

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **ARE WE SUPPOSED TO OBEY AND SUBMIT TO CHURCH LEADERS? IF SO, IN WHAT WAYS? AND HOW SHOULD LEADERS OPERATE?**

*that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors.*

*1 Corinthians 16:16 (RSV)*

Before we go on to look at how verses about submission to leaders are misused and twisted, let me first make it clear that, *when correctly understood*, submission is a valid biblical concept and is God's will. The point is of course that that is only when it is correctly understood and not twisted, taken to extremes or made into an absolute rule which has no limits, conditions or exceptions.

It is less fashionable to emphasise the authority of church leaders today. Nevertheless, this strand of false teaching does still exist in many churches. They exaggerate or over emphasise the fact that we should '*submit to and obey the leaders of our churches*'. Because this false teaching is an exaggeration of what the Bible does actually say, it is easier to justify, as there is an element of truth in it.

The problem is it is twisted to justify exploitation, control and domination, which are not what God intends at all. Verses such as those below, which speak of the valid and necessary concept of submission, are misused by some leaders to give the impression that God requires absolute obedience to leaders. They do this to support the traditional hierarchical system, where people are told what to do and are kept in their place.

So, here are some verses which speak of the need to submit to leaders and even to obey them. But, as with any verse in the Bible on any issue, we always have to begin by looking for:

- a) the correct definition of the operative words used
- b) the context in which the instruction applies
- c) any exceptions or conditions which might put limits on the application of that instruction

If you don't do this you will end up relying on someone else's definition of the words used, or the "traditional" interpretation, and that might well be wrong. Moreover, you would be in danger of mistaking a general instruction which only applies in its proper context for an absolute command which always applies, no matter what. And such a mistake is very dangerous.

So, let's look first at Hebrews 13:17, which many have wrongly presented as an absolute command to obey leaders in all circumstances, without question, no matter what they are doing. They are very wrong to present it in such terms.

It is actually a general instruction to make yourself easy to lead, easy to teach and a pleasure for leaders to work with. It means you should be reasonable, flexible, willing, cooperative and good humoured so that being one of the elders in your church is not made into a miserable task.

*<sup>17</sup>Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

**Hebrews 13:17 (RSV)**

Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, we see Paul urging us to respect and esteem leaders. This is absolutely valid and indeed essential in order to make a leader's role possible. Let me make clear that although I am warning about the misuse of authority and wrongful exaggeration of verses about submission to leaders, the real thing, when correctly understood, is both good and necessary.

Being a leader in a church is difficult, even at the best of times, but the role is made far easier if that leader is surrounded by members who are respectful, willing and cooperative rather than suspicious, resentful, awkward or curmudgeonly. So, the right kind of respect and submission is good and God wants it. It is just the wrong kind that I am warning against.

***<sup>12</sup>We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup>and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.***

***1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (ESV)***

Speaking below of his fellow worker, Epaphroditus, apostle Paul tells the church at Philippi to hold him in high regard. Of course, that doesn't mean they should treat him as a pop star or as a dictator. It just means showing respect and honour, neither of which involve either hero worship or slavish obedience. As always, when interpreting such verses, it is essential to use our common sense.

***<sup>28</sup>Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you. <sup>29</sup>Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; <sup>30</sup>because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.***

***Philippians 2:28-30 (NASB)***

Some whose aim is to exaggerate the level of submission we should show to leaders point to passages such as this one below from the Law of Moses. It illustrates the power the Levitical priests had in regard to certain issues and how their decisions had to be obeyed:

***<sup>8</sup>“If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns which is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God will choose, <sup>9</sup>and coming to the Levitical priests, and to the judge who is in office in those days, you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. <sup>10</sup>Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place which the LORD will choose; and you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you; <sup>11</sup>according to the instructions which they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the verdict which they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. <sup>12</sup>The man who acts presumptuously, by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die; so you shall purge the evil from Israel. <sup>13</sup>And all the people shall hear, and fear, and not act presumptuously again.***

***Deuteronomy 17:8-13 (RSV)***

In addition to their duties in the Temple, the Levitical priests were authorised to carry out a judicial function. They were appointed by God to fulfil a role which extended to areas which in our society

would be exercised by High Court judges, not church leaders. That applied then, in that context, when the Law of Moses was still in operation, *but it does not apply today to the Church.*

Thus the above passage from Deuteronomy does not provide any basis for supposing that church leaders today have any authority of that kind. Firstly, elders in churches are not Levitical priests. The fulfilment and bringing to an end of the Law of Moses means that all such roles are now obsolete. The only kind of priesthood which now exists in the Church is the “*priesthood of all believers*”. So, there are no longer any special people who act as an intermediary between us and God.

We are all now authorised to enter into His presence by ourselves through our High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself. We have no need for any other priest and God does not appoint anybody to the office of priest or recognise any such office anymore. It was part of the Law of Moses but is now gone, as is the power and authority which went with it.

Moreover, no equivalent function or power has ever been created under the New Covenant. Thus, power and authority of the kind the Levitical priests had no longer exists and has not existed since the Church began. Accordingly, no church leader, whether or not he presumes to call himself a ‘priest’, has any authority to rule over a church or to give orders as if he was an army officer.

An elder can only urge, persuade, exhort or even plead, but he may never give orders. Not even apostle Paul presumed to give ‘orders’, though he was technically authorised to do so, as were the 12 apostles, because of their unique position and authority. But they were a one off and after they died nobody was ever appointed by God to have that kind of authority. Nevertheless, despite having such authority, *Paul preferred not to use it.*

His letters seek only to persuade his readers to do as he instructed them, not to command. At any rate, what we are concerned with is the position of ordinary elders today who are not in the unique position occupied by the 12 apostles or apostle Paul.

With elders it is not like the position in the army where orders must be obeyed instantly and without question. That kind of authority exists in the military and is vital. But it does not exist within the Church now that the apostles are gone. We know that must be the case because in other passages we are all commanded to assess and weigh up everything that any leader says to make sure it is biblical.

The army would not allow such scrutinising of the orders given by officers. But the point is the Bible does. Indeed, it not only permits it, but endorses it, as where the Bereans are praised in Acts 17:11 for checking up on Paul’s teaching to see if it contradicted the Bible:

*<sup>11</sup> Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessaloni’ca, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*

*Acts 17:11 (RSV)*

### **What is the correct way to understand the concept of submission?**

In the correct sense therefore, we are meant to submit to elders and to every other form of leader within our church. God wants us to be teachable, willing, enthusiastic and helpful, not grumpy or reluctant. He wants all of us to be humble, gentle and submissive, in the sense that we are all willing to be advised, taught and corrected and to do tasks we are asked to do without grumbling.

Such advice and correction is meant to come from elders and also from anyone else who is just older than us or more experienced. God clearly wants us all to submit to such people, and to be easy to lead and He wants us to support, encourage and pray for those who lead us and not to cause them any stress.

But all of that is very different from what some leaders have actually turned it into. The concept of submission has been twisted to justify the idea that leaders are appointed by God to rule over us and are to be obeyed without question. This kind of false teaching became prominent in the 1970s with what was known as the 'shepherding movement'.

They taught that God wants every one of us to be "under the authority" of a "shepherd" to whom we must submit and be accountable. It very quickly became a cloak for those who just wanted to control others without being challenged or questioned.

So, submission to leaders, when correctly defined, is right and proper. However, in the biblical model of church, that submission is meant to be given to honest, unselfish men who are real shepherds, caring nothing for themselves, but only wanting to help those they lead and serve. To such a person one can safely submit.

Moreover, when the Bible speaks of submitting, it does not mean that we are to submit only to leaders and not to anyone else. On the contrary, the Bible actually teaches that we are all to submit to *every other person, whatever level we or they are at*, and regardless of whether we, or they, are leaders or not. People are always surprised when I point this out as they have never noticed it in the Bible or heard anyone say it.

God wants us to be cheerful, cooperative, easy going people who are a pleasure to deal with rather than a headache. Consider these two verses which plainly extend the duty to submit to include submitting **to everyone, not just leaders**. These verses urge us to be flexible and accommodating with everyone we meet, whether they are young or old, senior or junior. But this broadening of the duty to submit obviously requires us to ask what kind of submission is meant, because it clearly can't be absolute.

*<sup>16</sup>I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and labourer.*  
*1 Corinthians 16:16 (RSV)*

*<sup>21</sup>submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*  
*Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)*

The genuine kind of submission that the Bible speaks of is not craven and unquestioning subservience, or allowing oneself to be controlled or dominated. Far from it. It means that all of us should put others first, honouring, preferring and serving others rather than ourselves. That is what submission is really about and it is a matter for all of us, whether we are leaders or followers, young or old.

It is interesting that those authoritarian leaders who teach falsely on the need for us to obey them rarely ever make any mention of 1 Corinthians 16:16 or Ephesians 5:21. Such passages do not suit their purposes because they speak of submission in much wider terms and as applying to everyone, not just to leaders.

That broadening of the duty to submit and the implications for the definition of submission does not suit their purposes or their agenda. Therefore, such men turn a blind eye to these verses and do not see

the duty to be submissive as applying equally to them or requiring them to be just as submissive and open to advice, questions and correction as we are meant to be.

On the contrary if you ever try to give information to a church leader in a traditional denominational church or make suggestions for improvements or question his theology or tell him something he doesn't yet know he is likely to resent *what* you are saying and also resent *you* for saying it.

We see the very same attitude on the part of the Jewish religious leaders when they are questioning the man born blind who was healed by Jesus. At one point the ex-blind man starts to tell the religious leaders some things which they ought to know, but don't know.

But instead of listening respectfully and appreciating his help, they haughtily reject what he says and insult him, even uttering the classic line "*You were born in utter sin and would you teach us?*" I can think of no verse which better sums up the arrogance of the clergy mindset than that imperious statement. They consider it unthinkable that people such as them should be taught anything by someone like him:

*<sup>24</sup> So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." <sup>25</sup> He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." <sup>26</sup> They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" <sup>27</sup> He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" <sup>28</sup> And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup> We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." <sup>30</sup> The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. <sup>32</sup> Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." <sup>34</sup> They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.*

*John 9:24-34 (ESV)*

**Submission to leaders must not go so far as to become the abdication of one's own personal responsibility to discern, assess and scrutinise**

Let's be very clear therefore that what the Bible means by submission, or even obedience, is not what some leaders present it as. It is conditional, not unconditional, and is relative, not absolute. So, it is in no way analogous with military discipline where men must obey orders no matter what their own views are and with no rights to disagree or even ask questions.

In the Church we are never required or even allowed to abdicate our own personal responsibility to think for ourselves and use our own discernment. Therefore, every one of us must weigh and assess everything we are told, no matter who says it, and gauge whether the instruction given is in line with Scripture and acceptable to our own conscience. If it isn't then, far from being under a duty to obey, it is our *clear duty to disobey*.

Therefore, leadership in the Church is of a type that must always be consistent with each member exercising their own discernment and retaining their own personal freedom and autonomy. The obedience required of us is therefore voluntary, not compulsory, and subject always to each member's

higher duty towards God, his own conscience and his own critical faculties. We must always think for ourselves, even when dealing with leaders.

That duty to God must always take precedence if a leader ever teaches something or gives an instruction which we believe to be unbiblical or immoral. Perhaps the clearest proof that submission to elders is not absolute or unconditional comes from the very fact, as we saw above, that the Bible instructs us to show the same submission *to everyone, not just to leaders*.

As we see in Ephesians 5:21, we are told to submit “*to one another*”. Clearly, if we are all meant to submit to everyone rather than only to leaders, then the meaning of the word ‘submit’ or ‘be subject’ cannot be to the effect that we must all obey each other unconditionally. If it did mean that it would be absurd.

<sup>21</sup> *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*  
*Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)*

<sup>16</sup> *I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer.*  
*1 Corinthians 16:16 (RSV)*

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 16:16 above we are told to be subject to “*every fellow worker and labourer*”, not just to leaders. Again, that would be a logical absurdity if it meant absolute obedience because how can we all simultaneously obey everyone? What if the people we are submitting to disagreed with each other? And how can it make sense that while we are meant to obey them, they are supposed to obey us?

Of course, as we have seen, what is meant is *that God simply wants us to fit in, cooperate, give and take and make ourselves easy to deal with*. So, if one of the ladies from church asks you to put out some chairs, just do so, without grumbling, not because she has absolute authority over you, but simply because God wants you to be helpful and cooperative.

**Nevertheless, there are very many leaders who abuse, dominate and manipulate the people they are meant to serve**

We have established that biblical eldership is meant to be based on servanthood, not rulership, and we have seen how the biblical model of house churches helps to prevent the misuse of authority. The very set up takes away much of the temptation to become authoritarian. It also builds in safeguards to prevent domineering leaders arising or remaining in place, not least because there are other elders in the church who will speak up if any elder starts to be a tyrant.

Indeed, that is precisely why the unbiblical traditional model of church is so popular with authoritarian leaders who want to rule rather than serve. It creates opportunities to do so and helps them to maintain their rulership. Therefore, it is no coincidence that they support that model. They advocate it because it suits their personal objectives.

We therefore see such domination, exploitation and control happening in all sorts of ways, both small and large, depending on the personality of the leader and the extent to which he has been changed by taking on a traditional leadership role. Very often idealistic young men start out with a genuine desire to serve but their experiences in churches, not all of which are their fault, cause them to become suspicious, insecure and paranoid.

They then begin to feel that they need to defend themselves and protect their position and that they are entitled to use pressure, manipulation and even deception to achieve that. It is surprising how many improper things can seem justifiable to a man who feels threatened, especially if he thinks that threat is affecting his income and thus jeopardising his whole family.

Therefore, especially as they grow older and the stresses and pressures of leadership take their toll on them, many leaders become increasingly domineering and take more extreme steps to defend themselves and their positions. They become more and more wary of potential rivals and of anyone who might question or challenge the way they do things.

As I look back to how I was in my twenties and thirties when I had a lot of energy and had a questioning mind which ranged far and wide, I began to be seen by leaders as a threat, though without me realising it. They didn't know how to handle me and thought I was trying to undermine them or upstage them. In fact, I was never seeking to do any of that. I was just very interested in everything, was constantly studying, and had a lot of knowledge and ideas which I wanted to discuss and debate with them.

Any secure, confident man would have welcomed my interest and been happy to discuss and even debate with me. But none of the leaders I came across were secure or confident. Far from it. To one extent or another they were all insecure and threatened. I distinctly recall one man, a young Anglican vicar, to whom I gave an audio cassette tape by David Pawson which I had found interesting and I thought he would too.

It was all perfectly innocent and I was not implying any criticism of him or suggesting that I was his superior. But when I gave it to him it was as if I had handed him a serpent. The look of suspicion on his face was unmistakeable and he feared I was up to something from which he needed to defend himself.

But I think he also just thought it was inappropriate for me to presume to instruct a clergyman like him as with the religious leaders who spoke to the man born blind. He thought I was getting above myself and that it was not my place to tell him anything. He therefore saw the offer of the tape as an impertinence rather than a sincere interaction between Christians done with the intention of perhaps discussing the tape afterwards. So, both his paranoia and his pride were involved.

### **Some people actually prefer to be ruled rather than led**

It is only fair to add that the prevalence of authoritarian leadership is not solely due to being imposed by abusive leadership on a reluctant congregation. In many cases the people not only expect but actively want to be ruled over rather than led, guided or advised.

There is something within the fallen human nature which makes some people queue up to be ruled over and to keep coming back for more, even when they are taken advantage of. Perhaps the idea of thinking for themselves and weighing up all that they are told sounds too much like hard work.

More to the point, it is not what they are used to and what they have grown up with. So, they cleave to what feels familiar and therefore stay within the hierarchical, traditional church model. They then shy away from anything which would make them more personally accountable for what they believe and do. It just seems easier to sit back and be ruled over.

I liken such people to domesticated rabbits, who have become tame and dependent. They are then incapable of foraging for themselves, and the idea of having a master seems comfortable. But trying to

feed themselves from the Bible and making decisions and judgements for themselves feels alien and difficult.

They prefer, therefore, to leave it to the paid clergyman to do all their thinking and deciding for them. Moreover, they tend only to see something as valid if it has been said by a “proper” ordained clergyman, as if his status makes his opinions reliable. But they would be wary of accepting anything said by a non clergyman, even if he has studied the Bible more diligently.

So, they don’t exercise their own discernment. They just assume that if a man is ordained and is from their own denomination then he must be right. That has certainly been my experience on many occasions such that, despite my four decades of study, I am deemed to be ineligible and as lacking authority because I do not operate as a clergyman within the established structure of a denomination.

They take the view that authenticity comes from the dog collar, not from the man’s knowledge of the Bible. That is probably because the accuracy or otherwise of a man’s teaching is harder to assess and takes more effort, whereas a dog collar is immediately visible and they assume it guarantees legitimacy.

### **How certain passages in Scripture are twisted to justify authoritarian leadership and to silence those who ask questions.**

One doesn’t come across this so much today as we did a few decades ago, or at least not so openly. But there are certain verses in the Bible which the wrong kind of leaders misuse in order to justify the idea that we should submit to them without question and never challenge them. They misuse such verses in order to get people to obey them when they ought, in fact, to stand up to them.

For example, some leaders refer to themselves as being “*anointed*”, such that to oppose them, or even to question them, is to oppose or question God Himself. They refer to certain passages which they say support the idea that we should never oppose a leader. Verses such as these were quoted to me for that very purpose, i.e. to tell me that I should never challenge, criticise or question a church leader:

*<sup>6</sup> So he said to his men, “Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD’S anointed.”*  
*1 Samuel 24:6 (NASB)*

*<sup>9</sup> But David said to Abishai, “Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD’s anointed and be guiltless?”*  
*1 Samuel 26:9 (ESV)*

*<sup>15</sup> “Touch not my anointed ones,  
do my prophets no harm!”*  
*Psalms 105:15 (RSV)*

The truth is that verses such as these about “*the LORD’s anointed*” were never intended to be used by church leaders for that self serving purpose. One of these verses refers to God’s prophets. The other two refer to King Saul. They don’t refer to leaders of churches, and it is wrong to suggest they do, especially when such verses are used by a leader in relation to himself.

In any case, when one looks closely at the “anointing” which these men claim to have, as if God has personally chosen them to lead, it does not hold water. They themselves chose to go to a Bible College



and they chose to apply for assistant minister positions in churches. So, the reality is in most cases they put themselves into church leadership rather than being “chosen” and “anointed” by God.

At any rate, in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, that is the most likely explanation. I would add that it is very inappropriate to refer to yourself as “anointed”. If you really are anointed by God that is something which others will see for themselves without you needing to say it. Indeed, if you feel the need to tell people you are anointed then you almost certainly aren’t.

Genuine submission must always be voluntary, conditional and limited. Moreover, it is subject to the limits imposed by our own common sense. It should flow naturally from the fact that one sees in another person, whether he is a leader or not, that he has something to say which is right and with which we should cooperate.

Beware of any man who *wants* you to submit to him, or who accuses you of acting wrongly if you do not submit to him. Only submit to people who have *no personal desire for you to do so*. Be very wary of anybody who *asks for* your submission, especially if they start quoting verses such as those above to try to get you to submit to them.

### **What are “the ‘deeds of the Nicolaitans” and what is their teaching?**

These phrases about the Nicolaitans refer to two passages from Revelation chapter two in which Jesus Himself dictates letters to the apostle John which He wishes to send to the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum:

<sup>2</sup> *‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;’*  
*Revelation 2:2 (NASB)*

<sup>6</sup> *‘Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.’*  
*Revelation 2:6 (NASB)*

<sup>15</sup> *‘So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans’*  
*Revelation 2:15 (ESV)*

Though the word ‘Nicolaitans’ is not defined, or even described, within the letter, it is understood to refer to the problem of domineering church leaders seeking to impose their own illegitimate authority over the people under their care. The word itself is formed from two parts:

- a) ‘Nikos’ which means conquest or victory
- b) ‘laos’ which means ‘the people at large,’ as distinct from their priests or rulers. It is the same word from which we get the English word ‘laity’

Therefore when the two Greek words are combined, to create the word Nicolaitans, it would seem that it means those who conquer, dominate and oppress the ordinary people. It refers to a group of men who had, even in the first century, already begun to creep into the churches.

Note also that Jesus says He ‘hates’ their deeds. That demonstrates that to Jesus, oppressive and overbearing church leadership is not a mere foible which should, ideally, be avoided if we can. It is a

deeply damaging and evil trait which needs to be resisted wherever we see it, whether in others or in ourselves.

### **The insecurity, rivalry and paranoia that affects so many church leaders of all denominations**

The most insecure and paranoid group of people you are ever likely to meet are church leaders. I have personal experience of working in the Police, and then as a Solicitor in a number of different law firms. I also have experience in politics, firstly in the Labour Party and later in the Conservative Party. I have been a Borough Councillor and the Chairman of a Conservative Association.

In that latter capacity I have mixed with a wide range of people, including some senior figures in the Conservative Party, i.e. MPs, ministers and shadow ministers. I mention all these different sectors because none of the people I met in any of them came anywhere near to the levels of insecurity and paranoia I have seen amongst church leaders.

That is surely a surprising finding. Most of us would expect the opposite, i.e. to see lawyers anxiously trying to guard their positions within law firms, or politicians desperate to protect their seats. But, in my experience, I haven't seen either of those groups, or the police, display insecurity to anything like the same extent that I have seen with church leaders.

My own theories as to why it works out that way, with church leaders being more insecure than people in secular jobs, are as follows. The traditional role of church leader (as we have come to know it) is not even meant to exist. They are not supposed to be in full time paid roles as the solitary leaders of local churches. God generally intends for most of these men (not all) to be in ordinary paid jobs, like everybody else.

They should operate only part time as elders in churches, sharing their leadership duties with a group of other men, amongst whom they operate as equals, not as a 'boss'. Therefore the 'kingly' role they occupy is not biblical. It is not what God intended for them or designed the Church to support. Because God did not create those men for such a rulership role, He did not put within them the skills and giftings necessary to pull it off.

That's a significant point, because the role of full time church leader, i.e. a pastor, vicar or priest, usually calls upon a man to be able to preach, teach, evangelise, pastor, counsel, administer, lead worship, lead music, deal with finances, look after big buildings, manage staff, manage a congregation and other roles too. That is an impossible combination of skills which no man is likely to have, unless he is apostle Paul.

Plus, he has to do all of that while trying to raise the money needed for his own wages by trying to persuade the very people he works for to give it as gifts. No other job involves such a wide mix of different roles or pressures or requires such a wide range of skills. It is like taking a man who is born with a natural gift for running the 100 metre sprint and asking him to compete instead in the decathlon, i.e. with 10 different events, for many of which he may be wholly unsuited.

How stressful would that be, having to throw the javelin in front of crowds or do the long jump or run the 1500 metres, when a man knows he's no good at those things? Yet he has to pretend at all times that he is confident and competent and prevent other people from doing those things instead of him. If not, and he begins to share the work and delegate to others, then people might begin to say:

*“Why are we paying him to do this when he’s getting someone else to do it for him instead? If he’s paid, he ought to do it himself.”*

Therefore, many church leaders feel inadequate and stressed, at least in relation to some of their duties. They know that for each of their tasks there is some man in the congregation who could do it far better. However, the leader must never admit that, or let that other man have a go at it, even while the leader is away on holiday.

If he did, people might notice that the replacement man is better at it. For that reason, as we saw, many church leaders make sure that if they ever ask a member of the congregation, or a visiting speaker to cover a service or to preach, or do some other task, then they will choose someone who will not do it too well, so as not to arouse comparisons which would embarrass the leader.

An additional problem this causes is that the leader is never able to go away and get a break, or even to get suitable help while he's present because he is afraid it might expose some of his own deficiencies, which he is desperately seeking to hide. That kind of insecurity doesn't often happen in other jobs. At least, I haven't seen it anywhere I have worked. But I see it in churches.

For example, if a solicitor has a court hearing coming up but he's afraid of doing advocacy, or feels the case is too hard for him, he can easily engage a barrister, or an agency Solicitor, to do it in his place. Or if he needs consultancy or advice he can buy it in. If he needs administrative support he can delegate tasks to a cashier or office manager or to another solicitor etc. That's obviously the right thing to do, but many church leaders feel they can't risk doing any of that.

What compounds such an insecure church leader's problem even more is that he cannot even train up young men to be ready to replace him when he is getting ready to retire. If he did they might do it too well and there could be pressure from the congregation to retire him early and appoint one of them instead.

I once spoke to a travelling preacher from South America and he told me that in his country there are no openings for young men to serve in churches because of the pastors' insecurity and fear of being supplanted. So all churches have just one leader who does everything. Therefore, their churches are constantly having to split as young men move out to start their own churches.

There is no other way for a young man to get any opportunity to preach, teach or pastor. The very first time he preaches is the day he starts his own church. So, it is not just in Britain that we see these problems. It is everywhere that doesn't operate church in a biblical way.

Another factor that promotes insecurity is that some men are in church leadership for a career and that makes them competitive. If so, they are often ambitious to do well and to get a bigger church, or to see their own church grow bigger than the 'rival' churches nearby. If a man has any such motives then that ambition will, in itself, cause huge problems, because the church is not a business and leadership is not a career and never can be one.

There is no place in churches for selfish ambition. It can even cause problems in an ordinary secular job, but in a church setting the problems are far greater, because the whole model is wrong. You can't work for God while also building a kingdom for yourself. There must be no envy, competitiveness or rivalry, just a sincere desire to obey God and serve His people.

On top of all those natural fleshly factors, there is the added problem that every church leader is a particular target for demonic attack. The demons will inevitably single him out and try to undermine him, and arouse others to oppose him and that will compound all the existing problems. They will attempt to increase his insecurity, puff up his pride, waste his time, damage his marriage and family, and put financial, sexual and other temptations in his path.

However, because he was never even meant to be in that solitary role, and because the biblical safeguards are not in place, he is much more vulnerable to what the demons throw at him. If, however, he was just one of a group of elders and had a secular job which provided all his financial needs and gave him a proper outlet for his personal ambition (which a church can never be), then he would be better placed to withstand the demons' tactics and schemes

Many church leaders feel they need to protect their status, their income and pension. They even believe they are entitled to do so. They can easily persuade themselves they have the right to defend themselves, and that the end justifies the means. That being so, pretty much any kind of intrigue and manipulation is justified, given that it is needed for 'self preservation'. But Jesus did not call us to a ministry of self preservation. He called us to take up our crosses, deny ourselves and die to self, not to defend ourselves.

This problem amongst church leaders is nothing new. It was even there in the days of the prophet Jeremiah. When he arrived on the scene and gave genuine prophecies and teaching from God, the established leaders of his day saw him as a threat to their ministries. Therefore they opposed him and persecuted him in every way they could:

*<sup>1</sup>Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. <sup>2</sup>Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD.*

*Jeremiah 20:1-2 (ESV)*

No insecure man should ever take up a position as a leader in any church. He should wait until he has dealt with that insecurity and is free of its influence. An insecure man cannot be trusted to look after God's people. He will usually sacrifice them at some point to defend himself.

### **Envy and ambition within the church - men jockeying for positions and prominence and for their own ministry to be noticed and admired**

An aspect of our flesh nature is that we are already naturally prone to be envious of others. But the unbiblical traditional model of church intensifies that. From what I've seen of church leadership, there is more envy and competitiveness amongst church leaders than in the secular workplace. Apostle Paul spoke of this feature:

*<sup>15</sup>Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. <sup>16</sup>The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel; <sup>17</sup>the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*

*Philippians 1:15-17 (RSV)*

Many church leaders are seeking to be recognised and to be prominent, because there is a craving within the fallen human nature to be significant. That carnal desire will cause some men to use any methods

that will help them to maintain their position and status. Many leaders are more interested in holding on to their own position than in helping other people to grow and fulfil God's calling in their own lives.

God actually wants us to be delighted when other people around us rise up to reach their potential. We should be equally happy to see God's purposes fulfilled through the ministry of another man as through our own ministry. Why would we not be pleased, if our genuine aim is to see God's kingdom grow? However, if our real aim is primarily to achieve success and recognition for ourselves, then it would make sense, in a perverted way, to hold back those who show any potential to become rivals to us.

Have you ever noticed how rare it is for Christian leaders in their books, websites or day to day work, to promote the ministries of any other men? Most leaders focus almost entirely on their own ministry, with little or no attention given to raising up, recommending or encouraging others who might be seen as a potential rival.

That is awfully sad and is the opposite of what God wants. Contrast that with the supportive attitude that Paul had towards Timothy, and the way Timothy, likewise, helped others:

*<sup>19</sup>I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. <sup>20</sup>I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. <sup>21</sup>They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup>But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.*

*Philippians 2:19-22 (RSV)*

### **How a leader's isolation and lack of accountability can lead him to fall into sexual or financial sin**

If he didn't already face enough problems, a church leader's isolated position, lack of any boss, and the absence of effective accountability, means he is unusually vulnerable to falling into sexual or financial sin. It may begin with something which seems small, such as being dishonest and undisciplined with his use of time.

He might start by just taking some time off when he is meant to be working, because nobody is watching or keeping any tally of the hours he works. I can think of a number of leaders who have done this, for example watching DVDs during the day when they are supposed to be working.

It can lead on to other little lies and the cutting of corners, until he eventually falls into a major sin. That may well occur when the demons working on him have got his conscience sufficiently hardened by a long series of unfaithful or dishonest choices.

### **Balaam was used by God as a prophet, but he became corrupt, just as any leader, and any of us, could do**

It is not just false Christians or unbelievers who commit sexual or financial sins or become corrupt. It can also happen to real Christians, just as it happened in the Old Testament. Consider the example of the prophet Balaam. He disgraced himself and betrayed his own people, the Jews, by showing King Balak how to undermine them.

Let us firstly address the question of whether Balaam was ever a real prophet to begin with. A lot of people assume he wasn't, or that he cannot have been, because of the depths to which he later sank. However note what Peter says on the subject of false prophets:

*<sup>1</sup>But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. <sup>2</sup> And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. <sup>3</sup> And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

**2 Peter 2:1-3 (ESV)**

Although Peter goes on to confirm that Balaam went astray and was greedy for financial gain, he indicates that despite his carnality Balaam was, nevertheless, a real prophet. He clearly refers to him as the “*prophet*”, not the “alleged prophet” or even “false prophet”:

*<sup>14</sup>They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! <sup>15</sup> Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, <sup>16</sup> but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness*

**2 Peter 2:14-16 (ESV)**

Balaam's decline began because he wanted money. We see in the book of Numbers how he repeatedly toyed with Balak's idea that he should curse God's people, the Jews, in return for money. But he never actually did it. That was partly because God restrained him, but also partly because he held himself back from the brink. However, in the end, he did what Balak wanted, albeit indirectly.

He would not curse the Jews himself but he told Balak how to get the Jewish people to fall into sexual sin and idolatry, such that God would be obliged to curse them anyway as a result of their sinful actions. Thus, in the end, a prophet was brought to the place where he deliberately harmed God's people and disgraced himself. If that could happen to Balaam it could happen to any leader, or to any of us, if we go too close to the edge or toy too often with the idea of sin:

*<sup>14</sup>But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.*

**Revelation 2:14 (ESV)**

### **The unwise way that many churches select and train men for leadership positions**

We have seen that the whole structure and model of traditional church leadership is wrong. So is the way that young men are brought into leadership positions, when many of them do not have the life experience, and particularly experience of a secular job or profession, to be able to handle the role of leading a church.

How can you advise and counsel people in your church, most of whom have jobs, if you yourself have never had a job, or only very briefly? It would mean that whole area of their lives and the problems they face at work would be a closed book to you, and something you are not qualified to speak on.

Rather than rehearse all these points here, let me reproduce a letter I once wrote to the Trustees of an FIEC church which was proposing to appoint a young man of 23 to begin the process of training for full time church leadership.

He had graduated from university at the age of 21 and then spent two years in a trainee scheme within the church, i.e. shadowing leaders and learning about church work generally. The leaders of the church then proposed at a Members' meeting that this young man should do two more years in the church as a senior trainee, followed by just two years in an ordinary job. So, to their credit, they did at least concede that he ought to get some very brief experience of a job in a secular workplace.

However, they were planning to help him to get this job, rather than just leaving him to get a job for himself as any other person would have to. Then the plan was for him to go to Bible College prior to commencing full time church ministry. I thought it was a really bad idea, so I wrote to the Trustees of the church to explain why. Here is a copy of that letter, with all names and other identifying features removed. Unsurprisingly, my advice was completely ignored:

*Dear Trustees,*

***Proposal discussed last week at members meeting re xxxxx's future role***

*We are writing to set out our thoughts on the question of the proposed role for xxxxx after the summer.*

*As you know, we made some comments during the discussion at the members' meeting. There were a number of other points which I would like to have made, but there was no time to do so. We are writing therefore, to explain more fully why we think the proposal is not a good idea – for xxxxx, for the church as a whole, and for any future congregation to whom he might minister.*

*The proposal is that xxxxx, who has never had an ordinary paid job, should do two more years of "senior trainee" type work at (name of church) (age 23-25), then just two years of ordinary employment (age 25-27). That brief two year working career would then be followed by Bible college and permanent church ministry thereafter.*

*We feel uneasy about the proposal for many difficult reasons. It would seem much wiser for him to get an ordinary job now and thoroughly learn a profession or trade for 7–10 years or more, and then come back to ministry later. Any choice of career will do. It just needs to be something challenging and substantial which he can take seriously and pursue with 100% enthusiasm. An obvious possibility might be to do PGCE and then become a class music teacher or even an instrumental teacher. There are many other options too, e.g. retail management, accountancy and so on.*

*Our main reasons for recommending he get a long term job prior to entering into church ministry are as follows:*

- 1. To understand people and be effective in pastoring them, one needs to have had sustained experience of ordinary working life i.e. being in a long term job like nearly everyone else. Most people spend about 50% of their waking life at work, where they face a wide range of problems, pressures and issues that can stretch a person to their limits. If a church pastor has not experienced enough of those things, he may lack the ability to effectively minister to people in relation to about half of what their lives consist of.*

2. *Spending many years in ordinary employment enables one to experience the rigours and hard knocks of the world out there, and to learn how to deal with it all. This includes, amongst other things:*

- a. Working with difficult bosses and colleagues, including some who are harsh, unfair and even corrupt*
- b. Meeting deadlines, sometimes unrealistic and stressful ones*
- c. Handling clients/customers and the demands they can make*
- d. Other work related disciplines, which are not always required to the same extent in ministry life e.g. meeting sales/output targets, getting up early, working shifts, taking work home, complying with regulations, being accountable for how our time is used, and so on.*
- e. Dealing with issues of conscience (e.g. telling the truth even under intense personal or commercial pressure, dealing with dishonest colleagues/bosses, learning how to act when required to be around ungodly/carnal/sordid conversations etc.)*
- f. Workplace bullying, manipulation and inappropriate rivalry*
- g. Juggling work, home and church obligations when the demands of each add up to more than 100% of a week*
- h. The stresses of looking for and finding a job*
- i. The pressures of living with job uncertainty/possible redundancy*
- j. Competing to win promotions*
- k. Learning how to lead and supervise unbelievers*
- l. Dealing with staff discipline/dismissals*

*Our job is probably the main single thing that God uses to develop our characters and grow in us the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is generally also the main furnace in which He melts away the dross from our lives and refines us.*

3. *It is wrong to assume if someone goes into ministry that it is inevitably for life. Many things are just for a time, and that is equally true of ministry. We need to give God complete freedom to move us into and out of ministry work whenever He pleases. It cannot be viewed as a permanent "career". Therefore, everyone needs to have a trade or profession to which they can return at the drop of a hat. Otherwise:*

- a. A person can realise in their 30s, 40s or 50s that ministry is not, or is no longer, the right thing for them and/or that they have burned out or become ineffectual and/or insecure. But they can be trapped in ministry due to lack of training and experience in any other job, such that they feel there is no alternative but to soldier on.*



- b. A church or organisation can, likewise, feel trapped into keeping someone in ministry, where they perceive there are problems, but they feel that the minister has no other work options and they don't want to cast him adrift.*

*In short, any person in ministry should always maintain an escape route/exit strategy, i.e. realistic options to leave and resume their profession (or go into something similar to it) if it ever becomes necessary. Ironically, the fact that they always have the option of leaving can be the very thing that enables a man to feel secure and confident enough to stay in a ministry role.*

- 4. Where a person realises that ministry is no longer the right thing for them, and yet they can't move out of it, that can be a dangerous position for all concerned. At best they could become ineffectual. At worst, they could deal with their frustration and insecurity by becoming controlling and manipulative in order to defend their position from perceived threats. That would damage those in their care, as well as harming themselves. This is not a merely hypothetical scenario. It is a surprisingly widespread problem in churches, and produces tragic consequences.*
- 5. It is not biblical to go straight into ministry without having genuinely learned a trade. Jesus was a builder. So were His brothers, James and Jude. Apollos was a lawyer, Luke was a doctor, Matthew was a tax collector, and Peter and most of the others were fishermen. Paul was a tent maker. In fact, every Rabbi, no matter how eminent, had to learn a trade or profession. It was obligatory, even for Paul, a very high flier, who trained under Gamaliel. Therefore, learning a trade was by no means unique to Paul.*
- 6. It is wise for a person in ministry to make sure that they always have the option at any point in the future of becoming selffunding by working part time. That keeps them financially independent and also keeps their skills up to date. Paul funded his own ministry by working as a tent maker. However, that option is not possible if one has never learned any profession or trade to begin with, or if one has only ever had a very brief career. Merely to make a start in a job for a couple of years is not the same thing as thoroughly learning something.*
- 7. In our experience, (in law and business analysis), a professional person cannot be said to be genuinely trained and independent in their job until they have worked for at least 7 years. Until then they still need supervision and wouldn't have enough confidence and experience to be able to take a gap of several years and still be able to return to the same or a similar job.*
- 8. The most practical time to learn a profession or trade is when one is young. It is very hard to break into the job market, and even more so into a profession, if it is left till later in life.*
- 9. Time spent in employment is also needed to test and confirm the genuineness of a person's calling to ministry and to see whether they have built up enough of a stockpile of skills, character and experience to be sure they are ready for it.*
- 10. Time spent in employment allows a young person to grow up and to become more mature in their character and faith. This enables them to be more effective, balanced, understanding and realistic when they do eventually go into ministry.*
- 11. If one aspires to a church leadership role, one also benefits from having spent a number of years as an ordinary member in the main body of a church without a leading role. Otherwise, how can a person know what it is like for all the other people who are not leading? Having been a trainee,*

*xxxxx has already moved straight into a quasi leadership role at 21 and has by-passed the normal membership stage.*

*These points set out above apply to anyone in xxxxx's situation, not just to him. However, the points are probably even more relevant to him, because xxxxx's Dad has also been in full time ministry since before xxxxx was born. Therefore, xxxxx has never observed, even second hand, what it is like to be in ordinary employment. All he has ever known, since childhood, is church leadership, either his Dad's or his own.*

*Therefore, we would recommend that this proposal be rethought. In our view xxxxx should be advised to seek a career, for much more than just two years, and to see whether God then calls him into full time ministry work in his 30s or later. If he does, his subsequent ministry is likely to be a great deal more effective and long lasting. (The burnout/drop out rate for church ministers is alarmingly high). In the meantime, he can be getting on with studying the Bible for himself and even going to Bible college part time.*

*It was said at the meeting that one reason why the current proposal finds favour with the leaders is that it suits the present needs of the church, given the recent departure of zzzzz (former leader). However, the needs of (name of church) cannot be allowed to impinge upon any decision as to what is right for xxxxx to do. Even assuming there is a need, it would be wrong to meet it at the expense of jeopardising his future.*

*I hope these thoughts are of some help.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Sean Kehoe*