

Warning: Dangerous people

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The person who stirs up dissension has a variety of deceitful tactics but the goal remains the same — it is to separate and alienate people from each other. To divide people and draw a personal following, he will use subtle and slanderous accusations, questions with raised eyebrows, deceitful innuendo and flattery. This person sows seeds of distrust with the intention of turning people away from each other. He drives wedges between friends, neighbors, relatives and church members. And, like Absalom, it might be done to win the loyalties of people to himself and his agenda. Or, it could simply be that this type of a person takes some kind of perverted pleasure in separating people from each other. Whatever the motivation, God hates the person who engages in this type of evil behavior.

And, if this is what God hates, we can better understand what He loves. God loves peace and unity among His people. Thus we find exhortations like: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace ...” (Romans 14:19). “Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy ...” (Hebrews 12:14).

Now, Romans 12:18 said, “If it is possible ... live at peace with everyone.” But sometimes it is not possible. Sometimes, when we stand for truth and righteousness, we get labeled “troublemakers” instead of “peacemakers.” And when this happens we stand in the company of great prophets like Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

Right after Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” He said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.” But even here we must be careful not to disrupt peace unless we are genuinely standing for God’s righteousness. I make this distinction because people who stir up dissension in the church often try to give others the impression that they are only standing for truth and righteousness — when often it is their interpretation of truth and righteousness that they are using to drive wedges between people and to win people’s loyalties to themselves.

Yes, scripture is clear that there needs to be divisions between truth and error, and that these distinctions will divide people. And we should never seek peace at the sacrifice of truth and purity in the church. But the type of person who stirs up dissension doesn’t really and genuinely care about the unity or the purity of the church. He might feign a concern for these things, but his real concern is for himself and his agenda.

I strongly agree with the author of the book *Antagonists in the Church* when he writes that there are people who are simply bent on this type of behavior. He calls them “antagonists” and insists that these people must be identified and dealt with for the sake of church unity. His book offers, among other things, a personality profile and a manual for dealing with the person who “stirs up dissension among brothers.”

“Antagonists,” he writes, “try to build themselves up by tearing others down. They express their inner struggles with a negative self-concept by attacking people, enjoying the failures and misfortunes of others while they project their own sense of worthlessness onto them.”

Four Descriptions of antagonists

In describing the general personality characteristics of these people, the author uses four descriptions:

1) Narcissism: “Narcissism is a personality pattern in which a person displays an excessive sense of self-importance and preoccupation with eliciting the admiration and attention of others ... a narcissistic individual greedily fishes for and hungrily devours the praise and attention of others ... Narcissistic individuals who are antagonists are extremely reluctant to admit wrongdoings. They cannot conceive of being in error, because ‘right’ is what meets their needs, and ‘wrong’ is what obstructs the meeting of those needs.”

2) Aggression: “Antagonists also display patterns of aggressive behavior that permeate their entire personalities. Angry at self, the world, and any convenient situation or person, antagonists seem to wander through life seeking, inviting, and collecting injustices against themselves. Every perceived or actual wrong they experience is stored in their memories and periodically replayed to supply fuel for their anger.”

3) Rigidity: “Rigidity is characterized by inflexibility of thought, usually coupled with excessive concern for precise and accurate procedure (as defined by the rigid individual). Someone with a rigid personality sees the world as totally static; his or her explanation of events is, by definition, the unquestionably correct interpretation. Rigid individuals ridicule or ignore differing opinions and skillfully overlook contrary evidence ... Antagonists with rigid personality structures are especially jealous of leaders, because people in authority have the power to inject disturbing input. Therefore, rigid antagonists frequently employ their simplistic rules and regulations as weapons against leaders.”

4) Paranoid personality syndrome:

“Marks of a paranoid personality include persistent, unwarranted guardedness and mistrust of others; delusions of grandeur; lack of genuine emotions, and hypersensitivity. Because they distrust others, paranoid persons try to find hidden meanings in words and actions, continually looking for ulterior motives behind what others say ... they commonly experience difficulty in relating to others; disagreements and arguments are commonplace. Paranoid individuals find coworkers and authority figures most difficult to get along with.

“A paranoid person often projects his or her own feelings onto others. If, in a social gathering, a leader accidentally forgets to shake a paranoid antagonist’s hand, the paranoid might blow the incident all out of proportion in his or her own mind. The wrath carried inside the antagonist will be attributed by mental sleight of hand to the leader, as if the leader were angry with the antagonist.

“Antagonists initiate trouble; they do not wait for trouble to come to them. This often goes hand-in-hand with hypersensitivity on their part. They often take every word and action as a personal attack and respond aggressively. Something as seemingly minor as failing to say good morning to them can cause their antagonism to flare up. Their response to such an omission would most likely be to wonder what you had against them.

“The attacks of antagonists are self-serving. Often they will seize on a slogan or pick some side of a valid issue and pretend that is what they are fighting for. It rarely is. An antagonist will quickly drop a particular slogan or issue once it no longer serves his or her ambitions.”

A Guide for Identifying Antagonists

The presence of one or more red flags does not guarantee that you are dealing with an antagonist. But it will give you fair warning to exercise caution.

THE PREVIOUS TRACK RECORD FLAG

Some antagonists will wave a red flag announcing: “See how antagonistically I behaved before!” They could have played the role of antagonist earlier in the present congregation, or they might have done so in another congregation. Do not ignore this clear flag or say, “It won’t happen to me.” The data indicates that those with antagonistic track records tend not to reform.

THE PARALLEL TRACK RECORD FLAG

Individuals who behave antagonistically in other arenas of life are prime candidates to become active antagonists in the church. These person may not now behave antagonistically in the church, but do behave this way in one or more other organizations, such as the local school system, the workplace, or in a social club. He or she may even gloat about these antagonistic behaviors. In so doing, the individual conspicuously waves a red flag before you.

THE NAMELESS OTHERS FLAG

All leaders, whatever their position, receive criticism from time to time. Sometimes the criticism is valid, helpful, and legitimate.

When someone offers you a word of criticism, however, and adds, “There are X number of other people who feel the same way,” chances are excellent that you are talking with an antagonist. These “others” may be phantoms of the antagonist’s imagination, invented to validate his or her own feelings and to threaten you. Or they may be followers of the antagonist. Whether they exist or not is immaterial, because individuals who are not antagonistic don’t need to talk about “all the others” who feel the same way; they simply express *their own* thoughts and feelings.

The litmus test to determine whether someone is or is not an antagonists in this situation is to respond casually, “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Who are these other people?” If the person lists a few names, you are probably not faced with an antagonist. An antagonist is more likely to answer, “They came to me in the strictest of confidence.”

THE PRESSER-DOWNER FLAG

Beware of those who denounce your predecessor (in whatever position you hold) and praise you at the same time. They might say something like, “You’re my kind of leader, a person I can relate to — not like the others.” In certain ways, everyone enjoys hearing words like these. Both pastors and lay leaders can be seduced by such compliments, but a person criticizing others and simultaneously flattering you carries a flag of blazing scarlet. Someday you may be a former leader, and those who build up a new leader will do so at your expense.

THE INSTANT BUDDY FLAG

Be cautious with those who relate to you in an overly friendly fashion as soon as you move to a new congregation or immediately after they transfer into your congregation.

THE GUSHING PRAISE FLAG

Those who lavish effusive, gushing praise on you now will often be equally generous with their criticism later.

What causes this shift? One possibility may be unrealistic expectations. To be human is to have faults. You cannot sustain the level of perfection that antagonists expect. It is also possible that they become jealous of the image they have built up for you and consequently seek to destroy it by bringing you down to size. In any case, beware of someone who heaps excessive praise on you. This person is waving a red flag.

THE “I GOTCHA” FLAG

Beware of those who try to catch you in error — for example, those who ask you questions when you know they already know the answers.

THE CHURCH HOPPER FLAG

Beware of those who consistently move from congregation to congregation. I am not referring to people who move frequently because their occupations require them to do so. Antagonists change congregations because they are dissatisfied with the church staff, the lay leadership, or the outcome of a decision in the previous church. Indeed, they often confide that they have been dissatisfied with almost every pastor or lay leader with whom they were previously associated. At the same time, church hoppers will build you up. “Finally,” they exclaim, “I have found the leader for me!”

THE FLASHING \$\$ FLAG

Anyone who conspicuously uses money has better than average potential to become an antagonist. Churches are ideal places for them to demonstrate this characteristic. An antagonist is likely to make a spectacular contribution, visible to all, to fund a special program ... Face it: it is wonderful to receive donations, especially when the need is great — as is often the case. But be careful not to sell out for money. The long-term costs are too great!

THE NOTE TAKER FLAG

Be wary of those who take notes at inappropriate times — such as during a coffee-hour conversation — when an off-the-cuff opinion is expressed on a sensitive issue. Inappropriate note takers are often budding antagonists.

THE KENTRON FLAG

The kentron flag describes someone who uses sharp, cutting language such as sarcasm or a barbed comment disguised as a joke. An individual who consistently resorts to these tactics is a viable candidate for the position of antagonist.

THE PEST FLAG

A “pest” may be an insatiable questioner, a persistent suggester, or an incessant caller. This is a less significant red flag; many pesky persons are not antagonists but simply well-intentioned individuals who end up being nuisances. Occasionally, however, such behavior may be the tip of the iceberg — a fairly innocent behavior that results from antagonistic personality. People who first appear to be simply pests may later prove to be thoroughgoing antagonists.

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Antagonists are individuals who, on the basis of nonsubstantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity.

Next, ask yourself the following questions about the individual:

1. Is his or her behavior disruptive?
2. Is the attack irrational?
3. Does the person go out of the way to initiate trouble?
4. Are the person's demands insatiable?
5. Are the concerns upon which he or she bases the attack minimal or fabricated?
6. Does the person avoid causes that involve personal risk, suffering, or sacrifice?
7. Does the person's motivation appear selfish?

If the answers to several of these questions are yes, that is enough to suggest that a person might be an antagonist. Even if the answers to a few are no, you need to take a closer look.

