

Controlling

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RECENTLY, A COLLEAGUE TOLD me about an early ministry experience he had near the end of his seminary training. The senior minister at the church where he served as a part-time youth minister benevolently placed his hand on the youth minister's shoulder and gave him this advice: "Never invite a speaker into your church who is better than you. That way you will always look good to your people." No wonder some of our churches are so unhealthy!

By Jeff Faulk

Church health is a hot topic. More is being said today about church health than church growth. This trend is appropriate because when a church is healthy, it naturally grows. But where does church health begin? Where do we concentrate our energy and attention in our desire to promote church health? Should we focus on leadership since, after all, "everything rises and falls on leadership"? Should we emphasize doctrine, since the church is the pillar and support of the truth? Should we highlight involvement, since healthy churches are churches with high levels of participation? Should we elevate worship, trusting that everything else will fall into place? Should we promote evangelism, a primary purpose for the existence of the church? Certainly the answer to these questions is yes. But as indispensable as these things are to church health, there is one component of church health that permeates every other area of the church, from the music department to the morality department—humility! If pride is kept in check and humility is encouraged, an atmosphere of church health and church growth can be cultivated. Humility becomes job one. In other words, healthy Christians and churches have learned to control their "altar" egos.

Even secular leadership research has discovered that successful organizations are dealing not just with strategy, vision, and technical issues, but with emotional intelligence and relationship concerns as well. They are uncovering scriptural principles that have been available to us for centuries. Let's consider how the Word of God connects humility with church health.

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God's Perspective

"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). The Lord's admonition to the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:17) and Paul's stern words to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:2) demonstrate this principle. Since God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble, we are avoiding an avenue of grace when we allow pride to develop and remain in our hearts and our churches. The word James uses to describe God's opposition to the proud is a word which literally means "to place oneself in opposition" or "to battle against." God does not ignore churches that are proud; he actively fights against them.

Of the three major spiritual rebellions in the beginning of Scripture, each had pride at its root. Satan was cast from Heaven because of his pride. He wanted to be "like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14). Adam and Eve sinned and were banned from the Garden because of their pride. They wanted to be "like God" (Genesis 3:5). The builders of Babel were scattered throughout the earth because of their pride. They wanted to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4).

Pride was the downfall of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They made the classic mistake of caring too much about what people thought of them. Human nature hasn't changed. The same problems have been wreaking havoc in the church ever since. Pride stems from the desire to usurp God's glory and position.

Imagine the implications for church health and church growth. How can God bless a ministry or a church that is comprised of or led by people who are proud? The fact that God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble ought to cause us to reexamine our hearts in relationship to the health of our churches and ministries.

Too often we ignore this vital prerequisite to church health and sweep ego problems under the rug "in Christian love." We unknowingly jeopardize the entire church when we do so. Even John, the apostle of love, rooted out the pride in one congregation when he identified Diotrophes as one who loved "to be first" (3 John 9). Healthy churches actively address the issues of pride and humility.



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The Root of Disharmony

"Only by pride cometh contention" (Proverbs 13:10, *KJV*). Wherever there is dissension, wherever there is unhealthy conflict, wherever there is dissonance or contention, someone has a pride problem. Is there trouble in the worship department? Someone is proud. Are there unresolved staff conflicts? Someone is proud. Is there disharmony between the staff and the leaders? Someone is proud. Are there disgruntled church members who continue to complain? Someone is proud. Are there changes that need to take place, yet never seem to happen? Someone is proud. Are there changes taking place that shouldn't have happened? Someone is proud. Pride brings contention. James wrote, "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:16, *NASB*). Maybe it is an egotistical senior minister who seeks to exalt himself and his influence. Perhaps it is a self-willed elder seeking to wield power and control. It might be a talented performer who loves the spotlight. Or even a not-so-talented church member with his or her own selfish agenda who resists positive change. It could be a department head protecting personal turf. In each case the root issue is pride, and until it is dealt with, the church will never reach its "health potential."

Taking Inventory

Questions of pride and humility demand a personal inventory. Start with yourself and ruthlessly eliminate the seeds of pride and selfish ambition from your heart. Humble yourself before you attempt to diagnose the health of the body or anyone else in it.

Leadership by Example

Congregations often reflect the image of their leaders. If the leaders demonstrate humility, the congregation will follow. If the leaders manifest pride, then the congregation will eventually exhibit that pride.

The New Testament contains many examples of great leaders who controlled their "altar" egos. Apollos was an educated man, but he allowed Priscilla and Aquila to teach him and correct him. John the Baptist was the greatest man who ever lived, but he said, "He [Christ]

must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Jesus himself picked up the towel and the basin and washed the feet of his disciples. Spiritual, individual, and organizational health come only when genuine humility is preached and practiced by the leaders.

Assuming Responsibility

The people who make up our congregations must learn the importance of humility. None of us would allow glaring weaknesses in the structure of our churches to exist if they threatened the health of our congregations. Preaching and teaching emphasizing the vital importance of humility must be a top priority.

Practicing Humility

Once we have looked at ourselves, our leaders, and our members, we are ready to apply these principles to specific situations in the church. Almost without fail these principles will come into play when difficulties are faced in our congregations. A healthy and mature church will eventually come to the place where it is able to discern these issues in various situations.

Start with yourself and ruthlessly eliminate the seeds of pride and selfish ambition from your heart.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to meet a well-known preacher from a large congregation. I had admired him from a distance for some time. When I finally met him, I was impressed with his humility and his genuine interest in me and my concerns. He could have told me about *his* ministry and *his* church; instead, he asked me about *my* ministry

and *my* church. I was amazed. In contrast to my colleague's earlier experience, I walked away from this encounter with an even deeper respect for the preacher I'd heard so much about. Over the years I have observed his success and his humility and I can only conclude that one has a lot to do with the other.

We all desire healthy churches. Help make it happen in your church—learn to control your "altar" ego. 🌿

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