suppose we decided to go ahead and ignore the rather high percentage of faintheartedness and fragility that was spilling over into everything. And maybe it was because there was a rather pronounced heartbeat to build something

that God alone would have to build that provided the tiny thimble of bravery we might have had. Nothing felt very clear except that we clearly needed to move forward.

Of course, we'd have to leave the church we'd been at for years. I shared the news with the person I needed to share the news with. It should be noted that although a measure of fear was hanging over the proceedings, hope also had a seat at the table. This wouldn't be new news after all, just a decision that had been made after months of discussions, without any of the details beyond those even remotely decided or planned.

I've always been told I have a fairly good gift of discernment. Not that I always read a situation or person correctly, just that I get it right far more than I get it wrong. This situation would fall in the latter category in a way deeper than I could have possibly imagined. To say the news wasn't received well would be like saying a bear tends to get a bit agitated when you take his honey away. The anger was explosive. The accusations darted like knives. A bitterness emerged immediately. I was like a soldier who'd gone unwittingly into war with no armor on whatsoever. And then I had to go. The wedding rehearsal was in an hour.

We parted, composure attempted but barely maintained. The drive north was buried in reeling and confusion. The weekend was filled with angry texts as gossip and slander started flooding in from people who were given information we had no

hand in communicating. On Sunday it was announced from the platform that we were leaving. Our insurance was canceled. The elders gave us three weeks. E-mails to friends and ministry leaders were blocked. It was an inexplicable end. Devastation reached unparalleled heights in the emotional pools of our heads and hearts. It felt the way drowning feels in a slow-motion dream.

In the nuances of these nightmares, we ached for answers. What to do, what to do? No escape, and in a matter of days, no paycheck. We became an encyclopedia of worst-case scenarios, while finding occasional minutes of comic relief in the shocking hilarity of it all.

And yet, the light of grace beamed like lasers through the almost inconsolable blackness. Somehow, peace found its way into the inner reaches. God surrounded us with a shield of people who would not let us fall. By God's grace we stand side by side with them today. And yet, even now, there is still fallout. Years later, people still talk. We're reminded that resolution is hoped for but never guaranteed this side of glory.

This book is for those with unresolved stories, like mine. For those who love the church as much as they've been on the losing end of it. It's a book for those who need to be reminded of who the head of the church will always be so they will return to Him and the people who sin against Him. In reality, all of us are those people, aren't we? We've all gone and are going

The Bride(zilla) of Christ

through that which God is using to conform us into the image of His Son. And so we don't lose hope but rest in blessed assurance that Christ's bride will continue to be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

1

EXPLOSIONS IN THE SKY

A FAIRY TALE

Ted Kluck

Picture a bucolic midwestern town. A little blue collar. A little university. A little conservative, and of course by a little conservative I mean a *lot* conservative. This is an American flag T-shirt kind of town. This is a Republican think-tank kind of town. It's the kind of town where "rapid change" is measured in decades, not minutes, hours, days, or weeks.

In many ways it's the perfect kind of town. People say hello. The quaint coffee shop remains quaint because people love and support it accordingly. The town even supports a few "unconventional" types, like the skinny, long-haired middle-aged guy who runs the used-record store, because somewhere in the cosmos there's a bylaw that says all used-record store owners are skinny, long-haired middle-aged guys.

In this town there happens to reside the national headquarters of a large church denomination, which, culturally, resides someplace in between mainline and evangelical. The denomination's showpiece church resides in town and is the biggest,

most impressive building in town. It's also, maybe, the town's most successful business. Like most churches birthed out of the Hybels/megachurch/'80s model, it is large, taupe, carpeted, comfortable, and well appointed, and there is also a café. This, I've found, is a staple of all churches of that era.

Into this scene steps my friend. My friend has been an independent thinker, an entrepreneur, and a musician his entire life. He's recently moved to Midwestern Town (henceforth MWT) from Los Angeles, California, where he would routinely spend two hours in traffic each evening and where change was breakneck and constant. In L.A., change was the only constant. Not so in MWT.

For a time there was a mutually satisfying honeymoon period in which the American flag-shirt population was enamored by my skinny-jeans, faux-military-jacket-wearing Los Angeles friend. He couldn't have stood out more if he was walking down Main Street each day wearing an astronaut's outfit. Each trip out for a latte he would be regarded and talked about as though he were a real living, breathing celebrity, with people's reactions ranging from "Tell us about the music industry!" to "Why on earth would you move to this town?"*

* My friend is, of course, my coauthor, Ronnie Martin. For a while we thought it might be interesting to write this little vignette in a thinly veiled fairy-tale style, but we realized that doing so connotes a lack of courage and even the phrase "thinly veiled" is a little obnoxious, don't you think? Anyway, it's Ronnie, but I left the rest of it the same because I think the fairy-tale thing is an interesting and fun aesthetic choice.

For a while my friend and the town reveled in their mutual discovery of each other. Antique stores were frequented. Autumns were enjoyed, and fallen leaves raked. The first winter was quaint. Photographs of the snow were taken and of course Instagrammed, and comments were made like, “How are you and your wife surviving winter?” to which my friend would guffaw good-naturedly and say something polite about how much they were enjoying it. What’s weird is that they actually *did* enjoy it. A series of get-to-know-you dinners were had and enjoyed.

My friend took a job as a worship leader at the Hybels knockoff, and the moment he signed his contract he became the hippest person who had ever darkened the door of said church. While the rest of the aesthetic was all taupe and faux ficus trees, my friend’s office was a minimalist’s delight replete with art books, vinyl records, and a reformed book collection that made his office look like an annexed Crossway Publishing warehouse in the way that all reformed pastors’ offices should look like annexed Crossway Publishing warehouses.

But the thing was my friend loved the Bible, loved the church, and loved ministry. He did his best to lead worship, teach Sunday school classes, and lead small groups. He longed to do more than pick three praise songs to play each Sunday, but for a long time did the picking and the playing of those songs, steadfastly, each Sunday.

At some point the joy of discovery waned as joys of discovery always do. This is why people don't spend forever falling in love, and if they say they do, they're lying.

My friend, being creative, entrepreneurial, and eager to minister, began longing to preach. This longing to preach was met, initially, by some opportunities, but later those opportunities began to diminish. His ideas fell on deaf ears in a town and a church where change happened at a glacial pace. Discouragement set in, but then, in time, discouragement gave way to inspiration.

Concurrently, harmony and mutual discovery gave way to acrimony and conflict. A conflict that, as all conflicts are, was distressingly living and active. The kind of conflict that loads a glance in a hallway. That loads a previously unloaded comment in a meeting. That thinks the worst of the other. The kind of conflict where the idea of grace given because of the boundless grace of Christ we've received is somehow but also understandably forgotten. This is the Enemy at work in concert with the still-live cultures of sin nature, ego, and pride that swim in our hearts—hearts that are capable of nothing good apart from Christ.

Sometimes we forget this and wield the kind of power that the world wields. People do this. It's not unusual. People hurt other people. Commitments are broken and motives are im-

pugged. There's usually someone involved—usually a strong, charismatic leader—who has never had his motives questioned before or, at least, has never met an argument he hasn't won. He sees human interaction as competition and perhaps sees church as a territory that must be either annexed or protected, because he has been fed a steady diet of the world's constructs of power via 1980s corporate culture and his steady diet of John Wayne movies, which are both “clean” and “wholesome.”

For the record, I love John Wayne, and I met and really like the John Wayne figure in this anecdote, which all serves to almost hopelessly complicate these sorts of conflicts.

He is a strong figure. John Wayneian himself in stature and stride. He was probably a college athlete of some kind. The church is “protected” and prospers. People feel safe. Coffee flows. Conflicts are somewhat gray and difficult because that's pretty much how they always are. My friend loses sleep. He knows his days are numbered. His chest pounds while he lies in bed, and the house and town, which once seemed so quaint, now fill him with questions like, “Should we have come here?” and “What are we doing here?” and “Why is this happening?” The coffee shop that once held fawning, curious admirers now holds the aroma of distrust and anxiety, which is perceived even if not actually there.

This kind of thing happens outside and inside churches

every day because we *need* Christ desperately, and we don't just need Him on that one sunny day when we're six, by the swing set, when we "ask Him into our hearts."

E-mails are sent and, as is often the case when people are in a deep state of conflict, misinterpreted. The John Wayne figure feels especially at odds with the Los Angeles figure. Meetings are held. Forgiveness is asked for and, perhaps, not given. Spiritual rhetoric is thrown around via words like *character* and *concern*. This is a time in which it's not especially advantageous to be perceived as a flaky former California rock star with one too many fast-paced ideas. Ideas are currency in some places and threats in others.

Eventually Ronnie leaves the church. He has three weeks to dismantle the minimalist office (which takes only a few minutes for obvious reasons germane to minimalism). He has three weeks to return things like staplers, three-hole punches, and antiquated Toshiba laptops. "How are we going to live without the Toshiba?" he asks bravely. This is what is called "gallows humor."

He is told he will lead worship for one more Sunday. He is trotted out in front of the congregation one last time—a congregation that is fed words like *blessing* and phrases like "wish the best to," et cetera. False smiles are affixed and held. He is told that he's not to say anything, at the front, about the fact that he's leaving to plant a church.

In these situations, mathematics often takes over. Calculations are done furiously as questions are asked like, “How long until we go broke?”

Sometimes, in these situations, people become embittered. Hearts become hard. Cynicism becomes the operative flak jacket that makes life livable. The church that was once a haven of peace and sometimes even joy becomes something to be endured.

Sometimes, in these situations, people give up and leave, forever.

Sometimes, in these situations, a man’s pride and ego are broken and that man has no choice but to fling himself at the foot of the cross.

FALLOUT BOY: THIS IS WHAT IT’S COME TO

Scene 1:

Drug Mart in MWT (Midwestern Town) could be a setting in a Wes Anderson film about a depressing midwestern drugstore. It’s that unintentionally stylized. You can buy whiskey and convalescent toilets there. Drug Mart has all the tools, under one fluorescently lit roof, for getting addicted, ruining your life, dealing with the ruin, and then getting healthy. They also have a coin-operated copy machine, which is why I’m there with former rock star and current church planter Ronnie Martin.

Welcome to the glitz and glamour of church planting. It's not all skinny jeans, Toms, cowboy shirts, planning coffees at Starbucks, and iPads. I mean, it is, of course, but you get the idea.

Copies are fifteen cents, and we need change. We're directed to the Courtesy Center, where no courtesy (or change) is actually doled out. Ron screws up the first copy. More coins are dropped in. Coin noises happen.

"Coins are vintage," he says.

"This is what it's come to," I reply.



Scene 2:

I've never been to a church plant on opening day. I enjoy the crunch of gravel under my car tires in the parking lot. I spend a few minutes walking around the church building (a loaner from another church). I smell the basement, which smells like all church basements, everywhere. I see a copy of *Why We Love the Church* (my book) sitting atop a pile of Amish romances—all of which look like they've been read way more than my book. I count four hipsters and twenty-one regular people in the fresh, new congregation.

Church planting (and, by extension, *going* to church plants)

isn't only for the young and fashionable. You don't have to know the collected works of Thom Yorke.*

You can be an athlete. A salesman. A housewife or (gasp) a woman without a husband or (gasp again) *with* a job. It's true.

There's comfort in a church that's planted by a guy who's been hurt and humbled and is trying, in Christ, to deal with it the right way. And who loves the Bible and loves people.

I can relate to hurting people. I can't relate to a church planter whose sum total is some blog posts, designer jeans, and a dream. Dreams aren't enough. Dreams disappear and inspiration wanes. Christ remains and is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

There is comfort in "Jesus Paid It All" and "All I Have Is Christ" sung to an acoustic guitar. There is comfort in the gospel of God's grace for sinners (of which, to quote Paul, I am the worst).

* Of the alternative rock band Radiohead.

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