

SGBC - Identifying and Avoiding Church Killers (rev. 1 – 03/2010)

This material is an expansion and adaptation of material given to us at a conference by Ron Schrock our State Representative in 2010. The goal here is to present it and develop it continually so as to be aware of what causes churches harm and can even kill them. Please read this prayerfully with a goal to preserve peace and unity in our church for the name and glory of Christ.

Sad statistics: 80% of the churches in America are in a state of decline, another 15% are said to be at "plateau status". Only 5% of churches in America are purported to be growing. Two figures on how many churches die each year in America: one says 3000 and the other 4000. 1400 pastors or clergy leave the ministry in America every month.

It is important to recognize the nature of these church killers and how they differ in size and scope. The fitting analogy is that of the difference between many paper cuts and sizable wounds. Most often church killers come in the form of many small wounds that fester and go unchecked or resolved. Keep that in mind as you may see something that in and of itself appears insignificant, but add it to a few other troubles and you have a recipe for disaster. Ron Schrock says, "Churches seldom die from one shot or stab wound, but a series of small wounds (paper cuts) that get infected and drain the life slowly and painfully out of a pastor and congregation." Further, there will surely be some redundancy in the list. Just let that serve as a tool to say we need lots of work in that area!

Here is our list of Church Killers. Learn them, know them and commit to not letting them kill Christ's Church here at SGBC!

1. Sin in the Camp (Jos 7) – Simply put abiding sin in the people of the church will kill a church. Repentance ought to characterize a church. Sin harbored will destroy the effectiveness of a church and hinder God's blessing it.

2. False Doctrine (Titus 1:9) – This may seem obvious, but a huge portion of the New Testament is dedicated to combating this.

*Some churches try to avoid things doctrinal, this is a death knell! The whole book of Jude should serve to remind us of doing this right and avoiding death.

3. Radical Rulers – People or groups who seek to impose their own rule or show an ownership mentality over the Church that Christ alone owns.

a. Radical Pastoral Rule (3 John; Gal 4:17) – Dictatorial Pastors who ignore the concerns of the Church and check and balances God has set up. Diotrephes in 3 John is a good example.

b. Radical Elder Rule (1 Pet 5:3-4; Ezek 34) – Specifically in those churches with Elder Rule governments. Simply when instead of yielding to God's order of the Church in a single called Pastor and a congregational government, an Elder board runs the business of the whole church.

*These men often have more power than the Pastor and are chosen to the office by qualification with no call of God that the Pastor has. In these governments a few Elders (so called) will run the church.

c. Radical Deacon Rule – Deacons are given (or take) an authority position in the church when they are supposed to be serving ministers and table waiters.

d. Radical Pew Rule – Individuals, families or groups gather to impose their wills on the rest of the congregation. There can be an unyielding and strong-willed spirit that does not heed counsel of other members and/or Pastors.

Rather than trying to own a church and seeing ones' own will done, it is correct to seek God's will. Radical Servant leadership is what Jesus, Paul and others modeled and taught.

4. The Hatfields and McCoy mentality - Refusing to reconcile to the brethren (Matt 5:23, 24).

*Amazing that people can go week after week harboring bitterness in light of clear commands of the Bible e.g. *Forgive, and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37)*. Also see Php 4:2-5, Eph 4:26-27.

5. Methods over the Message - Tradition over Truth.

*This is seen when our traditions are almost canonized and made equal with Scripture. This falls into areas such as music, service times, Sunday School styles, particular ministries, etc.

6. Friends Over Foreigners - Enjoying the regular attendees and ignoring visitors.

*Very common killer. A church spends its time looking in rather than reaching out. New people can even sometimes be treated as intruders. A church that does not welcome and involve new people will die.

7. Skimpy Meals (2 Tim 4:2) – Not giving full treatment to the Scripture in the teachings of the church.

*Making sermons entertaining and short in order to satisfy a particular felt need of a church.

a. Dumbing Down – To make tough teaching palatable, the Bible is brought down to a low level.

b. The Amount of Meals – Too small (low in nutrition, high in fluff) or too big (an exercise in scholarship rather than a meal prepared for equipping God's people).

c. Books or Blogs over The Book (2 Tim 3:16-17) – Huge problem where people put their favorite author – Calvin, MacArthur, Piper, Sproul, Keller, etc on par with Scripture... or at least way above their own Pastor.

d. Stale Bread – Poorly prepared, poorly delivered or dispassionate messages. We are to preach right doctrine with right delivery. (2 Tim 4:2; 2:15).

8. The Grounds Steal the Glory (Hag 1:8) – An unkempt building and grounds can be an indicator of a dying church.

a. One side of a coin (poor care of grounds) is poor stewardship of the resources God has given to bring Him honor.

b. The other side of the coin (great care from wrong heart) is a mentality of ownership as though the building is for the people, not the Lord – an attitude of pride develops.

c. One contributor to the grounds problem is the "leftover" mentality. This is seen when folks no longer see something as 'good enough' for their own house and give it as a leftover to the church (furniture, equipment, etc.). Give that one some thought in light of Scripture that says as the old song does, "Give of your best to the Master."

*Ron Schrock suggests an annual walk through with a newer family to keep this all in check.

9. A list of killers from Nehemiah 13 where he asks, “why is the house of God forsaken?”

a. *Unholy alliances.* 4-9 – There is always precious on churches to unify. The pressure comes from within and from without. But becoming allied with someone God would not approve of can kill.

b. *Unholy or Lack of giving.* 10-13 – This one is devastating to a church. God requires His people to support the work of the ministry. When they don’t, He is displeased and the church will no doubt crumble.

c. *Unholy worship.* 15-22 – This is similar to the above emphasis on us putting our methods above God’s prescription. However, here we mean worship from an unholy heart. God is to be worshiped in spirit and truth.

d. *Unholy marriages.* 23-31 – Though pretty specific, this killer is very subversive. If the church yokes herself with the unbelieving world, especially in the family, she will die (read 2 Cor 6).

*This is often the case when we try to let unsaved people have a ‘ministry’ in order to witness to them. We just need to take care to realize that the Church is Christ’s and its workers are to be His and they are to be pure in their lives.

e. *Unholy workers.* 36 to 1 (ratio of personal pronouns of Nehemiah [me, my, I] – not pride, but he is effectively alone in ministry), note Vs 14, 22, & 30b. – When the Pastor is doing all of the work. A few do the work of many. The danger of burnout is real. Nehemiah should have had help. When the Pastor is alone, the church will die.

10. Forgetting the real enemy (Eph 6:11c-12) "....the wiles of the Devil.

a. When we mistake our friend for our enemy, we are unprepared for battle.

b. This leaves us going into battle improperly dressed (Eph 6:10-20).

*We spend lots of time with church folk and it becomes easier to see them as enemies rather than allies. Instead of watching out for the roaming lion, we attack the weary brethren.

11. Lack of Loyalty (Heb 10:25) – Folks church hop and never settle into being part of a local church.

a. They can roam around draining churches of their energy and getting what they want without any accountability or expectations.

b. A church filled with people who feel no need to be accountable, no need to serve or support others or give to a particular ministry will eventually die.

12. Unsubmissive Members (Heb 13:7,17; 1 Tim 5:17) – The independent spirit of America creeps into a church and people regard a Pastor as a peer rather than the undershepherd of Christ.

*This manifests itself in many ways.

a. Folks make huge life decisions apart from Pastoral counsel.

b. His counsel is seen as suggestion and sometimes outright intrusion rather than spirit-led.

c. He is pressured into being a friend rather than a leader.

d. He is thought of as brash or rude when he speaks in a straight manner.

e. The members of a church need to recognize that God calls men to the ministry, they don't. A failure to recognize this call and order in the church is an affront to God and can kill a church.

13. Divisive people who act more like wolves than sheep – Folks who do not hold to the church's doctrine and are not content with submitting to it, but rather try to undo it from within the ranks (Acts 20:17-38)

a. There are outright wolves (Acts 20:29) – Wolves who have intent to harm the brethren. Yes, they exist and are hunting good churches to kill.

b. There are also predator sheep (Acts 20:30) – maybe the more eminent threat. Actual Christians who subvert authority and cause division. Note Paul says here "from among yourselves."

14. Maintenance Mode (2 Tim 2:2) – Coasting or being content with the present level of growth.

a. Coasting only works for a short time and goes only one direction!

b. The danger of the status quo. We think we are content, but we are really complacent.

c. Survival is chosen in favor of growth.

d. This maintaining can even cause stagnation in spiritual growth. There is no pressure of being a "living sacrifice" as Paul says in Rom 12:1, 2. You hear things like, "I am only a sinner saved by grace" and "This is just the way I am... it could be worse."

e. It also shows in a total inward focus and a lack of maturity as a group. Relationships can be founded on many things that are not gospel and holiness centered. We can be 'comfortable' with our present state of Christian Maturity.

f. Sometimes folks go from fruitful to futile when they retire. They say things like, "I've served my time." Does the Bible give any retirement age for a Christian in service to the King?

*Complacency is a church killer!

*Job 28:28, Pro 1:7, Exo 1:17 & 21, Ecc 12:13, I Peter 2:17, I Cor 7:1, Rom 3:18

15. Improper or Extreme response to the Church outside of our own.

1) In the name of 'big' being evil, we can sabotage our outreach in the name of some false sense of duty to being "small" as though there is no Great Commission. "We've got to stay small and not get big."

2) We can see growth as the most important thing and try and get 'big' at all costs and replace the Great Commission with our *great* methods. "We've got to get big and not stay small."

*Growth and/or the lack thereof is not the touchstone of faithfulness.

16. Programs Over Prayer and Preaching (1 Tim 2:1) – Forgetting that the One who started the Church is the One who grows it and blesses it.

a. New churches rely heavily on the Lord for His provision. However, as we see with Israel and many NT examples, people can become self-reliant very quickly.

b. This is a problem of trusting the flesh over the Spirit - Zech 4:6b: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."

c. Prayer and trust in Providence taking a back seat will undo a church!

17. Imbalance in Ages – A church can be too old or too young in membership.

*Remember the value in the older teaching the younger and the younger serving the older.

18. Divisiveness over Music – Simply put, a major church killer.

*To avoid death of a church, all folks should develop a solid Theology of Music in Worship before they let their own opinions dictate in the church. The Bible has lots to say about music and that will keep this from killing a church.

19. Hypercritical People or Professional Faultfinders or *Humility Helpers*.

*There are folks who find it their job to keep everyone humble. This is a church killer! It is better to let the Holy Spirit do His job and for us to speak to one another with grace and let the Scripture be in our language.

20. Two Services or Two Churches

*Often done to make a contemporary and a traditional service. This almost universally leads to two churches and not one.

21. Two or more Pastors who don't get along

*Regardless of the reasons whether personality, sinful behavior, disagreement or even no reason at all, divided leadership in a church is a killer! Don't let persuasive words make you choose sides between two Pastors! You will find yourself in a dead church before too long if you do.

a. Even Paul and Barnabas had to be separated (Acts 15:39), but they separated and continued to bear fruit rather than undermine each other.

b. There may also need to be a separation for sinful reasons as with John's strong words to Diotrephes in 3 John.

22. Unqualified Leaders – Men who are not actually called into the ministry and try to run Christ's Church.

a. The man of God is to be called and gifted for the ministry (1 Tim 3:1 – desires; 2 Tim 1:6 – gift).

b. Many churches today put talented men who are in fact not called of God into ministry.

23. Faulty Constitution – A Constitution or Statement of Faith that has potential to harm rather than help.

*Easiest test is it Biblical, but there are other things that may not be as easy to discern. The church should always examine its Constitution to see if it has any killing potential within.

24. A list of Six Problems and One Praise: Revelation 2-3

- a.** A *love* Problem in Ephesus – The problem was not being a loveless church, but having an inappropriate order of love.
- b.** A *fear* Problem in Smyrna (2:9-10) – Fear of the wrong things. We can fear man more than God.
- c.** A *tolerance* Problem in Pergamos (2:14-15) – We are in fact to be intolerant of some things!
- d.** A *compromising* Church in Thyatira (2:20-24) – Disregarding God’s prescription brings death.
- e.** *Dead* while the Doors are Still Open: Sardis (3:1-2) – Self explanatory.
- f.** A *Temperature* problem in Laodicea (3:15-17) – Classic example of above mentioned complacency.
- g.** The Open Door Church of Philadelphia. (3:7-13) – Even though this church is commended, it is still not there today!