

HOW TO PREVENT CHURCH SPLITS

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(Note: Jump to “[Biblical, relational and practical ways to prevent church splits](#)”)

Baptist churches in the Philippines, just like in other parts of the world, have suffered splits. Over the years, I have counseled several pastors whose churches have been split. For examples, a pastor from a city east of Metro Manila had his church taken away from him by his best friend, the associate pastor, who spread lies and rumors against him. A young pastor from a province south of Metro Manila asked me for advice for over a year as to the brewing problems in his church. The Sunday after he expelled the rebellious officers and members of his church, the members loyal to him and the expelled members nearly had a violent conflict. I was told that, besides their Bibles, both sides in the conflict carried wooden clubs (“*pamalo*” in the vernacular).

My childhood church was split in 1981 and that event has been a defining moment in my life.

Church splits take place for a variety of reasons: a clash of personalities, theological or doctrinal grounds, financial mismanagement, immorality, etc. Some church splits have taken place over very trivial things like a [piano bench that split the Holy Creek Baptist Church in 1999](#).

Church splits are “intra-corporate disputes” under the jurisdiction of the Regional Trial Court; exceptions

Please take note that with Baptist churches in the Philippines registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), church splits are considered as “intra-corporate disputes” under the [Securities Regulation Code](#). These disputes fall under the jurisdiction of the Regional Trial Court designated as a commercial court. You can read more about this and related issues in my posts:

- [The Marian Guinn case: Improper use of church discipline](#)
- [Supreme Court ruling on termination or expulsion of church members](#)
- [SEC registration of churches](#)
- [Registering a local Baptist church with the SEC either as corporation sole or religious society or aggregate](#)
- [Sample Constitutions and by-laws which local churches can use instead of the SEC-issued forms](#)

(If your church or Bible school wants to have a free lecture-seminar on these topics, please e-mail me at gtgalacio@yahoo.com.)

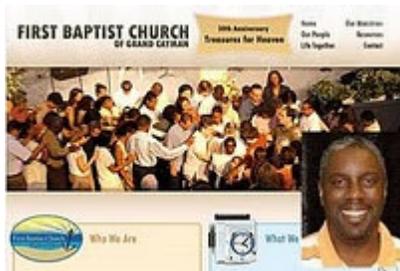
One interesting case decided by the Philippine Supreme Court is “*Fonacier vs. Court of Appeals 96 Phil 417*” which involved the 1955 dispute between the top two officials of the Aglipayan Church. Even though the dispute involved properties of the church and who the official leader was, the Supreme Court, citing the case of *Watson vs. Jones*, ruled that **the courts had jurisdiction since the contending parties did not have a higher body within the said church which could resolve the issue.**

The US Supreme Court in the cases I enumerated above has ruled that church conflicts involving doctrines, membership or property disputes anchored on doctrinal issues are beyond the jurisdiction of secular courts and should be resolved within the church itself. **This is not a problem with hierarchical churches since they have a layer of officers or bodies that can resolve or mediate the conflicts in lower levels of the hierarchy. But what about Baptist churches which are independent of each other? One Biblical distinctive of Baptists is the autonomy of the local church.**

When the conflict involves a mission work, then the mother church can of course assert its authority. But when the conflict involves for example, two opposing groups within the church, they do not have a higher body to which they can ask for help to mediate or settle the problem. The remedy then for the contending parties regrettably becomes filing a petition with the Regional Trial Court to resolve an intra-corporate dispute.

I will write later on a post about how, with the consent of all the contending parties, a group of pastors or deacons chosen randomly like in the system used by the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB) can act as a body that will mediate, conciliate or arbitrate the conflict. This can possibly prevent the violation of the Biblical admonition about church members taking each other to court.

Biblical, relational and practical ways of preventing church splits



Thabiti Anyabwile is Senior Pastor of [First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman](#) in the Grand Cayman Islands and a Council member with The Gospel Coalition. He has written an excellent five-part series on how to prevent church splits. Posted below are the links to his series ([Part I](#), [Part II](#), [Part III](#), [Part IV](#), [Part V](#)) and the highlights:

How to prevent a church split, Part I

Early warning signs of a church split:

Growing numbers of cliques and factions

Low concern for the church

Self-interests dominate group interests

Isolated and absent members

Lack of humility

Mixed allegiance to the pastor(s)/elders

Low emphasis on the Word of God

How to prevent a church split, Part II

“To prevent church splits, we must regain the centrality of the local church in our preaching and practice. We must lay heavy biblical emphasis on the centrality of the people of God throughout redemptive history and in contemporary Christian life. We must preach and emphasize the fact that the church is central to God’s affections, self-identification, and eternal plan. It must, therefore, be central to ours.”

The Church: The Center of God’s Affections

The Church: Central to Jesus’ Self-Identity

The Church: Central to God’s Plan of Redemption

How to prevent a church split, Part III

“Every church split, by definition, involves people who are alienated in their affections toward one another. The splits occur when this alienation is hardened and seemingly intractable. But the roots of the split extend back to that time when everyone seemed to be getting along (meaning there were no obvious conflicts) but really didn’t know one another. That period is the calm before the storm. Introduce an offense, teach something that crosses someone’s pet sin or tender spot, and what appeared to be placid water begins to foam and roil until a major storm approaches the shores of the church.

“As pastors I think it’s our duty to act while things are calm, to take a preventative step before these conditions for a split are aggravated. And, so far, I think one of the best antidotes to a split are wide, healthy, and spiritually encouraging relationships in the body.”

Hospitality

Discipleship

Modeling

Sentinels and Watchmen

[How to prevent a church split, Part IV](#)

A “daily dereliction” of the Word of God leads to the unraveling of the church. When, where and how does this “daily dereliction” occur?

Preaching

Counseling

Decision-making

Pastor’s Personal Life

[How to prevent a church split, Part V](#)

“If we are to prevent church splits one thing we must do is make sure that the natural affections and authority that accrue to the teaching office is dispersed among the leadership of the church. We must find obvious, subtle, and effective ways to attach the allegiance of the people to the church and the leadership as a whole. Four things come to mind.”

Teaching

Comments

Submission

Leading

Ptr. Thabiti concludes his series with these wise and challenging words: “Pastors must lead. There is a danger of being overly passive in the face of situations and decisions that require clear thinking and charting a course. In those cases we must lead.” Later on he says that “pastors must not be afraid to lead the church toward a split in order to prevent a split”. This sounds wholly contrary to what his whole series is all about. But you have to read his concluding article in its entirety to understand what he means.

To Ptr. Thabiti’s wise words, I can add my own caveat about church splits: “Do not ever be lulled into that complacent and overly-confident attitude that your church can never be split.”

Originally published at the link below, used by permissions of the author.
<http://baptist-rp.blogspot.com/2010/04/how-to-prevent-church-splits.html>