

Absalom Syndrome

How candid can church leaders be without undermining the pastor?
by Mark Wheeler, guest columnist | posted 3/13/2003

John was a man with a mission—to oust the pastor. He had a long-standing grudge and refused to let go of it.

John would sidle up to newcomers and say, "Does the pastor strike you as a little cold? Does it bother you that he votes on his own salary? Did you hear about the squabble last year? Let me fill you in on what really happened."

John rehashed his complaints with each new staffer and board member. If the leader didn't take his side, John accused him of covering up the issues.

My turn came one hot, summer evening. I had heard about John's tactic. I refused to be part of any gossip. To each accusation, I said, "John, you need to deal with your bitterness. I won't listen to any more until you do that." John has yet to do that, and now he considers me part of the cover-up.

Church staff, board members, and leaders are natural lightning rods for complainers. Afraid of voicing objections publicly or confronting the pastor directly, the disgruntled often come to us. Serving in staff positions over the past 10 years, I've learned some hard lessons about loyalty and integrity.

1. Step away from the gate.

If we are not careful, associates can easily become an Absalom at the gate, stealing away the hearts of Israel (2 Sam. 15:1-6). Like King David's son, we begin to think that things would be different if we were in charge, that we are the answer to the problem. We're tempted to think we're more "in touch" than the senior pastor. We discover there's support for our way of thinking, and we can become the catalyst for a power struggle or church split.

2. The shortest distance between two points does not go through me.

Rather than playing Absalom, we should follow the biblical pattern of confrontation (Matt. 18:15-17). Instead of listening to rumors, we need to ask the complainer, "Have you talked to the pastor yet?"

If he hasn't, we should politely tell him to follow what Scripture says about confrontation without commenting on the concerns. If he has done that and the matter has not been resolved, we should encourage him to follow Christ's instruction by taking another person along for a

private meeting with the pastor. If there is no resolution, then take it to the official leadership of the church.

3. **"They" will get you into trouble.**

At the church I serve, we have adopted the "they" rule. If a critic says "they say" or "several people are upset," we ask the complainer to identify who "they" are. It's hard to know how serious a situation is if you don't know whether "they" are one person or 100.

If the individual bringing the criticism is unwilling to identify "them" or have them speak directly to the party that has offended them, we won't listen to their accusations. After all, the end of Absalom's life shows the danger of playing to the crowd.

4. **Loyal David is a better example.**

Rather than Absalom's rebellion, a much better example for us is David's respect for his superior, Saul. Instead of manipulating the present for my own ends, I need to relax and trust God for my future.

To keep my heart pure and my perspective straight, I've had to discipline myself to do two things. One is to pray for my seniors on a daily basis. It's hard to criticize someone when you are praying for him. Lifting him up before God tends to diffuse any frustration and helps me to see him as God does. And two, I remind myself that, ultimately, I am serving Jesus Christ.

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