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Gossip in a Church: Defusing Self-Destruction

“You did a great job consulting our church, Tracee,” the pastor shared. “We’ve made a lot of progress following your recommendations.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” replied Tracee. “I’ve thought and prayed for you guys many times over this last year.”

The phone was silent for a moment. Then the pastor cleared his throat and continued, “Ah... the reason I’m calling you is that we need your help on another issue.”

“Sure,” said Tracee, “How can I help?”

“Well, we’d like to fly you out here before our church blows up,” the pastor replied. “It’s nothing from your consultation. You see, I got this long e-mail from one of our board members about our youth pastor — a lot of complaints.”

“What did you do?” asked Tracee.

“I wrote a long e-mail back to the person, covering each of the issues. Our board and staff are split, taking sides. I copied my e-mail to every one of them. When can you come?” the pastor continued, with a sense of urgency.

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Tracee was silent, reflecting: “Oh no, not another church imploding! Why is it so many Christians don’t know the Bible? Don’t they know how to communicate according to what God says?”

Jesus Speaks Great Wisdom

Why is there an escalation of bad behavior and communication tearing apart relationships in churches these days? It seems like people have lost their ability to “speak the truth in love.” The emotional pain and relational suffering seems worse than ever. Why is this increasing? What is causing it? And what can be done to help these churches?

These issues aren’t new among God’s people. There are reports of slander and gossip throughout the Old and New Testaments. *Slander* represents comments made in the presence of another person representing false statements damaging to a third person’s character or reputation. Slander is usually distinguished from *libel*, which is when the statements appear in written form (like an e-mail). *Gossip* is when a person chatters or repeats idle talk and rumors about others.

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus lays out a plan about what to do when there is an offense. This plan could save enormous heartache, disruption, emotional pain, and suffering if only it would be followed!

Jesus’ Three Steps to Better Relationships

Step #1

If you perceive someone has hurt you, go ALONE to that person and tell him/her. To tell anyone else, even a spouse, does nothing but spread the disruption. Ironically, it might be a simple misunderstanding. If the offense is genuine, or a misunderstanding, the offender has the opportunity to apologize. Either way, clarity can occur. Note, the one who feels the offense starts the process. The “alleged” offender may have no awareness of the offense. Remember, sometimes it’s not what the person said, but what you heard — or interpreted.

What does it mean, to “go to the person”? This is where it gets complicated. Does this include an e-mail or a written letter? As consultants, we interpret this *exactly* as Jesus said it. An e-mail or letter is not a conversation. It’s a “dump on the person.” Dialogue is a key issue, especially in sensitive discourse when emotions are involved. Also, words are not the only elements of communication. Body posture, tone of voice, facial expressions — all of these are enormously important. They only communicate, however, face to face.

What about long-distance conflict? Will a phone call suffice? In our experience with church people, this is a *distant* second choice. It can be enhanced with a visual call, like Skype, but there is something lost by the artificial medium, even with the best technology. Yet, sometimes it might be a necessary approach. It’s definitely your last choice.

Finally, it is clear, as mentioned above: No matter how long you have to wait — don’t share your issue with anyone else. It escalates the tension and potential disruption exponentially when you talk to others. Of course, it’s hard: You want to “get it off your chest.” It requires self-discipline and perseverance. However, as hard as it is, it is the healthiest solution: Talk one

on one. You can't improve on Jesus' advice. The benefit? The person who offended you can grow, and so can you.

Step #2

What if your one-on-one step doesn't resolve the issue? What if the person won't listen? Jesus has a plan for that, too. Go back a second time with one or two witnesses. Make sure they are seasoned Christians, with well-rounded biblical knowledge. Those with spiritual gifts of wisdom and discernment will be especially helpful.

You might be tempted, after a "round one" failure, to practice a little self-therapy by telling some of your friends about the situation. That brand of catharsis is a terrible idea! Again, it only escalates discord. And, it makes *you also wrong*, no matter what the issue is with the person who offended you. Now *you* are causing offense to the one you are accusing!

The one or two witnesses have an important role. They are "third party," unemotional participants who listen carefully to every word and confirm what is said. They are objective by definition. Do not "prep" them beforehand — or they become biased. And that disqualifies them! That is also unfair to the "offender." When you make the visit, these witnesses can ask questions without emotion or bias and help both you and the "offender" improve communication toward a solution.

The role of the witness or witnesses should not be an intimidating "big gun" to win your point. Their role is one of fairness and clarity. Make sure whoever is a witness is a deep Christian, exhibiting spiritual character and a good grasp on biblical knowledge. You should know by personal experience: They excel at "speaking the truth in love."

Step #3

This step is to "tell it to the church." What does that mean? If the person still hasn't repented after step 2 or there is no clarification or reconciliation, are you to take it to the *whole church*? Or should it be someone "official" in the church? Like a pastor? Or the elders? Or an elder?

It's hard to say. But common wisdom would seem to be clear: You don't want to parade this offender and the offense before the whole church. Why? For one thing, even if the offender repents, you won't likely keep him/her in your church. He/she has been publicly embarrassed. Is that "speaking the truth in love?"

Also, to take it to the entire church disrupts the whole congregation. What about those in your church who are 60 years old, but 2 years old as Christians? As parents, we try to protect our vulnerable young children. Wouldn't we do that with less mature children of God as well?

Exposed Sin: An Epidemic

Why is there an epidemic of church unrest caused by exposed sin (offense) in the church today? There are four causative issues.

#1: Yes, leaders are to be held to higher standards. That's good! However, basic Bible 101 teaches Christians, even as young children, that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). If Jesus were a member of your church, He might say, "Whoever of you is without sin, you can throw the first stone" (John 8:7).

#2: So how is it that we find people who really like a witch hunt against those who have fallen into

sin? Are they surprised that these people are human? The tone of Jesus is to call out sin, look for repentance, and **restore**. The body of Christ is a healing center, not an execution chamber. The Head, Jesus, already died for sins. Christians — “Onward Christian Soldiers!” — are sometimes the only army that shoots its wounded. What happened to “Amazing Grace”? The culture of the church has been rearranged by a corporate takeover. The body of Christ has become, instead, modeled after the corporate world. Yet Jesus said, “My Kingdom is not of this world — not like this world” (John 18:36).

#3: In the hundreds of churches we have consulted, we have discovered numerous church leaders — even staff — who are struggling in some sin that controls their dark side: gambling addiction, alcohol abuse, pornography on the internet, illicit sexual relationships, *etc.* Why would these dedicated workers, who give so much to God’s church, drift? It doesn’t make it right, but most are under severe stress and pressure. Yes, they need serious help. Yes, sin is sin. Yes, restoration is needed. Yes, healing is necessary.

Many of these leaders are part of a denomination. Working in these situations, we have learned that many denominational leaders (not all by any means) viciously remove these leaders and abruptly end their careers — and abandon them! In our early years of consulting, we couldn’t believe it. Church leaders thrown out like pieces of trash. Why?

We learned that it’s sometimes all about lawsuits and money. Many denominations have deep pockets. And when attorneys go after retribution, they go after the offender, the church, and the denominational coffers. So errant leaders, who have given their lives to service but slipped into sin, are thrown to the curb.

#4: How do things get out of hand and go ballistic when leaders who are offenders are discovered? Churches have drifted far from biblical forms of church governance. Many have moved toward corporate entities. They have developed “boards of directors” and subordinated the

TEN WAYS TO GET A GRIP ON GOSSIP

1. Practice Matthew 18:15-17 and Ephesians 4:15.
2. Study and teach the issue of gossip from Scripture.
3. Study and teach the issue of slander from the Scripture perspective.
4. Focus on the biblical teaching about restoration of those who fail, using the free Bible study E-mail Mania: How to Get Along in Church.
5. Choose leaders from those who have a lifestyle of ongoing Bible study. (If your constitution requires 10, but you only have three, go with the three.)
6. Consider revamping your decision-making structure through a Church Governance Consultation.
7. Teach biblical principles that speak to the Christian use of the internet.
8. Train those in your church to be spiritually discerning as they face information overload.
9. Speak openly and regularly about grace, forgiveness, and how these dynamics direct our actions toward one another.
10. If anyone gossips to you, speak the truth in love, and immediately put a lid on it. If no one in the church would listen to gossip, no one could gossip. If no one would gossip, no one could be caught listening to it.

“Don’t let pride get into your head or criticism get into your heart” (Nicky Gumbel).

biblical “elders” to a minor role. The corporate approach blows up in their faces when an offense is revealed. Those attracted to “boards of directors” are successful in business. Often, they are powerful decision makers, but sometimes, somewhat biblically illiterate. They attend church. However, our research shows that many don’t read the Bible even once a week, and few are part of a Bible study group with any regularity. They are biblically infants. When deep, sensitive, spiritual offenses occur, in the heat of the moment, they default to their corporate culture, rather than the culture of the Kingdom of God. The elders, meanwhile, should have been chosen as those who are deep spiritual leaders, by reputation. However, they are often relegated to the so-called “spiritual realm” with no input toward offense issues. Elders, if chosen properly, are, by definition, deep in biblical knowledge. Yet, they are rendered impotent by the corporate fantasy. Many churches have drifted so far, to their peril — especially in “heated” circumstances.

Citizen Journalism

The internet may go down in history as one of the most ingenious inventions of our time. History may also record that humans invented something that we aren’t morally strong enough to operate.

“Citizen journalism” is the drift toward publishing information that makes conclusions about others, without submitting to the discipline of researching the facts. Welcome to the vicious animal devouring many churches: e-mail!

Of course, e-mail is a blessing, when used properly. It is a ticking time bomb in the hands of immature Christians, who have not yet learned the Kingdom character of “love one another,” “forgive one another,” “serve one another,” “restore one another.”

Meanwhile, some Christians have been subtly polluted by forms of news media, cultural trends, fads, movements, and lifestyles that are far from God. But they don’t have sanctified

common sense or spiritual discernment. Even so, they do have the power of e-mail! Without a strong biblical foundation, with a few key strokes, they can blast opinions disguised as facts. They disrupt other Christians and unwittingly destroy the church they supposedly love. They cc all their friends — in a rush of power! And the epidemic is launched. And the enemy wins. And the healing, forgiving, restoring, witnessing body of Christ is crippled, by implosion.

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If you don't do something about this epidemic, sooner or later, it will bite you!

The Apostle Paul: "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.'

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good."

Source: Romans 12:9-21, *The Message*