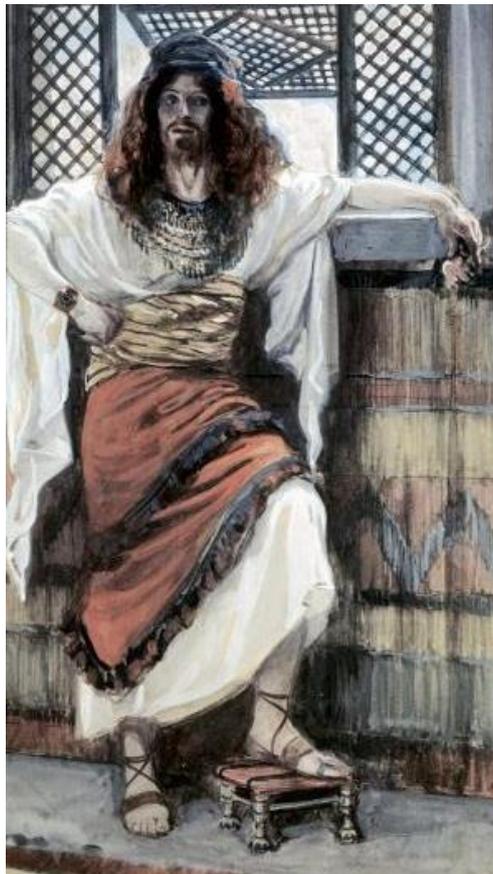


# Identifying the Absalom spirit



By Peter McArthur

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NOTE: In this teaching the "Absalom" is referred to as "he" for convenience sake. The spirit of Absalom may of course also work through a female, and in that case, it's often allied to the spirit of Jezebel. I have avoided using the terms "leader" and "leadership" in this article, and have chosen rather to use the more appropriate biblical terms "elder" and "eldership".

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One of the most insidious attacks against the Body of Christ comes from those who are "disaffected". This refers to those who feel they are not appreciated, recognised in their calling, or simply have a rebellious attitude towards God-appointed eldership. This attitude has plagued the Body of Christ from its earthly inception, and was even at work in Old Testament times in one of King David's sons, hence the term. We shall look briefly at the Biblical account as it highlights some important principles for us.

Absalom was David's third son. We read how his sister Tamar was raped by her brother Amnon (2 Sam 13:8-14), and when Absalom perceived this all he said was;

***Hold your peace my sister...do not take this thing to heart*** (2 Sam 13:20).

Such was the heart of Absalom. He was grossly insensitive and acted unjustly.

***To Amnon his brother he spoke neither good nor bad*** (2 Sam 13:22).

The consequence of this incest brought forth "foolishness" and "hatred" in Amnon (verses 13-15), which then resulted in "anger" and "hatred" within the family (verses 21-22).

Festering guilt mixed with anger led Absalom to plan his brother's death, after which he fled the scene and hid for three years (chapter 13). Eventually, upon returning to Jerusalem he was banned from approaching his father David (2 Sam. 14:24).

When, by another act of treachery, Absalom does get to see his father again (14:28-33) he immediately sets about to draw attention to himself by "***providing for himself chariots and fifty men to run before him***" (15:1).

The working out of this mind-set causes Absalom to not only draw attention to himself, but also to draw people to himself (15:2-6). This of course is the basic pattern and strategy of "the Absalom spirit". He wants attention, as well as the people who will give it to them! Those driven by an Absalom-spirit give the impression that they are people-orientated (and they truly might be a "people person"), but their motivation is wrong. They want an audience for their own approval and ministry.

There's a definite plan to all this. Note the sequence of how it is enacted:

1. Absalom chooses to rise early (2 Sam 15:2). He is driven by the need for approval.
2. He deliberately stands at the gate to the City, where many people pass by.
3. He focuses in on issues the people have (in Heb. lit. = *controversies*).
4. He also seemingly "approves" of their dissatisfaction (15:3), thus cunningly aligning himself to their concern, and vice versa.
5. Then he sows seeds of discontent by declaring that only he has the ability to make wise decisions (15:4).
6. The result is that people are duped and pay him homage when they should be going to their God-appointed oversight, in this case King David (15:5-6).
7. Absalom then uses a "religious ploy" to prepare the next stage of the deceit (15:7-8).

8. This brings about an uprising against the legitimate God-appointed eldership (15:10) by drawing others into the web to act deceitfully (the “spies” of verse 10a).
9. The final working out of all this is the setting up of a competitive seat of ruling power (15:10b).

So, we see the treachery that is acted out by one close to eldership. Sadly, this pattern still runs its course today and we find churches and fellowships undermined by this very same “spirit”.

Based on this Biblical account, what then are some of the factors to watch for?

### **THOSE WITH AN INDEPENDENT SPIRIT**

- ◆ Clearly we are to look for those who have an attitude that betrays an independent spirit. Such a person no longer wants to serve the Body but seeks recognition and reputation for himself. It may well have been that the person initially did serve others, but often this is only short-lived.

### **THOSE WHO SUBTLY SEEK SELF-PROMOTION**

- ◆ The next step is when such a person begins to manoeuvre to receive the praise of others. We have already seen in 2 Samuel chapter 15 how Absalom stood by the gate of the city and “*stole the hearts of the people*”. In modern jargon we might say, “he conned them”.

### **SPIRITUAL PRIDE RISES UP**

- ◆ It’s usually those who lack clear discernment who give accolades and praise to the Absalom-type among them. As this takes root in the heart of the perpetrator he begins to believe that he’s more spiritual than others, and certainly wiser than the current eldership. He becomes unteachable.

### **AN OFFENDED SPIRIT COMES TO THE FORE**

- ◆ The spiritual pride that resides deep in the heart of the Absalom-type turns into offence. Almost anything begins to cause offence because his “spiritual insight” isn’t appreciated by the eldership. All the time he works to have his ideas, doctrines and plans promoted. When it’s clear his suggestions are not being accepted, he is greatly offended and seeks out others to back him - and to get them to agree with him about the great offence caused. Disaffected people can so easily seek after others of like spirits, who in turn are drawn to him.

### **A CRITICAL SPIRIT BEGINS TO OPERATE OPENLY**

- ◆ Once the pattern gets this far it’s not too long before a critical attitude toward eldership begins to operate more openly. This will soon result in nearly every decision, major and minor, being questioned by the disaffected ones.
- ◆ About the same time that this begins to operate, the Absalom-type feels he can no longer receive any spiritual input or guidance from the eldership. Gradually he begins to distance himself from them, and complains that they’re the ones who are causing all this.
- ◆ He is reinforced in his thinking that only he has the wisdom to carry the group further spiritually. Because there’s no balance in his thinking he “hears” only those voices that approve of him, and he can even begin to find Biblical texts in support of this. He has entered very dangerous territory at this stage.

## **A SPIRIT OF COMPETITION ENTERS THE FRAY**

- ◆ What now emerges is a direct confrontation, which will ultimately lead to more and more confusion. The Absalom-type will set himself up in competition to the eldership by deliberately throwing innuendo and doubt into even casual conversation with the disaffected ones.
- ◆ Because they too feel unloved they will readily nod their agreement. All the while their conscience tries to alert them to the fact that something's not quite true - yet they ignore this alarm bell and continue in aligning themselves to one of like-spirit.
- ◆ Later the Absalom will begin to distort some of the teaching given by the elders, and misrepresent certain facts and decisions they make. Thus it moves from a sense of emotional hurt and lack of appreciation, to challenging doctrine. By this stage there's now occurred a major crisis in the pattern of this problem.

## **THE DELIBERATE SOWING OF STRIFE INCREASES**

- ◆ Now Absalom begins to take the strife to another level, often contacting other individuals in the church to spread the dissatisfaction; always of course making sure the hearer understands that this isn't gossip, but "truth" that needs airing!
- ◆ When it's something that occurs through a chance meeting with another disaffected person, it's one thing; but when it becomes more "organised" it's quite another. By the use of phone calls, invitations to a cuppa or a meal, and even through clandestine gatherings such as home fellowships, the strife spreads like a cancer.
- ◆ Absalom is keen to seemingly promote God, the teachings of the Bible, etc, to validate the reason for speaking against the eldership. He is very careful at this point not to blow his cover; he doesn't want to be seen as divisive, so acts with seeming humility.
- ◆ However, invitations to attend a cuppa, a meal or gathering are given out to selected ones who Absalom knows will readily accept. At the outset of such gatherings Absalom makes sure that the attention isn't drawn to him - "it is God who is our focus" he readily announces! This soon changes however, and gradually the gathering turns into a meeting of bruised souls all expressing their sense of hurt and rejection.

## **ACCUSATIONS FLY**

- ◆ The greatest accusation any believer will have to face is "You don't love me enough!". We all know in our hearts we fail at this point, so the poisoned arrow of accusation can go deep. This becomes the one great area of faultfinding, especially directed at the eldership. Usually it's not Biblical love that's the issue for the accusation here, but rather "emotional" love.
- ◆ While the disaffected ones are giving voice to their hurt, Absalom waits (somewhat impatiently) for an opportunity to turn it in a certain direction. He isn't really interested at all in their grievances; he wants to air his own feelings.
- ◆ A Bible text is usually flung about, as if to legitimise the gossip. It doesn't take too long before Absalom speaks forthrightly against faults that he's noticed in the eldership. Topping the list will be "lack of love", followed by an accusation that the current elders are "grieving the Holy Spirit", and are motivated by a religious spirit.
- ◆ Close behind these accusations will often come a "comforter" or "pacifier". In the Bible Absalom was keen to evidence loyalty to both God and David (2 Sam 15:7-9), yet his actions showed otherwise. The use of Biblical quotes or principles especially supporting the idea that we should still love the elders whom we've left brings a kind of "comfort" to the disaffected. They feel they're not really attacking God's overseers at all, because they, at least, still "love" them!

- ◆ Sadly this is nothing more than a trick of the mind; it's a spiritual and emotional somersault. If they would only listen they'd hear their conscience screaming out at them to wake up and see what's really going on.
- ◆ Attacks against eldership are often related to the spiritual qualifications required of them as set down in Scripture, and how the current elders fail to measure up. The breakaway group has now become so entrenched in their "mission of purification" that even minor failures of the previous elders are made to be seen as major flaws.

### **OPEN DISLOYALTY FOLLOWED BY DIVISION**

- ◆ Once this has reached a certain point, it's not too long before open division rears its serpentine head. Absalom doesn't necessarily need a large group to implement his next move; even a small band of followers will suffice. He knows he has them, for he has "*stolen their hearts*" (2 Sam 15:6) and they have unwittingly given themselves over to him. They have come under bondage (see 2 Pet. 2:19) and they are being savagely manipulated. By now Absalom is becoming quite smug and proud.
- ◆ Soon the disloyalty is shown by the making of some sort of declaration (2 Sam. 15:10), either in public or in private. It's remarkable how often those who seek to break away declare their intention to the elders by any means rather than have a face-to-face meeting! A hurried phone call or a short letter announces their intent; it is curt, to the point and there is no entering into further dialogue.
- ◆ A final parting dart is flung at the eldership in a last attempt to inflict hurt when it's announced, "by the way, you need to know that others feel the same way I do!" (Compare 2 Sam. 15:10-13). If the elders haven't guarded their spirit and soul, they'll wilt under this very common accusation.
- ◆ Perhaps it's only at this point that the eldership actually becomes aware of the depth of the division. How necessary it is then that elders should pay attention to God's warnings via prophetic words, and even dreams!
- ◆ Now the awful truth has come into the open: and the people must make a choice between their current oversight and the Absalom who has deceived them all by his treachery. Usually the larger group are not swayed by the Absalom-type, but he has caused enough division to foster doubt in the remainder of the congregation. A un-ease now hovers over the people and a spiritual sickness begins to pervade nearly everything they do as believers.
- ◆ The elders feel sick at heart, the congregation are desperately looking for answers, and those with a rather strong-will in the church begin to demand quick surgical action. The stress grows and a whole new dynamic begins to take hold. Sunday meetings are soon tainted with doubt, unease, and a sense of loss of anointing.

### **A CONGREGATION TORN APART**

- ◆ Amongst those whom Absalom has beguiled are the naïve ones (2 Sam. 15:11). These are those who "only wanted the best of church life", those who wanted to "move into something spiritually greater", those who truly did desire the "deeper things", and who wanted the "freedom of the Spirit". Sadly these ones don't see the truth until much later, and they become confused, while some ultimately leave fellowshiping altogether.
- ◆ Both sides are now in a flurry to re-establish and establish their respective groups. At this point the eldership may try to encourage the remnant through all sorts of ways, in a hurried attempt to stabilise them. Sadly there's often an over-reaction in this and the people sense

their elders are “trying too hard” to keep them. This can actually cause further unease, and it may very well be that some of the surviving congregation begin to think that there might be something in what Absalom has been saying all along!

- ◆ Absalom however will begin to gloat, all the time making certain this isn't seen publicly. But the signs will be there, and sooner or later, what's in his heart will overflow in his words and actions.
- ◆ One thing the Absalom-type cannot fail to do is to speak out against what he's left behind. He will actively seek out “teachings” that will seemingly “approve” of, and legitimise, his actions.
- ◆ Those who align themselves with him will find some “comfort” in these teachings, as it seems to validate their choice. However the instruction they receive from him will be un-balanced and its source is often other “Absaloms”. He has now cunningly set himself up as a “wise one” subtly imposing upon his group the view that he can lead them into something more “spiritual”, unlike the previous eldership.
- ◆ When the Absalom sees something go wrong in the church he's just left, he's quick to say that “God's judgement” has now fallen upon them because they didn't listen. Sadly, even insignificant events will be seen as “signs” that God has approved of the split. Spiritual discernment cannot possibly function in the breakaway group because of the bitterness and pride that's taken root there.

#### **THE JUDGMENT THAT WILL SURELY FOLLOW**

- ◆ There's a Biblical principle that states: If the root is evil then the fruit shall also be evil. This simply means that a group birthed from the workings of an “Absalom” will suffer the same fate in due time. Disloyalty, gossip, and eventual rebellion will follow as sure as night follows day.
- ◆ Note that in Scripture, Absalom died in a most revealing way; his head got caught in trees and he was left dangling until he was executed. Caught by the head! In Biblical typology “the head” stands for authority and leadership.
- ◆ Absalom set himself up as head and by his head he was judged! (2 Sam. 18:9-18).

May the Lord and His teaching Spirit guide us into ALL of His wondrous ways and increasingly deliver us from the spirit of Absalom: please pray that MATURITY will be the hall-mark of today's church!

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