

The bad churches that we love to love

By [David Williams](#)

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As my sweet little church joins me in a Lenten journey through the history, meaning, and purpose of evangelism, I found myself with a peculiar thought in my head.

Being a part of a church is a relationship, much like the kind of relationship you have with another soul. A community has a strange sort of spirit to it, one that's not quite as clear and distinct as the personalities of the human beings that comprise it, but a spirit nonetheless.

The goal, for any community of the Way, is for that spirit to be fundamentally healthy. That doesn't mean "big" and it doesn't mean "rich," any more than the message of our Teacher is about bigness or richness. It means manifesting grace, service, mercy, and kindness. It's not measured by organizational metrics and institutional measures and leadership dashboards. It's qualitative, like a poem or a story or a song. Like the Good itself, spiritual health is a quality, not a quantity.

Yet I wonder at this, because the goal of the church is not just to be healthy, but to be virally healthy. Meaning, to be a place of strength and support and respite to those whose souls have been broken and fragmented. Healthy churches aren't just healthy for themselves. They're places of healing for those not yet within their bounds.

To be that healthy churches need to be attractional. Or, to skip the obnoxiously-made-up word, folks have to want to be there. There needs to be a draw.

Here's the rub, though. Broken souls aren't typically drawn to healthy relationships. They're drawn, more often than not, into relationships that reflect their brokenness.

Those who feel a lack of control, or who are threatened by change? They're drawn to demagogues, who control them with that yearning for power, who turn their anger into the seething tribalism of the mob.

Those who suffer with shattered self-image and self-hatred? They're drawn to the abusers and the manipulative, to the one who beats them down with fear, to the one who keeps them in your place.

Those who struggle with material poverty and the anxieties it creates? They're drawn to the con artist and the charlatan and the huckster, pitching out prosperity while they sparkle and shine on your last dime.

Wounded souls are drawn to institutions whose broken souls plug into their own, like the protein nubbin on a virus plugs in to a cell. This is not news.

Neither is it good.

Which means that while there are churches that grow like gangbusters, their growth has nothing to do with the *evangelion* of the Way.

They grow because our broken souls love things that are bad for us.

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