

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

Sin in the Camp: The Problem of Achan

I can only imagine the feelings of the Israelites as they slinked back into camp after being thoroughly routed and embarrassed by what they thought would be an easily defeated, rather puny defensive force in the town of Ai.¹ I can imagine the pain in the Israelite's new leader, Joshua, as he tore his clothes, fell face-down before the LORD, and poured himself out to God.

The issue wasn't Joshua. The issue wasn't the ineptitude of Israel's fighting men. The issue was that there was sin in the camp, and God was not going to bless Israel's actions until that sin was dealt with. Achan was the culprit, and he had committed a "secret" sin the others did not know about.

Way too often, I see a form of this scenario played out in our churches. Everything seems to be difficult; every decision is hard if not impossible to make and results in disputes and quarrels. The leadership team cannot seem to agree on much of anything, and pastors, staff and board members are frustrated until they come to their wit's end and give the EFCA West team a call.

More often than not, I find that the tumult and crises seem to be related to one or maybe two people – a single board member or a lone staff member that seems to be unable to support anything, that consistently takes a contrary position, and in general seems to mess up everything.

The question I generally ask is this: "How did this person get picked to be on the church board or staff?" The most frequent answer? "I/We picked him/her." After a little inquiry, I almost always learn that this person was a "but." Yes, only one "t." He was a "but" in that the pastor or leaders that picked him thought he would be a great choice, "but" he had a "minor" character, personality, or other flaw. Bummer.

Churches are usually pretty good at taking action when a leader or staff member has committed a "big" or "yucky" sin – you know, stuff like embezzlement, adultery, porn, abuse of others, domestic violence. But these same churches often put up with the "small" or "annoying" sins that these "buts" bring to the office or board room, and then we wonder why our work is so hard, why there is so much conflict, and why it is not much fun to go to work.

¹ Joshua chapter 7

Interestingly, it is the small stuff that seems to be most highlighted in scripture. Our Bibles call out the sins of arrogance, pride, hatred, discord, rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, gossip, hypocrisy, and the like, yet we so often quietly let it go rather than confronting it. By letting it go, we make such behavior the new baseline for acceptable behavior, and we wonder why we are getting the results we are getting.

This month's topic may be a little sensitive for a group discussion, especially if you have accepted and tolerated a "but" being in your group. But it is well worth your attention and action to rectify such situations. Here are some things for you to consider. Sin in the camp may be an unpleasant topic, but it is definitely something to talk about.

- Do I/we have the habit of accepting these types of sinful behaviors within our leadership team? If so, what steps can we make to make such behaviors unwelcome from this point forward?
- How can we avoid appointing "buts" to leadership positions in the first place? What vetting processes do we have to learn enough about potential leaders to avoid this pitfall?
- Does our leadership and perhaps our church culture value being "nice" over addressing damaging sin in the camp? How can we change this? What does it mean to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds"² as it relates to this kind of conduct?
- Do our governance documents require us to have more board members than we have qualified members to appoint? I can't tell you how many times a "but" has been appointed to leadership because "our bylaws require us to have one more board member." This is a significant problem for churches that may have experienced a decline in membership or attendance and have not adjusted their bylaws to reflect those changes and in churches that failed to grasp the difference between minimum requirements and optimal requirements for numbers of board members when their documents were last amended. When a church frequently has difficulty filling required positions of leadership, it is a problem that needs to be corrected.

Please note that there is a difference between a person that is bringing sin into the camp and a person that is proving to not be as skilled in carrying out their duties as may have been originally thought. The former needs to be confronted and removed if unrepentant. The latter needs to be shepherded out of their mismatched position into an area of service where they can contribute to the church what God has equipped and gifted them to do. But they both need to be removed because their actions are impeding the work.

These are tough decisions and actions to take, but they are essential to a healthy leadership team which is essential for a church to be spiritually healthy. The EFCA West team is here to strengthen church's leadership communities. Let us know if we can help.

Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.

² Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)