

CHAPTER 8

THE UNBIBLICAL CONCEPT OF A “CLERGY CLASS” WHICH IS HIGHER THAN ORDINARY PEOPLE

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Mark 12:38-40 (ESV)

⁶ Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicola'itans, which I also hate.

Revelation 2:6 (RSV)

³⁴ They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

John 9:34 (RSV)

The Law of Moses created a special class of men known as priests who were intermediaries between God and the people. But now, according to the New Testament, we are *all* priests and we no longer require any human intermediary.

During the period in which the Law of Moses was in operation God appointed priests who were descendants of Aaron to perform special duties in the Temple, to offer sacrifices for sin and to serve as intermediaries between God and the Jewish people.

⁴⁴ I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me.

Exodus 29:44 (NASB)

However, the Law of Moses ended when Jesus died and is no longer in operation. That includes the role the priests had. Their job has ended and we no longer require the ministry of human priests either to offer sacrifices for us or to serve as intermediaries between us and God.

Although Jesus still serves as our High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek, as described in Hebrews, we do not need human priests. Indeed, God now views us as being a kingdom of priests, i.e. that each of us are priests ourselves and thus able to approach God directly, albeit that we still require the intercessory ministry of Jesus Himself who serves as our High Priest and advocate.

So, while the Law of Moses was in operation, the priestly class was viewed as being holy and separate from the ordinary people. They had a specific role which only they could do and they were ordained and consecrated to do that. This made them different from ordinary laymen.

³¹ “You shall take the ram of ordination and boil its flesh in a holy place. ³² Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket, at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

³³ Thus they shall eat those things by which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration; but a layman shall not eat them, because they are holy.

Exodus 29:31-33 (NASB)

Therefore, it is true to say that while the Law of Moses was in operation God did distinguish between the select priestly class with their special duties and the wider mass of the population, i.e. “lay people” who were not set apart or considered to be “holy” in that very specific way. By the way, the English word “lay” simply comes from the Greek word “*laos*” meaning the wider population or common people.

However, no such distinction exists now. There are no priests, except in the sense that we are all considered to be priests, i.e. a “kingdom of priests”. So, every Christian is now of equal status and none of us are special or set apart. There is leadership but not priesthood. Neither should there be any such thing as “clergy”.

Those elders who provide leadership do so while continuing to be ordinary people, as we all are, whether we are leaders or not. That is how God sees it and that is why He established the house church model as seen in the New Testament with lots of small churches led by groups of about 1, 2, 3 or perhaps even 4 elders who were all unpaid and not considered to be holy, set apart or different.

As we have seen, the Roman Catholic church is based on there being a literal priesthood with men whom they actually call priests. These men are supposedly the only ones who are entitled to minister the various “sacraments” and, above all, to perform the ritual of the mass whereby the bread and wine are allegedly turned into the literal body and blood of Jesus. They call this “transubstantiation”.

They allege that this priesthood is based on the Old Testament model i.e. the descendants of Aaron. However, it is in fact based on the pagan model of priesthood which was brought into the churches when multitudes of unsaved pagans flooded into the churches in the 4th century. This happened when Emperor Constantine effectively took over the churches – i.e. those which were willing to compromise and to accept his leadership and influence, thereby creating a toxic mixture of Christianity and paganism.

When the Reformation happened in the 16th century the Roman Catholic concept of priesthood was one of the things the reformers got rid of. So, they did not continue to have priests *but they did keep the concept of a clergy class* whereby leaders had the elevated status of clergy and were separate from and higher than the ordinary “lay” people.

Admittedly, they were no longer priests but they were still rulers rather than servants. They tended to “lord it” over the people and saw themselves as just as special and set apart as the Roman Catholic priesthood had been. They were no longer a priestly class but they were still part of the “clergy class”, which I believe is what Jesus was referring to in Revelation 2:6 when He said He hates the works of the Nicolaitans.

That word, “Nicolaitan” simply comes from combining two Greek words, “*nikos*”, meaning to conquer or subdue and “*laos*” meaning the ordinary people. So Nicolaitanism is essentially about a clergy class which conquers and rules over the people rather than operating the model of servant leadership which the New Testament presents.

That said, it’s not quite true to say that the Reformed churches have all dispensed with the idea of priesthood. In the Anglican and Episcopalian churches, many of their clergymen still refer to themselves as “priests”, i.e. the ‘high’ Anglicans. Also, even in Calvinist churches, many continue to believe that the ability to baptise babies was given only to the clergy, as they claim Jesus’ commands were given to the clergy, not to us who are just lay people.

So, not only do they believe in infant baptism, which is unbiblical in itself, but they also wrongly believe baptism should only be done by the clergy. However, the Bible clearly teaches that any believer can baptise a new convert (provided the convert is old enough to believe the Gospel, and is therefore not an infant).

So, the Calvinists get it wrong in both senses, and in fact even more badly than the Roman Catholic church does, because the Catholic church does actually believe that anyone can baptise a person. Their error however is to think that should be done to babies. Therefore, the nuns at my primary school told me that even I, as an 8 year old, could and should baptise a baby if it was dying.

Church leadership as a local elder/ bishop / overseer is not meant to be a career

We don't only have the problem of leaders seeing themselves as clergymen (or even as priests) and therefore higher than ordinary church members. We also face a separate problem of leaders seeing themselves as pursuing a "career" in church leadership. That was never meant to be and did not happen in the Early Church.

Back then, if we imagine a house church with perhaps 10-20 members, there would probably be 1-4 elders in that church sharing the leadership role. But all of them would either have full time or part time jobs or they were retired. What they did not do, anywhere in Acts or the New Testament letters, is to build a paid career for themselves in church leadership.

The only people who received financial support were "*those who are sent*" which means missionaries who travel far away from their home country and are therefore unable to get jobs, or at least not initially. Likewise, people with itinerant ministries such as travelling evangelists or Bible teachers who move around all over the country or even the Empire and who therefore could not do a paid job.

Such men were entitled to receive money to support their ministries and it is such men that Paul had in mind when he said "*thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the grain*". He was not referring to ordinary local elders who remain in their home church in their home town.

Yet, such passages which support financial support for missionaries and itinerant teachers and evangelists are routinely twisted today to imply that they apply to all church leaders, regardless of whether they travel or stay at home.

When I point this out to people they often respond by saying "*That may be how they did things in the Early Church but there is no obligation for us to do the same*". They argue that God has given us freedom to organise church and church leadership in whatever way seems best to us.

And they have a point, because the New Testament does not expressly *command* us to follow the example of the Early Church as seen in the New Testament. It simply tells us what the Early Church did without explicitly telling us to imitate them.

However, my response to that is to say that if the New Testament presents us with a consistent model of church structure and practice which all the apostles followed then isn't it obviously common sense for us to voluntarily copy what they did, even if there is no direct command to do so?

Moreover, even if God felt relaxed about allowing us to create minor variations in the way we do church, depending on our culture, class, level of education, age or nationality, how likely is it that He would

approve of us doing the *direct opposite* of what the Early Church did, and not just on one or two practices but on *every practice*.

Surely your common sense tells you that what we have today in the traditional churches is not just the Early Church model with a few minor variations. It is the exact opposite of what they did and in just about every way.

The burden of proof must surely be upon those who advocate these wholesale changes to justify them and to explain why the right thing for us to do on every issue is the very opposite of what the apostles did. It is not my duty to prove we should copy their example. Surely, I am entitled to view that as self evident?

Returning to the specific issue of whether a local church leader should consider that role to be a career, we need to examine some of the advantages and disadvantages of that, as opposed to each elder serving in the church in his spare time and supporting himself financially by having an ordinary paid job as a butcher, baker or candlestick maker.

Let me begin by looking at what it does to the attitude and expectations of a man when he goes into full time paid leadership rather than continue as an unpaid elder. In my opinion the difference it makes is profound. For example, I was part of an excellent small church in the 1980s which met in a primary school on Sundays and in houses mid week.

I really loved that church and it functioned so well in the early days. There were three unpaid elders who each had full time paid secular jobs. So, they shared the leadership, not only between themselves, but also with the worship leaders and house group leaders.

So, out of about 60 members there were about ten people who had a leadership role of some kind. The whole atmosphere of the church was therefore relaxed, friendly and intimate and there was not even a trace of insecurity or of anyone seeking to dominate, manipulate or control anything. And the people were all very committed and whole hearted.

But then it was decided that the senior elder, David, who had been a deputy head of a secondary school, should give up his paid day job and become a full time elder, while the other two elders carried on as before. I must admit that at the time I did not foresee the problems this would create.

Therefore, I supported the change wholeheartedly and my wife and I increased our giving to the church to help cover the cost. I believed it would lead to a real improvement as David would have more time to devote to the church.

However, even within the first year, I could see that things were not working out as we had hoped. Instead of improving the church, it was a major step backwards. What it did in particular was to seriously change David's attitude and make him feel stressed, insecure and vulnerable. That in turn led to him becoming over sensitive and feeling he had something to prove to justify being paid by the church.

Therefore, David began to do more of the preaching, which had previously been shared out between all three elders plus some other men. Also, David began to preach even when he didn't have anything important to say and where the Holy Spirit had not given him a burden to preach on a particular issue.

I believe that we should only preach when we have something we are burdened with and care passionately about. We should never go looking around for something to preach on in order to fill a slot if it isn't a theme which God has been laying on our heart and convicting us about.

In addition to this, David also became bossy and rather tetchy, which I believe was due to the pressure he now felt which he had never felt before. He had suddenly become insecure. People also began to look to him to give the lead rather than the three elders as a whole. That too made him feel pressurised.

So, that single change whereby David became a full time paid elder really changed that church in my opinion and very much for the worse. It not only changed David but also the tone and style of the church. It also placed more pressure on the church to raise finances to cover David's salary, an expense which had previously not existed at all.

Admittedly, we hadn't got a building to pay for but even paying one man's salary was a pressure, especially as many of the members were not wealthy. Beforehand all our giving to the church had gone outwards to help the poor or to fund outreach work etc. But now the money was needed to fund David's salary which became a burden to us and a source of guilt and pressure to David.

I am reminded also of another man called Nick who was a paid full time leader in an FIEC evangelical church. He had begun as a chartered surveyor but had then moved into full time church leadership. I do not doubt that when Nick began as a surveyor by day and a leader of the young people's work in the evenings and weekends, he had done well.

I didn't know him then but am willing to believe that, at that time, he probably had fire in his belly to want to work with teenagers. However, some years later, when I knew Nick, all that fire had gone out. He was now in his mid 40s and I believe he felt trapped in church work. He no longer had any burning desire to do it. That was obvious from his laziness and total lack of enthusiasm.

The role now bored him and he delegated most of his work to others to the point where one wondered what there was left for him to do. But he also had no way of escape from church work because he had been out of the secular workplace for so long he couldn't easily return to being a surveyor. And yet he needed his income. Therefore, Nick was a burned out man in his 40s with no passion for youth work but no ability to go back to a secular job as all his skills as a surveyor had withered away.

So, he was trapped. Not many could see that but it was plain to me as I employed many people in my law firm and I had developed an instinct for recognising whether staff were working well and were happy in their jobs. He therefore became useless as a leader of youth work and he delegated just about everything to others – i.e. to ordinary unpaid members of the church who did all the work for him.

The tragedy was that if he had simply carried on being a surveyor, doing youth work in his spare time, he would have done a good job of it and would probably have continued to be happy doing that combination of roles until he retired. But instead we ended up with the worst of all worlds, paying a man a full wage to do little or no work and at the same time keeping him trapped in a role he no longer enjoyed and in which he was not effective.

You might argue that if we make local church leadership a full time career we will get the benefit of more professional leadership and the men who do it will become more skilled and experienced. I can accept that argument in the very different context of a highly specialist ministry such as translating the Bible into obscure languages or even working on the streets at night with drug addicts and so on.

In such roles it may not be practical for that leader to also do a paid day job. But the point is that is not the type of leadership role that I am talking about. I am addressing the issue of local elders in an ordinary local church in their home country. In such a case there is no need for “professionalism”. Indeed, it could prove to be a disadvantage and often does. What is needed most of all in a local elder in a house church is for him to be faithful, honest, motivated and diligent.

He also needs to have a servant heart and to be free from various temptations and pressures which tend to ensnare men who are in full time paid ministry. The biggest snare of all is the very fact that he has to rely on the church to pay his salary so he can cover his mortgage and pension and feed his family.

As soon as you alter the dynamic and move from being a carpenter, plumber or pharmacist who doubles up as a part time local elder and become instead totally reliant on the local church for your entire income you will feel under great pressure. You may not expect it or intend it but that pressure is virtually inevitable. It need not be the case that the local church wants you to feel under pressure.

They may want the direct opposite, but it will happen anyway. So, that happy, carefree local elder putting in maybe 5-10 hours a week of unpaid work, alongside his fellow elders, ceases to feel relaxed about what he says to people, or whether his preaching is offending them. As a paid full time leader he suddenly starts to feel that he must tread carefully and focus on avoiding giving offence to anybody.

So, his preaching will cease to be hard hitting and become soft, smooth and inoffensive. Instead of seeking to convict the people of sin and judgment and the need to repent and change and become genuine committed disciples he will focus on talks that make people feel good. He can't take the risk of offending people and losing members as that would put his own income in jeopardy

It may also impact the way he relates to members of the church. So, those who are wealthy and are major donors to the church will be treated differently from those who aren't. There will be a particular fear of offending or alienating richer Christians, and he is also likely to become prone to being manipulated by them, even if it is all happening unconsciously.

But that same elder, when he still had his paid job and only worked for the church part time, felt free, relaxed and independent. Nobody could intimidate him or pressurise him and he could preach about any topic the Holy Spirit laid on his heart without worrying whether it might upset some people.

By the way, I am not advocating a policy of deliberately offending people, as if that was a good thing. I simply mean that the Bible, when preached truthfully, leaving nothing out, is an offensive book. It convicts us, rebukes us, corrects us and challenges us and most people don't like that, especially when it gets close to home. And that is the case no matter how gently or politely you tell people what the Bible says.

As a leader, the last thing I want to do is offend people. I would rather offend nobody and be popular with everyone all the time. But the problem is God has not called us to be popular but to be faithful. He has given us the job of preaching His Word and teaching His people the truth about how they should live and what they should believe. That cannot be done without being willing, if need be, to risk offending people.

I have annoyed people many times and I seem to manage it no matter how hard I try to be polite, sensitive and gentle in the way I preach God's Word. The point is it isn't me who is being offensive.

It is God's Word that is really offending them. I am just the messenger. People's flesh reacts to any form of correction or rebuke and the Bible is full of both.

But the fundamental issue is that when a man derives his entire income from a secular job outside the church he is much more likely to be willing to preach fearlessly and simply tell the people what God is saying, without worrying whether they are offended or not.

He knows the worst that can happen is people will leave the church, which he will deeply regret. But that prospect does not frighten him at a personal level or keep him awake at night because it cannot have any effect on the financial well being of his family. Even if things get so bad that they throw him out as an elder, he still has his paid day job. Knowing that makes a huge difference to a man because all men have a God given instinct to be the provider for their wife and family.

You might argue that I am exaggerating this issue and that only a tiny minority of full time paid elders will allow their minds to be influenced by such financial pressures. If so, I would have to disagree. Based on over four decades of experience of church and leaders I believe the pressure gets to the vast majority of them and influences their preaching at least to some degree.

That is one reason why so many controversial subjects are never preached on. Leaders treat the Bible like a buffet bar from which they only ever serve up carefully selected topics which will offend nobody. However, such insecure leaders are not only tempted to curtail what they say and what they preach about. They will also tone down what the Bible says or even deliberately twist its meaning to avoid controversy, for example concerning homosexuality or fornication.

There is also a strong temptation to defend their own position by keeping a wary eye out for anyone who could be a threat, a rival or a critic and then silencing such people or alienating them or driving them out of the church. When this is done it is not because that person is seen as a threat to the church, but because they could be a threat *to the leader himself*.

In my other books I mention a leader I shall call 'Rick' with whom I clashed 25 years ago. The key point in this context is that he saw me as a threat to him and also a potential rival. In particular he was threatened by my preaching which, in his insecurity, he feared might be seen as better than his.

I am not making comparisons myself. I am not insecure, perhaps because I gained all the personal security and status I needed from my legal career, not from preaching. Therefore, I don't feel any need to prevent other men outshining me as a Bible teacher. On the contrary, in my website I draw attention to several other men's ministries and urge you to listen to them, not just to me.

But Rick was different, as he was very insecure. Therefore, one of the things he began to do was to prevent me preaching. I tell the full story elsewhere in my Book 7. It started after I gave a talk one Sunday which was particularly well received by the congregation. But instead of being pleased, Rick was worried and he tried very hard to prevent me preaching again.

I later discussed the problem with a retired church leader who, because he was retired, felt able to tell me openly what he knew. He told me that the average church leader, if he is going to be away for a Sunday, will deliberately make sure that any replacement speaker is of low calibre so that he need not worry that the replacement speaker will outshine him. So, he will deliberately choose a dud.

The retired leader assured me that this is exactly what happens and that he was not exaggerating to make a point. And I have to say that this accords with my general experience in churches where I have observed for myself that replacement speakers are almost never any good.

So, insecure leaders deny their church the chance to hear a good sermon from a gifted speaker simply because they fear for their own job security. I think that is tragic. Moreover, it is totally unnecessary and could be avoided just by not having full time paid elders in local churches.

What did Paul mean when he referred to maintaining “traditions”?

This verse below has caused some confusion so we need to consider it:

²I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.

1 Corinthians 11:2 (RSV)

I have heard people refer to that verse in an attempt to use it to justify the traditions that have built up in the churches i.e. the denominational traditions we know today which aren't in the Bible. But that is not what the verse is talking about at all. Indeed, it means the very opposite.

When Paul speaks of “traditions” he is not referring to those which arose later, from the 4th century onwards, after Catholicism was formed. Paul is actually urging people to imitate and maintain the things he did and the way he conducted church, i.e. *his practices and methods*.

In other words, he is saying “*maintain our practices which you have seen me doing*”. Therefore, insofar as we might want a statement in Scripture instructing us to do church in the way the Early Church did it, then this is it. But what it certainly does not mean is an instruction to follow the unbiblical practices of the paganised Catholic church which were still 250 years in the future when Paul wrote that letter.

The craving to control other people is widespread in churches because it is a major part of our fallen fleshly nature.

The biblical model for church did not arise by accident or for no reason. It was God's plan for the Church and was designed to deal with and mitigate the problems that arise due to people's carnal nature and fleshly ambitions and cravings. Foremost amongst those is the longing to be in control of other people and to have power over them. That craving is at least latent in most people even if they don't know it, and it is due to the sinful flesh nature that we all inherited from Adam.

So, that urge needs to be restrained and guarded against and, in the context of church, God chose to do that via the biblical model for church structure and leadership as demonstrated in the book of Acts and the letters. That structure was designed by God to restrain men's desire to control others and to prevent abuse and exploitation.

Therefore, if we remove the God given structure and model of church then we also remove the safeguards. It is a little bit like the American Constitution which puts in place all sorts of checks and balances precisely in order to restrain any wicked politician, judge or Government that might arise and to put obstacles in their path to prevent them becoming tyrants.

So, the US Constitution was not written to regulate the conduct of citizens but rather to regulate the behaviour of governments and to prevent them misusing or abusing their powers. The biblical model of church is designed to achieve the same purposes by preventing any leader having the opportunity to dominate or exploit people.

Unbiblical churches are always power structures which are designed to protect the power and influence of those who lead them

It is equally no coincidence that the features of all traditional, hierarchical, denominational models for church are all designed to achieve the opposite effect. That is, they are intended *to protect the leaders, not the congregation*, and to maximise, not minimise, the power they wield.

In the same way, they all seek to minimise the level of accountability that leaders face and to prevent or reduce any scrutiny of their actions. In other words, the traditional unbiblical model of church is a power structure which is designed *to maintain the leaders' grip on power*. Again, there is no coincidence involved. That approach did not arise by accident. It is all entirely deliberate.

Adopting a biblical church structure in place of the traditional structure

It is unlikely that you have ever previously come across any of the points made so far, let alone heard anybody preaching on them, or explaining how church was conducted in the first century. This whole area is something which very few preachers ever mention. There are two likely reasons for the absence of such teaching, even though the Bible is so clear on all this:

- a) many men have learned how to lead churches solely from watching other men lead churches, not from finding out what the Bible actually says about all this. It does not even occur to them to ask what the Early Church did or whether it differs in any way from what they are used to. Thus, even leaders often have this huge blind spot. They just can't see what the Bible says about how to do Church, even when it is staring at them from the pages of the New Testament.

The power and grip of church tradition is very strong and it preconditions our minds to see only what we expect to see, rather than what is on the page. Thus, when we read the book of Acts, or the letters, we tend to visualise church buildings like our own. We picture apostle Paul wearing priestly robes, with a large crowd of people sitting in rows in front of him in a big building, even though none of that is true and none of it is stated anywhere in the Bible.

We nevertheless read such things into the text and picture them, unconsciously, without realising. We likewise edit out anything the New Testament says about church practice or structure which contradicts what we have grown up with or become used to. The human mind is very skilled at editing out uncomfortable things.

- b) However, even where leaders have been told the truth, or have noticed for themselves, what the Bible actually says and how far removed that is from our denominational traditions, most leaders, still choose to keep their mouths closed. Most would still not teach any of this to their congregations as it would be too disruptive. From their perspective, church leadership is a career. It gives them a job, an income, power, status and importance.

They are unlikely to want to give up any of that, or even to put it at risk, whatever the Bible might say. Thus, even if they notice them, they avoid all those parts of the New Testament which touch on this. And that's not all they avoid. It is amazing, once you start to look out for these things, how much of the Bible is avoided by church leaders and never preached on. It's an astonishingly high percentage.

Common problems in churches today

We shall look below at more of the problems and sins that are common in the Church and the ways in which we all fall short and fail to achieve what God intends for us to do and to be. Instead of churches being places of freedom, personal growth and creativity, many of them are so heavily controlled by authoritarian leaders they are stifling.

For example, there is no place for the gifts of the Holy Spirit in most churches. Even those churches which theoretically believe in the gifts tend to be too cautious to allow their use, in case there is any misuse. And even if one person does have the knowledge and the courage to operate in the spiritual gifts, it is unlikely that there will be anyone else who believes in the gifts or is willing to let them be used. So that person is effectively prevented from operating in the gifts.

Moreover, by church leaders themselves there is widespread manipulation, deception, ambition, worldliness, love of money, empire building and suspicion. There is also a clamping down on free discussion. Instead, there should be freedom in every church for anyone to question the preacher on his sermon or even to contradict him.

Then a discussion and even a debate should follow which is conducted *with impeccably good manners* and self control. That free and relaxed exchange of views is how we learn best and it is also how errors are identified. A secure, confident leader is happy to face such questions and debates, but an insecure leader isn't. Therefore, he will make sure there is no right of reply.

In our church, I try to encourage people to ask me questions and to feel free to challenge what I am teaching. I don't feel the slightest bit threatened or insecure. In the old days I used to allow people to comment or ask questions during the sermons but I eventually stopped that and asked them to do it after I had finished. But that was only because we were taping the talks and the comments and interruptions from the congregation made it sound messy.

But you will still hear it on the earlier recordings on the website. So, what happens now is that people question me to their heart's content after I have finished. They are also perfectly free to contradict me. I don't mind that at all, although I feel equally free to answer back myself to support and justify my stance and explain the point better. Free speech cuts both ways.

However, if it emerged that the person challenging me was correct then I would positively want to abandon my view and adopt theirs. And I would thank them for correcting me, as the main person to gain from that correction is me, because my goal is to preach God's Word accurately, not to pretend to do so by covering up my mistakes. That is surely common sense. Yet, I expect you will agree it is not what happens in the vast majority of churches.

There are many and varied reasons why we face all these problems. One of the main reasons is that members are also fleshly and worldly, not just leaders. On top of that there is demonic activity, which

multiplies every problem that comes from our fleshliness. Most of us pay no attention to the role demons play in our lives and we act as if they did not exist.

God deliberately designed the biblical approach to church in order to reduce and limit these demonic and flesh related problems. But because we don't adopt God's methods, as demonstrated in the New Testament, our fleshly sinful natures are allowed to operate without the intended restraints.

So, these problems with church structure and practice are not just of academic interest. They have very practical implications and consequences. The unbiblical way in which most churches operate has a major impact on what the churches feel like to be in, even if it is done in ignorance, without any conscious intention to disobey the Bible.

Our fallen human nature longs to be in charge of people including exploiting, abusing and dominating them. Few people in leadership are mature enough to entirely avoid doing any of this, especially where the very system itself creates insecurity and promotes pride and arrogance. In doing so it makes such misuse of authority even more likely.

Therefore, deception, domination and control by leaders has always been a problem. It was even a problem in the days of Jeremiah. Many of the leaders he wrote about were false and ungodly. Yet, the people seemed to prefer it that way, because they were carnal people themselves, just as we generally are:

*³⁰"An appalling and horrible thing
Has happened in the land:
³¹The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule on their own authority;
And My people love it so!
But what will you do at the end of it?
Jeremiah 5:30-31 (NASB)*

*¹⁵"Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done?
They were not even ashamed at all;
They did not even know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
At the time that I punish them,
They shall be cast down," says the LORD.
Jeremiah 6:15 (NASB)*

Likewise, in the days of Ezekiel many of the shepherds of God's people were corrupt and selfish, looking after their own interests, not the welfare of God's people:

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts.

The biblical model for church structure and leadership was carefully designed by God to reduce the scope for leaders to abuse and exploit others. But, if we organise church in the traditional unbiblical way which we have known since the 4th century then those safeguards do not exist. If so, the dangers of abuse are actually increased, not reduced.

Even if leaders preach the true Gospel, and even if they are good men, the traditional leadership model and unbiblical church structure encourages domination and control. I have seen a great deal of it, in all denominations, especially after I began to keep my eyes open for it. Prior to that I had been oblivious to it, even though it was staring me in the face. Now that my eyes have been opened I can see it all over the place, which is very distressing.

In 1999 I began, very slowly, to realise the seriousness of the problems with the unbiblical structure of British churches and, in particular, the behaviour of their leadership. Up until then the problems, at least in my own experience, had not been so intense.

It was also partly because I had less discernment back then and couldn't see the problems even when they were right in front of me. Therefore, my slowness in grasping these things was partly because I was simply blind to it. I could not see it, even when it was obvious.

I attempted to confront the problem for the first time in 2001, but I failed completely. I met face to face with 'Rick', the main leader of the church to express my concerns about him. Then I later wrote a long letter just to him, not copied to anyone else, concerning a catalogue of problems with his behaviour, and especially his lack of honesty.

I believe I had every right to write that letter even as an ordinary member of the church. However, as it happens, I was also the Chairman of the Trustees of that church, with responsibility for the church's finances and its employment of staff. So, there can be no doubt that I was entitled to confront him about his behaviour.

Sadly, my intervention and my very polite questioning of Rick, and subsequently of the wider leadership team, achieved nothing other than to arouse their hostility and thus to open my eyes even further to the true scale of the crisis. We therefore left that church that we had been in for 7 years and began the search for a good biblical church.

Therefore, over the next ten years or so I tried several churches but always felt a deep sense of frustration at being unable to find what I was looking for. Partly that was because my own sensitivity and discernment had increased so I became much more able to see dishonesty, manipulation and pride in leaders. It was also because I learned more about the biblical model for church and how far most churches have diverged from that Early Church model.

When one does not know anything about any of this one can be in a blissful state of ignorance. But as your eyes open more widely and your understanding increases, you find yourself becoming more and more concerned, and distressed, at how far our churches have diverged from the churches of the New Testament that the apostles founded and the impact that has had on the behaviour of leaders.

In 2001 I discovered a small church which, at first sight, had some good features, but after a few weeks the leader, Steve, came to see me and said God wanted me to tithe to his church, i.e. to give him 10%

of the profit of my law firm! Unfortunately for him, I had a good understanding of what the Bible teaches about financial giving and I was discerning enough to realise his motives. They were not hard to see.

I calmly asked him to show me where in the Bible it says that we should tithe to our local church. He tried to dodge the question but, when I persisted, he eventually admitted the Bible doesn't teach that at all. He actually said, in the end: *"But if we didn't teach that how would the church get money?"* He was quite brazen and unapologetic about it, as if the need for money obviously justified his manipulative actions, even misrepresenting what the Bible says.

He was therefore prepared to distort the Bible's teaching on financial giving, and to try to exploit me, just to benefit the church he was leading, as if the end justifies the means. But, the end does not justify the means. If something is dishonest and wrong, then it continues to be so, even if it is done by a church. In fact that makes it all the more wrong.

Interestingly, since that incident in 2001 I have watched from a distance the development of Steve's church. Over the years it has grown but it has become even worse in terms of wrong teaching and practice. Ironically, the very reason that church was set up in the first place was because Steve and his wife were 'refugees' from Rick's abusive church that I later left. They spoke openly of his controlling and manipulative behaviour.

That was one reason why I turned to them for help when I encountered the hostility of Rick and the wider leadership. I thought these two who had left Rick's church earlier for the same reasons would be on my wavelength and would share my opposition to corruption.

But, on the contrary, once they had become leaders themselves, in their own church, they quickly reproduced within it all the same abuses they had previously criticised in Rick's church, which they (and I) had left. They also created some of their own, as with pushing hard for tithing and also a form of showmanship and self promotion which I found disturbing.

It is remarkable how quickly and easily those who are abused can become abusers themselves. This husband and wife pair ended up doing most of the same things they had previously condemned when done to them by Rick. Like many leaders, they didn't have *'the love of the truth'* and they quickly began to look after themselves and to promote their own interests.

Many leaders don't honour truth as something precious in itself. Where the truth cuts across or interferes with their interests, especially their income, then they opt to defend their own position or career, rather than the truth. They also seek for power without accountability, which is a recipe for disaster.

If more churches stayed small, met in people's homes, and therefore had no buildings to look after, and no salaries to pay, they would not need to raise money for their own running costs. The members would then be able to give money away to support their own relatives, or evangelism, or the needy, as they see fit, instead of constantly being asked for money for the church's own expenses.

They could then use their money to support any number of people or projects that the Holy Spirit lays on their hearts. Instead, they pay wages for full time staff, who then feel they need to justify these wages by doing all the work. If this wasn't done, unpaid elders could let the work of the ministry be shared widely around amongst all the members, as God wants it to be.

By the way, if you believe that God wants you to give money to your church, which He might well do, may I suggest you do it by one off gifts, preferably anonymously into a collection. I advise against setting up any regular standing order via your bank because if you do that it can be difficult to stop it or reduce it later without causing awkwardness and even resentment.

You might argue that regular giving via the bank is better so that the church can claim back your income tax on it. But be aware that churches can only do that if they accept “charitable status” which requires them to submit to the government’s rules. But that will curtail the church’s freedom. The most obvious example of this is that your church meetings then become “public meetings” which anybody is entitled to attend, as a right, so you can’t exclude people. But it goes further.

For example, if your church is reported for breaking lockdown rules or for calling homosexuality sin, or teaching that there are only two genders, it may well have its charitable status revoked. Many leaders are keenly aware of that risk which is why they self censor to avoid it. That is why I urge churches not to seek charitable status and not to seek tax money from the Government.

Taking away the need for a church building and the need to pay salaries to full time staff would, in itself, remove a large part of the problem. If elders have ordinary paid day jobs, then they will usually get their sense of self worth and security from that, rather than from trying to cling on to a church leadership role.

There is no place for worldly ambition in a biblical church. But if it surfaces in one of the members or leaders, it meets with resistance and is curtailed by the healthy safeguards which are inherent within the biblical model of church. But in a traditional, unbiblical church structure that doesn't happen.

A traditional hierarchical leadership will, in the end, always look after itself, not just about money but also misconduct. That is exactly what occurred in the Roman Catholic church some years ago with the worldwide problem of the sexual abuse of children. That scandal had been covered up for many years by their leadership, including John Paul II, who knew all about it but said and did nothing. Indeed, many of the senior leaders and bishops were actively involved in child sexual abuse themselves.

However, exploitation is not just sexual. It also involves financial and personal exploitation and it is widespread in most of the other churches. The problem is by no means confined to the Roman Catholic church. It is across the board and takes many forms. Primarily it is about the domination and control of the church members by their leaders.

The widespread tendency for church leaders in unbiblical, traditional churches to dominate, manipulate and control the people in their care

The desire to dominate and control other people is a central part of our fallen human nature. It will inevitably surface wherever it is allowed to do so. I have seen it happening frequently in the workplace, not just in churches. Where a junior employee is promoted, even to a very lowly supervisory role, then they frequently change and the ‘power’ goes to their head.

There is a desire to start to use that new position for their own ends. They also get a thrill out of being in charge of others. It is remarkable how many people do not have enough maturity and self control to handle power without it going to their heads. I have seen power abused many times, even by those I

had never expected to behave in that way. Such people therefore made it impossible for me to promote them.

I can think of a lady who worked at the same company as my wife. Then she was put in charge of the stationery cabinet and although it was the most lowly position imaginable, it went straight to her head. She began to act like a little tyrant, enjoying her power to give, or not give, people the pens, paper and other stationery they needed. She made them request it from her personally and dispensed it in a haughty, imperious way as if she was royalty.

This fleshly desire to dominate and control others is there in all of us. It is not the exception. It is the rule. It is just waiting for the chance to surface and to find a way to be expressed. A biblical church structure anticipates all of that and helps keep it in check. An unbiblical model of church, based on tradition, does the exact opposite. It encourages leaders to assert themselves and to indulge their flesh rather than crucify it.

The very structure was created by successive generations of ambitious men who wished to increase their power over the people, to reduce their accountability, to guard their position and to undermine anybody who might threaten them. Therefore, we ought not to be surprised when the traditional structure, which was created for those very purposes, tends to perpetuate such wrong practices.

In a sense the temptation to compromise on doctrine and to control others is understandable. One can see why even good men get drawn into it. If a church leader's whole income, mortgage and pension is tied up in his church job, it is bound to make him insecure, unless he is a man of exceptional honesty and conviction.

A rare example of such integrity was the late David Pawson. Back in the late 1950s or early 1960s he was the full time leader of a Methodist church. They then decided that they wanted to offer infant baptism. But David Pawson refused to do them because it is not in the Bible. However, they insisted and he was given the choice of doing infant baptism or being sacked, which would have meant overnight losing his income, pension and even his home, as the church provided a house.

It was a tough decision as he had a young family. However, he held firm and resigned with nowhere to go to and nowhere to live. God then blessed him for his faithfulness by immediately giving him a new position as the minister in a Baptist church. That story illustrates why I hold David Pawson in such high esteem.

But that's rare. Most men will immediately compromise on anything to protect their income and their career. Moreover, they are likely to attack and undermine anybody who may be a rival or a threat. That may shock you, but it happens daily in our churches. If you can't see it, then perhaps your eyes are still closed, as mine used to be.

In particular, unbiblical church structure and the traditional hierarchical model of leadership also breed a desire for domination even in good men and provide the perfect setting within which to manipulate others. It is a magnet to those who want to control others. That is one reason why so many unsuitable people are attracted to church leadership in the first place.

Your eyes may be closed to this problem, but theirs are not. They see it clearly and regard it as an opportunity, not a problem, and they make use of it. They also see in the church an easy way for a person of limited ability to gain a position of power and status and to hold onto it.

It provides an easier route to a position of seniority than can be achieved in most secular workplaces. There is much less accountability as well. Few commercial organisations would promote the kind of men who become church leaders. Even fewer would allow them to get away with the improper practices that many of them engage in.

Even for those leaders who begin with good intentions and pure motives, the very model itself has a tendency to change their heart attitude and to tempt them to compromise on doctrine and to start to abuse their position. Some leaders cannot withstand that temptation or resist being corrupted by it.