

Book review: *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict*, Kenneth C Haugk, Augsburg, 189 pages

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What level of interpersonal conflict should we expect in our churches? Where is it likely to come from? What are the best ways to deal with different sorts of conflict?

These are important and basic questions, which many books deal with helpfully. This article relates to an often-neglected area of conflict.

My experience is that we hear a great deal about Christians facing persecution and ridicule from the non-Christian world, especially when we seek to evangelise. And we should also expect that from time to time we will come up against false teaching in the church. What has surprised me is the extent to which lesser issues can form greater barriers to the work of the gospel.

Internal church conflicts weaken the community of faith and dampen any resolve to evangelize the wider community. Sadly, many of these conflicts are based on personality differences, power struggles and small-minded party politics. This may not be true for every congregation, but it is all too common.

As an experienced minister of many years, I have both given and heard my fair share of sermons. They have majored on the positive aspects of the gospel and its generous implications for relationships. But very few of them have had much to say about church discipline. Of course, Matthew 18 has had a good run. We obviously need to discipline the person involved in blatant sin. But my concern is with the antagonists who are disruptive and divisive, but not involved in the obvious sins that are clearly condemned in Scripture. There are some people in some churches who seem to deliberately slow things down, cause confusion and spread a feeling of discontent. Such antagonism can be a drain on the emotional energy of the church leadership, a discouragement to the minister and it can cause other people to leave the church that is 'falling apart'. Anyone who has been the leader of the ministry team in such a church will understand the anxiety that leads to sleepless nights, the sense of responsibility for the mess and the drive to leave the ministry, in the hope that the next leader will be able to do better.

Recently, I discovered a book that not only described my situation but also gave me some very helpful advice. The knowledge that other leaders in other places experience the same sort of conflicts can be a help, especially if one is already prone to take opposition personally ("It's all my fault!"). The book is called *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* by Kenneth C. Haugk (Augsburg, 189pp.).

Many of us have been trained to think theologically. This book is about thinking strategically. Haugk certainly accepts that we need to keep praying for our opponents, forgiving them and loving them. But until they change, while they continue to exhibit divisive and destructive behaviour, they need to be managed, and their potential for damage controlled. Haugk is writing about a very small percentage of people, who could be described as antagonists at three levels:

hard-core, major and moderate. His definition is penetrating: “Antagonists are individuals who on a basis of non-substantive evidence go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against church leadership” (pp. 26-27).

This definition is explained and illustrated with specific examples, which show how unreasonable some people can be. Consider, for instance, the “insatiable” antagonist. It seems loving to try to compromise, to appease, to find a way to keep everybody happy. But the proverb, “Give him an inch and he’ll take a mile” fits this antagonist to a tee. The theme of the book is this: don’t let antagonists destroy God’s church where you are. Antagonists need to be recognised and put in their place.

Naturally, there is a chapter on the biblical perspective. Christian leaders will know the verses about avoiding godless chatter (2 Tim 2:16-17), about those who cause divisions and difficulties (Ro 16:17) and about those who are factious (Titus 3:10-11). The more obvious cases are straightforward. Harder to handle are the irritating cases. For many of us the problem is how to manage the people who we can never seem to pin down for outright heresy or blatant sin. These are the niggardly antagonists. Jesus said that you will know the false teachers by their fruits. Haugk says that you will know the antagonists by their flags. By and large, however, antagonists identify themselves clearly and do so early. Just pay attention to the signals. Haugk lists quite a few early warning ‘flags’. Here are some examples.

[The Parallel Track Record Flag](#)

Individuals who behave antagonistically in other arenas of life are prime candidates to become active antagonists in the church. These persons may not now behave antagonistically in the church, but do behave this way in one or more other organisations, such as the local school system, the workplace or in a social club.

[The Nameless Others Flag](#)

When someone offers you a word of criticism and adds, “There are X number of other people who feel the same way,” chances are excellent that you are talking with an antagonist. The litmus test to determine whether someone is or is not an antagonist in this situation is to respond casually, “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Who are these other people?” If the person lists a few names, you are probably not faced with an antagonist. An antagonist is more likely to answer: “They came to me in the strictest of confidence”.

[The Gushing Praise Flag](#)

Those who lavish effusive, gushing praise on you now will often be equally generous with their criticism later.

[The ‘I Gotcha’ Flag](#)

Beware of those who try to catch you in error – for example, those who ask you questions when you know they already know the answers.

[The Different Drummer Flag](#)

A ‘different drummer’ makes changes independently and often by surprise, saying things like,

“I’ve never played by the rules; I’ve never been a good soldier.” Such a person feels compelled to march to the beat played on his or her own drum. An antagonist, however, follows only the rule of expediency: “Rules are good for others, not for me.” This attitude can play havoc with orderly congregational life.

The Pest Flag

A ‘pest’ may be an insatiable questioner, a persistent suggester, or an incessant caller. People who first appear to be simply pests may later prove to be thoroughgoing antagonists.

Individuals who wave these red flags merit close scrutiny. After some consideration, you may relax, or you may decide to pay close attention. Knowing these indicators – and knowing them well – is worth your time and effort.

Having cautiously identified some antagonists, what is the best way forward? Haugk gives some good advice. Without telling you everything, here are some of the things, which I found helpful:

Follow established policies

A good way to prevent antagonism is for everyone to follow the established policies and procedures of the congregation. Leaders must never practice or tolerate corner-cutting. Procedures are safeguards against antagonists. Although at times they seem only to tie things up and cause undue headaches, in the end they are valuable aids to ensuring that antagonists will not gain an upper hand in the congregation. If your congregation does not have clear procedural guidelines, consider formulating some.

Clear channels for communication

It is always important to establish and use clear channels of communication, but it is essential with regard to antagonism. Two-way, open communication needs to exist between leaders and members. To facilitate this, leaders must clearly tell the congregation what the appropriate channels of communication are, and reiterate it frequently. When clearly spelled out means of response are available, an antagonist who blatantly disregards them is more easily detected and exposed.

A broad base of responsibility

A strong, broad base of authority can do much to thwart antagonistic attacks. The authority I speak of here is not the authority over doctrine or souls, but authority in matters of administration and program. When a single individual holds power in a congregation, a one-on-one-struggle (usually antagonist versus pastor) often results. When an antagonist realizes that power is carefully distributed among a group of people, then he or she will think twice before instigating trouble.

Public pronouncements

By using public channels of communication to address minor issues that are raised, we can actually give more attention to those issues and people than is warranted (this is certainly true in my experience). It only reinforces the negative behaviour. Only a minority of the congregation are aware of the problems before they come to public attention, and this can create doubt and uncertainty in the minds of some people who would otherwise be quite happy and keen in our

church community. Using one's role as the pastor to fight publicly with antagonists can be seen as an unfair use of position and therefore can gain sympathy for the opponents. When leaders are concerned to give a strong and loving biblical lead, they do their best when they continue to teach and apply God's word to the hearts and minds of their people.

In the end, leaders of congregations are answerable to God and not to their detractors. Leaders need to be people of the Word, of grace, led by the Spirit. When leaders lead they will come up against opposition of various kinds. Haugk's book helps one to be aware of one sort of conflict that may arise and it offers helpful suggestions to minimise the damage. But at the end of the day the road may still be bumpy. For the gospel-centred pastor, it is the only road to go down.

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