



Don't Let the 'BIRGers' Get Close to You!

Leaders must be wise about with whom they choose to socialize. Friendships with individuals in the church can be a blessing or one fraught with problems. For example, there is a negative friendship dynamic between leaders and people who want to be close to the leader. It is a phenomena social psychologists call BIRGing, which means “Basking in Reflected Glory.” One of the most influential and descriptive studies on BIRGing was done by Robert Cialdini, et. al. in 1976. He defines BIRGing as:

BIRGing occurs when someone's self-esteem and personal evaluation is enhanced by being close to, or identifying with another person's success.

BIRGing in the Christian culture is seen when individuals want to be close to a leader because it makes them feel better about themselves and enhances their reputation with others. It's all about impression management. The BIRGer wants the attention of the leader and wants to be seen by others as important because of his or her association with the leader.

This happened to Carter who pastors a very close-knit and thriving church in the Midwest. Roy was an elder who had significantly reached out to befriend Carter and his wife

Janet. Roy and Nancy treated them to dinners out, bought them very nice birthday presents, and took them to Mexico on vacation for four consecutive years. Other leaders complained that Roy seemed to dominate Carter's time - especially before and after service. Additionally, Roy at times acted like he was a pastor on staff even though he had no official role beyond the Elder Board. Carter greatly appreciated the perks Roy offered but was increasingly feeling challenged by Roy's behavior.

I saw a storm brewing. I could see Roy was getting his self-esteem needs met through his association with Carter. People like successful people. Church people like being around those that God favors. They can be tempted to BIRG on Pastors who represent God, since pastors are often the facilitators of God's presence and life changing truth. Sooner or later this type of relationship goes sour. One-way relationships are unhealthy and don't work over time. At some point Carter would have disappointed Roy when he didn't give him the attention or special place of influence and recognition Roy continually sought. Roy would be tempted to react against Carter because idolatry easily turns to despisement in insecure or wounded people. Roy would have swung from praise and appreciation of Carter to disparaging remarks and criticism.

Thankfully, Carter's response to Roy helped dampen his reaction and avoided a crisis. Had Roy become disappointed and despising of Carter, he may have sewn enough dissatisfaction among fellow church members to encourage people to leave the church, or worse yet a church split. It only takes a few disgruntled individuals to cause a major rift (see September 2015 e-newsletter issue titled *Have You Heard of Mobbing*). If this had happened, Carter and Janet would have felt deeply betrayed and wounded, yet puzzled over Roy and Nancy's attack.

One-Way Relationships

All healthy relationships require a give and take. They can't be one-sided. The best leaders learn the importance of having friends who have solidly grounded their identity in Christ and have resolved their inner challenges of self-esteem and insecurity. Friendships cannot be possessive, smothering or based on flattery, and still be healthy. They can't be all take and no give, especially where money is concerned. I worked with Carter and helped him gradually wean his relationship away from Roy and Nancy. It took a time to do so. Weaning the relationship gradually, averted a serious negative reaction from Roy and Nancy. They appeared to be disappointed but not to the point of wanting to attack.

I challenged Carter to examine his own motives for continually being on the receiving end of someone else's generosity. Carter valued the gifts but upon closer self-examination found he enjoyed Roy's praises and attention even more so. This is a common pitfall of many leaders who want to know they are having an impact in people's lives. The leader craves the positive feedback of lives changed and places too much personal need fulfillment in other people's praises. It can also be a sticky wicket when you rely upon others to fund you ministry. Accepting personal gifts instead of re-directing the appreciative party's generosity to the ministry can provoke this dynamic. Avoiding the BIRGing trap will greatly reduce the possibility of having to face a storm in your ministry.