

Ghosting: The Temptation and Offense

Joshua Farris, Ph.D.

“Though he felt a little guilt over disappearing, it wasn't even guilt, just sadness over not even *wanting* to call her.”
Catherine Lacey, [The Answers](#)

We've all been rejected at some point in our lives—of this I'm sure. Rejection is a normal part of life, and it is something we can often learn from, grow from, and use to develop as fully virtuous human beings. Then there is what several authors have termed 'ghosting.' Ghosting is a recent form of rejection, but there is nothing healthy, honest, or right about it. It is the ultimate form of rejection, and it is personal. But what about when it occurs within Christian communities and between believers, whether in church, school, work, or social settings?

Ghosting commonly occurs in dating. You may have experienced this before. You imagine that all is moving along with great ease and the relationship is both natural and freeing. Then, it just ends. The calls, the texts, the emails – no more. You attempt to reach out, but nothing. You may think that some tragedy has occurred, and in one sense it has. Later you realize that the person is alive, but not really to you. It could be motivated from a place of fear or just a growing disgust of the person, but you will likely never know.

This phenomenon occurs in other contexts. I have experienced it before with friends – at least I thought they were friends. One day, they simply stopped calling and they stopped responding. No matter what the motivation, they probably believed it was just easier for all involved, so they stopped the relationship. You never really know what happened or how it happened.

Ghosting is anything but courageous. Instead, it is dishonest, unkind, and indecent. It amounts to more than passive aggression. It does violence to the design of healthy, caring relationships that seek the good of the other. It is unloving. And more, it is lazy. But this is something that occurs among Christians and in churches too.

In a church it occurs in one of two ways. First, it occurs when members simply get up and leave a church with no explanation to those with whom they've developed genuine, open relationships of accountability and love. Second, it occurs when church members or leaders simply stop talking to someone in the church. I have seen both occurrences happen more often than I'd like to admit.

I have seen members leave a church where they were members or at least in attendance for several years. The rationale could be as simple as someone inadvertently rubbing them the wrong way or something the pastor said that they didn't agree with. Being a leader in the church over the years, I've seen it, but I've also spoken to pastors about it. It actually happens quite frequently, and it hurts. Rather than being open and honest with other people or speaking with

the pastor directly to offer some explanation, people just leave. And we know that in our culture this is actually quite easy to do. Persons can simply move on to another church with no questions asked and no explanation required. But it damages the body of Christ and I see no scriptural warrant for it. Don't hear me the wrong way. I am not saying that there are not reasons to leave a church, and sometimes great reasons for doing so, but *this* isn't *that*. It doesn't help the persons leaving, those they've left, or the pastors attempting to tend to the health and virtue of their flock.

Then there's the second way of ghosting. It occurs in contexts in which there are no plausible routes to pursue difficult relationships or wrongs committed. So what happens? Everyone just ignores it. It may also occur in churches that practice it as a means of corrective discipline.

In some cases, a theological justification is given. Some will point to Matthew 18:17: "...treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (New International Version). In other words, treat them like an unbeliever. Or they may cite 2 Thessalonians 3:14: "Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed." In fact, I have heard it stated from the pulpit that those in the church are to ignore, not talk to, or ever be around those who have been or are being disciplined. Unfortunately, the phenomena of 'ghosting' is more like treating the person as if they do not exist and you do not exist to them, but that is not identical to treating them as an unbeliever. I see no endorsement in these passages for *unqualified* ignoring or manipulative strategies that simply act as if someone no longer exists. In other words, the phenomenon of ghosting is not found in these passages nor would a responsible reading of them justify it.

So, what should one do in a context in which ghosting has occurred? The answer to that question is that, sadly, there really isn't an easy fix. That's part of ghosting's design. Do obey the advice in Hebrews 12:14: "Pursue peace with everyone..." (New Revised Standard Version) and the instructions of Paul in Romans 12:18: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (NIV). Try to reach out and attempt to have a real, heartfelt, and honest conversation, but know that you may only be met with silence. It may not lead to any good or virtue. Do try, but then again, you're just a ghost.

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