

## Passive or Aggressive – Which is Worse?

By Dan Adler

I'm sure you've probably heard the phrase "Evil prospers when good men do nothing". It's a profound thought that has serious implications. But I believe that most of us don't tend to actually think that way. I would say that we tend to think "Evil prospers when bad people do bad things". We tend to think of the aggressors as being the real bad ones (or misled ones) who cause the evil to prosper— not the passive "good" people. In fact, we tend to not notice the passive people. We see something bad that has happened and we look for who the culprits (the aggressors) are so that we can blame them. But I've started to think a bit differently about evil and it's successes in the world and specifically in the Church, and I'm wondering which is worse – to be an aggressor set out to cause trouble and division or to be a passive person who strongly disagrees but is unwilling to do anything about it for fear of rejection, embarrassment, financial loss, loss of status, loss of friendship or just plain inconvenience?

I've been around the organized church and church organizations long enough to see that lots of painful things happen between people in congregations and Christian organizations. That's one of the reasons we have so many divisions in the Church. It's painful to have known so many stories of pastors who have been "eaten up" by their elder boards or powerful individuals in their congregations. It's also painful to see so many individuals who have been "eaten up" by their pastors or other church leaders. Many times in a congregation, a small handful of vocal individuals with perceived power, will stand in opposition to what a pastor or worship leader or youth pastor is trying to accomplish. Those people usually rally like-thinkers to themselves, do a lot of gossiping and politicking and intimidating of others with their opinions that helps to undermine this leader. So many times, just a small group of people can utterly devastate the life and ministry of a leader in the church and cause great division. Again, my knee-jerk response is to feel angry at those divisive people. But as I've observed this dynamic several times, consistently there is always a significant group of other elders or congregants who disagree with what these "divisive" people are doing – but they don't say or do anything about it. Many times these people will come to the pastor or leader in private and tell them of their support and how much they appreciate them and what they're doing. But when the rubber meets the road, out of any of the possible reasons I listed above, they just passively let things happen. Congregations split. Pastors leave. Families are devastated. Moves of the Spirit are quenched. Ministry is hindered. Christians quit going to church because they're so disillusioned with what they've experienced. And it was all the fault of the "divisive" people right? I don't think so.

You see, on one hand, I have to hand it to the "divisive" people. They've got convictions. They don't like what's going on, they think they're right, and they're going to make a stand. Now they're very likely really messed up and unbiblical in their convictions, but nonetheless, they've got convictions and they're acting on them. I'd call that integrity. I don't like it. I think they're wrong. But they have integrity to stand up for their skewed thinking. They're consistent. But what seems worse to me are the passive "Biblical" thinkers. These folks have convictions too – ones based on the Bible, but they don't have integrity. They're willing to let their church split, their pastor and family get devastated, and have countless Christians have their faith damaged, rather than risk taking a bold stand for their convictions and facing the consequence of doing

so. I think these people sometimes see themselves as Biblical “Peacemakers” – not wanting to rock the boat or cause tension. But that kind of peace isn’t the kind of peace that Jesus modeled. That’s a false peace. You could call it “pacifying”, “not making waves”, “acquiescing”, but not Biblical peacemaking.

This same dynamic applies when things are reversed, when it’s the Pastor or spiritual leader that is the abusive or divisive one. Many times, through the sheer power of the position of being leader or having the charisma to intimidate, pastors and spiritual leaders have spiritually abused many in the flock beyond repair.

I remember a few years ago, a new friend that we had met told us of how she went to speak with her pastor of a large mega-church about a concern she had. She spoke with him humbly and sincerely. But in that meeting, he went about systematically dismantling her verbally, spiritually and emotionally. She was so traumatized and disillusioned that she ended up in counseling for a long period of time after that and found herself, understandably, very wary of pastors from that point on. The thing is, this guy was known for this kind of arrogance and abuse. But, he was a great speaker and commanded a huge, growing church. People on his elder board and staff who had Biblical values and convictions had an obligation to confront this behavior and not tolerate it. But there were jobs and friendships at stake and positions to be held and then that reality of personal consequences if they were to do so. So it went on. Eventually, this leader had a more blatant moral failure and left the church and the ministry. After he left, there was all this talk about this guy and his ego and arrogance and power-trip that had marked him for years – yet all those people who knew those things let it carry on. Who was worse in that picture, the arrogant, abusive pastor who in his delusion thought he was right to behave such a way, or those passive, “Biblical” thinking co-workers and elders who wouldn’t act on their convictions and confront this person? Who knows, if they had done so, maybe there would have been a real breaking in that leader that would have restored him and kept him from his future moral failure.

And then there are those divisions that happen one on one between brothers and sisters in Christ. Through rampant gossip and slander or bitter unforgiveness, “aggressors” can undermine relationships, damage reputations, question motives and divide friendships and congregations. But it’s the passive listeners and receivers of such talk that give the cancer a laboratory to grow in. No one wants to be the bad guy and confront a friend or foe who uses their tongue to tear down instead of build up. Who knows, that person might turn on us and not be our friend anymore, or start slandering us! But because we don’t do so, the cancer grows, the Spirit is quenched and division is fostered. You see it’s not just the aggressors who cause evil to prosper, but the fearful, passive people who don’t have the integrity to act on their convictions.

So where do you fit in this picture? Do you confidently hold to your Biblical values while only acting on them if they cost you nothing? Or are you willing to walk the Way of the Cross that Jesus and the apostle’s walked. Honestly, I think I’ve done both - sometimes taking bold steps and many times fearfully doing nothing. And sadly, sometimes I’ve been the gossip and the slanderer – the divisive guy. Thankfully, I have had some Godly friends and family who’ve confronted me with love to help me to stop my aggression. But what I know is, I want to be someone with integrity who is willing to pay

the price to live out my beliefs – beliefs that are truly grounded in the Word. Because what are my beliefs if I don't live them out, other than self-deception?

I recently heard someone describe the difference between an ethical man and a moral man. An ethical man knows that it's wrong to cheat on his wife. A moral man won't cheat on his wife. Wow... Big difference. I want to be a moral man or as it says in James 1:22, I want to be a doer of the Word – not just a hearer who deceives himself.

Bringing Biblical unity to the Church is hard work that takes boldness and courage. Racial reconciliation is hard work that takes boldness and courage. Confronting evil takes boldness and courage. And even more difficult, it all has to be done in love or it's worthless. But it all has to be done. We can't sit back and passively watch Satan inciting us into division and destruction, we are all called to act on our convictions with integrity and love – not be silenced by self-protection and fear.

On this day after the anniversary of Martin Luther King's birthday, I'd like you to read the words of a man who was willing to act on his convictions. I was already planning on writing this article, then someone just happened to send me this quote below yesterday. I find it profound. Here are the amazing words Martin Luther King, Jr. had to say in his sermon "But, If Not" delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church November 5, 1967,

*"You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be. And one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls upon you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid. You refuse to do it because you want to live longer. You're afraid that you will lose your job, or you're afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity, or you're afraid that somebody will stab you, or shoot at you or bomb your house; so you refuse to take the stand.*

*Well you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90. And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. You died when you refused to stand up for right. You died when you refused to stand up for truth. You refused to stand up for justice"*

*-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*He was assassinated five months later on April 4, 1968*