

Forward

Welcome to the Ministry is not about any one particular person or congregation, it is about the experience of many different pastors and congregations in general. When St. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,” that applies just as much to what is going on inside the church as outside the church. Maybe even more so. The powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil are working overtime within the church to be divisive in any way they can. Outwardly, it may look like people are suggesting valid programs, good ideas and suitable “ministries,” but the motivation and egocentricity behind it is all wrong. What could have been useful, turns out to be destructive, not because it was wrong in the first place, but because of the hard, sin encrusted hearts that insist that everything be done their way. You can see them in meetings, with scowls on their faces, the veins popping out of their forehead, their fists being pounded on the table, uttering the words, “I do not give a darn what God’s Word says, we are doing things MY way.” Their impetus is not Christocentric, to the glory of Christ and the furtherance of His kingdom, it is their own glory and the furtherance of what they unyieldingly demand is their “ministry.” They have little or no concern about what the Bible says about true ministry being Word and Sacrament, as long as the congregation follows their rules. They feel hurt and insulted if their personal program, opinion or idea is not held up as the one important, all prevailing paradigm. They demand, command, control and try to be in charge of every aspect of their particular archetype and may God have mercy on anyone who disagrees with them.

Why did I write this story? Was it out of hatred, bitterness or a desire to get even? Hardly! It was quite simply to warn others. I have included 14 guidelines at the end of the story, that hopefully will guide you into God pleasing decisions and a way to help handle those antagonists and dragons that absolutely insist that things be done their way. However, I am also realistic enough to know that one book is not going to help in every case and so, if nothing else, I pray that it might help a few people or pastors who have experienced these adversaries and intimidators and strengthen them in their resolve to remain faithful to Christ.

WELCOME TO THE MINISTRY

Pastor Bob Griffin walked out of his office, his head spinning. Without any warning he had just been told to resign. There was no due process, no discussion, not even a good reason given. He was simply told by the Regional Head, “This is a hurting congregation and I want you to resign.” For twenty years Pastor Griffin had served faithfully. He had poured his life and soul into his work, only to find that he was expendable. Now what was he going to do? What could any 40 something year old ex-pastor do? The only job he had ever known was being a pastor. He had never written a resume, been through an interview or even thought much about working outside the church. He had a wife and family to support. Whoever orchestrated his resignation sure did not seem to care about any of that. How did this happen? Why did it come to such drastic measures? Pastor Griffin went for a long walk through the woods to try and sort things out. This is what he remembered...

When he first arrived at Marshal Community Church, George and Pearl Harbinger slapped a magazine down on his desk and said, “This is what our church is all about. We hope you enjoy reading it and implementing all of their great ideas.” George and Pearl were highly influential in the church. In fact, they basically ran the church. What they said was law. Even though the Bible says, “If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers,” most of the leadership in the congregation pretty much worshipped the ground they walked on. They also thought very highly of themselves. Pearl Harbinger once said about her husband, “He is the greatest and most godly man I have ever known.”

What was the magazine they were sharing with Pastor Griffin and why was it so significant? It was, *Spotlight on People*, a church magazine dedicated to highlighting all the noble things that people do. It was filled with lots of advice on how to be moral, upstanding, honest and decent people in the world. There was just one problem. It had very little to do with God. It had little to do with how God changes hearts, forgives sins or gives us guidelines to live by in the Bible. It had long extra-Biblical lists of rules and regulations that people should follow in order to be successful, happy, dedicated or victorious in their lives.

It had articles like: “What is life like after you get married?” It contained suggestions from counselors like, “Love is the answer to all your problems,” without explaining what love is. It said things like: Read a book with your spouse. Go for walks with your spouse. Raise a pet with your spouse. Sit and drink tea with your spouse. Put your spouse above everything else in life. And so on. Except for notable exceptions, for the most part it was perfectly good advice. There was just one problem – the advice was rarely from the Bible and did not pertain to everyone. George and Pearl Harbinger were asking Pastor Griffin to take the spotlight off from God and His Word and put it on supposed practical advice given by counselors and other so called experts. The spotlight was going from God and His Word to people. Which was exactly what George and Pearl were all about. They loved being favorites. They loved attention. They wanted people to put the spotlight on them.

When they slapped the magazine down on Pastor Griffin’s desk, it should have been a strong warning of what was ahead. He should have seen what was coming next. It should have been obvious that George and Pearl were going to be his worst nightmare, but he was oblivious to it all, even though Jack Keening had gently tried to warn him.

Jack Keening was a quiet, unassuming middle aged man, who truly cared about God’s Word and as an Elder in the congregation was very active in a lot of what went on. One day he took Pastor Griffin out to lunch and said, “Pastor Griffin, we are very glad that you are here, however, I must apologize that we were not up front with you when we asked you to be our pastor. This is very difficult to say, but there is a huge problem in our congregation and I am afraid you will be caught in the middle of it. This is not gossip, because it is pure fact, so I am warning you now – watch out for George and Pearl Harbinger. They are considered and treated as favorites in the church, even though they have some major problems with what the church believes. I will be very honest with you and say Pearl Harbinger is openly committing adultery with Daniel Presbutan and George totally supports her in it. Not only that, but people have said she has some kind of medical disorder that makes her act like she is possessed by a demon. We have tried numerous times to deal with it, but they are very powerful people and I am sure you well know that money talks. They are major givers and nobody wants to lose that, so please tread lightly.”

Pastor Griffin did not know how to respond, but he did take Jack's advice and began to watch out for the Harbinger's.

Little did he know that they were "watching out" for him too. In fact, the next day they held a secret meeting in their home. They called together all of their closest friends and discussed their new Pastor. George started out by saying, "My friends, we must keep a close eye on this new fellow. I have a bad feeling about him. I know we do not know a lot about him, but from the start he seems like a hard headed, belligerent, stubborn guy and now it is up to us to bend his will to ours. This is our ministry. We do not need some stranger coming into our midst and stirring things up. Let us all make sure we work together from the beginning to mold him into our likeness." Pearl continued by saying, "George is absolutely right, as always. We have owned this church from the get-go and I am not about to let some arrogant swine, who knows nothing about what the true ministry is all about, just waltz in and ruin everything. If he gives us even the slightest bit of trouble, we will make sure he is run out of town. Not just out of the church, but completely out of town. I will not subject my children to anything less than the perfection we deserve. We have spent countless hours building this church, this empire, this ministry to reflect our own personal model of ministry. Nothing less than complete subservience to our will is going to be tolerated. Unlike our Pastor, we have a solid and life long history and tradition in this church body and believe you me, nothing or no one is going to change the way we do ministry around here. We will definitely see to that. Does everyone agree?" Heads cheerfully wagged up and down and even a few started to clap. "Fine," Pearl said, "then let us join in the fellowship of cookies and coffee and get to work shaping this new Pastor to our way of thinking."

The following Sunday Pastor Griffin stood in the pulpit and joyfully proclaimed the Word of God. He gave all glory to God and extensively declared what God had to say, straight from the Bible. He did not mix in any pop psychology, secular humanism, trite advice from *Spotlight on People* magazine or any other worldly guidance. He was thrilled to stand in front of a group of people who wanted and needed to hear about God's love and mercy. He was overjoyed to rise into the pulpit and bring the comfort and strength that can only come from God's Word. When he finished his sermon he was on an adrenaline high from the elation and privilege of being able

to share the power and majesty of God – something that went far beyond anything this world has to offer.

After the worship service George and Pearl shook Pastor Griffin's hand as they were leaving, but they did not say anything and had a strange look on their face. That morning Pastor Griffin had a Bible study on the supremacy of God's Word and George and Pearl sat in the back of the room. While he was expounding on the power of God's Word and why it was so important, George kept raising his hand. "Yes George?" he asked. "Pastor Griffin, wouldn't you agree, that Pastor Reform from down the street has it correct, when he says the most important thing is our relationship with each other?" "That is a good question George. Thank you. I would say our relationship with each other is very important, however, I believe our relationship with God is more important, because it defines our relationship with each other." The Bible study continued. George kept raising his hand. "Yes George." "Pastor Griffin, don't you think our church has been cold and uncaring for much too long and we need to share warmth and love with each other?" "I believe every church should be warm and caring, as they share the warmth and love of Christ with each other, which can be found in the Gospel," he answered. Pearl then interrupted and said, "Pastor Griffin, I think our church is stifling true religion. We need to go from the milk of the Gospel to the meat of the law. There are so many other things we need to know than just Christ and forgiveness. Our relationship with one another is far more important and we need to go beyond the elemental things of Christ and consider how we can spur one another on to good works. I love my husband with all my heart and he is the greatest man on earth. I want to honor him with all I do in my life and I need more suggestions from you on exactly how I can give honor to this fabulous man I am sitting next to." "Thank you Pearl. Perhaps I can dedicate the next Bible study to the relationship between husband and wife according to the Bible," he replied. "Make sure it is not just Bible studies. I want to hear it all the time – from the pulpit, from your office, always," she said. Pastor Griffin went on with the Bible study and managed to finish it with only a few more similar comments from George and Pearl.

After the Bible study, several people came up to Pastor Griffin and whispered in his ear things like, "You better watch out for George and Pearl." "Do not get George or Pearl on your bad

side.” “George and Pearl are definitely not of the same mind as our church’s doctrine and they make it clearly known, but whatever you do, do not cross them.”

Later that week Pastor Griffin was sitting in his office when Matthew Sanction walked in. Matthew was the head of education and an older, highly knowledgeable man. His commanding demeanor and what he thought about himself was immediately evident from how he spoke. “Pastor Griffin, we have a special program going on in this church, that I believe demands your attention. It is called, *Adoration and Reason*. Granted it has nothing to do with God’s Word. In fact, it is entirely secular, but it is the best material I have ever seen on how to deal with unruly children in a church. We need to adore those little ones and sit down and reason with them all we can. They need our attention. I am absolutely proud to share my worldly wisdom with them and I think you should be too. Here is a set of video tapes. I want you to watch them, learn them well and grow to love them like I do. They are truly the best in the world today.” Pastor Griffin replied, “Ah, OK. Thanks for the information. I will definitely look into it.” “Make no mistake about it Reverend,” Matthew continued. “You are going to be seeing a lot of me and I expect you to take my advice. I have seen it all and done it all and if you ever have any doubts about what to do, be sure and ask me and I will gladly tell you what to do. In fact, next Saturday we are having a youth group meeting at 6:00 PM. It is all about religious music and its positive influence on our lives today. I expect you to be there. Here is a little gift for you. It is a music CD by Frank Peterson. He is one of the greatest religious singers in the world today. I have a huge library of religious CDs that I share with all the children. They love me you know. You will soon come to find out just how influential I am. I do hope and pray that you are listening to religious radio every day. I am pushing it heavily in this church, because I believe we need to immerse ourselves in the Word of God, while remaining relevant to our every day life. WXZQ is the absolute greatest religious radio station and I make sure the children love it. I make sure the Youth Group room has all kinds of rock posters on the wall and even invite them to rock concerts and pay their way. After all, I may be old, but I still want to relate to the children on their level. If we do not promote WXZQ the children will just listen to some other radio station and we do not want that now do we? Do you know George and Pearl Harbinger? We are best friends. You will find that we agree on everything. We are absolutely on the same page, think alike, can just about read each others’ thoughts, if you know what I mean. Well, say Pastor Bob,

I have to hit the road now. You have a great day and we will see you on Saturday.” Matthew walked out the door with a big grin on his face and Pastor Griffin just sat there, stunned.

After Matthew left, Pastor Griffin took out a special CD and played one of his favorite songs called, “Traveling Light,” by Joel Hanson and Sara Groves. It was a beautiful and comforting song about the Twenty Third Psalm. He had absolutely nothing against Contemporary Christian Music in general, but he sure did not see the point of any congregation heavily promoting it in an uncensored manner, especially with children. It did not make any sense. He was not about to put posters on his wall, build a huge CCM library, invite impressionable children to CCM concerts and commonly promote any particular genre of music, musical artist or radio station. It was up to him to promote the Gospel.

During the afternoon Pastor Griffin visited several shut-ins and that evening he made a member visit at the home of Evan Stuttgart. Evan had invited him over for dinner and it looked wonderful. The table was impeccably set with beautiful rose trimmed china plates, lead crystal water glasses, real silver silverware and cloth napkins. The main entrée was stuffed Cornish game hen, with mushroom soup bean casserole topped with crunchy fried onions and a beautiful garden salad with thousand island dressing on the side. Dessert was chocolate mousse with Grand Marnier cognac. Evan’s character equally matched the decor of the home and table. His talk was smooth and calculated, articulate and cultured. As they were about to be seated, Evan said, “I am so glad you could come to dinner tonight Rev. Griffin. It is indeed our pleasure and privilege to have you here. We are undeniably blessed to have a gifted cleric, such as yourself, as our servant at Marshal Community Church. I am convinced that you will be an asset to our ministry and add immeasurably to the wealth of human knowledge that we have congregated. Matthew Sanction and George and Pearl Harbinger are by far the most gifted members of our beloved congregation. You will do well to follow our advice. In fact, if you do not mind my saying, I would humbly go so far as to say, if you follow our rules you will do quite well here. However, if you break our rules, I am afraid your ministry will be a short one. Not that any of us want that, of course, and I am very certain that you will not only be cooperative but exemplary in your leadership. Also, just so I am very clear on this – this is not to be considered an official pastoral visit. An official Pastoral visit is not truly accomplished until it adheres to my

definition. Now, how about we enjoy this fine meal set before us and dispense with the religious talk until some other time. Reverend, would you please do us the honor of speaking a word of grace?”

Pastor Griffin’s mind was whirling with all he was experiencing. There were so many different people telling him what to do. So many varying people with their own opinion of what “ministry” was all about. How could he possibly live up to everyone’s expectations? How could he even fulfill one person’s expectations, for instance Evan, who never did bother to tell him what his definition of a pastoral visit was. He was beginning to feel between a rock and a hard place.

Margaret Anderson was a pretty lady and quite intelligent. Her short blond hair and dark eyes were complimented by her tailored wardrobe. She was in charge of the kitchen and sanctuary areas of the church. Literally in charge. One day she called up Pastor Griffin and said, “Rev. Griffin I must speak with you immediately. Please meet me in your office at 1:00 PM.” When she arrived Margaret was wearing a beautiful white sweater, with two delightfully embroidered multi-colored hummingbirds neatly patterned on the front, with a creme colored, pleated skirt that came perfectly to her knees. Her black high heeled shoes glistened and her hair was flawlessly in place, neatly pulled behind her ears, making her look quite attractive. Immediately after sitting down, she pulled out a sheet of paper and began to read. “Pastor Griffin, this is my list of expectations. Please do not deviate from them. Do not step foot into my kitchen. It is my domain. As for the sanctuary, do not move the altar even one inch from where it is at. We will put the candles on the inside of the altar, not the outside. Please do not touch them. The ribbons in the hymnals must always go on the outside of the hymnal, not on the inside. You will not leave any extraneous papers on the altar. It looks much too messy. We strictly follow the colors of the church year calendar and you are required to wear the appropriate color stole with your gown at any given worship service. If you do not wear a gown and the appropriate color stole you will be reprimanded. We clean and sweep the altar and sanctuary every Thursday at 10:00 AM sharp. I will thank you to not interrupt us. I know it is not my place to say this, however, the organist expects you to have the music to them at least two, if not four months in advance. No excuses. Matthew Sanction, George and Pearl Harbinger and Evan Stuttgart are by far the

most exceptional, most loving, most talented individuals in this entire congregation. Learn to get along with them or your life will become a living nightmare, if you know what I mean. Do you have any questions? Oh, will you look at the time. I have got to run. Good-bye Reverend.” Margaret folded the piece of paper, placed it in her purse and rushed out the door. Pastor Griffin sat at his desk not knowing what to think, but had a dark foreboding about the future.

His foreboding was not just because of one person. Week after week he continued to see a very clearly emerging pattern. Several members of the church had their own exceedingly strong opinion about what should and should not be considered “ministry.” He could easily see the hand writing on the wall and so he did a little research. He looked into the history of the congregation and found out that this type of behavior and attitude had been prevalent, almost from the beginning. Several called workers had either left in disgust or been driven out. It was the same with many of the past members who had not conformed. The same pattern kept rising over and over again. Obey the rules, play the game or be driven out or destroyed. It was not only sad, but absolutely sinister and evil. It unquestionably did not appear to be the person and work of Christ behind this prevailing mind-set and conduct.

Patty Isinger was a rather quiet individual. She was not particularly pretty, but not exactly ugly either. She was in charge of landscaping and took a great deal of pride in her horticultural skills. One afternoon, as Pastor Griffin pulled into the parking lot, Patty walked over to him and said, “Good afternoon Pastor Griffin. How are you today?” “I am doing great, thank you,” he replied. “Good. I am glad to hear that. Do you have a minute to talk?” she asked. “Sure. Not a problem.” “I was just trimming those shrubs over there,” pointing to the shrubs next to the curb, “and I was thinking it might be nice if we put some roses right next to them. I was talking to Margaret Anderson about it and she thinks it is a fabulous idea. What do you think?” she asked. “I think roses are pretty. I would simply suggest you bring it up with the Trustees first, to make sure there is not a problem.” “OK, thanks for your input. Have a great afternoon!,” she replied smiling and went back to trimming the shrubs.

Pastor Griffin spent the rest of the afternoon working on the upcoming Sunday sermon and Bible study, went home for a peaceful dinner and returned for a Council meeting. Every Council

member was present, including Matthew Sanction, George Harbinger and Evan Stuttgart. Pastor Griffin started with a Bible study and prayer and the Chief Councilor started the business part of the meeting. “Gentlemen, we are here tonight to discuss a very important and burning issue within our church. I was informed earlier this afternoon, by none other than Patty Isinger, that Pastor Griffin wants to put roses next to our beautiful shrubs. He did not bother to ask the Trustees or bring it before this Council. He simply charged ahead, making changes he had no business making. This is a very serious issue and must be dealt with accordingly. Pastor Griffin, what do you have to say for yourself?” Pastor Griffin was absolutely taken aback. He had no idea what to say. So, he lowered his eyes and very humbly and politely said, “Gentlemen, I sincerely apologize for any omission on my part. Being new to this congregation, I see I have a lot to learn. I completely apologize for any mistakes I might have made and ask for your forgiveness.” The Chief Councilor replied, “Well Pastor Griffin, we can certainly accept your apology this time, but in the future, please make sure that you clear everything with this auspicious group before jumping head long into a major renovation project that might cost us hundreds, if not thousands of dollars. We cannot afford to throw good money after bad and we need a Reverend we can trust implicitly.” Matthew Sanction, George Harbinger and Evan Stuttgart all nodded their consent and the meeting continued. That night Pastor Griffin went to bed with a sour stomach.

In fact, sour stomach became a daily occurrence and began to build into anxiety and depression as things digressed rapidly. At one point in his research, he found two books deeply hidden in a stack of books in the church library, written by a previous member. They were scathing. They told story after story about how the church leadership had been unloving, domineering, controlling, egotistical and self-centered and how no one wanted to face the truth about what was beyond a doubt happening. Again and again the gory and menacing details of years upon years of an egocentric, instead of a Christocentric leadership kept rearing its ugly head.

A few weeks later, George and Pearl Harbinger called him and made an appointment to speak with him. He was a little apprehensive, because they were still making very derogatory remarks during his Bible studies, giving him glaring looks as they shook his hand while leaving the worship services, plus he was still hearing from numerous people how they were considered

favorites in the congregation. People kept saying, “Whatever you do, do not cross the Harbingers.” George and Pearl walked into the office, with very serious looks on their faces. George was wearing a thousand dollar business suit, with shiny brown loafers and Pearl was wearing a handmade sequined shirt, with casual dress pants and slip on flats. Both looked like they were there on exacting business. Pearl started out, “Rev. Griffin, we have come here, because we need to talk to you seriously about your sermons.” George continued, “Yes, Reverend, it has only been a short time, but we have already noticed that something is gravely lacking in your sermons. You have way too much Gospel and not near enough Law.” Pearl hurriedly rushed on, “What we are trying to tell you, is that we are already quite indoctrinated with the Gospel. Everyone in this congregation already knows the Gospel, so we do not need to have it repeated over and over again. We need the meat. We need some depth to your sermons. We need more sanctification. We need to hear about how we can have better relationships with one another.” George then smiled at his wife, spoke up and said, “Do you remember the *Spotlight on People* magazine that we shared with you when you first arrived? That is what we are looking for in your sermons. For instance, my wife and I, we love each other dearly. We have been married for twenty years and love each other more every day. My fantastic wife is the greatest spouse I could possibly ask for. However, we still need lots of advice on how to handle our every day interactions. What should we make for breakfast, lunch or supper to make our spouse happy? What TV shows should we watch to build our relationship? What books should we read to enhance our marital bond? Get practical Reverend. Quit stifling us with irrelevant Bible passages that have been outdated for two thousand years and get some up-to-date advice from current psychologists and experts on human relationships.” Pearl pushed her chair closer to her husband, gave him a big hug and quick kiss on the cheek and continued, “I could not have said it better myself. This awesome man is so gifted. He takes the words right from my mouth. Do you see what we are saying Reverend? I sure hope so. Your sermons are so dull. You quote way too many Bible passages and keep talking on and on about a bunch of dead people from the Old Testament and New Testament. We need fresh material that is relevant to us today. We find it very difficult to take you seriously when you live in the past. Liven it up. Freshen it up. Put some life into that sermon, by making it totally applicable to our lives. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. We are really looking forward to hearing your sermon this Sunday. God bless you Pastor Griffin.” George and Pearl got up, held hands and happily stepped

out of the office, leaving Pastor Griffin with his head down on the desk, tears in his eyes and profound sadness in his heart.

The sadness kept growing and growing. Pastor Griffin was beginning to struggle more each day, wondering if he was headed towards a nervous break down. With the daily harassment and antagonism getting worse, the stress, tension, angst and well founded trepidation began to take its toll on his health. He went to visit his doctor for advice, but what kind of advice could possibly help in such an impossible situation?

That Sunday, he tried very hard to add a special section of application. He agonized over the sermon for days, trying to find material that might be relevant, up to date, significant and life changing. For weeks after that, he searched magazines and the internet and talked with people about what was germane to their lives, wanting to make specific application in his sermons. He started to run out of time for visitations, began having stress headaches and ended up spending twice as much time on his sermons as usual, all to please George and Pearl. For months he poured every ounce of energy he could into his sermons and for months, every week they would shake his hand after the service and say things like, "I think you might be getting a little better Reverend, but you still have a long ways to go. Keep at it. Remember less Gospel, not more and definitely never end your sermon with the Gospel. When you do that people think they can ignore the rest of the sermon and all your great applications get tossed out the window."

One Sunday, Pastor Griffin preached a sermon about a radio address he had heard. Without malice or forethought he said, "Dear friends, I have been hearing on the radio, how some people in the world think we need less Gospel, not more. Some people in the world think we need more Law, not less. I think we need a good balance of both, paying close to attention to the love of God and how it specifically applies to our everyday lives. The Gospel is by far the most important Good News that God has given to us and that needs to be emphasized, both from this pulpit and in our relationships with one another." It took exactly one day for George Harbinger to give Pastor Griffin a call and set up an appointment.

George and Pearl entered the pastor's office with Jack Keening, a very astute and capable man, who knew his Bible well. George immediately sat down, crossed his legs and arms and began to tensely and vigorously say, "I have brought along Jack, so he can back up what I have to say. So listen up Bob and tell us if you please, why you preached against us in your sermon? Why did you betray us? Where is the love of God in your heart? I am offended that you would even think you have the love of God in your heart, with the attitude that you portrayed in your sermon this past Sunday. What kind of gibberish and balderdash is it, to say that the Gospel is the most important thing in our lives?" Pearl immediately piped up, "I can clearly see that you are a liar and there is no truth in you if you believe that. Everyone knows that we start with the Gospel, but good grief man, we have got to go beyond the elementary teachings of Christ and live holy and God pleasing lives." By this time George's face was turning red, he was clenching his fist and digging his fingernails into the palm of his hands. He looked down and blood was coming from the nail marks. The veins on his temples were sticking out and he began to sit up even more in his chair. You could see the vehemence and darkness in his eyes as he continued, "This kind of heresy is unforgivable. This kind of deviation from the will of God will not be tolerated. You will obey my orders to preach more sanctified sermons or we will see to it that your life will be a living hell on earth." At that, both George and Pearl quickly got up out their chairs, threw open the office door and stomped out. Jack Keening and Pastor Griffin sat and discussed the situation for a little while, but Pastor Griffin was left with a sinking pit in the middle of his stomach. It appeared as if the Captain was going down with a sinking ship and he had no clue what to do about it. Like the story behind the Titanic, he knew things were going to get much worse, before they got better, if they ever did get better.

Pastor Griffin tried exceptionally hard to write relevant sermons, but now both George and Pearl began to insist that he was writing duplicitous sermons against them and their friends in the congregation. He even tried to preach sermons from previous churches, from other pastors and off from the internet to avoid even the appearance of duplicity, but the accusations grew stronger, louder and more widespread. Matthew Sanction, Evan Stuttgart and Margaret Anderson started to make unpleasant remarks about his sermons. He had no clue how to stop the raging river of gossip that had begun to boil. Then summer came along.

Marshall Community Church was not a wealthy church, not by any means. However, they normally did a great job of keeping up with paying the bills. Unfortunately, this summer they were struggling considerably more than usual. Within a couple of short months they found themselves over \$60,000.00 in debt, with no means or desire to pay it back. The Chief Councilor was out of town most of the summer. Many of the other Council members had no idea what to do and some were saying, "I do not want to be the one to make the tough decisions. You do something Pastor." He had a few ideas, but he still inquired of several pastor friends and finally naively decided to write a letter to the entire congregation.

It was not a particularly lengthy letter or even all that profound. It merely pointed out the shortfall and recommended that they might look at various programs that may perhaps need to be cut if the shortfall continued and encouraged them to give more if they could. A nightmare broke loose. Matthew Sanction, George and Pearl Harbinger, Evan Stuttgart and Margaret Anderson went on the rampage. They accused Pastor Griffin of being insane, inept, unloving, ungodly and pretty much anything and everything in-between. He was given the label of "Public Enemy #1 of the Church." Since he had specifically mentioned the landscaping as a possible program to scrutinize, he was declared the devil incarnate, or possessed by a demon for ever having such evil thoughts in first place. How could he possibly dare to be against the landscaping program, which of course was a prime outreach tool to lure in the people with the gorgeous setting. Patty even came to him and said, "Pastor Griffin, my landscaping program IS your ministry here. Don't you dare ever mess with it!"

Pastor Griffin was getting a pretty horrible thrashing and hammering from some very embittered people and over what? Was it false doctrine? Was it an immoral life? Was it dereliction of duty? No. It was none of the above. It was entirely over how others defined "ministry." Whether they were right or wrong did not matter. Whether they were helping or hurting the congregation made no difference. Whether it had to do with insurance groups or music, education or landscape, sermons or Bible studies, people would selfishly demand their own way, be adamant that they were right and dig their heels in as deep as they could until they got their way or made your life miserable if they did not. As long as they could keep a death grip on their

self-interests and refuse to budge even an inch in any direction, then Pastor Griffin could see no good future in sight and as things turned out there was no future for him at all.

Matthew Sanction and George Harbinger called together a private meeting of the Council, without inviting Pastor Griffin or letting him know that they were going to have a private meeting. George Harbinger had written six pages of complaints. He told Jack Keening that he had interviewed several prominent members of the congregation, who were seriously unhappy with the performance of their pastor and said, “Look Jack. This new pastor is a wing nut. If we do not do something drastic right now and I mean right now, he is going to ruin this congregation. My wife is so upset, she could spit nails.” Jack tried everything he could to calm George down, talk rationally and defuse the situation, but it was much too late. George was on a collision course with Pastor Griffin and nothing was going to stop him. When Jack read the six pages of criticisms, he could not believe what he saw. It said things like, “The pastor does not wear a tie all of the time, like he should. The pastor puts his feet up on the desk. The pastor does not listen to people or take orders like he should. The pastor is rude and insensitive. It is obvious that the pastor does not have the gift of discernment and he is hurting numerous members of this congregation with his utter tactlessness. The pastor is unloving and his judgmental sermons are way out of line. The pastor has an appalling attitude problem. The pastor cannot get along with the staff. He stinks and I say let us get rid of him now.”

Jack was so concerned that he went over to the pastor’s house to talk with him. “Pastor Griffin,” Jack said, “something is seriously wrong. Did you know that George and Evan called a private meeting of the Council to discuss six pages of complaints against you?” “No, I had no idea,” Pastor Griffin replied. “Yes, George gave me his six pages to read and I could not believe the unloving innuendoes and out right slanderous allegations that it contained. It is nothing more or less than hate mail. There is honestly nothing of substance, it is just extreme loathing. George and others are definitely out to get you. It sounds to me like they will not be happy until you are gone.” How prophetically correct he was.

The private meeting was held on a Tuesday and the following week on Thursday, Pastor Griffin had a meeting with George Harbinger and Evan Stuttgart. Pastor Griffin started by asking,

“Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you recently called together a private meeting of the Council to discuss certain allegations about my ministry. Is that correct?” They both looked at each other, smiled and shrugged their shoulders. So he continued, “Are you aware that the Constitution of this congregation forbids private meetings, particularly meetings to bring complaints against any individual in the congregation, especially without the knowledge of the pastor?” At that, George spoke up and said, “Reverend Griffin, I am highly offended that you would suggest such a thing. We have done nothing against the Constitution of this congregation. A group of Christians got together to lovingly discuss some suggestions to greatly enhance the ministry here. Do you really find anything wrong with that?” Evan chimed in, “Yes, Pastor Griffin, I see absolutely nothing wrong with a loving group of believers joining together for their joint edification. We certainly do not have to tell you every single time we want to get together for a cup of coffee and discuss some uncomplicated ideas to help further the mission and ministry of this parish.” Pastor Griffin asked, “Is it not true that you had six pages of complaints against the pastor that you wanted to discuss?” Evan haughtily responded, “Pastor Bob, my good friend George here has only the best in mind for you and this entire group. If he had six pages of anything, they were merely love offerings to our gracious God. Please allow me to reassure you that we did not discuss six pages of anything. In fact, I have never seen nor read six pages of anything pertaining to you. The gathering was purely a get together of mature, tender hearted members who had nothing but the absolute best intentions.” They discussed things for a little while longer, but Pastor Griffin was still unconvinced that their motives were pure. As things turned out, he was absolutely right.

Every day Pastor Griffin still tried to be as loving and supportive as possible. He would spend time outside helping with the landscaping. He would make pastoral visits to discuss the situation with people. He would attend private devotions with the antagonists. He bent over backwards to try and appease them, avoid confrontation and diffuse the situation, but by this time it was already way past the point of no return.

A few months later, things escalated even further. Pastor Griffin had prepared a special Bible study, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the church. In the Bible study one of the questions he asked was, “What is it like for a pastor, when a congregation is losing money and

nothing appears to be changing?” It did not matter that he also added, “ Fortunately, God has blessed this congregation greatly. Through the love of God and generosity of the members Marshal Community Church has never suffered any major financial difficulties that it has not pulled out of.” Matthew Sanction, George and Pearl Harbinger, Evan Stuttgart and Margaret Anderson went ballistic. They saw the Bible study as a blatant attack against them personally and against the congregation as a whole. They began to openly berate Pastor Griffin and started a highly orchestrated and concentrated effort to get rid of him. They said they could and would never trust him again, not for any reason.

At one meeting, when Pastor Griffin met with them all, he attempted to smooth things over, by openly and humbly apologizing for any and every mistake he had ever made. He asked for their forgiveness and Pearl tersely replied, “We will forgive you this time, but we will never, ever forget. I hope you understand that we can never trust you again. You are no better than King Saul, tormented by an evil spirit, who keeps thrusting spears at our hearts trying to kill us. You have completely destroyed any love, meaningful relationships or hope that we have ever had that you could ever be a competent pastor.” Pastor Griffin hung his head in shame and openly admitted that he was having severe struggles with stress from dealing with everything that was going on and needed to seek some outside assistance. They left the meeting with a grin like the Cheshire cat and hearts like vultures, piously saying, “We will pray for you Pastor Griffin.”

For several months Pastor Griffin did seek counsel. Among many others, he spoke with a special religious counselor and even a Psychiatrist to help him sort things out. He took a good long look at his life and his skills and abilities as a pastor and even his desire to remain a pastor. After much anguish and deliberation, with the support and input of many people, Pastor Griffin decided to suck it up and work harder, do the best job he could given the circumstances. There was always the hope that things might work out and the rest of the congregation would stand behind him. Unfortunately the merciless attacks continued.

Jack Keening tried over and over to help Pastor Griffin and his help and advice was invaluable, but unfortunately it still fell short of what was needed. At one time, Jack recommend that Pastor Griffin have a meeting with George and Pearl, but just sit there for the first fifteen minutes and

let him do the talking. His idea was to draw them out, get to the bottom of the situation and clearly determine where they were coming from. Perhaps it would reveal their real motives and give Jack and Pastor Griffin a way to deal with the situation. So they tried it. Regrettably, it only made things worse. The first words out of Pearl's mouth were invective and inflammatory, "Pastor Griffin, why do you hate us? Why are you so afraid of us? What have we ever done to you?" By the time it was over she was hysterical, screaming at the top of her lungs, her eye balls bulging out of her head and fixedly calling Pastor Griffin a liar over and over again.

Immediately after that meeting, Matthew Sanction and Margaret Anderson sent letters to the Local Head Cleric, accusing Pastor Griffin of being incompetent, unreliable, unloving, unstable and beyond hope. The Head Cleric sent back a letter saying, "From my investigations, the congregation is doing just fine. You just pulled out of a heavy debt, largely because of the hard work and dedication of Pastor Griffin. I see nothing that he has done that the love of God cannot solve." They wrote back again, only this time saying, "The entire congregation is falling apart because of this man. He cannot be trusted. His attitude is so poor that we can no longer work with him. He has severe deficiencies that he refuses to overcome and none of us have any confidence in him whatsoever." The Head Cleric once again wrote back, "How can you say the congregation is falling apart, when you are gaining members, finances are staying steady and the vast majority of the people are quite happy with Pastor Griffin? What about forgiveness and love? Once again, I see nothing that he has done that is not covered by the love and forgiveness of God." Both Matthew and Margaret openly declined to take the advice of the Head Cleric and refused to love or forgive and the battle raged on until they sent yet another letter, emphatically stating, "Pastor Griffin has a mental illness and we are scared for this congregation." When the Head Cleric did not respond, Evan Stuttgart called in the Regional Head.

Matthew Sanction, George and Pearl Harbinger, Evan Stuttgart, Margaret Anderson, Patty Isinger and a few others were invited to meet with the Regional Head. The vast majority of the congregation had no hint what was going on, truly loved their pastor and were being served quite well by him. However, after meeting with the antagonists for only a few hours, the Regional Head walked into Pastor Griffin's office and bluntly said, "Pastor Griffin, you have a hurting congregation here. I demand that you resign for the good of the ministry." "What if I do not

resign,” he asked. “Then I will suspend you from the ministry for moral incompetence.” There was no due process, no trial, no discussion, nothing. Pastor Bob Griffin walked out of his office, his head spinning. For twenty years he had served faithfully. He had poured his life and soul into his work, only to find that he was expendable and all because of a small group of hateful people who cared more about psychology, secular principles, landscaping and their own agendas than the Word of God. Now what was he going to do? What could any 40 something year old ex-pastor do? The only job he had ever known was being a pastor. He had never written a resume, been through an interview or even thought much about working outside the church. He had a wife and a family to support. Whoever orchestrated this resignation sure did not seem to care about any of that. How did this happen? Why did it come to such drastic measures? Pastor Griffin went for a long walk through the woods to try and sort things out.

Three months later, he was still not able to sort things out, because there was nothing to sort out. What was done was done. Nothing was going to change at the church. The same people were pushing the same things. The same “favorites” were still ruling the roost. The same secularism was being pushed. The same leadership was controlling the reigns. His only hope was that he could warn a few others, before it was too late. At least forty people had already left the church. The pain, hurt, suffering and open wound caused by those unloving leaders left a lasting scar that just would not heal in the congregation. The history of the congregation was doomed to repeat itself over and over again. The landscape still looked great, but the church was rapidly going down hill, especially spiritually, with nothing to stop the downward momentum. With the same people in leadership, nothing was changing. Another pastor was soon heading for the slaughter. Another fresh group of unsuspecting Christians were being duped into believing that everything was just fine. Another collection of unsuspecting children of God were being deceived into believing that it was just fine for a church to heavily promote uncensored Contemporary Christian Music. Another company of saints were being heavily subjected to secularism. And so Pastor Griffin sat down to write a short story about his experiences in hopes that it just might help someone in the future...

Conclusion

What does God call upon us to do when we are being bombarded by the evil one? He says in 2 Timothy 2:10 to “endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” What could God possibly be thinking when we are going through horrible times like that? In Jeremiah 29:11 He says, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” What should you do if the powers of darkness has got a foothold in your congregation and the things that happened in this story are being done, promoted and supported in your church? Here are 14 guidelines to help both the pastor and the laymen guard the church against unscrupulous operators:

1. Support your Pastor 100% when he is carrying out his ministry according to God’s will. Pray for him. Attend meetings and back him.
2. Never let “favorites” run the church.
3. Only vote people into office who openly have Christ’s best interests at heart.
4. Be very discerning about everything that is being promoted and supported by your church.
5. Clearly and loudly speak out against secularism in the church.
6. Keep your church focused by keeping their eyes on Jesus.
7. Never let the leadership call in higher officials without the knowledge of the entire body.
8. Do not listen to or spread gossip.
9. Insist that the leadership always follow the Bible and the Constitution at all times.
10. Thoroughly investigate any disputes, making sure you get both sides of the issue.
11. Never elevate any so called “ministry” above Christ’s ministry of Word and Sacrament.
12. Remember that you reap what you sow and your flesh sows nothing but corruption.
13. Endure everything for the sake of the elect.
14. Wait on the Lord, be still in Him.