

How to Spot a Bully in the Church

Newsflash: There are often people in a church who are bullies and get away with it because church leadership is too nice to call them out on their destructive behavior. Often, we know something is not right, but how do we know when behavior has crossed a line and is unacceptable? Here are some behavioral signs that you may be dealing with a bully.

They have to get their own way. If a group decision is not their liking and they insist that things are done their way, beware.

They intimidate to get their way. It can be intimidation in attitude, not letting go of an issue, constantly pushing, or threats of some sort.

They triangulate others into their orbit to put pressure on leaders. Talking about their "concerns" (nothing other than manipulation), they develop a group that they rope into their point of view, so now there is a group dynamic to the bullying.

They criticize others, usually leaders in private, seeking to undermine the authority of a leader or leaders. Those they talk to often take up the offense or cause without any reason.

No matter how much attention they are given or how many conversations one has with them, they do not move off their position. It is their way or no way.

They often raise their issues in congregational meetings, seeking to force the hand of leadership. Nor are they nice about what they have to say.

They do not respect authority. Especially church authority - unless they are in church leadership, in which case they demand others respect their authority.

They cloak their concerns and language in spiritual terms. When behaviors don't match the words, don't be fooled. This is not spiritual. It is about power and getting one's way.

When confronted, they deny, fight back, or lie. They are not willing to be held accountable.

They hurt people who get in their way but are never wrong and rarely apologize. After all, it is about them, not others.

Why do bullies get their way in many churches? Because they can and because fellow Christians are not very smart about what is happening. After all, would a fellow Christian have ulterior motives??? The answer in many situations is "absolutely." Don't be fooled, don't be intimidated, and don't allow these kinds of behaviors in your church. It is divisive, dangerous, ungodly, and evil. Call it for what it is.

By the way, the Apostle Paul warned of those who create division in the church. That is what Bullies do, but our unwillingness to confront sin often lets them get their way. In fact, in many cases, we would never put up with that behavior in the workplace, but we do it all the time in the church. Sad.

When Church Boards Don't Confront Church Bullies

Church bullies are toxic to the local church. They create divisions and unhealthy alliances, spread gossip and rumors, and undermine leaders regularly. They do this to accomplish their ends. They may be angry, have an agenda, or want to hurt leaders, whether boards or the senior Pastor. But the end result of their toxic, unethical, and unbiblical behavior is to hurt God's people. If you are a church leader, please read that last sentence again because it matters.

Here is the problem with church boards and church bullies. Boards are very reluctant to deal with them. They are intimidated by them and don't want to rock the boat. They find all kinds of ways to justify this toxic behavior. "Oh, that is just Joe; get used to it." Listen, Betty is a good person despite all the gossip and malicious lies she tells." "We have always had a problem with Bill."

And who gets hurt? First, God's people. The leadership becomes complicit in the toxicity when they refuse to deal with it. Bullies use disinformation, unkind words, gossip, malicious charges, and underhanded techniques to get their way. And they refuse to be held accountable. They triangulate leaders and, in the process, create doubt, distrust, and undermine senior leaders. Often, the senior Pastor.

I am asking passive boards to reconsider their inaction when it comes to those who are toxic in the church. You are the key to solving these issues, and I invite you to do what God needs you to do and protect the body of Christ.

I have several questions for church boards.

First, if you were the target of this malicious behavior, would you want someone to stand up for you? That is what senior pastors often don't get. They are expected to put up with unacceptable behavior in the church because you, as a board member, will not call the bullies out and confront them on their behavior. Many pastors live in pain or choose to move on when boards will not protect them.

Second, if you were a business or business owner leader, would you allow this behavior in your organization? Of course, you would not. You would recognize that this behavior does not serve you well and is undermining you and what you are trying to accomplish, and you would put a decisive stop to it. So why do you allow it to continue in the church?

Third, what do you make of frequent commands to Timothy and others to deal with divisive people in the church because their behavior is antithetical to what God has called us to? One day, you will stand before God and account for what you did and did not do as a leader and whether you protected the flock for such sinful behavior.

You cannot have a healthy church with unchallenged toxic behavior! It will not happen, so pretending it is OK and you don't need to act is foolish and naive. Paul specifically commands leaders to deal with the three wolves of heresy (false teaching), sinful behavior (that is ongoing and egregious), and those who sow division in the church. Paul challenged the church in Corinth to deal with those who sowed division and those living in unrepentant sin.

Church bullies do what they do because they suspect no one will challenge their behavior. After all, they have gotten away with it for a long time. They refuse to be accountable and refuse to repent, apologize, and adopt healthy behaviors. And boards coddle them, don't confront them, and tell pastors this is just the price of ministry. That is wrong, unbiblical, toxic, and makes leaders complicit. And thousands of complicit church leaders refuse to do what they are supposed to do as undershepherds of God's flock and protect the body of Christ.

If you are one of those board members who will not confront sinful behavior (it is), either step aside or do the job God has given you to do. The health of your congregation is at stake.

Confronting Bad Behaviors of Church Bullies

The carnage of bullies in the church is significant. Yesterday, I was in an intense discussion at a coffee shop in Canada with three other individuals regarding my blog, "[When Church Boards don't Confront Bullies](#)," a woman at the table nearby was listening. As she left, she came and introduced herself and told the story of how her large church in Calgary had been destroyed by a church bully and gave us a book recommendation on narcissists in the church. She was right on three counts. One bully behavior is classic narcissism. Two, it has the power to destroy churches. And three, church leaders are notoriously bad at dealing with the problem. And when they ignore the issue, the damage is significant.

Bullies are chameleons. They try to look spiritual and concerned. But their behaviors are destructive, toxic, and hurtful. Don't be fooled!

Boards don't deal with church bullies because they are intimidated by them. That intimidation is a form of control by bullies, which provides them license to continue their bad behavior. As we will see in this series, and as we have experienced, the bully can be a pastor, a board member, or another individual in the congregation. Intimidation is their method of operation, and the response of many church leaders is passive acceptance of their behavior because they are cowed by that intimidation. Don't be!

How do we effectively deal with those who create division and discord in the church?

First, we need to be clear that there are behaviors that are not OK in the church or, for that matter, in any healthy organization. They include slander, malicious gossip, character assassination, lack of accountability, the need to have "my way," working behind the scenes to divide and conquer, unwillingness to resolve personal differences, operating in the shadows where one can create doubt, distrust, and division without being accountable for their actions, and the list could go on. See my blog, "[How to Spot a Bully in the church](#)."

Bullying behavior in the church is not very creative. It is, at its core, pure intimidation. Bullies are often arsonists in their behavior. They light fires of mistrust, create doubt, slander others in private conversations, and then deny and lie when confronted. But the behaviors are pretty consistent - often hidden in "spiritual" language, which is not spiritual at all but is evil because it destroys people, manipulates to get its own way, destroys the unity we should have in Christ (Ephesians 4), and reflects the Evil One rather than Jesus.

So, the first step in confronting such behavior is to be clear that these behaviors are unacceptable and must stop. This is the job of church leaders. Whether it is a friend of theirs, a long-time acquaintance, or someone with money and power - it does not matter. These behaviors are wrong, and if you claim the Scriptures as your guide, you cannot ignore the obvious: This is sin, it is wrong, and it hurts the Body of Jesus.

Bullies in the church believe, often rightly, that you will not confront them. You must! They must know that you are aware of their behavior, will not tolerate it, and that it must stop. Period. Bullies will deny, excuse their behavior, tell you they only want God's best, point the finger at others, and try to intimidate and divide you as leaders, but don't fall for it. They must know that their behavior is wrong and will not be tolerated, and if they continue, there will be consequences.

Here is something to remember. Bullying behavior is underhanded behavior because bullies are often cowards at heart. Cowards use deceptive tactics and run from accountability. They will be surprised when church leaders are clear that this behavior is not OK and will not be tolerated. They may try to divide you and talk their way out of it and can become angry when confronted. None of that is indicative of a humble, Christlike attitude. In the best-case scenario, they respond with humility and repentance. Often, that will not happen. Regardless, you must protect the body's unity and health, which means that this behavior will not be tolerated.

They need to know that you will not tolerate their bad behavior. They also need to know that you will not back down. Not now, not ever. Leaders unwilling to hold bullies accountable should not be in leadership because they are not protecting the flock.

What happens if the behavior continues and they will not be accountable. You have already been clear. You have reasoned with them. You have clarified what is acceptable and what is not. If they persist, you simply tell them that if they continue, you will follow the Matthew 18 model and put them under church discipline.

In my experience, bullies often run when they realize you will not back down. They hate accountability, and if you make it clear that you will hold them accountable, they will often leave the church. You hope they will change their ways, but if they don't, your job is to protect the flock, and that means that you will not shy away from public disclosure of their behavior, and that is the one thing they are deathly afraid of because they work in the shadows rather than in the light.

Here are the objections you will hear from being clear on acceptable behaviors and holding them accountable for those behaviors.

One: They are long-time acquaintances, and I don't want to offend them. What you are saying is that you are willing for others to be hurt and the body of Christ compromised because you don't want to hold someone accountable for their behavior. That is a terrible bargain to make if you are a church leader.

Two: They are really good people and have done many good things. This is about something other than whether they are good people or not. It is about behaviors that are sinful and destructive. No matter how many good things they have done over the years, their bullying behavior is unacceptable and should not be tolerated.

Three: They are big donors to the church, and we cannot compromise that. I am amazed at how often this comes up. We say bad behavior will be tolerated because we need the individual's money. Do you think Jesus thinks that way? Let me say this. Their supposed generosity is often a perception they want you to have, but it is not a reality. Regardless, it is not a license to hurt the body.

Four: Others might leave if they leave. So, let's be honest. People will leave if you don't deal with them because they create a toxic culture. Your job is not to ensure no one goes but that the body is healthy. Harmful behavior hurts people, and the church is meant to heal rather than hurt. Other people will make decisions about where they want to attend. If people leave because they take up the offense of those you have held accountable, so be it. That is their decision. Your job is to create a healthy environment; the more healthy it is, the more people will be attracted to it. If you want to kill a church, allow toxic behavior, and it will die. It may be a long, slow death, but it will die. Remember that if you are unwilling to hold bullies accountable. In that case, you have simply signed the church's death warrant.

Five: I don't want to rock the boat. What you are really saying is that you don't want to lead. And that you are willing to let the bully rock the boat while you remain passive.

Six: Are we not just overreacting? When you have bullies in the church, there is often a pile of bodies in their wake. If you want to know if you are overreacting, ask those who have been the targets of your bully. They have been hurt, many have left the church, you may have lost a pastor because of them, and a great deal of pain has been felt. And look, you would not allow this behavior in your business, but you are willing to allow it in the church? Paul was clear on behaviors that are not acceptable in the church. Was he overreacting?

There are many reasons not to confront bad behavior in the church and church bullies. In the end, choosing that route will destroy and hurt your church. Don't go that route. What excuses are you using if you have a bullying problem and have not confronted the individual? And what behavior are you allowing to be perpetuated in your passive acceptance of their behaviors?

If you need outside counsel to navigate a difficult church bully, get that help. But don't ignore the issue. Lead as God has called you to lead. In the best-case scenario, you help a bully move to health and humility. If not, you protect the flock from their behaviors. In either case, it is a win, and the alternative is a loss.

When the Pastor is the Bully!

Sometimes, the church bully is the Senior Pastor!

Some years ago, I was asked to help a congregation that was in turmoil. It was a large church, and the senior Pastor had just fired the two key associate pastors, which had caused an uproar in the church as they were loved and had many relationships.

The first thing I did was to interview the three pastors involved. The behavior of the senior Pastor, as reported to me, was not pretty, and he didn't deny it. I then discovered that six additional staff members had left or been fired in the past two years, and I asked the board if they had interviewed any of them on the way out. They said no, hanging their heads, so I called and interviewed each of them. Their stories were consistent and painful to listen to.

This story ended with a senior pastor being asked to resign, the church dividing, and the board resigning. The board had not paid attention even though they knew the senior leader was dysfunctional. He had created an atmosphere where they didn't dare challenge him. The Pastor was the bully.

Why do pastors get away with forbidden behaviors even in the secular workplace? Here are some behaviors I have observed over the past 20 years of consulting with local churches, and I am talking about evangelical churches here.

- Pastors whose insecurities cause them to divide people into two camps. Those who agree with them are, therefore, their friends, and those who disagree with them are their enemies. Enemies are ignored, shunted to the side, and marginalized. How does that square with loving the flock?
- Pastors who use threats to get their way. Threats as blatant as "I could fire you if you don't do this" or "I will resign if you push me on this." "I don't care if I get zero votes on a confidence vote. I am not leaving and will take the church down if necessary."
- Pastors who are intimidated by other strong leaders (seen as a threat to their leadership) make it hard for them to serve in the church.
- Pastors who are unaccountable with their time. When they are away from the church, no staff members know where they are or how to reach them.
- Pastors who will not allow their boards to speak into their lives, specific situations that have occurred, conduct executive sessions of the board or give them an annual review. This sends a loud message, "I don't have to be accountable to you."
- Pastors who hire staff without due diligence don't mentor or coach them regularly and fire them if they become a threat to them or don't perform to their standards. This is a user mentality toward people.
- Pastors who leave their church angry deliberately dividing the congregation on their way out.
- Pastors who triangulate relationships to form alliances against others, whether other staff members, board members, or congregants. It is not only wrong but a sign of poor emotional intelligence.
- Pastors who take credit for any advance and find scapegoats for any failure.
- Pastors who use their "God-given authority" to lead as they see fit. After all, they are "God's anointed." Again, this ignores accountability and shared leadership.
- Pastors who speak ill of board members or congregants even as they become angry if they hear of either group criticizing them.
- Pastors don't allow other staff to challenge their ideas or speak candidly to them about what they see. This creates a closed system where they cannot be challenged or held accountable. Those who ask questions are often marginalized and often let go.

- Pastors who are building their own kingdom rather than God's kingdom. What matters are their ideas and their way. Essentially, they use people to achieve their ends. In fact, when the bully is the Pastor, there is usually a growing pile of bodies in their wake. Those who have been discarded, disenfranchised, marginalized, and left on the side of the road.

So why do church boards allow this to happen? Unlike a corporate board with little interaction with staff, church boards are a part of the congregation. In almost every instance where I have helped churches deal with a bully pastor or heal in the wake of one, I have asked the church board if they knew something was wrong. In every instance, they said yes. When I asked why they didn't address it, they said they were told it was not their purview, were intimidated by the senior leader, executive sessions were not allowed so that a candid conversation could not take place, and they just hoped things would get better.

In every instance, the board members said they wished they had spoken up, asked hard questions, had the complicated conversation, and dealt with the dysfunctional leadership of the senior leader. But they didn't, and the fallout to the church was significant. Trust can take years to rebuild, and the culture returned to health after bullying pastors. Boards that do not deal with the poor behaviors of their senior leader are directly complicit in the damage that is done.

The Close Connection Between Narcissism and Bully Behaviors in the Church

Bully behaviors in the church, whether from a board member, a pastor, or others in the congregation, are usually narcissistic behaviors. A bully wants his/her own way and will use whatever means possible to achieve their goals. This can include manipulation, creating leadership division, gossip, slander, passive-aggressive behaviors, threats, and intimidation. All of these are classic narcissistic behaviors. And when confronted, they will play the victim and claim they are being mistreated. It is also why, if confronted, they will often run. Bullies and narcissists don't like accountability and seek to avoid it at all costs.

A friend left his comment on Facebook on an earlier article in this series. "We dealt with a bully in our life group recently. We made it very clear that the behavior was not acceptable. We were very willing to walk through it with her if she desired to change. She left the group. We shared this with our church leadership so they would be aware. When she repeated the behavior with others, the leaders confronted her. She left the church. Repentance and healing was our main goal, but it was clear that was not hers. The results were a blessing to all." This is not an uncommon outcome because bullies hate and avoid accountability. This is classic narcissistic behavior.

I shared several reasons that boards do not deal with bullies in the church, but there is one reason that I did not cover. We simply cannot believe these people we know would have impure motives. After all, they are Christians! Their motives must be good!

When we think that way in the face of toxic behaviors, we must wake up and smell the coffee. You need not judge motives, but you can always judge behaviors. Narcissistic behavior or bullying hurts people and organizations, and the church is meant to be a place of healing and unity. To give people a pass on behaviors that violate the Fruit of the Spirit, demand their own way, and use intimidation and underhanded tactics to achieve that is sinful, destructive, and evil. Yet church boards give such behaviors a pass regularly. The result is that people get hurt, deeply wounded, often leave the church, and sometimes abandon it because of the terrible behaviors they encountered among God's people.

Regardless of how long the offending individual(s) have been in your church or how spiritual their language (I call it God talk), when bully behavior is present along with the toxic behaviors listed above, do not give it a pass! If you do, you are giving them free access to hurt people – God's people – which is not OK. When you do that, you become complicit in their behavior. So now, the very people who are charged in Scripture with protecting God's people become complicit in allowing them to be hurt instead. You cannot teach from the pulpit Godly behaviors and allow the opposite to exist within the congregation because you are unwilling to call it out!

Narcissistic behavior is the polar opposite of the humility Jesus himself exhibited and teaches us to exhibit in our lives. Humility is like Jesus. Pride, arrogance, and narcissism reflect the Evil One, not Jesus. So when we give it a pass, we are platforming the Evil One in the same church where we teach Jesus and His character. How can that be? On the one hand, you teach people the nature of God and the Fruit of the Spirit; on the other hand, you allow the opposite to create cancer in the church! These are opposing cultures, and you destroy the culture you seek to make in the church.

Where there is a bully in the church who is creating chaos with their tactics, and the board refuses to deal with it, and it is long-standing, I have counseled pastors caught in the mess to leave. The board is allowing someone to destroy what they are trying to build from the Scriptures, and the two cultures cannot co-exist. But if you confront the behaviors and stick to your guns as Paul did in his letters to the churches in the New Testament, you can root out the rot. But that takes courage. If you are in leadership, I hope you will have that courage when faced with narcissistic behaviors and church bullies.

When the Bully is a Church Board Member

Sometimes, the church bully or church boss is a church board member. I have dealt with these situations, and how do you confront someone who has authority in the church but is misusing that authority? In this series, we have cataloged the damage that a church bully can perpetuate so we know that it matters. Generally, a church bully is able, through intimidation and bad behavior, to exercise veto power over important decisions in the church and to ensure that they get their way regardless of the will of the majority. This abrogates the choice of other leaders and often of the congregation itself.

Church boards often function in dysfunctional ways, which works to the advantage of a church bully. So, the critical factor in dealing with dysfunction on the board is ensuring that it operates as healthy as possible. This starts with a board covenant. Never allow a church board to exist without a board covenant that defines how it will work together. See a sample board covenant in my Blog; operate [without a board covenant at your own risk!](#)

A critical factor in any healthy board is a commitment to candid dialogue where any issue can be put on the table, except a hidden agenda or personal attack. Church bullies love the fact that board members won't speak up and won't confront. But we always should. I am constantly amazed at the number of issues that boards know exist but remain unmentioned in their deliberations because it might create friction. So we ignore the obvious and allow the huge elephants to stay in the room unattended to.

Many interviews were conducted in a culture audit in one church I worked with some years ago. These included staff, deacons, trustees, and people deeply involved in ministry. While many issues surfaced because of poor church leadership, the one outstanding theme was a lack of trust in the senior leader to lead the church forward. All interviewees were key leaders in the church. The board did not want to deal with it, and in this case, the Pastor was the bully who intimidated anyone who got in his way, and I resigned from working with the church. Time will tell if this board will lead more healthily, but this story is familiar. They were complicit in allowing a church bully to hurt many people. Unfortunately, it is a common issue.

In my blog, [15 Things a Church Board should not do](#), I outline some board behaviors that mitigate against a healthy church board. The bottom line is that the healthier a board, the less likely a bully can exist on the board and get his/her way. Healthy boards operate in ways that create clarity, accountability, and group decision-making. No one person can have veto power, and poor behavior is called out.

In every instance where I have encountered bullies on a board, it was dysfunctional and unhealthy so they could have a platform in that venue. So, the way to deal with a bully on the board is to bring your board to a healthier place in its practices. My book, *High Impact Church Boards*, can guide you to that healthy place. It takes courage and fortitude to sit on a church board. You must be willing to call out poor behavior and challenge pockets of power that keep others from having a voice. Dysfunctional church boards with a power player can be toxic places to serve. Appeal to the reasonable voices on the board to move the board to a healthier place. And don't be shy about getting outside help to strengthen your board health and practices.