

The Church Can't Afford to Ignore This Destructive Sin Any Longer

One of the most ignored or tolerated sins of the church is the sin of schism: The formal separation of a church into two churches, caused by differences in opinion or belief. I have been a part of splits and, let me tell you, they are messy. No, messy is too nice a word. They are downright destructive—demonic. And, sadly, both sides usually are convinced they are on God's side.

Too often a disgruntled assistant pastor or lay leader feels he can do a better job than the pastor. He promotes his cause through gossip. Once his movement has enough steam he leads a coup against the senior pastor or starts a new congregation. Paul calls this "building on another man's foundation" (Rom. 15:20). It is also called rebellion, divisiveness, self-promotion, pride, gossip and more.

The fruit of schism is broken relationships. I have seen families split into two over congregational divides. I have seen lifelong friendships come to a halt. That is the demonic part. A spirit of division disguises itself as righteousness or godly boldness. It feels right. You're taking a stand. But rarely does the fruit of the split justify the pain it causes.

Yes, there are times to take a stand against a pastor or leader of a congregation. Sometimes, you might even need to warn people to leave:

1. Sexual immorality or other chronic sins (theft, habitual dishonesty).
2. False doctrine (to be clear, that means it goes against what mainstream evangelicalism considers broad orthodoxy, not just against your opinion).

3. Cult-like tendencies of control over the lives of the members.
4. Gross ineffectiveness—and, in this case, I would expect that you would have a group of elders who had already appealed to the ineffective senior leader.

Jesus Loves Unity

God puts a high price on unity. It was the thing that Yeshua asked the Father to establish in the body in John 17: "Holy Father, through Your name keep those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are one" (John 17:11b).

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for establishing cliques, and equates division to destroying the temple of God! And then, he warns them about what God does to the person who destroys His temple (i.e. causes division):

Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy. And you are His temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

What if two leaders simply can't work together? It happens, as we will see with two of our heroes. Sometimes, it is even God's way of moving someone out in a new direction. The question is: do you have the humility and love for the body to do it in a way that causes the least damage to the congregation. If you are the junior in the relationship, then it is incumbent upon you to walk away. When we seek to take others with us, it is often because we don't trust God to lead us in a new direction. We take people with us, so we can still have a congregation. We can easily disguise it, even to ourselves, as taking a stand.

Even Paul Was Part of a Split

Leaders are, by nature, a little strong-willed (read: hardheaded). We tend to think we are right. Even Paul and

Barnabas had sharp disputes that put an end to their ministry relationship.

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit our brothers in every city where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas determined to take with them John, who was called Mark. But Paul thought it was not good to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. Then there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brothers to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches (Acts 15:36-41).

The issue was simple. John Mark left the team in the middle of their mission. Barnabas, who is more of a pastor in his gifting, has mercy on Mark and wants him to join them. Paul, who seems more prophetic in his calling, takes a hard line. *If he abandoned us once, how do we know that he will not abandon us again?*

This is such a big deal that they go their separate ways. It does seem that Paul and Mark worked out their differences, as Paul refers to him later in life. Through this example, though, we can learn from Paul and Barnabas how to disagree and, even separate, in a godly way. They did not let their split affect the churches they had planted or the people in them.

Who Has the Spiritual Authority?

When they first started out, Barnabas was the lead apostle. But, very shortly thereafter, Paul became the primary leader. When they separate, Barnabas goes to Cyprus with Mark to minister to the believers there. Cyprus recognized Barnabas as their spiritual father, as it was one of the first places they visited. Paul takes Silas and visits the churches they had

planted after Paul was the lead apostle.

They respected each other's apostolic fathership. You'll notice, there is no book of Cyprus from Paul. He had no authority to write it, as Barnabas was the father. Paul only wrote to churches he planted (except for Romans, and there was a reason). Whenever you find yourself in a situation where you have to break with another leader, the easiest way to know who needs to walk, is to ask, 'Who has the authority here?'

I Almost Caused a Split

I almost made this mistake after I first moved to Israel. I had a disagreement with my pastor, and there did not appear to be a solution. I wanted to start another congregation. Of course, if I did it in the same city, people from my former congregation might be tempted to follow. Some had already expressed interest. I felt completely justified (we always do), even though it went against everything I had learned and had taught. But I was deceived. I was completely unjustified. So, we had a disagreement. It didn't come anywhere close to the four reasons I stated above. In the end, thanks to godly counsel, we shut down our little group. A few years later, I reconciled with the pastor and, today, we have a great working ministry relationship.

And what is interesting is that by humbling myself—not what I wanted to do—God opened an amazing door in another city with far more influence than I had before. But it didn't happen until I committed to not start a competing ministry.

But, sadly, all over the world, splits are winked at when, in fact, the historic church looked at the sin of schism as a serious violation. We would do well to take it more seriously as well. {eoa}

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