

CHAPTER 11

UNBIBLICAL CHURCH STRUCTURE ALSO PROMOTES COMPROMISE ON DOCTRINE

*¹⁴Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen for you oracles
that are false and misleading.*

Lamentations 2:14 (ESV)

⁵²“Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

Luke 11:52 (NIV)

In addition to all its other problems and disadvantages the traditional, unbiblical model of church also promotes doctrinal compromise. One reason why it does so is that a leader knows that teaching accurately from the Bible will upset people. Some of those members may have large incomes and could choose to leave the church.

Such concerns mean a paid leader who depends on the church for his income is going to be tempted to steer clear of anything controversial and even to knowingly compromise on the truth. That temptation could have been avoided very easily if that leader had an ordinary, paid secular job and just operated part time as an unpaid elder in the church.

If so, money would have no hold over him. Neither he, nor the church, would need any money. Then it would not matter so much to him if people left the church because they are offended by what the Bible says. He would then be able to teach honestly and fearlessly without any concern for his income or the welfare of his family. But few leaders are in that relaxed position.

Many leaders feel trapped by the fact that they need an income in order to look after their families and that that income has to come from the very people they are leading. It creates an obvious conflict of interest, which, in the business world would be noticed straightaway and removed or regulated. But in the churches very few restraints are put in place to deal with this temptation to doctrinal compromise.

As a result of this an idealistic young man who wants to preach the truth can gradually turn into a compromiser. It doesn't happen overnight. It can take years and will intensify when he gets a wife and children. But it could all be avoided if we operated church in a biblical way. Then the temptation to compromise would be greatly reduced.

We are actually under a duty *not to allow* ourselves to be deceived or wrongly taught

The usual way to see this is to say that God wants leaders to protect every church member from being deceived or taught false doctrine. However, God also considers each of us to be under a duty to *protect*

ourselves from deception and false teaching but also from being used and exploited. So, we are not to see ourselves as wholly innocent, defenceless victims.

God expects us to show some backbone and to be assertive enough and discerning enough to identify and challenge false teaching and wrong behaviour. In other words, we have a duty not to allow ourselves to be led astray, or at least to try to avoid it. Therefore, we cannot regard ourselves as blameless if we are deceived, exploited or dominated because we should not have let it happen:

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?” ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “Take heed that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.

Mark 13:3-8 (RSV)

Note how Jesus says “*take heed that no one leads you astray*”. Clearly, that means He puts at least some of the responsibility on us to protect ourselves from deception. Likewise, we are to watch out for false Christs, for example, the many versions of Christ presented by the New Age, or Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons or even the watered down version of Jesus presented by many churches. Moreover, we have a duty to be on our guard against false prophets:

²¹ And then if any one says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. ²² False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand.

Mark 13:21-23 (RSV)

In this next verse Paul warns us against being taken captive by “*philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition.....*” This means false teachings but also unbiblical man made traditions which aren’t from the Bible, which is the very thing we see so much of in traditional denominational churches of every kind.

But the point is that when Paul says “*See to it*” he is putting the responsibility on you to prevent yourself being deceived. You can’t delegate that duty to the leaders of your church while you just sit back and believe everything you are told.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8 (ESV)

Is it right or wrong to point out the errors in other men’s teaching and practice?

Despite the clear instructions Jesus gave, plus the example set by apostles Paul and John who openly confronted false teaching and rebuked deceivers, a convention has arisen in today’s churches such that it is considered wrong to disagree with a leader’s teaching. It is seen as even more unthinkable to do that in public.

And yet it is exactly what Jesus and the apostles did whenever they came across false teaching. They did not allow the need for politeness to prevent them speaking up plainly. In doing that they behaved in exactly the opposite way to how most of us operate. Look at how Jesus tells the Sadducees very bluntly “you are quite wrong”:

¹⁸ And Sad'ducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, ¹⁹ “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the wife, and raise up children for his brother. ²⁰ There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no children; ²¹ and the second took her, and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; ²² and the seven left no children. Last of all the woman also died. ²³ In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife.” ²⁴ Jesus said to them, “Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵ For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶ And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? ²⁷ He is not God of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.”

Mark 12:18-27 (RSV)

In this next passage we see apostle Paul going much further in terms of assertiveness. Firstly, he rebukes Elymas for being a deceiver and he says it in front of everyone. But not only that, Paul then declares that Elymas will be made blind for a short time as a judgment upon him. I am not suggesting we should imitate him in that but we can certainly learn from this incident that defending the truth is more important to God than being polite and avoiding public controversy:

⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But El'ymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Acts 13:6-12 (RSV)

There is also the famous episode where apostle Paul dug his heels in and argued with the “circumcision party”. They were Jewish believers who insisted that we need to obey the Law of Moses and even that Gentile Christian converts need to be circumcised. But Paul was adamant that the Law of Moses had ended and, moreover, that Gentiles were not under any duty to be circumcised. Paul was willing for this to lead to a public row and for people to be upset rather than compromise on the truth:

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Acts 15:1-2 (RSV)

Likewise, Paul was willing to be very direct in the way he spoke about Hymenaeus and Alexander. He bluntly described them as having “*made shipwreck of their faith*”, which proves Paul didn’t mince his words when the truth was at stake:

¹⁹holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰among them Hymenae'us and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

1 Timothy 1:19-20 (RSV)

Note also how very bluntly apostle Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians about false teachers. He does not pull his punches or use soft diplomatic language. He is utterly direct about what they are, even calling them “*servants of Satan*”:

¹²And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

2 Corinthians 11:12-15 (RSV)

But it wasn’t just strangers that Paul confronted. He stood up to Peter and also Barnabas when they both took the wrong stance over the argument with the circumcision party. Paul did not hold back because it was Peter or because it was his friend Barnabas. He told them both straight and he did it publicly.

¹¹But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹²For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Galatians 2:11-14 (RSV)

Paul was so committed to defending the true Gospel that he even went so far as to say that if anyone preaches a false gospel “*let him be accursed*”. That wasn’t a mere figure of speech. He really meant it because defending the true Gospel is of the utmost importance:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed

Galatians 1:6-9 (RSV)

What is the right way to deal with concerns, complaints or accusations against an elder?

If you are in a traditional hierarchical church there is basically no way of dealing with concerns or complaints about a leader. The system is designed to protect the leader from the congregation, not the other way around as with the biblical model for church. But if you are in a biblical house church with elders then the Bible provides what I call the “*Matthew 18 procedure*” for dealing with concerns, complaints and accusations.

That said, in addition to that there is also a wise safeguard to protect elders such that an accusation against him should not be accepted unless there are two or more witnesses. That is a sensible measure to prevent taking disciplinary action against an elder when it is just one person’s word against another:

Never admit any charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

1 Timothy 5:19 (RSV)

Therefore, if there is a problem then we are meant to use the Matthew 18 procedure which Jesus gave us, such that we tackle the dispute in three stages:

- a) Go one to one to make your complaint face to face to the other person, regardless of whether he is an elder or not. So, begin by seeking to resolve it privately and quietly just between yourselves.
- b) If that fails, go back again but this time with one or two witnesses who will attend the meeting and hear what each of you say.
- c) If that fails then take it to the whole church, which means all 10-20 members of the house church. That is what you need to picture in your mind when you imagine doing this.

¹⁵ ***“Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that on the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be confirmed. ¹⁷ And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, he is to be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.***

Matthew 18:15-17 (NASB)

The truth is that this Matthew 18 procedure is only capable of being used in a small house church with 10-20 people or 50 at most. If it is a large traditional church it becomes impossible. Can you even imagine raising grievances before the whole church, *as Jesus told us to do*, if the church has 500 members? It would be totally unworkable. Therefore, of course, the Matthew 18 procedure is never used in traditional churches. I have certainly never seen it used. Have you?

You cannot assume a leader or teacher is valid just because he is in the same denomination as you.

I have been surprised by how many people assume that the best way to achieve doctrinal accuracy is by making sure you belong to the right denomination. They imagine that their own denomination obviously has the right beliefs and thus any leader who belongs to that denomination can be relied on to preach true doctrine.

Not only is that approach absurdly naïve. It is also wrong in the sense that the person is delegating to their leaders their own duty to assess and discern, instead of doing it themselves, as God wants them to do. The duty to judge other men's teaching is always yours and can never be delegated.

Therefore, you can't keep yourself safe from false doctrines by simply limiting yourself to sermons preached by men of your own denomination. They may be right and they may be wrong but their denomination is no guarantee of anything because all denominations, and all preachers, get things wrong. They just make their mistakes over different issues and doctrines.

There is therefore no such thing as the "right" denomination. They are right if they agree with the Bible on a given issue and wrong if they don't. But in each case that has to be assessed and weighed up (diakrino) issue by issue, not across the board.

What to do if you are in an unbiblical church at the moment

I first became a Christian, aged 21, while I was in the Roman Catholic Church. I then stayed in it for another two years because I naively thought I could influence people within it and reach other Catholics with the real Gospel. I hoped I might even be able to share what I had discovered with the priest and he might be saved. That was utterly naive, as I eventually learned. You as an individual cannot influence the Roman Catholic Church, but it will certainly influence you if you don't get out.

No matter what you or any other individual might do, the Roman Catholic church as a whole will remain unchanged to the very end. Indeed, I think it is getting worse and this current pope, Francis, is a real villain. The only wise thing you can do is to leave it immediately and go to a biblical church. Then you have a chance of being fed and taught properly and you can, hopefully, make some real relationships with other Bible-believing Christians.

I would like to stress the fact that I am not simply picking on the Roman Catholic Church alone. The very same advice would apply if you are part of a liberal or high Anglican Church or a liberal Methodist church promoting same sex marriage or a Reformed church which is pushing Calvinism.

It also applies to a Pentecostal church if it has ceased to honour the Bible and instead follows unbiblical ideas and practices. There are many examples of false teaching and unbiblical practices in *all* the above denominations, and most of the others too. Indeed, even in house churches which are not part of any denomination you may still encounter errors, wrong teaching and even misconduct.

There is no such thing as a church in which you don't need to exercise discernment. So, I am not advocating biblical house churches because I imagine they have no faults and never go wrong. It is simply that they are likely to have fewer faults and to go wrong less often.

It is not simply one denomination that has gone wrong. Error, deception and compromise are rapidly spreading throughout all the denominations. Therefore, you have to be alert to it and seek to discern clearly what is going on in whatever church you may be part of, *even in a house church*. And you must do that for yourself, issue by issue, carefully comparing what they teach with what the Bible says.

The need for discernment about false teaching and false practices in churches

Once your eyes open and you begin to be more alert and discerning, you will realise that all sorts of wrong things are being taught and done in most churches. It would be nice if these doctrinal errors or unbiblical practices were all minor and peripheral. But they aren't. Often the issues at stake are central to the Gospel message and have potentially ruinous effects.

God therefore expects us to be on our guard everywhere and keenly alert to weigh everything we are told and to compare it with what the Bible says. Therefore, if we are deceived it is at least partly our own fault. If we are properly vigilant and examine the Scriptures thoroughly, we will not be deceived, or at least not as often or for as long. God therefore holds each of us responsible for avoiding being deceived.

So, we are not to be mindless or passive recipients of other men's teaching. We are to scrutinise everything we hear and read to see whether it is authentic. If it isn't, we are to reject it. We are not to submit to any other man's teaching if it is false and unbiblical:

¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. ²⁰If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²²(referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? ²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

Colossians 2:16-23 (RSV)

In our approach to leaders we must be neither cynical nor naïve, but realistic

When I started as a Christian I was unusually naïve about the errors and sins of church leaders. My eyes were blind and I couldn't see any wrongdoing, even when it was staring me in the face. I remember a pastor in the early 1980s who had to give up his position because it was alleged that he had had an affair with a woman in the congregation.

When I heard of it my immediate reaction was outrage on his behalf, i.e. that anybody could be so horrible as to accuse him of that. So, I went to see him to offer him my complete support. He looked rather sheepish but thanked me. His wife sat in the corner looking rather tense. Later I learned that the allegations were actually completely true.

So, I'd been too naïve and had just assumed his innocence out of loyalty, without ever considering the facts. I had got the idea in my head that every church leader is a 'man of God' and that God would always want me to support him and not to believe anything bad about him.

Many years later I went through a very different phase, from 2002 to 2008, where I came across one devious, manipulative church leader after another. Partly it was coincidence but it was also that I was becoming more discerning and was therefore seeing things which I had previously been blind to.

However, in part, I think God was also deliberately arranging for me to bump into this long series of dishonest men. I think He orchestrated it because He wanted to add to my education and to force open my closed eyes. He also wanted me to be able to see the real extent of the corruption and apostasy in the British church and not to view such leaders as very rare exceptions.

That series of experiences left me feeling shell shocked and I was becoming cynical. But that extreme wasn't right either. It's wrong to be so naïve that you are incapable of seeing wickedness in others. On the other hand, it's also wrong if you get to the point where you positively expect to be lied to and start to assume leaders to be corrupt before you even know them.

I feel I have recovered from the series of shocks I went through at the hands of that succession of false and worldly leaders. The right position, of course, is to be just as realistic about church leaders as you are about any other group. Some are genuine. Some are not. Some are corrupt, or are heading in that direction, but some are shining examples of what a godly man should be.

We need to learn how to tell the difference and not to prejudge leaders or make unwarranted assumptions in any direction. And it is also important not to rush into making your mind up about a leader, either for him or against him. Until you have enough evidence to make a proper decision just keep an open mind.

What is God's view of false prophets and false teachers?

This is not a minor issue. God feels very strongly about His Church being corrupted and led astray by false men. That is why He wants us to take this so seriously and to learn how to discern the real nature of these men so we can resist the false ones and counteract their influence within the Church.

The prophet Jeremiah encountered the same problem in his own day and expressed it this way:

⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 29:8-9 (ESV)

See also what God said through the prophet Zechariah and how plainly He says He will punish such men:

³“My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders....”

Zechariah 10:3(a) (ESV)