



## **My child turned his back on God**

### ***A mother tells about her son in a letter to a dear friend***

Quite some time ago an article was published in a Reformed magazine in the Netherlands; it deeply moved me when I read it and hence I would like to share it with you. Many a reader will identify him or herself with this mother as she shares her pain and sorrows about her wayward son.

It is three years ago now that Mark broke with the church. This morning I opened my diary to read:

This afternoon, as if timed, on the day that Mark was born twenty-one years ago to the day, our minister called in to inform us that, come Sunday an announcement will be made that Mark has removed himself from the congregation.

It shook me to the core and at once all the memories came rushing back again. The day of his birth; by some medical negligence something had gone wrong. After more than an hour of fighting for his life, the doctors hesitantly congratulated us and said: "He'll make it!" And now, exactly 21 years later, we are told: "Sorry, he has not made it; coming Sunday is the funeral."

This is how I feel now; I am totally distraught and I ask myself again and again, "What's all this about?" I am unable to think straight; it is just beyond me.

To get to grips with my confusion and emotions I search for his birth announcement card, and read: "God alone, Who created you, knows the whys, the wherefores and the wheretos." I place the card where I can see it instantly. I badly need some grip and for the moment this small card gives me some support.

I am now on my way to his birthday party. We have to celebrate? But how can one do that when one has just been told that he will remove himself from the church roll?

His birthday and the following days pass as in a fuddle.

On the Sunday we went off to Utrecht to celebrate the birthday of one of our grandchildren. We were unable to be present when the announcement was made from the pulpit. In hindsight I regret not having been there when the announcement was made.

Friends told me that "it was done quite tactfully". But I can't imagine it. How does one do this "nicely"?

And so life goes on as usual, demanding activities, housekeeping, church work... The children are in and out with their friends. We have to eat and drink and sleep. But I barely exist and move around as in a dream.

But somewhere, far away there is the recurring thought: "O, God, it hurts so much; I feel so lonely and sad. It is like driving on two separate rails, which never meet. I try to put it all into some perspective for myself, to make it more bearable, but I don't succeed."

And now, it is already three years ago to the day. I've never felt so intensely lonely and even more so when in church. I had hoped for some understanding and sympathy in my own church. But they

could offer no more than platitudes, commonplace remarks; that's all! Even those remarks I found in my diary.

"He still lives", they say. "Who knows, he may change his mind?" they say.

"He is still young!" they say. "Don't give up hope!" they say. "God won't let him go!" they say. "You're not alone in this," they say.

I hear all this and what they are saying. I look at them and know that they do not understand.

Someone gave me a poem with the title "Bad days", which advised not to go to others but only to a close and true friend who can be trusted. One who does not reproach you or betray you or question you. One who accepts you with your weeping face. One who silently accepts you for what you are and recognises that, though still shaky, you are on the mend again.

It sure was an eye-opener for me. Keep my house in order, sure that is important, but have no expectations from those who cannot share the pain with you.

We talked for hours. Actually I wanted to say that we talked together. But that was not true. I did the talking and she did the listening. She listened with her heart.

We are now three years down the track. Years, in which much has happened. Much which also demanded a lot of my time and which helped me to get my pain and sadness more or less in the background.

But though the sharp edges have been rubbed off somewhat, there still is, as far as the church is concerned, an invisible sorrow.

For a long time I tried hard to understand: "Why is it that so little attention and understanding is given for those parents who lose a child (or more) in this way?" Because that is what it really is. Because you now cannot share anymore with that child the essence of what for you is the most important thing in your life, the living relationship with God.

I just can't follow it. Sometimes I think that it has not touched others whatsoever, but only me, just me alone! Nobody talks about him; nobody asks about him, as if he never existed, as if he never was a member of this church, as if he never was baptised in the midst of the congregation and had not publicly confessed his faith before he withdrew from God's people.

O, yes, they enquire about my other children and grandchildren, but they never ask about Mark, never!

I suppose our pastor may be right when he tells us that the others probably feel uncomfortable with the situation. Though I can't help thinking that this too is a commonplace remark. After all, is it not within the fellowship of the church that sympathy and understanding should be found...?

Deep down, I am convinced that it just is not right! There should be more care and empathy with those parents to whom this happens! Or are we so used to the fact that young people move away from the church so easily?

Of course, in general, the church does pray for those members who are not active anymore, those who don't come to church any more but have not — as yet — been removed from the church roll. Sure, that is good; they need to be prayed for, but... It hurts me so deeply when I think then ... "Again", not for him and others who have been removed from the church roll.

And do you know what hurts me so much? That everyone around me is so busy with the stranger, the visitor in our midst. We pray for them; we pick them up and bring them home. We embrace

them, kiss them when they come and when they leave. And we praise ourselves for what we do for the "others."

And sadly I think, "What about the ones who have been of the household of faith?" Was there no one then who could have spoken in an understanding way? Who could take action when they were lost and disappeared from the scene? Who still cares for him or her? After all, they now too have become a stranger in our midst.

I warn myself, be careful, don't turn bitter, see things in their right perspective. And I realise again and again that the hurt is still there and will not go! Let go! But it is so awfully difficult to let go of what is so dear to my heart. Let go, I tell myself, let go. Give it out of my hands, pray for him and learn to leave it to God.

It does not mean that I don't have to do anything anymore, but ... to have a talk with Mark is not possible. I know he won't have a bar of that and I would lose him maybe for good, if I talked about our faith in God. He had made it quite clear at the time. He said "I love to be home. I love you all, but leave me alone on this matter of beliefs. I still have a sense of God's presence. I will try to live a good life but for the rest, the subject is closed. And certainly that part which has to do with the church."

All I can do now is to show my faith by my life and example. And that is not always so easy. Certainly not when I myself get into a jam.

And of course it is okay to have compassion for the "stranger" in our midst. But you will agree that we must do this but not leave out the other.

One other thing! I often hear the complaints in my circle among the sick, the elderly and those who find themselves alone and lonely: "Hardly any one comes to visit us". They are so busy with this and with that. That's not right, is it?

My dear and trusting friend, what about a few days in a retreat together; I can just imagine and taste the atmosphere. Praying and singing. Talking together, laughing together, maybe even crying together, but especially charging the batteries of our faith again.

I would like to conclude with a positive and encouraging thought.

You know about James, one of Jesus' half-brothers. Initially he did not believe that his brother was the Messiah, the Son of God. Check John chapter 7. Jesus' brothers told him to go public. But they themselves did not believe He was the Son of God, the Messiah (verse 5). And then later we read that James was singled out by Jesus and even got a special mention by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (15:7): *"Then He appeared to James, then to all the Apostles."* He is also mentioned in Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:9) as one of the pillars of the church.

What I am saying is that all is not always lost. Just think of James and don't give up hope! Keep on bringing the wayward before the Throne of Grace and leave the rest to the Lord. There is never a guarantee just because he or she has been baptised or publicly professed their faith. Nevertheless, we ought to remember them in our prayers.

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