



Sticks, stones, Christian bones

When Christians fight, the reporters catch the action

Someone once said that everywhere the Apostle Paul went they had a riot or a revival. Now all we do is serve tea and cookies.

Not quite.

Riots are still much in vogue. But instead of non-Christians trying to kill Christians, it is now believers throwing stones at each other.

Every day, it seems, you can find a news article about a church split, scandle, or lawsuit. Of course we never read about these horrible blood-lettings in the Christian press. We're busy defending the Kingdom. Rather, the articles appear in the secular press. And for every fight that makes the newspapers, there are hundreds of others which remain successfully hidden. These are the private wars accomplished by smiling hoodlums under the guise of love and honor.

More and more, however, God seems to be allowing those things formerly done behind the closed doors of church business meetings to now become public.

It used to be a pastor could leave his wife and abscond with some poor-young-thing half his age, a deacon could slug it out with a fellow deacon in the choir room over who gets to say the prayer at the Lord's Supper, or the youth director could be fired because his wife wore slacks to the church picnic — and no one outside the chosen few would ever know.

Not so anymore.

Now, thanks to the miracle of the media, let a church treasurer be accused of stealing, let the head of a parachurch ministry use donations to buy a speedboat, and the entire world reads about it in the papers the next morning.

Take the case of the Good Neighbor Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey — a tiny group of people who forgot to be good neighbors.

Last July, in a business meeting, 37 of the church's 62 members met and voted to oust the pastor, Malachi D. Rountree, who along with his family had founded the church 10 years before.

The pastor, in turn, sued 14 of the church leaders — including his father, two brothers, his sister, his aunt and uncle and two

cousins. He claimed the vote was illegal. Besides, when he and his family founded the church, he was made "pastor-for-life" according to the church by-laws.

The whole mess wound up in Superior Court in Newark. I read about it in an English-language newspaper in Singapore.

The point is not whether church members will ever stop fighting. I predict churches will continue to battle each other, denominations will continue to split, and Christians will continue to bloody each

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other with stones as long as churches remain (a) social clubs rather than the "called out ones," (b) family fiefdoms rather than the Body of Christ, (c) exclusive racial and cultural cliques rather than the *koinonia*, (d) a mixture of sprinkled (or dunked) heathens playing power games rather than the blood-washed saints who have relinquished all rights under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Rather, the issue is how much longer will God allow our stupid, silly fightings to go undetected by others in the Kingdom and hidden from the world at large.

Several years ago when a deacon in the huge First Baptist Church of Atlanta tried to wrest the microphone from the pastor and in a rage slugged him in the jaw in front of the entire congregation, very few Baptists, and almost no one in the world, learned of the altercation. It was quickly hushed up on all counts.

After all, Christians reasoned, why air our dirty linen in front of the public? If there is trouble in Camelot, who'll want to join our club?

Today, however, such an incident would make the headlines—probably with on-the-spot TV interviews with the red-faced deacon, the distraught pastor's wife, a local psychologist, and a theologian from Princeton Seminary.

That may be healthy. In fact, it may be one of the things that will cause us to start acting like we preach.

Down here in Florida we have what is called the "sunshine law." All government business must be conducted in the sunshine—in the open. No "behind-closed-doors" meetings are allowed.

Perhaps when Jesus said "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed," He was referring to church business meetings. When the lights go on in church closets, it means we will have to deal with the skeletons.

Last year one of the elders in a Florida church was indicted for selling unregistered securities and wasting money invested by some of the church members in his personal ministry.

The morning after the indictment the newspapers carried front page headlines: CHURCH ELDER BILKS CHRISTIANS.

While some of the people were going about saying "tch-tch," the pastor was calling the newspaper and inviting them to send a reporter to the church the next Sunday morning.

"It's time the news media finds out how problems should be handled in the family of God," he said.

The reporter didn't show up. But he did come by the church office on Monday and listen to the tape of the service which contained the pastor's full explanation to the congregation, the tearful apology of the accused elder, and the spoken statements of forgiveness on the part of some who lost money.

"I've been going after the wrong story," the reporter said after hearing the tape. "I thought Christians were like everyone else. But it's really news when you find people who forgive rather than fight."

We'll always have church problems. But when they are handled the way Jesus taught, the church will once again become a witness—not a scandal. ◀