

## **CHAPTER 14**

### **WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THE PROBLEMS WITH CHURCH STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP?**

*<sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”*

*Matthew 28:19-20 (RSV)*

#### **What is the true scale of the problem?**

I have tried hard not to exaggerate. If anything, I am probably understating the true scale of the crisis in the Western churches. The problems are immense. Very few churches are biblically structured or led. Moreover, very few are making disciples and training them, as opposed to just entertaining an audience. Few churches teach the Bible faithfully and even fewer allow the gifts of the Holy Spirit to operate.

We have a largely man-made church pursuing men's objectives in man's way. Instead, we should be operating church in God's way as demonstrated in the New Testament and seeking to fulfil the Great Commission that Jesus set out for us, i.e. to go into all the world and *make disciples*. Instead of doing that, we are mainly making passive spectators, and keeping them as dependents, who don't know the Bible and aren't mature, rather than enabling them to grow up so they can start training up disciples themselves.

That is what is meant to happen, so that disciples are multiplied exponentially. Jesus' plan was that Person A would train up say 10 disciples over a number of years and each of them would do the same, bringing the total of trained disciples to 100. They would then each train up 10, bringing the total to 1000 and so on. That is exactly what the Early Church did, which is why the Church expanded so fast and “*turned the world upside down*”.

However, we now have a situation where very few churches are training up disciples and even fewer are training those disciples *in how to train up more disciples*, so that everyone is doing it, not just leaders. The church can't grow exponentially, or even arithmetically, if it is only leaders who make disciples. And the situation is even worse if they don't train up disciples either. That is one of the main reasons why the number of Christians is declining and has been throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

#### **What are the chances of you finding a biblical church led by honest men?**

To be frank, your chances today of finding a biblical church led by honest men are not high. Certainly, if all you do is wander into the nearest traditional church and join that, then the chances are close to zero. But, if you search around diligently, exercise discernment, and ask plenty of questions, you might be able to find a reasonably biblical and honest church somewhere, at least within driving distance.

Sadly, the very fact that you ask such probing questions will, in itself, cause many churches to be wary of you and to reject you. Though that's not pleasant, it does at least help you to identify those churches

which are best avoided, because if they can't cope with sincere questions about their doctrines and practices then they are not the right church for you to join.

I remember an example of this some years ago when my wife and I were looking for a church after we were effectively driven out of Rick's church due to challenging Rick about his conduct. We were therefore wary of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. So when we went to try out a number of churches, we kept our eyes and ears open and also asked a lot of questions. At that time, I had not yet realised that God's intended model for church is the small house church. Therefore, we were only looking at large traditional churches.

One Sunday we went along to a 'Vineyard' church, which was very large, having perhaps 500 people present at the service we attended. We deliberately went to a church over 20 miles from the town we lived in as our names had been blackened by Rick in many of the churches there. He told many lies about us and turned all the local leaders against us. However, we were totally unknown in this Vineyard church.

As soon as we went in my wife said she didn't like it and didn't feel it was right. She felt uneasy about it. I tried to keep an open mind until I had spoken to one of the leaders. Before that conversation happened, however, I was disturbed by the fact that the main leader kept staring at me. He was on the stage which was raised up and we were several rows back in the middle of a congregation of 500 or more.

Yet he kept looking at me repeatedly and for prolonged moments. I clearly saw concern and disapproval in his face. He had no idea who I was but he evidently didn't like what he saw! I can only assume the spirit in him didn't like the Spirit in me. He plainly felt I was not the sort of person he wanted in his church, even though he had no idea who I was and we had never spoken.

Later, after the service, I spoke to the No 2 man, the deputy leader. I asked what facilities they had for young children. Our kids were about 8 and 6 years old respectively. He said they had an active children's ministry in the church. I then asked, very politely, whether the *Bible* was taught to the children or just games, songs and activities etc.

As I said that it was as if I had let off a stink bomb. His face hardened and he became wary, hostile and even sarcastic. He said "*Well we don't line them up in little rows and do Bible studies with them*". I was taken aback by the sudden turn of his mood and tone towards us and I said, with a touch of sarcasm of my own: "*Well, it's not being in rows that I'm concerned about. I was just asking whether the Bible is taught to the children or not*".

I had asked my question in the first place because in the church we had been in for the previous seven years, the children's work was not based on teaching the Bible. Instead, they emphasised fun and games almost all the time, as if the Bible was beyond the kids' ability to understand (which it isn't). He really didn't like the questions at all and to my surprise he then said very directly "*I don't think this would be the right kind of church for you*".

He had come to that stark conclusion after the very brief conversation set out above. Virtually nothing else had been said between us. He obviously had his own kind of feral discernment which alerted him to the kind of genuine Bible believing Christians who would be a threat to him.

The point was he had obviously had some ‘bad’ experiences, from his perspective, of Bible believing Christians challenging the absence of the Bible from their services, not just for children but for adults. He sensed, correctly, that if we were to join his church we would be likely to start asking awkward questions about whether their teaching and practices were biblical. At the time I knew nothing about Vineyard churches but what I later learned increased my concerns.

Today I would be aware that many of them involve a mystical worship style and other practices which are reminiscent of the New Age. They also tend to tolerate, or even promote, a carnal, worldly lifestyle and mode of dress, especially amongst younger members. Though I knew very little about Vineyard churches at the time, the deputy leader (and the main leader who had stared at me beforehand) could tell what I was, and that I wouldn’t fit in. They saw what I was far quicker than I saw what they were.

I should also add that the main leader had said a number of things during the service which struck me as odd and worldly. Moreover, his wife, who was in her 30s was dressed quite suggestively, particularly given that she was at a church service. Therefore, I was uneasy about what I was seeing and hearing.

But the main leader, who had never said a word to me, or heard a word from me, knew even more clearly that I was bad news from his perspective. Therefore, we were rejected by them before we got any chance to decide to reject them. They clearly knew how to keep out people who might be a threat.

By the way, many years later a young woman applied to my law firm for a job. She had put on her CV that she attended a Vineyard church (a different one) and that she and her boyfriend were co-leaders of an ‘Alpha Group’ there, plus they helped with the children’s work.

I should mention here that “Alpha” is not something I would recommend for evangelism. The problem is it is a watered down version of the Gospel with virtually zero mention of repentance, Hell, judgment or the Lake of Fire. So, her involvement in that set off another alarm bell in my mind.

I was interested in her application, but as our conversation progressed, she told me, quite openly and without any embarrassment or awkwardness, that she and her boyfriend were living together while unmarried. She even made a joke of it and said that it helped to keep the bills down. Plainly, she saw nothing wrong in what she was doing which suggests nobody in her Vineyard church had objected to their carnal lifestyle.

My point is that her worldly attitude and lifestyle were, evidently, no bar to becoming a member of a Vineyard church, and even to taking up leadership positions. By contrast, my asking an innocent question about whether the children’s work involved Bible teaching rendered me unsuitable even to join that particular Vineyard church as a member.

Had proper biblical discipline been in operation at her church, then the girl who was living unmarried with her boyfriend (and he too) would have been asked to step down from any leadership position. Moreover, if they would not agree to live separately, then they should have been asked to leave the church entirely. However, in the situation my wife and I were in, in a different Vineyard church, it was we who were excluded.

## **How to be discerning and alert about falseness in the church without being cynical, suspicious and critical**

This is a very difficult issue to address, because we have more than one objective. If all we had to try to do was one of the following options it would be easy:

- a) to avoid the risk of being overly suspicious, even if we never achieve any discernment **OR**
- b) to be discerning and avoid being deceived, but at the expense of becoming cynical about most of the people we meet.

Either of these positions on its own would be quite easy to achieve. Most people tend to adopt one or the other, or to at least veer towards one or other extreme. But neither position is good enough. We have to do something much harder, which is to attempt *at the same time* to

- a) be discerning and to watch out for falseness in those we deal with, so as to avoid being deceived, but, also, to
- b) avoid being cynical or suspicious, so as not to assume the worst about everybody we meet before we even know them.

To achieve that kind of balance takes a long time, if indeed it can ever be fully achieved. Realistically, all we can hope for is to achieve that balance most of the time and to minimise the excesses in either direction.

### **What is the difference between being '*discerning*' and being '*suspicious*'.**

This is an important question and deserves some careful thought because being discerning is a valuable skill which we are commanded to develop, whereas being suspicious is a fault. So, we need to be able to tell them apart. Being discerning simply means you approach every person or situation with an open mind ready to assess the position and form a view in whatever direction the evidence takes you, but only when you have enough information to do so reliably.

So, there are no pre-conceived ideas or judgements. You only form those when it is possible to do so safely because you know that every conclusion you form must be based on facts and reliable evidence that you have tested and checked to see whether it is true. Yet, a discerning person is well aware that he has a duty to question and test everything he hears and everyone he meets in order to avoid being deceived.

The point is, however, that he does not ask those question or check those things because he already assumes the person or situation is false. He assumes nothing, in either direction and has no preconceived ideas. He only arrives at conclusions or forms opinions when there is a proper basis for doing so.

But the opposite is the case with a suspicious person. He does not approach every person or situation with an open mind. Instead, he comes to situations with a mind that is already persuaded, due to past hurts and bad experiences, that this person or situation is likely to be false, corrupt, dangerous or out to get him.

Can you see that such preconceived ideas, even if based on numerous past experiences, are the very opposite of discernment? Discernment is the process by which an open minded but careful and sensible person arrives at conclusions, on a case by case basis, after appropriate thought and weighing of evidence.

So, to enter a situation already having an opinion is the opposite of discernment. It means you are not exercising discernment at all because you are not openly and fairly weighing the facts and the evidence. How can you be when you had already made up your mind before any of the facts were known?

This is a problem with which many people struggle. They claim to be discerning but they are often just being suspicious, labelling people before they have even met them. And yet we are commanded to be discerning at all times. Therefore, we need to monitor ourselves for any signs that we are becoming sour or are prejudging people and making sweeping statements about people just because we have had bad experiences in the past and are still scarred by it.

This balance is harder to arrive at than you might imagine, especially if we have been wounded by people in the past. We have a natural tendency to defend ourselves and we often think that can be done by being suspicious and wary and expecting people to mistreat us. That doesn't help and actually just creates problems.

Indeed, a suspicious person will often behave in eccentric, anti social ways which become a problem for others and even damage others. They create problems where there were none. As the saying goes "*damaged people damage people*". Of course, such situations are difficult and so handling this is far easier said than done.

Yet, it must still be our aim to get to a place where, despite all the past harm done to us, we still give everyone we meet a fair chance without labelling them hastily or prematurely. But, this has to be done while, at the same time, being vigilant and on our guard because we are well aware that in the world out there, and also in the churches, there are very many people who are false, devious and well capable of harming us.

### **Some common misunderstandings about the meaning of 'church unity' and the problems caused by pursuing unity at the expense of truth**

Here is another thing which causes confusion until we realise the balance that is needed. The point is we are commanded to "*diakrino*", which means to weigh and assess everything we are told. We are also told to "*contend earnestly for the faith*" and to confront false teachers and those who are immoral.

Yet, at the same time, we are also commanded to pursue unity in the churches and to avoid creating division. Let's look at a passage which focuses on the need to seek to preserve unity as, at first sight, it seems to contradict the duty to "*diakrino*" and confront etc:

*<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow*

***Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?***

***1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (ESV)***

The point is that what the Bible means by not creating “divisions” obviously has to be consistent with the duty we also have, *at the same time*, to stand up for truth and to oppose false doctrine and immoral practices in the church. So, the goal of preserving unity and avoiding division is not absolute but relative. It is subject to certain exceptions and in those cases it becomes our duty to intervene, to ask questions and to confront *even if that leads to divisions*.

Such divisions, if they arise for those valid reasons rather than about trivial disputes or personality clashes, are actually necessary. Paul addresses this point in 1 Corinthians where he explains that sometimes factions in the church are needed in order that the people who are genuine can be recognised and distinguished from the false:

***<sup>18</sup> For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, <sup>19</sup> for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.***

***1 Corinthians 11:18-19 (RSV)***

We must therefore think carefully before we take a stand on an issue to make sure it is something vitally important, a matter of defending true doctrine or opposing sin or corruption, and not just a difference of opinion on a trivial or peripheral issue. On such minor matters, preserve the peace by letting the others have their way. But if it is about an important issue of doctrine or morals then take a firm clear stand, even if that results in division, just as apostles Paul and John did regularly.

### **How to deal with the emotional wounds we receive from false or carnal Christians, especially from leaders**

One of the consequences of the wounds that false Christians, especially leaders, can inflict on us is it can leave us traumatised. That certainly happened to myself and my wife and to most of the victims I have interviewed. Typically, when a person emerges from a church where they have been abused, slandered, exploited or deceived, they go through a period of time when they are overly wary, or even paranoid. It is difficult not to be.

Having been violated, the innocent party will usually take on the persona of a victim. What has been done to them tends to take over their lives for 2-5 years, such that it defines them for a time. It becomes the centre of their thoughts and feelings and can easily consume them, such that they become obsessed by it. Obviously, we should seek to avoid this, or at least to limit its duration, but the fact remains that this is how most of us will react, at least initially, until we have thought it all through and calmed down.

Ironically the perpetrator, who did the harm, tends to be largely unaffected. He will feel no shame, express no regret, and take no steps to change. Typically, he will carry on in a full and gregarious relationship with the rest of the church and with the people in that town.

They will be friendly with him and will show no concern about his treatment of you, even if they know about it. He will not acknowledge or admit what he did and will usually tell lies to cover it up, or to excuse it, or to discredit anyone who might expose him, so they are less likely to be believed.

Even where the true facts become known, my experience is that few other people in the church will even disapprove of, let alone attempt to discipline, the wrongdoer. In short, the wrongdoer will tend to escape the consequences of his actions and will lose few, if any, relationships or positions of responsibility.

Most people will treat him just the same, *even if they know what he did*. Indeed, some will actually fear him all the more as a result as they will not want to be driven out of the church as you were. Therefore, ironically, they may end up even more inclined to do his bidding.

The position for the victim is very different. We found, and so did many others we spoke to, that it is extremely painful to experience the complete indifference of fellow Christians about the wrong that has been done to you, even when they know all about it. Far from disapproving of the wrongdoer, there is a tendency for others in the church to disapprove of the victim for making such a fuss.

They may even feel that he is making a nuisance of himself by "harping on about it". There is a perception that it is the victim, not the perpetrator, who is the main problem and that everything was OK until he started making a fuss.

As they see it, the wrongdoer isn't saying anything and he isn't upset. Therefore, in many people's eyes, he isn't the problem. The victim, on the other hand, can't seem to stop talking about it. He can begin to be seen as a bore, or even as being a vengeful and obsessive 'persecutor' of the original wrongdoer. It is frequently turned upside down in this way, especially as the wrongdoer will usually also lie about what happened, which compounds the problem.

Of course, at the Day of Judgment all these issues will be fully dealt with, and exposed publicly which should cause us all to tremble. But here and now, in most churches, the victims of abuse, especially where it is abuse by leaders, are frequently treated appallingly. Even the people whom you thought were good friends will walk by on the other side of the road and do nothing to help you because they "*don't want to get involved*" and, above all, they don't want to fall out with the leader.

It would be hard to exaggerate how painful that betrayal is. It hurt me badly but my wife was particularly wounded by it as she could not grasp how people who had been our good friends could turn so completely against us overnight and without any of them ever asking us to tell them our side of the story. They literally couldn't care less whether we had been badly treated. They didn't want to know and they didn't want to fall out with Rick.

The most important objective in the eyes of the wrongdoer's fellow leaders is just to smooth things over and cover it up. The last thing they want is for things to be openly investigated and misconduct exposed, or for any disciplinary measures to be taken against the wrongdoer. They don't want anything that would rock the boat or cause scandal.

I haven't seen anyone expelled from membership of a church since the 1980's. It simply doesn't seem to happen anymore, no matter how bad the wrong that has been done. There is little or no appetite for any genuine church discipline in most churches. Few even know that the Bible provides for such disciplinary measures to be taken. Even fewer are willing to implement them.

The only thing I have seen happen is that people who express concern, or challenge the practices of a church, are likely to end up being driven out, directly or indirectly, by the leadership. Such people are seen as the problem, for raising issues, not the wrongdoer or the wrong practice they are complaining

about. They are drawing attention to things which many leaders prefer to sweep under the carpet rather than deal with.

Genuinely biblical steps for dealing with wrongdoing in a church have as their main objective:

- a) the need to do justice to the victim
- b) to let all concerned see who was right and who was wrong and
- c) to uphold truth and integrity.

However, many church leaders today would oppose all three of those objectives and see them as a potential threat to their own interests. Many churches are now led *by leaders for leaders*. It is often the interests of the leaders that are seen as paramount, not the objectives that God has for that church as a whole.

Therefore, they don't want to get to the root of the matter so the truth can be made known because they know the truth might not show the leader in a good light. They aren't seeking to find and reveal the truth as you might imagine they are. That is usually the very opposite of what they want, which is to cover it up and make it go away.

If in future you are ever in the position of having been undermined or abused, then you will have to think carefully about how to handle it and how to protect yourself from further damage and trauma being caused to you or your family by:

- a) the brazenness of the wrongdoer
- b) other people's indifference to your sense of violation such that nobody comes to your aid
- c) the unwillingness of the church to use any biblical discipline against the wrongdoer
- d) by contrast, their eagerness to silence, or fob off, the injured party
- e) the growth of bitterness within yourself at the trauma of the original abuse and the subsequent indifference of the church as to how you feel
- f) the harm that is then caused to you by the unforgiveness that is building up within yourself
- g) the potential further harm that is caused by your being alienated from other Christians because of your difficulty in coping with their indifference and betrayal
- h) the sourness and cynicism that such an experience can create in you, such that if a stranger walked into the church and saw the wrongdoer's relaxed nonchalance and contrasted it with your tension and 'gritted teeth'. He may well assume there's something wrong with you, not with the wrongdoer.

I have experienced all of the above, as has my wife, and so have many other people I know, or have heard from. It is far more widespread than you probably assume. Thus you are not going to be able to solve the overall problem. All you can realistically hope to do is to prevent or minimise any further damage to yourself (or others you are helping) by managing your own reactions wisely and by having realistic expectations of others.

The less you expect, the less damaged you will be when people you know from the church, whom you thought were your friends, do not come to your aid, do not care and do not want to know. Often their refusal to be seen as supporting you is due to their cowardice as they are not willing to put themselves

at risk of being attacked as you were. Deep down they know you are telling the truth but they also know that anyone who sides with you against the leader will suffer for it. So, they cut you adrift to protect themselves.

Yet, I have never in my whole life ever heard a person admit to being a coward. I could handle it better if they were to say, *"I know you were in the right but I was just too scared to be seen as supporting you. So I kept out of it."* That would be disgraceful but it would at least be honest. But they never say that. They just abandon you and say nothing. See also my Book 2 which includes chapters on forgiveness, as does Book 7 as well. Those may be of use to you in learning how to forgive people.

### **How genuine, godly leaders also get damaged, abused and undermined by the people they care for**

We must not allow the impression to be formed that it is only leaders who act wrongly or become wolves and that church members never harm leaders. On the contrary if any leader is sincere, godly, and wants to obey God and pursue a genuine ministry, then he will definitely be attacked and undermined. That attack will come from:

- a) false leaders in other churches, i.e. wolves and hirelings
- b) false members of the leader's own church i.e. wicked people posing as Christians who have never been born again
- c) carnal Christians who have been born again, but who are immature and fleshly, such that they damage those who care for them
- d) an orchestrated demonic onslaught against that man, the purpose of which is to destroy him and his ministry by whipping up a) b) and c) above, as well as by direct demonic opposition.

Perhaps the hardest thing for a genuine shepherd to cope with is being abused or mistreated by the very people he is there to care for. Godly men pay a very high price for their obedience and will almost always be wounded. There is, however, something you can do for them.

Whenever you come across a godly pastor, evangelist, missionary, youth worker, etc, you should do all you can to encourage him. One dose of affirmation and encouragement from you may well cancel out the harmful effects of 50 of the people who are knocking him down. That is the enormous power of encouragement.