

6 Dangerous People Who Could Hurt Your Church

For more than 2,000 years the church has survived wars, persecution, heresies, tyrants, charlatans, false prophets, swindlers and divisive rebels. Satan has attacked the church from outside and infiltrated it from within, yet Christianity is growing faster in some parts of the world than at any time in human history.

But that doesn't mean the devil is backing off. He is a relentless enemy, and we must constantly be aware of his schemes. When the devil attacks, he normally uses human agents to carry out his work. That is why church leaders are called to protect God's people from those who might hijack our mission.

In all my years of ministry I've noticed that the devil's tricks are actually the same no matter where I go. He uses a familiar cast of characters to sow discord in the church, to distract us from our mission and to veer us off course. If these people are busy in your church, they must be confronted. Never allow these six people to get their hands on the steering wheel:

1. The financial controller. Every church needs the wise counsel of older saints, including those who have business experience. But sometimes when spiritually immature people are put in such positions, they can develop a sense of ownership or entitlement. If this is not checked, they begin to use their money to buy influence. This was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5—and their severe punishment made it clear that God doesn't like it when people try to control His church with their money.

James 2:1-7 warns church leaders not to seat rich people on

the front row of the church. Yet in many congregations, wealthy members have bribed their way into a place of favor so they can make decisions. Weak pastors won't challenge this behavior because they fear offending big donors.

2. The self-appointed prophet. We should earnestly desire the gift of prophecy in our churches. But the apostle Paul also warned the Colossians about super-spiritual people who claim to always know what God is saying to the leadership (Col. 2:18-23).

The difference between true prophets and self-appointed ones is their attitude. Legitimate prophets are loving, servant-hearted and submitted to godly authority. Dangerous prophets are those who can't be corrected. They are spiritually proud, they tend to be loners and they leave a trail of damaged relationships in their wake. Never allow someone like this to be in a leadership position.

3. The attention-getter. In the church we encourage volunteers to discover their gifts. This works well until someone comes along who needs to prove something to himself or everyone else. Then things get weird—especially because churches have platforms and microphones. Emotionally needy people want the stage. They may even ask for a chance to preach or sing a solo—and they might get mad if you don't let them.

From my reading of Scripture, God does not pick people who want the spotlight. He calls broken men and women who know they have nothing to offer. He chooses leaders who trust not in their own ability but in His. We must teach immature attention seekers that God must crush all selfish ambition before He puts them in a visible position. And we must teach that ministry is about serving when no one else sees.

4. The bitter avenger. The church is full of people who have been hurt by pastors or by other church members. That's understandable. But if someone has not resolved their hurts,

they can spread their resentment like a cancer. Hebrews 12:15 warns us to be careful of those with a “root of bitterness” because this will cause trouble and defile many. Bitterness is often the cause of church splits. Never allow a bitter person to be in a leadership position.

5. The sexual predator. Paul told the Ephesian elders to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock” (Acts 20:28). This watchful attitude is especially important in today’s carefree sexual environment. Wolves prey on the innocent—and that includes children, abused women who have low self-esteem and anyone struggling with sexual confusion. Churches must enforce strict rules about who works with kids and youth. And we must be willing to confront any immoral person—man or woman—who is using church to find a new sex partner.

6. The immature know-it-all. Long ago, Satan led an angelic rebellion in heaven. Since then, many young leaders have tried to overthrow older leaders to start new movements. This process is always messy and divisive—and those who lead such rebellions discover that the ugly cycle is repeated when they get old. What goes around comes around.

We could eliminate this pain if young leaders would emulate David, who waited patiently for God to give him the throne instead of grasping for King Saul’s position. Any young leader who is too eager to rule has not been fully tested. 1 Timothy 3:6 warns that we should never put a new convert in a position of leadership, “so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6).

The Bible has given us clear warnings about who to trust in leadership. Never give these six characters a position in your church until they have fallen on the rock and allowed the Holy Spirit to transform their character. {eoa}