

PROBLEMS

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. –
Ephesians 6:12

One of Jesus' least popular promises is John 16:33, *Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. True, he went on to say, But take heart, because I have overcome the world.* But you have to have problems before you can overcome them.

As pastor, most problems will wind up in your lap. Don't try to deal with them all by yourself. Where possible and appropriate, enlist the aid of your leadership team or other mature Christians. In some cases it may be helpful, or even necessary, to call for support from other local pastors or denominational leaders.

Most pastors want to believe the best of everyone. This is good, but don't be naïve. The devil would love to bring down your church and your ministry. Protect yourself and your church from his attacks.

Problem People

People are fallen. That means people have problems. When they come to church, they bring their problems with them.

This should not be a surprise. Jesus said he came, not for the righteous, but for sinners (Mark 2:17). Even after they come to Jesus, new Christians (and some not-so-new Christians) tend to do things in church the same way they've been used to doing them in the world. Ideally, as they grow under your ministry, they will learn more Christ-like ways of behaving. But you still have to deal with them until they do – and some never do.

Here are some of the common ways people create problems in the church.

Try to control the church through money

Every church has some people who donate more money than others. Sometimes those large givers can feel that their donations should entitle them to a commensurate amount of control. This is usually expressed subtly, but it can easily spill over into an explicit threat: "If you don't do things the way I want, I'm going to stop giving my money to this church!"

You need to remember, and teach your leaders and congregation, that the church belongs to Jesus Christ, not any person. **No one should be allowed to hold hostage the body of Christ.** Our God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalms 50:10). Our God will supply all our needs according to his riches in glory (Philippians 4:19). If we bow to the demands of those who would use their money to control the church, we demonstrate that we don't really believe that God can or will provide what his church needs. But if we lovingly but firmly point out to the big giver the spiritual implications of what they are doing, God will honor our faith and provide what we need.

Try to control the church through influence

Some people have a lot of influence over other people in the church. They may be elders of large families, people of importance in the community, or just persuasive talkers. These people use influence the same way big givers use money. The message, implicit or explicit, is this: “If you don’t do things the way I want, I’m going to another church, and I’ll take all my family and friends with me.”

Answer influence-controllers the same way you answer money-controllers. Remind yourself and them that the church belongs to God, and God will provide, if you stay with him and his calling.

Complainers

Constructive criticism and new ideas can be a blessing. Chronic complaining is entirely different. Paul said we should focus our thoughts on the positive (Philippians 4:8). Complaining focuses on the negative. Often, the complainer winds up doing the work of the Accuser, Satan.

Identify chronic complainers. Learn not to take their complaints personally. And never put chronic complainers in leadership. But don’t label people as complainers just because they disagree with you!

No group of human beings will all be happy with everything all the time. The church is no different. But chronic complainers can damage your entire congregation. They are especially dangerous if they are influential in the church or community, or if they gain the ear of people new to the church.

Teach your people to focus on positives, not negatives – in the church as well as in their marriages and families and businesses. Teach them to refuse to listen to complaints. That’s not rude, it’s good spiritual discipline. And it’s about the only way to help complainers break their bad habit of complaining so they can grow more like Jesus, who never complained.

Gossips

Gossips are similar to complainers, and can do as much damage. Romans 1:29 puts gossip in the same list as hatred, lying, and even murder. Never put a gossip in leadership, regardless of other qualifications. Especially be careful that gossips are not put in a place where they can gain access to confidential information, such as helping the pastor schedule counseling appointments, or counting the offerings.

Sometimes gossip comes disguised as a prayer request. “Oh, we have to pray for Sister A and Brother B, because I heard that somebody saw them doing such-and-such...” That is nothing more than malicious gossip, no matter how it is worded. Make sure your congregation understands that. Like complaining, gossip is a dangerous addiction that must be broken and replaced with healthy and positive habits of speech, for the sake of the person and the church.

Drainers

All pastors like to help people, or they wouldn't be pastors. It's a great joy to help someone over a rough spot and see them go on and achieve success and happiness. But some people never seem to run out of rough spots, no matter how much you help them. Whether their need is financial help or emotional support, they never seem to get enough. If you don't watch out, they can completely drain you of all your resources, and you will find that you have no time, energy or strength left for anyone else, including your family and yourself.

Guilt is a favorite tool of drainers. They are gifted at making you feel guilty if you don't meet their every need. They can do the same with your church leaders and members. And then, when they have sucked you dry, they'll move on to another church and do the same thing.

Drainers want you to take care of them, but they don't really want to change. They'll accept your money and sympathy and time, but they won't take your advice and do the things they need to do to put themselves into a better

situation.

Pastors need to be able to identify such people. You need to protect yourself against their unreasonable demands, and you need to protect your congregation. And the pastors in a city should warn each other against such people.

Con artists

The main difference between con artists and drainers is sincerity. Drainers genuinely believe their stories, and they are looking for help. Con artists tell whatever story they think will get you to give them the most money.

Pastors like to think the best of people. This often makes them easy targets for con artists. Then either you give away too much of the church's money, or you become hardened and distrustful of people in general. Neither is a good situation.

Personally, I would rather give money to a con artist than refuse to help someone who is genuinely in need. And I like to believe people. So if it's left to me, I wind up giving away a lot of the church's money to con artists. I find it very helpful to have someone else in the church handle those requests, someone who is not as gullible as I am.

Con artists often go from church to church and charity to charity telling the same story over and over. The pastors in a city, and perhaps even the leaders of other charities and social agencies, should consider developing a way to identify these people and warn each other against them.

Self-appointed prophets and teachers

Paul, Peter and John all faced problems from people who came into their churches claiming to be teachers or prophets. It's important to show hospitality to traveling pastors and Christian workers, as well as Christian brothers and sisters visiting from other places. But it's also important to prayerfully discern the source of their message (1 John 4:1-6). Sometimes the reason they are visiting your church is because they have made themselves

unwelcome in theirs!

Conflicting Beliefs and Practices

Most church conflict is caused by problem people. But there are many issues on which good, sincere, Bible-believing, educated Christians disagree. What are we to make of these differences?

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said, “In whatever does not strike at the heart of Christian faith, we think and let think.” The same idea was expressed hundreds of years earlier by the African theologian, St. Augustine: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.”

This is a wonderful philosophy, in keeping with the biblical spirit of Romans 14. As long as the issue is confined to the realm of thinking, most of us have little trouble with it. However, once we move to application, problems arise.

It’s one thing to have a polite disagreement about when a person is old enough to be baptized. It’s another thing to decide whether or not, in a given congregation, you will baptize babies.

Some churches teach that the use of instrumental music in worship is against scripture. Some teach that pastors should be hired or fired based on a vote of the congregation. Some teach that women should not be allowed to do certain things in a church setting because of their gender. Other churches believe these positions misinterpret the Bible. Both sides can line up scores of impressively credentialed expert witnesses to support their views. So how is a local congregation to discern God’s will for its practice in these areas?

In many churches, the preferred biblical understanding is predetermined by denominational affiliation or local church history. But what if someone from a different background comes in and raises a heretofore silent issue, and the members and even the leadership suddenly discover that they are split down the middle about what the Bible says and means?

In such a case, certain principles must rule.

Understand unity

Christian unity does not require that we all be alike or think alike. Beyond the non-negotiable truths that define what it means to be a Christian, church members disagree about all kinds of things. Unity does require that we agree about how we will approach our differences, and what differences we will tolerate even if we can't change each other's opinions. Each of us must have settled in our mind, what is worth fighting about? And what will we do if we lose the fight?

Use the Bible responsibly

The Bible is the infallible, inerrant, inspired written word of God. Yet each part of it was inspired and written by a certain person, addressed to certain people, for a certain purpose, at a particular time and place in history and culture that is foreign to every person living today. Naturally, as with any other book, we read the Bible through the lens of our own culture, our own subconscious assumptions, and our own history and experiences. Furthermore, the vast majority of Christians know the Bible only in translation, so what we are looking at through our lens is already one step removed from the original meaning. The wonder is not that Christians differ about what the Bible means; the wonder is that those differences are so small!

How can you be sure you are using the Bible responsibly? I went over this in more detail in the chapter on preaching. Let me repeat some points here in the context of resolving conflicts.

Prayerfully examine your motives

Are you really trying to find out what God is saying, or are you looking for support in the Bible for your own preconceived views?

Don't be dogmatic where the Bible is not dogmatic

God knew people would be reading the Bible in hundreds of languages and cultures for thousands of years, so he made sure the really important things are very clear. The Biblical standard for establishing a fact is *two or three witnesses* (Matthew 18:16; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28). Where the Bible does not provide us with a minimum of two or three clear statements, we cannot be rigid in our interpretations.

Avoid the temptation to take passages out of context

Let the Bible interpret the Bible. If we don't look at all the different places where God addresses a certain issue, we may miss important clues to understanding. In seeking relevant passages, we must remember that the Bible is not a theology textbook, and it is not primarily written in propositional statements. Most of the Bible is narrative. The stories of how God used and dealt with people must be given much weight in our discernment of God's will.

If the Bible is not clear, consider tradition, reason, and experience

These three elements are great for framing a discussion. Unfortunately, they can also be highly subjective.

Disagree agreeably

What do we do if we've sincerely sought to apply all the above principles, but still find ourselves differing? If we have to take action one way or another, how do we agree to disagree?

The first step is for the proponents of the two views to **acknowledge each other's sincerity, love for God, and desire to do the right thing**. This includes admitting that, while each believes they are right, it's barely possible

that they might be wrong, and we won't find out for sure this side of heaven.

Next, agree to focus on areas of agreement. Whether we focus on our differences or our unity is a matter of choice. **Division is a tool of the enemy**; carried far enough, every person can find “reasons of principle” to separate and divide from every other person. Emphasizing our agreement, while not minimizing our differences, results in unity with integrity.

Finally, I had a colleague who used to say, “always err on the side of grace.” When it comes to rules and regulations, there are two basic philosophical positions. The first says, “Everything that is not expressly allowed is prohibited.” That view can easily result in legalism. The second position says, “Everything that is not expressly prohibited is allowed.” That view tends toward grace, and grace is a sign of God.

Sin in the Church

For those who have become new creatures in Jesus Christ, sin is no longer a part of their nature. Unfortunately, it may still be a habit. Temptation can still be strong. Weakness can still strike. The sad fact is, church membership is not a vaccination against sin.

As a pastor, **your job is not to seek out sinfulness**. Ideally, the sinner will come to you personally to confess and ask for help. If that doesn't happen, you might witness sinful behavior, or somebody might tell you of it. However it happens, odds are that the time will come when you need to apply church discipline to deal with a situation of sin in the congregation.

This is definitely one of those areas where you want to make your church policies ahead of time. If you wait until a situation arises, your response, and that of your leaders and congregation, is much more likely to be based on personalities, friendships and church politics than on clear biblical thinking.

Making sin difficult

If people want to sin, there is nothing that you can do as a pastor to stop them. But most of the time, church members don't set out to sin. They get tripped up by a combination of temptation and opportunity.

Sometimes it's possible to put policies in place that will greatly reduce these temptations, or the opportunity to act on them. For instance, you can create a policy that whenever church money is being counted and handled, at least two people from different families must be involved. You can require that a man and a woman not married to each other should not be alone together in the church building, or that an adult is never allowed to be alone with an unrelated child. These policies not only reduce temptation and opportunity for wrong behavior, but they also provide protection against false accusations.

Of course, **the best protection against sin is a strong desire to please Jesus**, combined with a growing knowledge of what does and does not please him. Your people will learn this through your preaching and teaching ministry, and through your example. But just in case not every person in your church has grown to that level of Christian maturity, the steps I've just described are a wise precaution.

What really happened, and does it require your response?

So something allegedly happened in your church. How do you move from "allegedly" to "definitely?"

Start by asking, is this charge serious enough to require an official pastoral or church response? Ideally, your church policy will define that for you. Perhaps the situation is best handled by privately talking to the person. Perhaps you should consult with a trusted leader in the church whom you know will keep it confidential. Perhaps you don't have to say anything, just pay special attention for a while to see if it recurs or gets worse. Or maybe it's one of those subtle sins, like gossip or pride, that may be best handled by preaching. If that's what you decide, be careful not to point out any identifiable current person or situation in your sermons.

If you decide the situation warrants further inquiry, the next step is to make sure that whatever is claimed actually happened. If the person confesses to you, then you know it happened. If you saw it yourself, you probably know what happened, but it is best to check with the person to make sure it really was what you thought it was. If a third party comes and tells you about it, ask yourself these questions before taking any action.

- Are there other witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19)?
- What do you know about the alleged wrong-doer?
- What do you know about the person who is telling you?
- How mature in the Lord are each of them?
- What is their character?
- Is this the first time the one has been accused?
- Is this the first time the other has brought accusations?
- Would the first have a motive for doing the thing?
- Would the second have a motive for wanting to believe they did?

If you are unable to just dismiss the accusation – your pre-written church policy should describe how that decision is to be made – and if the person accused is in a position in the church that would provide them opportunity to do it again, they should be removed from that position while you carry out your process. For instance, if the accusation has to do with stealing money, don't let the accused handle any more money until the situation is cleared up. If, God forbid, it has to do with mistreating a child, don't let them work with children until it is cleared up. Try to help them understand that this is for their protection as well as for the protection of the church. Again, a pre-written policy requiring these steps should help remove any sense that you are picking on them personally.

Through all of this, **keep the situation as confidential as possible**. After all, the accused may turn out to be entirely innocent. Or they may confess, repent, and be restored to the Lord.

Confronting sin

Let's say you've decided that something did happen that requires some kind of follow-up. How do you do that in a Biblical and Christ-honoring way?

Confronting sin is one of the few places where Jesus laid out a specific course of action. It's also one of two places where he used the word "church." Since we are talking about confronting sin in the church, he's speaking right to us.

If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. – Matthew 18:15-17

Any sin within the church degrades the purity of the church and is therefore a sin against the church. Use Jesus' method of dealing with it.

The words of Jesus are clear. Let me just add three important points.

1. At any point when the sinner confesses and repents, the process of investigation and confrontation stops, and the process of restoration begins (see below). In most cases, the matter should not need to become any more public.

2. *Take your case to the church* does not mean naming names and details in a public setting such as a worship service, where people who are not church member may be present. Rather, it means a prayerful discussion with whatever body has the authority to impose church discipline in your congregation.

3. The goal of the process is always confession, repentance, and restoration. *Treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector* does not mean punish them or shun them. It means start over with them, seeking to draw them back to the Lord.

Restoring the sinner

The first and greatest goal of church discipline is to protect the other church members. But a second and equal goal is to restore the sinner. Paul encouraged the Galatians,

Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. - Galatians 6:1

He gives us an example in his two letters to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5 he demands discipline for a case of open sin in the church. But in 2 Corinthians 2, having apparently heard that the sinner had repented, Paul instructed the church to welcome him back with forgiveness and comfort.

Part of your discipline policy should deal with processes of restoration. Of course, simply following a policy will not guarantee that wrong-doers change their ways, but it will help protect you and the church if they don't. In particular, think and pray ahead of time about what you will require before accepting the person back into full fellowship. Are words of sorrow enough? What if they cry? Will you require a minimum waiting period? A course of counseling or supervised study? Some other indication of sincerity and change? What you require may depend on what the offense was. And of course, all of this assumes that the person wants to come back to your church, and is willing to accept your terms. Remember, this is not punishment. **It should be offered as a loving corrective, aimed at helping the person become more like Jesus, and the church become more like the Kingdom of God.**

One last thought: receiving wrong-doers back into fellowship does not necessarily mean receiving them back into leadership, or allowing them to return to a place where they may be tempted to fall again. If they demand that, it may be a sign that their repentance was not completely genuine. In fact, any kind of demanding attitude indicates a lack of humility, which almost

always means a lack of true repentance.

Ambushes

A favorite tactic of guerilla warfare is the ambush. It's a beautiful day. You're peacefully moving along a smooth road, minding your own business. You come upon an innocent-looking outcropping of rocks or copse of trees, or you turn a corner around a building. And all of a sudden you're under fire.

Ambushes can be effective even when they are expected. When they catch you off guard, they can be deadly. Here are a few phrases church people will say that I've learned can be cover for an ambush. Be on guard for them. I'm sure you'll add your own to the list.

"I'll be happy to take that on"

We pastors love volunteers. It seems like there's always more work than workers. Even Jesus had that problem. He told his disciples, *The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields* (Luke 10:2). So when somebody volunteers for a job in the church, we want to say, "Hallelujah! Thank you, Lord, for sending more workers!"

Experience has taught me this is not always the appropriate response. Usually volunteers are quite sincere and just want to help. Sometimes, though, they have an ulterior motive. If the job they want will put them in a position to make or influence important decisions in the church, be careful. Are they hoping to gain power or prestige? Are they hoping to steer things in their own direction? One person tried to gain a seat on the finance committee because he thought the church was paying me too much. Others have sought official positions because they wanted to replace me as pastor.

Be careful about anything having to do with church leadership, church vision and direction, church discipline, and how church money is spent.

When somebody says, "I'll be happy to take that on," thank them profusely. But if "that" is something that will allow them to pursue their own agenda

instead of the way God is leading you, don't accept their gracious offer too quickly.

“People are saying”

This has happened to me more than once. I'm in a church board meeting. One says, “Several people have told me they're not happy about such and so.” Another person says, “I've heard that, too.” A third says, “A number of people have told me the same thing.”

Wow! It sounds like there's a groundswell of sentiment among the congregation. A major movement is happening! We better do something!

Not so fast. Almost every time, on digging a little more deeply it turns out that the same three or four people talked to every board member. What sounded like a strong consensus in the congregation proved to actually be just a lobbying effort by a small minority. And once you figure that out, you know to be careful about those who were doing the lobbying.

“The whole church agrees with me”

Sometimes a person comes presenting themselves as spokesperson for the congregation. The issue is usually a change they don't like, but it can be anything. And very often, what they present as the unanimous feeling of the congregation is actually just their own opinion, perhaps with a few others. Yet they aren't lying. They actually believe they represent the whole church.

After many years of trying to understand this phenomenon, I think I've figured out the psychology. Note that these are not intentional or even conscious ways of thinking, but I believe for many they are true nonetheless.

They come to you, express an opinion, and add, “the whole church agrees with me.” When pastors hear “the whole church,” we think of everybody associated with the church: leaders, active members, occasional attenders, even those we are hoping to attract. Most people don't think that way. When they say “the church,” in their minds they are picturing the people they normally see and talk to and do things with at church. There are other

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people there on Sunday morning, but they're kind of vague and peripheral and they don't really count.

So when these people say "the whole church agrees with me," what they really mean is, "all my church friends agree with me." And this is to be expected, because most people find it hard to be friends with those who disagree with them on issues they feel strongly about.

But it goes further than that. Some people have no problem forcefully expressing their opinions. A friend used to say, "It's my opinion, and you're entitled to it!" People who take it on themselves to tell pastors what the congregation thinks are likely to be that kind of person. But most people, especially people who are trying to be nice Christians, are not like that. In fact, most people like to avoid confrontations, especially in church. When somebody says something they disagree with, they don't want to start an argument or offend a friend, so they say something noncommittal and try to change the subject. The problem is, opinionated people are not often very adept at reading such social subtleties. In their minds, if you don't argue with me it means you agree with me.

So sometimes – not always, but more often than you might think – "the whole church agrees with me" actually means, "all my church friends agree with me." That actually means, "nobody argued with me." And some people carry it even further, because if someone did have the temerity to argue they are removed from the category of friends and placed with "those other people," who don't count. So the person can still say, and fully believe, "the whole church agrees with me."

All this is not to say that you should ignore people who come to tell you what the church is thinking. In fact, you need people who can reliably report the thoughts and feelings of various groups within the church. Just prayerfully follow up and verify what people tell you, especially when their thoughts are unsolicited.

“I can’t tell you”

Confidentiality is a crucial value in our dealings with people in the church. If someone fears that you will tell others their secrets, they will most likely not share them with you, even in a counseling situation. Once that trust is broken, it is difficult to regain. I personally make it a policy never to use a story about anyone in the church as a sermon illustration, or in any other public way, unless I have first received permission from the person involved.

That said, one of the devil’s favorite ways to keep his evil doings hidden is to raise concerns about confidentiality or fears of embarrassing someone. This is particularly true when people are reporting concerns or criticisms to the pastor. I once had a church member who repeatedly told me, “Pastor, people aren’t happy. They don’t like what you’re doing, and if you don’t change they’re going to leave the church.” But she wouldn’t tell me who was unhappy. And she wouldn’t tell me what I was doing that they didn’t like. It was “confidential.” Not knowing who it was, I couldn’t talk to them about it. And not knowing what it was, I couldn’t do anything about it. The only result was to add stress to what was already a very stressful time in that church, and distract me from using my time more constructively.

I try not to pay attention to anonymous notes or reports. If a person will talk to me directly, or write me a letter, or even give someone else permission to share their concerns with me by name, then I’ll prayerfully consider them. If they are not willing to own up to their opinions, I am not willing to be concerned with them. The end result of anonymous communications is almost always trouble.

Unholy Spirits

Some churches just seem to exude a wonderful spirit. It seems like when you walk in, you can “feel” hospitality, or evangelism, or a love of Bible study or worship. Unfortunately, the same can be true on the negative side.

Some understand a negative atmosphere as a natural consequence of certain personalities. I believe there is often a spiritual influence as well. Casting

out demons was a major part of Jesus' ministry. Paul warns that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against evil spiritual powers. We are not to be unaware of the devil's tactics, but resist him with appropriate spiritual warfare. Paul tells us how in Ephesians 6:10-18 and 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

One of the less-appreciated gifts of the Holy Spirit is discerning of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10). If your church seems to be experiencing more than your share of trouble and conflict, earnestly desire this gift (1 Corinthians 14:1). Some spirits, like criticism, deception, and greed, are common in many areas of life. Here are some unholy spirits that seem to focus on churches.

Religion

A spirit of religion tries to focus people on the religious acts they do, rather than on their relationship with God. These acts may be very good in themselves, such as tithing, daily Bible reading, and reciting certain prayers. But when the acts become the focus of the people's hope of eternity, rather than the grace of God, people's faith grows cold and their hearts grow hard. That is the goal of the religious spirit.

The Pharisees are the great Biblical example. They were so focused on properly practicing and protecting their religion that when the one they claimed to be doing it all for appeared among them, they completely failed to recognize him.

Legalism

A spirit of legalism focuses on the letter of the law rather than the spirit of it. When a legalistic person looks at himself, he asks, "How far can I go before I get in trouble?" When he looks at others, he focuses on their failure to observe every detail of the law. Legalism results in justifying self and judging others.

Suspicion

A spirit of suspicion often masquerades as the Biblical gift of discernment of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10). If this spirit gains influence in your church, people will suspect each other, and especially you, of lying, using the church for personal gain, and having ulterior motives for everything you try to do. Suspicion suggests the worst possible interpretation for everything that happens.

Division

The devil loves “divide and conquer,” especially since God loves unity. Sometimes it seems that division occurs more easily in the church than outside it.

Let’s say it’s time to paint the church kitchen. What color should it be? The pastor could decide. But let’s say the pastor is trying to train the leaders to make godly decisions, and it seems this is a good case to practice on. After discussion and prayer, one group wants to paint the kitchen green, and the other wants to paint it yellow. Not a major decision, right? But because they prayed about it, each group feels that they heard from God. Suddenly, the issue is no longer what color somebody likes, it’s who hears God best. A spirit of division will grab that and run with it. People will begin to feel, “I prayed about the kitchen and God told me it’s supposed to be yellow, and if you want to paint it green, you are rebelling against God’s will!” Of course, the green faction feels the same way about their color. The next step is, “It’s my duty to God to do everything I can to make sure the kitchen is painted yellow, even if I have to drive you out of the church to do it!”

A spirit of division doesn’t care what the issue is, and it really doesn’t care who wins. If your church seems to be constantly in conflict, rather than settling back into unity once a particular issue is settled, the problem may be a spirit of division.

Poverty

Our God is a God of abundance (John 10:10). He created all the sand on the seashore and all the stars in the sky. The Bible says God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10). God has all the resources in the universe, plenty for every church and every Christian to have all they need to carry out God's plan to reach the world for Jesus.

The task of a spirit of poverty is to blind our eyes to that truth. It works to keep Christians and churches poor, or at least acting as if they are poor. It is wonderful to have support from brothers and sisters around the world, but I don't believe it is God's plan for any local church to have to depend on that for more than just its beginning stages. Every Christian and every church must learn to look to God as our source.

Control

A controlling spirit seeks to usurp the proper authority in the church. Often this manifests as people attempting to undermine the authority of the pastor, usually through various threats. "If you don't do things my way, I'll leave, and I'll take my tithes and my friends with me!" This can expand to a small group that tries to run the church. However, a pastor can also exhibit a controlling spirit, often by trying to tell church members what to do in every detail of church and even personal issues, rather than teaching the leaders and members to be led by the Holy Spirit to make godly decisions for themselves.

Combinations of spirits

Often problem spirits work together and reinforce each other. For instance, in a church beset by a spirit of poverty, a person who tries to exercise control by threatening to withhold giving will have more influence than in a church that trusts in God's abundance. A spirit of suspicion can turn up the fire under divisions.

Origins of unholy spirits

Where do these troublesome spirits come from? Probably most are brought in with troublesome people. Sometimes, though, they come with the church itself, from something that happened in its history, maybe even in how it was founded. Of the seven churches I have served, this was true of two that I know of.

When I first went to one church, I was told it was started as a daughter church by a congregation in a town nearby. After a few years I started hearing another version of the story. It turned out this church actually started as the result of a church split. A spirit of division had done its dirty work. Some involved in the split were still influential in the church I was now serving. At that time, I didn't know what that might mean, but I found out. The church was growing, attracting new people with new ideas, even talking to an architect about building a larger sanctuary. The old guard suddenly found themselves being outvoted in church meetings. The divisive spirit that was part of this church's birth raised its ugly head once again. Most of the new people left, the building project was canceled, I was moved to another congregation, and that church has never again reached that level of potential.

Another church I served also had an instructive history. I was told the original church was built on land donated by a faithful member. Sounds wonderful, right? But when we started digging into the records, some details emerged that shed a different light. It turned out the land was originally intended for the donor's daughter. But she fell in love with a poor man whom her father felt was beneath her. The father threatened that if his daughter married this man, he wouldn't give her the land, and she would be poor her whole life. She did marry him, and the father gave the land to the church instead. I don't know if the curse came true for the girl and her husband. I do know a perception of poverty stayed with that church for many generations. A generally healthy congregation was less effective than it could have been, because it saw itself as poor.

The Bible says, *The Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil* (1 John 3:8). Jesus did this first through his own life and death. Now he does it

through his body, the church. Of course, the devil fights back. Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church (Matthew 16:18), but there are still battles to be won.

Dealing with unholy spirits

Here are three steps I have found to be helpful in dealing with problem spirits.

Expose them to light

The devil loves to work in the darkness. Perhaps that's because John 1 tells us Jesus is light, and the devil can't stand Jesus. The devil also can't stand the light of exposure. It's been said that the devil's greatest trick is to make people believe he doesn't exist. Don't let him get away with it. Peter wrote, *Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour* (1 Peter 5:8). In your preaching and teaching, shine a light on that lion. Illuminate his hiding places. Teach your people to recognize his schemes, so they won't be outwitted by him (2 Corinthians 2:11).

If you discern that an individual has a problem, go to that individual privately. But if the problem is with the whole congregation, if you discern that a spirit of gossip or criticism or control or whatever is becoming entrenched, you need to publicly shine a light on it.

The way to do this is not to announce, "This brother has a spirit of gossip," or, "That sister has a spirit of control." That kind of accusation is the work of Satan, the Accuser. Instead, teach your people. Preach about evil spirits and how they can infect a congregation, how to identify them and what to do about them. Be sure that as you teach, you always speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). In this way, no one should be embarrassed, and the whole congregation will learn to recognize this behavior and avoid it. Your goal is not just to refute a particular piece of gossip. You want to create a church culture where everybody knows that gossip, criticism, arrogance and so on are "not the way we do things around here."

Emphasize the opposite virtues

Luke 11:24-26 tells us that it's not just enough to evict evil spirits. We must replace them. If we don't fill the spiritual void, we'll wind up worse off than we were before.

Start by inviting the Holy Spirit to come and fill your church. Of course, you should always be doing that. In dealing with evil spirits, though, it's important to specifically invite the Holy Spirit to produce and manifest the graces and virtues that will counteract the effects of the spirit that caused the problems. If you're dealing with a spirit of division, pray for the Holy Spirit to produce unity. If the issue was a religious spirit, pray for the Holy Spirit to release grace.

Then act on your prayers. Encourage your people to focus on practicing the virtues and spiritual fruits (Galatians 5:22-23) that are opposite to the problem spirit. Combat a spirit of poverty by encouraging faith and generosity. Fight a spirit of legalism by encouraging freedom. It's not always wise to name the evil spirits to the whole congregation, but it's always appropriate to preach on the good things of God.

Binding and loosing

Jesus gave his followers the power to evict evil spirits (Luke 10:17; Mark 16:17; John 14:12; Acts 1:8). That power was never revoked. Unfortunately, the Bible does not give us step by step instructions for every situation. My goal here is just to make you aware of these issues. If God leads you to explore further, or if you ever find yourself in a situation where you need to know more, there is a lot of good information available. Of course, given the topic, there is also a lot of bad information. Remember Paul's advice: *Test everything; hold fast what is good* (1 Thessalonians 5:21 ESV).

Points to Remember

- Learn to recognize and deal with the problem people in your church.
- You can't help people who don't want to be helped.
- Handling conflict is a skill you can learn.
- When you need to confront sin in the church, don't do it by yourself.
- Your real enemy is not people; learn to recognize and deal with problem spirits.