

Biblical and unbiblical churches

BOOK 8 IN THE REAL CHRISTIANITY SERIES

SEAN KEHOE

(Intermediate draft)

realchristianity.com

PUBLISHING DETAILS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO BIBLE PUBLISHERS

© Sean Kehoe 2025 Published 2025 (as intermediate draft)

Biblical and unbiblical churches - Book 8 in the Real Christianity series by Sean Kehoe

Sean Kehoe has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Published by realchristianity.com

Scripture quotations in this book are from a variety of translations. The Bible version used is indicated by the relevant initials at the end of each reference, as follows and the following acknowledgements are made to each of the publishers:

NIV = New International Version

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised Edition) Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica (formerly International Bible Society). Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. "NIV" is a registered trademark of Biblica – UK trademark number 1448790.

KJV = King James Version

The rights in the Authorised (King James) version of the Bible are vested in the Crown

RSV = Revised Standard Version

Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the national Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

NKJV = New King James Version

Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ASV = American Standard Version Copyright, 1901, by Thomas Nelson & Sons.

Copyright, 1929, by International Council of Religious Education

NASB = New American Standard Bible

Scriptures taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

ESV = English Standard Version

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version ® (ESV ®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

www.realchristianity.com

BIBLICAL AND UNBIBLICAL CHURCHES – intermediate draft

BOOK 8 IN THE REAL CHRISTIANITY SERIES

CONTENTS

| | | Page |
|------------|---|------|
| Chapter 1 | What is the problem? How are churches unbiblical and why does it matter? | 4 |
| Chapter 2 | What do we mean by ‘church’? | 14 |
| Chapter 3 | Why do we have to be part of a local church anyway? What is it for? | 31 |
| Chapter 4 | Our respect for the Church and for one another must never prevent us confronting falsehood when we see it | 37 |
| Chapter 5 | How Jesus dealt with the same problem of man made traditions which contradict Scripture | 48 |
| Chapter 6 | How the Roman Catholic church was created | 53 |
| Chapter 7 | The so called “church fathers” – who were they and how did they contribute in leading the church away from the New Testament model? | 56 |
| Chapter 8 | The unbiblical concept of a “clergy class” which is higher than ordinary people | 59 |
| Chapter 9 | What exactly does the Bible say about paying money to leaders? Are we supposed to “tithe” to our local church? | 75 |
| Chapter 10 | Are we supposed to obey and submit to church leaders? If so, in what ways? And how should leaders operate? | 95 |
| Chapter 11 | Unbiblical church structure also promotes compromise on doctrine | 113 |
| Chapter 12 | False teachers and abusive, manipulative or domineering leaders | 121 |
| Chapter 13 | Why are so many church leaders ineffective as preachers? | 132 |
| Chapter 14 | What can we do about the problems with church structure and leadership? | 136 |
| Chapter 15 | How to start and lead a biblical house church | 145 |

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? HOW ARE CHURCHES UNBIBLICAL AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

³ *Greet Prisca and Aq'uila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,* ⁴ *who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks;* ⁵ *greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epae'netus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ.*

Romans 16:3-5 (RSV)

The title of this book is *Biblical and unbiblical churches*. The question therefore is what exactly do we mean by 'biblical' as opposed to 'unbiblical'? My argument is that what the Christians of the first century knew as church, i.e. the way it was organised, structured and led, as set out in the book of Acts and the New Testament letters, and also as historians describe it, was *the way God intended church to be*.

By stark contrast, what the vast majority of churches now do is pretty much the exact opposite in every respect of what the Early Church did. I shall seek to demonstrate and justify that claim below. In the table I will set out, on the left, what God intended. By that I mean what the apostles *taught* and what the first century Christians *did*.

Then, on the right, I will set out what the vast majority of churches today actually do, as per the traditions which virtually all the denominational churches follow. They inherited these methods and structures from the Roman Catholic church, not from the first century Church. However, very few of them know that, mainly because most people never give this issue a moment's thought.

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|--|--|---|
| a) | Small in size, i.e. perhaps 10 – 50 people | | Large in size, i.e. 100 – 500 people or even thousands |
| b) | Meeting in people's homes or perhaps in barns or outbuildings | | Meeting in large and elaborate buildings |
| c) | The people themselves are the church. There is no special church building which costs a lot of money to buy and then maintain and so all the church's financial giving can go to help its members or the poor or homeless and isn't needed to fund the building. | | The building is the church and the people attend it. This creates a huge financial burden for the people in trying to buy and then maintain the building. That puts people under financial pressure to give more than they can afford and it diverts money away from the poor and needy. The special building also requires a lot of time and effort to maintain. |

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|--|---|
| d) | <p>The leaders have ordinary jobs and support themselves from their own wages. They are not paid anything for their roles in the church, unless they are full time itinerant Bible teachers or are sent away as missionaries to other countries where they cannot initially get jobs.</p> <p>If so, the sending churches support them, not the people to whom they are sent. Even then, such missionaries or itinerant teachers would still try as far as possible to support themselves, as Paul did, by a part-time trade such as tent-making.</p> <p>Overall, therefore, having no special building and usually no paid staff, the congregation is free to direct all its financial giving towards supporting their own families and also the poor and needy, as the average house church has very few expenses to pay for, if any.</p> | <p>The leaders work full time within the church and are paid. Many have never worked in any ordinary job and have no trade, career or profession to which they can return. Even those who once had a job lose their skills and become unemployable in their previous job after a number of years, such that they cannot return to it anyway.</p> <p>Such men can often end up feeling trapped in ministry work. They have no alternative but to carry on, even if they have lost all their enthusiasm or have become burnt out. This affects many men in their forties and fifties, such that the final 20 or more years of their ministry are ineffectual and miserable for all concerned.</p> <p>The need to pay staff puts an intolerable burden upon the congregation and diverts money away from the support of their own families and the poor and needy. In most churches today, 90% or more of the church's annual budget is spent on salaries and the building, neither of which were an issue until the 4th century.</p> |
| e) | <p>Each local church is led by a number of mature men called elders or bishops, which are just alternative words to describe the same person. A key part of their role was to protect the church from false teaching and corrupt behaviour – and that included keeping an eye on each other and challenging any heresy or misconduct even if it came from a fellow elder.</p> | <p>Each church is led by one man called a pastor or minister. In larger churches he will be accompanied by 'assistant ministers' who are, likewise, full time and paid. Under this hierarchical set up, the "junior" leaders do not see it as their role to question or challenge the senior leader's teaching or conduct. If they did their 'career' in the church would immediately end, as would their salary. So, they don't challenge anything the senior leader does.</p> |

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|--|---|
| f) | <p>All the tasks of the church, including teaching, preaching, music, evangelism, children's work, administration, pastoral work, etc is shared between all of the people, not just the elders, so that everybody is active and all participate in the ministries and roles for which they are best suited/gifted.</p> | <p>One man, or perhaps a few men, irrespective of their giftings or lack of giftings, do all the work on behalf of the people. Therefore that man, or small group of men, do many things for which they are not suited, even when there are several people in the congregation, sitting idly by, who would be far more capable of doing those tasks. If anything is ever done by people in the congregation it will only be menial work, behind the scenes. Any visible work which attracts public attention is reserved for the paid leader(s).</p> |
| g) | <p>The people sit in groups or a circle within a house/barn/outbuilding and they all participate in a two-way dialogue during or after times of teaching and preaching so that it is fully interactive. All can contribute to, comment on, question and even disagree with, whatever is being taught.</p> <p>None of the leaders are insecure so they don't object to being questioned or even contradicted and they reply without taking offence. Also, a variety of people take turns to lead/teach/preach, not necessarily a whole sermon, but a contribution of some kind, even if it is brief.</p> <p>This then gives every member of the church the chance to gain experience of some form of leadership or teaching and enables them to grow in maturity and confidence. It also makes it possible for future elders to be identified as their gifts and qualities are given the chance to be displayed. This format also gives women the chance to contribute without having to adopt a full teaching or preaching role.</p> | <p>The same man speaks every week or most weeks, irrespective of whether he has anything fresh or interesting to say, or about which he feels passionate. The people sit in rows, facing him and never interrupt or participate in any way while he speaks. Neither does anyone question or contradict him after the talk has ended. Indeed, it would be considered unthinkable for them to do so.</p> <p>They are essentially spectators and there is no scope for questions, comment or debate. It is just a one way process. Therefore, the people remain unskilled, immature and inexperienced and they never develop the confidence to begin to contribute and lead.</p> <p>That protects the leader from embarrassing questions and silences any potential rivals, which is a relief to him. But it denies the church the benefit of each of those people's gifts, qualities and areas of experience. It also denies them any scope to question or contradict him which is a vital part of the process of assessing (diakrino) what leaders teach, as we are all commanded to do.</p> |

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|---|--|
| h) | The people eat a meal together each week, like a family, which often, but not always, includes bread and wine. It need not necessarily be a cooked dinner. It could just be a packed lunch. But the point is they sit and eat together. They do so to have fellowship with each other and also to commemorate Jesus' ministry, His death on our behalf and His future return. But it is very important because eating together creates a wholly different dynamic and encourages intimacy and sharing in a way that doesn't happen where people don't eat together. | There is no meal and very little meaningful fellowship or intimacy and the people just have bread and wine as a pure ritual with nothing else to accompany it. Therefore, the congregation rarely get to know each other properly or in any depth and it all remains superficial, such that you can attend a traditional church for 20 years and many of the members are still effectively strangers to you. |
| i) | The leaders serve the people. | The people serve the leaders. |
| j) | The members of the church make all major decisions collectively as a group. The leader(s) do not decide for them. | The leader (or small group of leaders) make all the decisions on behalf of the church. |
| k) | Nobody rules over the people of the church. The elders, although recognized as being more mature, are still just members of the church and their role is to protect, advise and serve, not to rule. | The leader rules over the people. He is higher than and different from the members and they serve him. |
| l) | Every member of the church submits to, honours, cooperates with, and defers to <i>every</i> other member equally. It is mutual submission and goes in all directions, vertically and horizontally. See chapter 10 below in which I look in closer detail at the whole issue of authority and "submission" and what it does, and doesn't, mean. | The direction of submission is entirely one way. The people all submit to the leader and he submits to nobody, other than the regional or national hierarchy of the denomination. |

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|--|---|
| m) | Each church is free and independent and is led by its own elders/bishops, albeit that all important decisions are made by the membership of the church as a whole. So, one house church might have 1-4 bishops (which is just another word for an elder). | Most churches are part of a national or international denomination with very senior leaders who rule over all the churches in that area or country. The men known to us today in traditional churches as bishops have a regional or national role. They rule over many churches, rather than being <i>one of the leaders within a single local church</i> , as they were in the New Testament. So, one bishop might rule over 50-100 churches and there are no bishops within any church. In short, their definition is totally different from the biblical definition. |
| n) | A leader of a church is an ordinary man and is not seen as anything exalted or special. There is no distinction between any of the people and no such thing as 'clergy' or 'lay' members. Neither is there any such thing as 'priests'. All Christians are equal. | The leaders belong to a special group called 'clergy' which is separate from the people and seen as higher than them. They are 'ordained' because they are seen as having been called by God to an enhanced status, or even 'priesthood' which makes them quite unlike the ordinary people, who are referred to as 'lay' members. |
| o) | Meetings are likely to be different each week in their form, content and mood, depending on who is teaching or leading the worship that week and on what the others choose to contribute. It therefore varies according to what the rest of the people, led by the Holy Spirit, choose to say. | Meetings are exactly the same every week. They follow a rigid pattern and timetable known as 'liturgy'. This is done according to long-established traditions and customs. The Holy Spirit is not involved and would not be permitted to alter anything if it went against the church's traditions and timetable. |

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|--|---|
| p) | <p>The vast majority of leaders are not paid and do not depend on the church for their livelihood. Therefore they are secure, relaxed and confident. They are not afraid of or beholden to anybody and can teach the Bible faithfully and without compromise, even if the truth is unpopular and causes some members to leave.</p> | <p>The leader(s) depend solely on the church for their salary, pension and the mortgage on their home. Unsurprisingly, they tend, therefore, to become very insecure and cautious. They will frequently compromise over doctrine or avoid teaching on controversial issues.</p> <p>They censor themselves to avoid upsetting anybody who might leave the church and/or stop giving financially and/or give less. As a result, in most traditional churches, 50-75 per cent of the Bible is never spoken about, given that the Bible is an inherently controversial book which is likely to upset people if it is taught fully and openly.</p> |

| | <u>The biblical model of church:</u> | <u>What most churches now do:</u> |
|----|---|--|
| q) | <p>Because the leaders are relaxed and secure, they do not feel threatened by each other, or by up and coming young men who have potential to become future leaders, or indeed by anybody else whose personal talents or spiritual gifts are different from, or greater than, their own.</p> <p>Therefore, each leader is happy to help to develop other Christians and to see them grow into mature disciples who can look after themselves and help others and are not dependent upon him. Indeed, even if a young man grows so well as a disciple that he becomes a better leader and preacher, the older man will be glad and will happily let that younger man become a fellow elder and even the senior elder.</p> <p>We see this exemplified in the Book of Acts which begins with Barnabas as the senior figure and Paul helping him, but then it is reversed and Barnabas recognises Paul as uniquely gifted and begins to serve him. So, at first they are referred to as Barnabas and Paul, but later Paul and Barnabas.</p> | <p>It is very common for paid leaders to be deeply insecure and even paranoid. They will then seek to protect themselves from real or imagined threats or from potential rivals who might preach better than them or have greater gifts. Any talented young man will be frozen out or driven away.</p> <p>At any rate, those young men will not be given opportunities to teach, preach or lead. The leader's fear is that they might do a better job than him and cause unflattering comparisons to be made. Therefore, such leaders don't develop gifted young men into mature disciples within the church. On the contrary, they hold them back or even drive them out.</p> |

I could have made the above list a lot longer but you will see the general pattern and the consistent contrast, right across the board, between what churches are *meant to be* and what they have *actually become* for most of us. Within this book I shall address other areas of divergence as well, because the list above is far from comprehensive.

The question is *how* and *why* did all of this divergence happen? How did we stray so far away from the biblical model, as demonstrated for us in Acts and the New Testament letters, for how church should be? Did it happen by accident, or did some person or group deliberately cause the Church to go down this unbiblical route whereby we end up doing the exact opposite of what the Early Church did on just about every issue?

You will presumably agree that the misalignment is much too consistent for it to be a coincidence. For example, imagine you were to go to a car dealership and order a brand new car and you wrote out a long list of 30 or 40 different specifications. What would you think if you were then to find, when the car arrived some weeks later, that it was the *exact opposite in every respect* of what you had asked for?

Imagine you'd asked for a saloon but they sent an estate/station wagon. What if you'd asked for diesel and it was a petrol engine? What if you'd asked for it to be black, but it was white? In fact, what if all 30 or 40 items on your specification list were not only wrong, but the *direct opposite* of what you had specified?

You would surely conclude that somebody was altering things intentionally because if they were just entering the data into their computer randomly, then at least some of the options they selected would be correct. However, if every single factor was the reverse of your instructions you would feel sure it was either a practical joke or deliberate sabotage.

My suggestion to you, in the context of church, is that the specifications laid down by God have been reversed on purpose. I do not suggest that any single man, or even group of men, did this. That would be impossible, because the pattern is so consistent, right across the world.

It seems clear to me that this divergence has arisen as a result of Satanic/demonic influence throughout the centuries, in particular since the fourth century AD. That was when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, effectively took over the churches throughout the empire and created the corrupt hierarchical organization known to us as the Roman Catholic church. This then degenerated further into a toxic mixture of Christianity, paganism and man-made philosophy.

I shall return to that theme below as a separate issue, but see also Book Three in this series in which I go into some detail about the errors of Catholicism, including their authoritarian, top-down leadership model. But what may surprise you is that quite a lot of their approach to leadership and church structure has been retained by the Protestant churches, notwithstanding the Reformation.

The Devil was well aware of how important it was for each local church to operate in the ways that God ordained, with all the built-in safeguards, as per the way in which the apostles operated. Therefore the demons set about distorting and diverting every one of these specifications to prevent God's instructions being implemented. They wanted to remove all the safeguards and make churches less effective and less healthy than they were meant to be, and would have been, if we had kept the biblical model.

How then did I get interested in this subject, i.e. how did I notice the problem of unbiblical churches and work out what was going on? It began for me in the 1990s when I was becoming increasingly frustrated at the way churches operated and how ineffectual they tended to be, especially their leaders. This was partly because the condition of the churches was getting worse all over the western world, but also partly because my eyes were starting to open and I began to see things which had been there all along but which I hadn't noticed.

Then, from about 1999 onwards, I found, time and time again, that certain church leaders I knew were behaving dishonestly, carnally and manipulatively. Moreover, most church leaders seemed to be second or third rate men, lacking the ability and confidence one sees in men in the secular workplace.

The churches seemed to be attracting weak, unimpressive men who would never reach senior positions in any trade, business or profession. Moreover, many of them were seeking to dominate and control their churches. This wasn't happening just once or twice, here and there. I noticed it again and again, all over the country. And I heard others reporting the same problems. Eventually I concluded that it was the norm rather than the exception.

I also found that an alarmingly high percentage of church leaders (*though by no means all*) are what the Bible calls '*hirelings*' rather than genuine *shepherds*. Hirelings are men who have no sense of vocation and view what they do as just a paid job rather than as a service to God or His people.

Hirelings are not necessarily seeking to cause any deliberate harm. It is just that they care more about themselves than about the people they lead. So, they are not willing to lay down their lives, or take risks, or even tolerate inconvenience, for the sake of the sheep. By contrast, a real shepherd willingly does all those things.

Even worse, I saw that a significant minority of leaders were *wolves*. That means men who see church leadership as a position which they can use and exploit, either to get money or power or to build an empire for themselves. They are often the third rate men who have not got enough talent or imagination to succeed in a secular career or profession.

They see the church as an easier route where untalented men can reach the top and where there is far less accountability. They will then intentionally deceive, control, manipulate and exploit people to whatever extent is necessary, either for personal gain or to protect their position or just to indulge their own egos.

This gradual series of discoveries about the real nature of many British churches was both bewildering and depressing. There were times when I also found it traumatic, because I was one of the very few people who actually tried to tackle such leaders face to face rather than complain behind their backs. I always challenged them directly and openly, never engaging in gossip.

But I found that when I did, they were always quick to close ranks and to band together with other leaders in their own church and in other churches to attack and undermine anybody who was challenging them, or whom they perceived as a threat. I found that such men are vastly more skilled at the art of self-preservation, and at protecting each other, than they are at teaching, preaching or caring for their people.

In this book, and also in Book 6, I describe how several leaders I have known have been willing to say and do whatever it takes to defend themselves, even to the extent of telling blatant lies. I also show how their hierarchical institutions joined with them to resist correction and to undermine anybody daring to expose or challenge them. I hope the details of those experiences may be of use to readers who have faced, or are now facing, similar problems and are bewildered by the coordinated wall of hostility that they meet.

You might ask whether I am saying that if a church is not biblical in terms of its structure, organization and leadership then it isn't a church at all. Or, am I at least saying that it is not a *valid* church, such that God would not bless or use them? *No, I am not saying any of that.*

Many such unbiblical churches have been, and are still being, both blessed and used by God. That is so, even where one or more of the leaders are corrupt. In one sense, God has quite limited options available to Him because virtually all churches, especially denominational ones, are organised and led in an unbiblical, domineering and hierarchical way.

So, I am *not* saying that an unbiblical church is not a real church, or that God does not use or recognise such churches. On the contrary, I know He does use many of them, despite all their faults. What I am

saying, however, is that if such churches were to alter their structure, approach and leadership style, so as to be biblical rather than unbiblical, then God would be able to bless and use them far *more* than He has been able to do hitherto.

So, the fact that some people get saved in unbiblical, domineering churches is not an argument for them continuing to be run in an unbiblical domineering way. Moreover, if we were to have a twenty first century reformation whereby we again learn how to do church in a biblical way, as in the Early Church, then a great many unnecessary and self-inflicted problems would be avoided.

Vast numbers of Christians today are obstructed, wounded and damaged by leaders and their talents are wasted. This is done to them within the very churches which God had intended to be a haven of protection, support and fellowship. He meant the local church to be a safe and healthy place where every one of us can grow, fulfil our potential and be active in *doing the work of the ministry*.

Instead, at present, countless millions of people are attending churches as mere spectators, where there is little for them to do other than watch the minister perform as a *one man band*. That state of affairs is especially frustrating for men, more so than women, because a man's very nature recoils from being passive. That is one reason why so many men abandon church. They see it as an essentially feminine institution, led by inadequate but manipulative weaklings, which provides nothing meaningful or constructive to do.

I would also add another point which was not the case even 30 years ago but is happening now. That is I believe we are living in the period of the time known as "the last days" or "the end times" which are the run up to the rise of the antichrist. The point is that we are already seeing a move towards a dictatorial one world government with oppressive laws and severe censorship. And it is happening at an astonishing speed.

That attack on our freedoms will gather pace and will be increasingly directed at churches. Therefore, it is going to be all the more essential for us to rediscover the biblical model of house churches, if only to enable us to evade Government surveillance and restrictions and "fly under the radar".

All the large denominational churches will be easy for a dictatorial government to regulate and most of them won't even object to doing whatever they are told, as we saw in the Covid hoax of 2020 when virtually all traditional church leaders caved in to government pressure and immediately closed their churches. The only churches that defied the oppressive covid rules were the house churches.

I believe that God greatly desires to change all of this and to see a return to biblical church, meeting in homes, and especially a return to biblical leadership. I would therefore urge you to consider whether what I am saying is true and, if so, how you could play a part in your local area in starting to effect that change.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘CHURCH’?

²⁴And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV)

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 no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 (ESV)

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

John 9:34 (ESV)

The different uses of the word ‘church (“ekklesia”)', to mean either the local church or the entire Church as a whole

There are two main ways in which people use the word ‘church. At a ‘micro’ level it means a local assembly or congregation, consisting of Christians who live in that town or village. Indeed, there will be several such churches in that locality. So, that small local group, provided they see themselves as a church and an elder or group of elders have been appointed, is a ‘church’, with a small ‘c’.

I included the proviso about how they see themselves and are structured because not every group of local Christians is necessarily a church. They could just be a Bible study group or a prayer group or the organisers of a soup kitchen or food bank and, if so, they would be doing good work and they might all be Christians, but they would not be a church.

So, although the Bible tells us “...where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20), that does not mean that every such gathering of two or three people is a ‘church’. They may just be two or three people gathered together, no doubt doing valuable work, but not being a church because they do not see themselves as a local church, are not structured as such and do not function as such.

That said, it is also entirely possible for a group of people, even as few as two or three, to be a local church *if they see themselves as such*, and have at least one elder, and function as a small house church. Indeed, in these apostate days where genuine Christians are extremely scarce, it may be that many local house churches will be obliged to function with very small numbers.

There may be no alternative because there are so few real Christians around, especially in a rural area with a small population. Yet, even as a tiny handful of people, it would still be a perfectly valid house

church. So, it is to the local church that Paul is primarily referring in this verse when he refers to doing good to the “family of believers”:

¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Galatians 6:10 (RSV)

At a ‘macro level, the word ‘Church’, which I always spell with a capital ‘C’ to distinguish it from a local church, means the entire worldwide group of saved Christians, numbering many millions who have believed the Gospel and been saved from the Day of Pentecost in Acts onwards and right up to the Rapture. At that point the Church will cease, and be removed to Heaven.

Anyone on the Earth from then on who becomes a Christian will be saved and will be referred to as a ‘Tribulation Saint’. However, he will not be part of that special group known as ‘the Church’ which is also known by the metaphors of ‘*the body of Christ*’ and ‘*the bride of Christ*’. So, it is this wider group, the Church as a whole, with a capital C that is being referred to in these verses:

³²This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:32 (RSV)

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27 (ESV)

² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:2 (ESV)

⁷ Let’s rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has prepared herself.” ⁸ It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

⁹ Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.’” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

Revelation 19:7-9 (NASB)

What do we mean by a ‘genuine’ church?

You will see many times in this book and in my other books, that I speak in terms of whether people, leaders and churches as a whole are ‘genuine’, ‘real’ or ‘sincere’, as opposed to being false, phoney, heretical or apostate. So, when I speak of a church being genuine or false I am not referring to the church structure and method of leadership, but focusing instead on whether the leaders are honest men or phonies and whether they care for their people or exploit them.

So, this is the first of my ways of classifying a church and, in particular, its leaders. When I speak of such things I am not referring to extremely rare problems that one hardly ever sees. Sadly, we live in a century where there has been a catastrophic decline in the authenticity and sincerity of the Church as a whole and also local churches and individual Christians.

Right across the board, locally, nationally and internationally, multitudes of churches, even many which used to be solid and genuine, have become controlling, manipulative and abusive in terms of how they treat people. They are also false, deceitful and have no qualms about telling lies to protect themselves or get their own way. I give many examples of such abuse in my Book 6.

In this book, and also in my Book 6, there is some explanation of why this is happening now at such a stratospherically high level. In my opinion, it is happening because this is the great apostasy or falling away which the Bible says will happen in the last days prior to the rise to power of the antichrist.

But the key point for now, is simply to recognise that this decline in integrity is happening, i.e. that most churches are to some degree toxic and unhealthy places for you to be. You might never have realised that and may be shocked by the very suggestion but, sadly, it is the truth. Having realised that, our task is then to figure out what to do about it.

This problem of corrupt, carnal, heretical leaders is not new. It also existed in Old Testament Israel

These problems of corrupt, domineering, apostate leaders are not unique to the Church age. The Old Testament prophets have much to say about the same problems caused by carnal, worldly leaders who led the Jewish people astray. But note from these few sample passages that God clearly does not regard this as a minor matter for which such leaders should receive a mild slap on the wrist.

God is profoundly angry at how these men abused and misled His people and I see no reason to suppose He is not equally angry today when He sees corrupt leaders ruling over the churches which they are meant to serve, and exploiting the people they are meant to protect. So, let us take this seriously:

⁸ *The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'*

*Those who handle the law did not know me;
the shepherds transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal
and went after things that do not profit.*

Jeremiah 2:8 (ESV)

¹³ *"For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.*

¹⁴ *They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
saying, 'Peace, peace,'
when there is no peace.*

Jeremiah 6:13-14 (ESV)

²¹ *For the shepherds are stupid
and do not inquire of the LORD;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.*

Jeremiah 10:21 (ESV)

God plainly takes this problem just as seriously today in the Church age and is just as angry at the actions of ungodly, domineering leaders who exploit His people rather than serve them. That must be so because He addresses the same problems in the New Testament:

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

2 Peter 2:1-3 (ESV)

⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

2 John 9-11 (ESV)

³ Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ

Jude 3-4 (ESV)

What do we mean by a 'biblical' church?

We have looked at whether a church is 'genuine' by which I mean whether its leaders are honest men or deceivers and whether they are servants or abusers.

If we refer to a 'biblical church' there are two things about it which we might claim are biblical:

- a) its doctrines, teachings, beliefs and approach to interpreting Scripture
- b) its structure, method of leadership and way of operating

So, the first dimension to this second classification of churches is about what that local church *teaches* and the second is about how it *operates* and how it is *led*. It is actually possible to have a church which is biblical in one or other of these ways, but not both. So, you could see a church with an unbiblical structure, based on the traditional hierarchical, clergy dominated model and yet their teaching of the Bible is good.

Or it could be the opposite, a house church which is structured just as churches were in the New Testament, with local unpaid elders, meeting in homes and with everyone participating, and yet its teaching of the Bible is heretical. So, a good and biblical structure does not guarantee doctrinal accuracy. But the point is it does make it more likely.

In this book however, I shall focus primarily on how a church is structured, led and organised and whether it meets in homes with unpaid elders or in traditional "church buildings" with paid full time

ministers or ‘clergy’. My contention is that if we get that right and begin to benefit from all the safeguards which the biblical model of church is designed to provide, then we are far more likely to get our doctrine right as well. Plus, we are more likely to develop leaders who are servants, not abusers and tyrants.

A church can be genuine even if it is not biblical. Conversely, it can be biblical, but still not be genuine

A church can be ‘*genuine*’ in the sense of being honest, real, sincere and authentic in terms of the *character of the leaders* such that they are gentle, kind, humble servants who tell the truth and look after people. And yet, such a genuine church with honest, godly leaders could have an *unbiblical structure* with a formal traditional building and a paid ‘clergyman’ leading it and wearing a dog collar.

Or it could be a biblical church in terms of its structure and leadership model and yet its theology and teaching are hopelessly muddled and inaccurate.

We could even have a church which is biblical in both its doctrines and its structure, type of building and leadership model and yet one or more of the leaders are not honest men and they exploit and manipulate people instead of serving them. I have personally known men with good, accurate doctrine who have still been domineering leaders who use and control people.

I know a former Anglican vicar called Nigel who broke away from the Church of England and set up an independent church, taking much of the congregation with him. His theology was actually very good and accurate, so much so that I joined his church for a couple of years. However, we learned during that time that *in his dealings with people*, he was remarkably dishonest and devious.

For example, when the church took votes on important decisions, Nigel used to go into a side room by himself *and count the votes alone!* Thus, the result was whatever he said it was, with nobody to check anything. Somehow he convinced the elders that that was the right way to do it and they were too passive and too much under his control to argue about it.

Over the past 43 years that I have been saved, I have come across just about every type of church you could imagine and every combination of features. Therefore, you will realise that I am advocating that churches should be BOTH biblical AND genuine such that they maximise the chances that they will get things right in ALL of the following areas:

- a) their teaching of the Bible and their doctrines
- b) their structure, model of leadership and type of building
- c) the personal character and integrity of the leaders, i.e. they should be good, honest, humble servants who treat people rightly.

So, I emphasise again that getting your church structure right doesn’t by itself guarantee that its doctrine and teaching will be accurate. Likewise, having sound accurate doctrines does not guarantee that the leaders will be honest men with servant hearts. There are no guarantees of anything but what we can say is that getting our church structure and leadership model right will greatly *increase the chances* of those leaders being, and remaining, kind, honest, diligent men with sound doctrines.

The state of the churches today

It is vital for every Christian to try to find a local church to be part of which is both biblical and genuine. However, that is now far easier said than done because there is a tremendous amount of confusion, deception and error about what a church is and how it should operate. Indeed, this is possibly the area on which the Church as a whole is more ignorant, confused and deceived than on any other issue.

Just about every conceivable error, false doctrine or false practice that one could think of has found its way into some part of church structure and practice. That is mainly due to us getting our ideas of how church is meant to operate from looking at the churches *as we have always known them* and automatically assuming those methods must be valid because we have never seen anything else.

Instead of looking at how churches have always been, throughout our lives, we should be looking *at how they should be*, as described in the Bible. Most of us have made the mistake of following human tradition, rather than imitating what we see described in the Bible. However, God tells us to do the exact opposite. He wants us to follow the Bible, *not what we see other people doing*, even if it has been done for centuries.

For many of us, our own personal experience of church has therefore been a profound disappointment. However, we tend to assume the problem is unique to us and that we have just been unfortunate in the particular churches we have found rather than it being part of a worldwide problem. In fact, the problems within our churches are very widespread.

In the West, most of what claims to be the Church, is actually worldly, carnal, biblically illiterate, authoritarian and dysfunctional. Many people attend churches, but show no sign of having been born again. Even fewer are seeking to become mature disciples or grow in character, let alone to help others to become mature disciples as Jesus commanded *all of us to do* in the “Great Commission”.

¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ 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)

Yet, hardly anybody questions or challenges anyone else as to whether they are even saved, let alone maturing as a disciple. Much of what calls itself the Church today is actually 'apostate', at least in the West. That means it has turned away from what it once knew to be the truth and has become false. And nothing is done about it. Indeed, if anyone tries to do something about it, as I have tried, they are seen as the problem and as a threat to the leadership.

This chapter is aimed at three different groups of people

Most people who have any dealings with church tend to belong to one of three very different groups. The first group approve of church but are so naive they are unaware of the problems that this chapter will discuss. This group tends to see any criticism of church leaders, or of the structure of church as inherently invalid and even improper. So, with this group, the task is to get them to be able to see that there is anything wrong with the way church is led or structured today.

The second group are those who see no point in church, i.e. they are not motivated to attend regularly or even to join a church at all. They assume that it is ok just to go it alone and be a Christian without being part of a church, or at least without being active with other believers locally.

Some of the people in this second group have had some experience of church either recently or in childhood but and have found it dull, lifeless and unhelpful. So, with this group, the task is to get them even to see the point of church, i.e. why it matters and why we need to belong to a local church. They are just too bored and disillusioned about church to want to get involved.

The third group is one that has grown very rapidly over the last 30 years or more. It is those people who have been so wounded and damaged by authoritarian, controlling or dishonest church leaders and/or by the manipulation of fellow church members, that they are now 'allergic' to church. They see it as something toxic and, sadly, they are often right.

These wounded, damaged people may have seen the value of church in the past. They mostly used to belong to the first group i.e. the naive trusting group, which is why they were so vulnerable to being exploited. However, their experiences at the hands of controlling leaders and manipulative fellow members have left them badly scarred. The task with this group is to get them to understand why they came to be damaged and how to avoid it happening again.

Even harder than that is the task of persuading such wounded Christians that it is worthwhile, or even safe, to make another attempt to be part of a church. Some just will not have anything to do with churches anymore, because their experiences have been so consistently awful.

I truly sympathise with them but, even so, they are still making a big mistake (and disobeying God) if they choose to have nothing to do with any church. They, therefore, need to keep searching until they find a biblical, sincere, non abusive church. Or, they need to *start one themselves*, which is an option most people never even think of as they assume it to be both impossible and illegitimate. Yet, it is probably the right option for many of these people.

So, it may assist you if you were to try to identify which group you are currently in. There is no single message that can be given to all people. Therefore, I will seek to address the particular needs of your group, alongside the other two groups. However, please bear in mind, when I am addressing issues relevant to the two other groups that such groups really do exist, even if you aren't aware of them or haven't come across them yet.

Church is a very sensitive subject, about which people tend to feel strongly. Many resent anything that they regard as criticism. For example, people who belong to the first group, the naïve and trusting types, tend to see nothing wrong with church and regard any criticism of church or of a leader, as the equivalent of an attack on God. It isn't. At least in my case, it is a genuine, and necessary, attempt to address some very real and urgent problems.

I visited an old Anglican church in the countryside some years ago and there was an article pinned to the notice board in which the vicar (a woman) was bemoaning the fact that so many people criticise the church, by which I think she meant the Church of England. She spoke as if to do so was inherently wrong and unjustified. The essence of the message was that the church (of England) and its workers/leaders are doing their best and that it does no good to criticise them.

The article had a point, in one sense, but the writer was evidently unaware, or did not consider it important, that there are many people whose experience of church has been very different, even horrific. So, if you are in the first group listed above, the naïve and trusting types, and can't see any problems, I would urge you to be open-minded to hear about the experiences of those who have been wounded by church, or by what claims to be church.

They are numerous and they have a real and valid story to tell. Moreover, they are not necessarily being negative or unfair in their criticism, even if they don't always know how to express themselves constructively or cannot contain their emotions sufficiently to speak calmly. Sadly, the victims of abuse in all contexts often make poor witnesses and do not present their case well because they are so emotionally damaged. You therefore have to make allowances when listening to them.

Those in the third group who have been spiritually and emotionally scarred, tend to be so wary and reluctant to get back into any church that they are agitated even by the suggestion. They are suspicious of anyone who urges them to join a church. To those in that group I would suggest you try to be open minded. Consider it possible that some trustworthy people do still exist in Western churches, even amongst leaders, and to be willing to try again, albeit carefully.

A large proportion of the Western church has also become compromised in its doctrine, is lukewarm in its worship and provides little or no discipleship training. In most churches the Bible is hardly taught. Or if it is taught at all, it is done badly. Instead, the leaders focus on teaching the traditions, opinions and practices of men and the Bible itself is ignored or they merely scratch the surface of it and leave out 80% of its contents.

Consequently, a large percentage of churches today have unbiblical practices, woke/liberal teaching, scepticism and very confused theology. These false ideas and practices have not come from the Bible but from man-made philosophy, other religions, the New Age, or even the occult. Few Western churches even mention sin, judgment, Hell or repentance today, let alone emphasise them.

That's a depressing, but sadly an accurate, summary of the Western church as we now know it. This should not surprise us though, as the Bible tells us it will happen and that, in particular, false leaders and false prophets or "*fierce wolves*" will come into the Church. It's not a possibility but a certainty. Indeed, we are warned of it repeatedly:

¹⁵"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

Matthew 7:15 (NIV)

¹Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1 (NIV)

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Acts 20:28-30 (ESV)

¹ "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. ³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.

John 16:1-3 (ESV)

This is nothing new and we are not the only generation to have these problems. The prophet Jeremiah warned the people of his day that many so called prophets, teachers and leaders were actually insincere men, giving out wrong teaching and false prophecies:

¹⁴Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds.

Jeremiah 14:14 (NIV)

These passages above are a warning to us to take care and scrutinise very closely whatever is taught in our churches. We cannot, and must not, simply accept everything that church leaders say. That would be very foolish, because much of what is taught in our churches is false. Therefore, we have to "judge" everything we are told and weigh and assess it against the Bible to see whether it is true or false.

The Greek word for this kind of judging is *diakrino* and it is not only allowed to us but we are positively commanded to do it. In order to do that, we have to get to know the Bible thoroughly for ourselves or we will, inevitably, be led astray by false teachers.

Sadly, many people today are being led astray, and are even failing to find salvation or become genuine disciples, simply because they are not willing to put in the effort to study the Bible for themselves and apply it. Therefore, they have no ability to test or assess anything they are told. And they have no idea that the gospel message (if any) that was preached to them may have been false or incomplete.

Thus, many of us attend churches, whether biblical or otherwise, without ever having truly repented or even believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, many of us have only the flimsiest, misguided understanding of what it is all about, or even why we are there. People's motives for attending church vary.

For some the church is simply a respectable institution to which they can belong. For some it is a place to find friends. For others it is just something they were born into, and which they feel is a comfortable, familiar part of their culture or heritage. For many others it is a place where they can practice man made religion, obey rules and feel respectable.

'Religion' is the self centred attempt by mankind to get to God through our own efforts and self righteousness. That religious mindset is surprisingly widespread. There is something about religious ritual and tradition that appeals to our fleshly nature and pride and which is even addictive. One reason for it is that our flesh likes pomp and ceremony. Another is that the practice of man-made religion and keeping rules seems to offer us the chance to achieve merit or righteousness for ourselves.

All in all, the Western church today is probably in the weakest condition it has ever been in since before the Reformation of the 16th century. In historical terms, the number of truly born again Christians in the West is now at an alarmingly low level. That fact cannot be denied. The real Church has only a fraction of the influence it once had on our society and on political life.

Instead, the West is now far more influenced by secular humanism, paganism and left wing political correctness or “wokism” than by the Gospel. These anti Christian ideas are growing rapidly in militancy and power. They are increasingly replacing Christian values in our government, councils, legal system, schools, police, hospitals and workplaces.

The same is true even within churches. For example, take note of how many misguided churches now regard “racism” and “global warming” as the key issues we face, albeit that they are now starting to call it “climate change” because even they can see it is not getting hotter. So, they don’t preach the Gospel but they do urge you to avoid using plastic bags.

The torrent of new laws that are passed each year, are no longer based on the foundation of biblical principles, but on political correctness, globalism and misconceived concepts of “human rights”. Most of this legislation and the anti Christian thinking on which it is based, emanates from the World Economic Forum (the WEF) which now dominates and controls most of the governments in the world.

Christians ought to know what the WEF is and be appalled by it, but the vast majority have never even heard of it. Its thinking is based on secular humanism, the values of which are very different from what the Bible says about our responsibilities and duties. Indeed, many and perhaps all of the leaders of the WEF are literally Satanists. All of this social and spiritual change is happening remarkably quickly.

The principal reason for the rapid advance of the WEF is the extreme weakness of the Church, which is no longer exerting anywhere near the same influence on our society as it once did. A vacuum has therefore been created which is rapidly being filled by pagan, antichristian philosophies, even within the apparent church, not just out there in the unbelieving world. Please refer to my audio series “Modern Deceptions” for more detail.

The condition of the Church worldwide before Jesus physically returns to the Earth

Again, all of this decline and decay in the professing Church ought not to surprise us. Jesus said that these things would happen, and that in the period just before His return to the Earth, a large proportion of what claims to be the Church would have become corrupt, lukewarm and apostate. Therefore, it is only to be expected that in the last days many people in the churches will abandon the truth of the Gospel and replace it with man made ideas and philosophies.

This decline into worldwide apostasy is inevitable, and we need to be prepared for it. Jesus prophesied about it very clearly. Therefore, it will happen. Consider these statements by Jesus Himself in which He tells us about the cold hearted and corrupt condition into which most churches will have sunk in the period leading up to His return to the Earth:

¹⁰At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹²Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Matthew 24:10-14 (NIV)

Indeed, Jesus prophesied that far from the Church taking over the world, as some misguidedly believe it will, the decline of real faith at the end will be so extreme that He asks, as a rhetorical figure of speech, whether He will find any faith at all on the Earth when He returns. That expression is intended to illustrate how bad it will get. So, He did not envisage merely a relative decline but rather a drastic collapse into widespread apostasy.

⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Luke 18:8 (NIV)

Paul also describes the depths to which people will have sunk prior to the return of Jesus. Consider the description Paul gives of the people of that future time. Alarming, it sounds just like our own generation, as our wickedness and people's insane delusions about gender etc have already reached unprecedented levels:

¹But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. ²People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NIV)

Note the verse above in which Paul says that the final generation on the Earth, in the "last days", just before Jesus' return, will have "a form of godliness but denying its power...". That description fits us so well, far better than any previous generation. When has the truth of the Gospel been less well known and less valued, at least in the West, than it is now?

There are very few people today who want to hear sound biblical doctrine or who are willing to make the effort to study or to listen to thorough teaching. Not many church members are asking for it, and even fewer leaders are providing it. Most of the churches just give short jocular feel good messages and tell their people whatever they want to hear, without much regard to whether it is true. Again, Paul said it would be so:

³For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NIV)

Peter also had much to say about this. He refers to how scoffers will arise (i.e. those who despise and ridicule sacred things). Moreover, we are specifically told they will pour particular scorn on the very idea of Jesus returning to the Earth. It is significant, therefore, that in our own day there is such a widespread abandonment of belief in the fact that Jesus will physically return. That used to be widely believed but our generation rejects or ignores that particular truth more than any past generation I can think of:

³First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." ⁵But they deliberately forget that

long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

2 Peter 3:3-7 (NIV)

Peter also draws attention to the fact that in the 'last days' there will be a widespread abandonment of belief in God as Creator. No previous generation has ever done that on any significant scale, but ours has. Ever since Charles Darwin wrote *'The Origin of Species'* in 1859 his absurd theories have spread. It was slow at first, but since the mid twentieth century, belief in evolution has largely taken over.

It is now aggressively foisted upon our children in schools and presented as if it was fact, when it is actually just a feeble theory which is obviously false. Indeed, God considers His role of Creator to be so utterly self evident that He classifies anyone who denies it as a fool. We are told this in Romans:

¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up to vile impurity in the lusts of their hearts, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for falsehood, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 1:19-25 (NASB)

Nevertheless, many churches have also succumbed to pressure and absorbed evolutionary nonsense. They are embarrassed to speak of God as Creator, in case anybody should laugh at them, or consider them old fashioned or unsophisticated. That level of error on such a profound issue is unprecedented in the entire history of the Church. Therefore, even in terms of the belief in evolution alone, aside from all other heresies, the churches are more misguided now than they have ever been.

All previous generations, no matter what their other religious views were, saw it as plainly obvious that God is our Creator. That is no longer the case. I emphasise all this because it seems highly likely that we are now in, or are very close to, that final generation. That is why modern Western churches are so appallingly weak and corrupt. They have never been as lukewarm as they are now.

The problems we see are not merely in our imagination. Neither are they exaggerated. Things really are bleak, such that many churches are led by men (and even women) who have no real faith. They do not know the Bible and do not even recognise Jesus as Saviour, let alone as Creator, Judge or King.

Let us examine these issues and look at what we can do to try to find a way to restore at least pockets of real Christianity here and there, and set up some genuine biblical house churches as we await Jesus' return. Sadly it is no longer easy for anybody (in the West) to find a sincere, genuine, biblical church to be part of. Indeed, that is to put it mildly as it is actually really difficult. Such churches are few and

far between. But, we now need to look more closely at what we mean by a “good biblical church” and why we need to be part of one.

What do we mean by the word ‘church’?

Before we look again at the difference between a biblical and an unbiblical church, let us first define what the word ‘church’ means. It is the English translation of the Greek word ‘ekklesia’, from which we get words like ‘ecclesiastical’. We first hear the word ekklesia being used by Jesus Himself in Matthew chapter 16, before the Church even came into existence:

¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Matthew 16: 15-18 (NASB)

The word ‘ekklesia’ itself comes from two other Greek words being put together, i.e.

- a) ‘ek’ which means ‘out of’ or ‘out from’ and
- b) ‘kaleo’ which means ‘to call’ or ‘to summon’

Thus, you could say that ekklesia means an assembly of those who are ‘called out of’ or ‘called out from’. It therefore means a group of people who are called out of this world for a uniquely privileged purpose. Jesus was using the word to refer to the special new society, of which He was to be the Founder. That is one aspect of what Jesus meant.

However, the word ekklesia was also used among the Greek people to refer to a body or assembly of citizens who are gathered to discuss affairs of state. It is used that way in Acts 19:39.

*³⁹But if you want anything beyond this,
it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.*

Acts 19:39 (NASB)

The word ekklesia, or ‘church’ therefore has two main meanings for our purposes:

- a) When spelled with a capital C, the word Church refers to the church at a ‘macro’ level, i.e. the whole worldwide company of redeemed people, i.e. all Christian believers of all nations and all ages throughout the present era. The Church age runs from the day of Pentecost shortly after Jesus’ resurrection, when the Church as a whole was formed, and it continues up until the Rapture in the future.

That is when Jesus will remove the whole Church of that day from the Earth. From that moment onwards, any unbeliever who becomes a Christian will be called a “Tribulation Saint”, but will not be part of the Church. This broad meaning of the word ‘Church’ is what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 16:18 above and it is also what Paul is referring to in Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 1:22-23

²⁸ *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

Acts 20:28 (NASB)

²² *And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,* ²³ *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*

Ephesians 1:22-23 (NASB)

- b) ekklesia also refers to every smaller scale group of professing believers which meets together at a local level, i.e. when the word church is being used in its ‘micro’ sense. When we mean it in this local sense we spell the word church with a lower case c. It is also used at an intermediate level in Acts 9:31 when it refers to that part of the church which was in Judea, Galilee and Samaria, i.e. the believers in that whole region which would, of course, have consisted of many small local churches but was not the entire Church.

³¹ *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.*

Acts 9:31 (NASB)

At the smallest end of the spectrum we have the word ekklesia being used to refer to a church meeting at a very localised level, e.g. the church which met at the house of Philemon. That too was a church with a small c:

¹*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,* ²*and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house*

Philemon 1-2 (NASB)

What then is a ‘biblical church’?

The phrase ‘biblical church’ is not itself found in the Bible. It is a phrase which is used by me, and by others, to seek to draw a distinction between the two following alternatives:

- a) church as we generally know it and as we usually see it around us, i.e. traditional, denominational churches.
- b) what a church ought to be (and used to be) as described in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament. So, it is led and structured on a small scale, meeting in houses, with mostly unpaid local elders in the way the churches of the first century were.

My contention is that most of what we see around us in churches today is not structured, led or conducted in a way the apostles would recognise. They also contain a high proportion of unsaved people who are just “churchgoers”. If Paul walked into one of our churches today, even a small ordinary one, let alone a large cathedral, he would probably assume it to be a pagan temple.

The Christians of the first century did not have the large elaborate buildings we have today. More importantly, they did not have our church structures, methods, liturgy, traditions, vestments or forms

of leadership. Therefore, in almost every respect, what most of us know as church today is unrecognisable in comparison with what the apostles knew and practiced.

The Bible never spells out any rigid formula for exactly how every local church should be conducted. But it does lay down some clear general principles.

We need to emphasise that the Bible does not spell out or mandate precise ways of operating i.e. how every church, without exception, should sing or pray or dance or not dance. Neither does it tell us at what time, or even on what day, meetings should be held or exactly how they should be conducted. The Bible has been deliberately written in such a way as to give us maximum freedom.

It is quite the opposite of the approach taken by President de Gaulle, who wanted a rigid structure and timetable for every primary school in France. He said he could look at his watch at say 10:00 am on a Thursday morning and know that every nine year old child in France is doing maths at the moment.

That kind of uniformity may have appealed to De Gaulle, but it is not God's way and is not how He wants church to be. We are given a lot of latitude to conduct ourselves as we see fit, in accordance with the culture, character, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, age, abilities, nationality etc of the people in that local church.

So, a church in rural Wales is not obliged to try to imitate some other church which meets in a city in England, and vice versa. A church in Africa does not have to act as if it was in America. We are all free to operate in whatever ways suit the needs, personalities, culture and preferences of the people in our own local church.

So, for example, I am a very bookish, reserved, conservative person and I don't like dancing in church or clapping my hands in an exuberant way. So, I am not a tambourine player. It just doesn't suit my personality. Yet, when I was a new believer, many people tried to pressurise me to act as they do and to be demonstrative in worship. But, I always felt uncomfortable doing such things and that I was being bullied into acting in ways which were alien to me.

But eventually I realised that God made me the way I am and is happy with my personality and does not require me to imitate other people who are more extrovert. Realising that was very liberating and I never again allowed anyone to pressurise me to act as they do. I fully accept that God is pleased with them when they dance and shake tambourines. But I now know that He is equally happy with me when I don't.

The point is there are many ways of expressing worship and being passionate. In my view, one of the very highest forms of worship is to study the Bible with a whole hearted desire to learn it and obey what it says. That may not sound like passion but I am quite sure God sees it as such, as with the writer of Psalm 119.

When I was in my 30s, I received an unexpected compliment from a man in church who said that when he first met me he had thought I was very reserved and buttoned up. He said he had initially assumed this indicated a lack of passion. However, he then said *"But I now see that you are one of the most passionate people I have ever known."*

That said, despite all the freedom we have as to the details of how to operate church, there are still some very clear and important principles which are set out in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament. These reveal the big picture and show what all of the first century churches did and how the apostles all operated.

The New Testament is not therefore being prescriptive and giving us commands as to exactly what we must do and how and when to do it. But it is telling us what the first century churches did. So, it doesn't give us orders but it does present us with a clear and consistent pattern or template and we would be foolish to ignore that and even more foolish to choose to do the direct opposite of what they did.

So, notwithstanding the very real freedom we have to make our own choices about matters of timing, style, procedure and approach, we would be most unwise to ignore what all the apostles did in all the churches they established.

When I raise this issue of unbiblical churches people often get defensive and remind me that the New Testament doesn't command us to imitate the structure and methods of the first century churches. That is quite true, as I have already said. But what they don't do is explain why the early Church operated as it did, why God told us about it, and why it would be alright for us to completely ignore their example.

At any rate, if we are to depart from the methods and approach which they adopted, we surely ought to have thought about it enough to have some good reasons for doing so. At the very least, we ought to be aware of what they did in the first century in order to be able to make an informed and conscious choice not to imitate them.

The reality is, however, that in the vast majority of churches no teaching is given about the methods, structure or practices of the early Church. Therefore, most of us have no idea what happened in first century churches, or how they conducted themselves, or why, or even why it matters. In fact, if we give it any thought at all, which most of us don't, we probably just assume they operated in the same way as we do.

So, we might picture Paul standing at a lectern, or in a pulpit, or at an altar, speaking to a large group of people all of whom are sitting quietly in rows of chairs in front of him. We might also picture Paul wearing clerical vestments and a 'dog collar' with a pointy Cardinal's hat, giving out 'orders' and being in authority over everyone.

We might also picture a hierarchy of 'clergy' assisting 'Pope' Peter, Cardinal Paul and the other apostles, performing the liturgy, keeping the people in order and directing them as to what to do. However, if you do picture the early Church in any of those ways, you would be very mistaken.

None of those things were true of the first century Church. Yet all these things, and even worse things, are to be seen in the vast majority of traditional denominational churches today. The point is, therefore, that those practices obviously did not come from the Bible, but from:

- a) the imagination of men's minds, with the 'help' of demonic deception
- b) a wish to protect the power and prestige of 'clergy'

- c) even worse, from the practices of the pagan priests who had previously served in Roman temples, but who came into the church when the Emperor Constantine took over the (apparent) church in the year AD 312.

We shall look more closely below at what the Bible says about the principles of church leadership, structure and organisation. However, for now, one could just say how odd it is, given the freedom of every church to choose how to conduct itself, that virtually all of them have opted to do *the exact opposite of what the apostles did* and on every issue and practice.

One could understand it if we had all chosen a multitude of different combinations or permutations, some valid, some not, some biblical, some unbiblical. However, for virtually all of us to choose an unbiblical approach, and in virtually all the things we do, gives the distinct impression that it is not a coincidence and that a sinister unseen hand, or rather a sinister mind, is at work.

I believe it is the Devil who is behind it, seeking to subvert and undermine all the churches throughout the world. He wants them to choose an unhealthy and unbiblical approach at every possible point in order to deny them the benefits and protections which would have come from adopting the methods of the Early Church.

CHAPTER 3

WHY DO WE HAVE TO BE PART OF A LOCAL CHURCH ANYWAY? WHAT IS IT FOR?

²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:25 (NASB)

Why do we have to be part of a local church?

The simplest reason why we need to be part of a local church is because the Bible commands us to be. So, if you wish to be brief that settles it. Therefore, we have no alternative but to try our best to find, and maintain, genuine biblical churches with sound doctrine and honest leaders, no matter how difficult that may be, because, as we see in Hebrews 10:25 above, all Christians are commanded not to forsake meeting together.

It is not a matter of personal choice, therefore, as to whether we bother to belong to a local church. God has expressly told us to be part of one. The real Church as a whole is the body of Jesus Christ, i.e. all truly saved believers. However, the real Church as a whole is invisible. You cannot meet with it. You cannot even point to it. It isn't just in one place. It does not have a building or a headquarters.

The real Church consists of all genuine Christians, dotted around, here and there, throughout the whole world. It also includes all those truly born again believers who have ever lived and died in the past. All those individuals, no matter what denomination they belong to, or wherever they live in the world, whether today or over the past 21 centuries, are collectively **the** Church.

Therefore, when we become a real Christian, but not if we are just a phoney one, we become part of that real Church. It spans true Christians living in the whole world today and throughout all of the last 21 centuries. That entire group of people is the Church. They are alternatively known as the 'body of Christ' and also the 'bride of Christ'.

However, for us to be able to relate to other believers and to learn alongside them, we have to become part of that real Church at a local level with other living people whom we can see and touch. We cannot meaningfully do anything at a worldwide, century spanning macro level.

That means that to function as part of the Church we have to meet up with other Christians locally for worship, prayer, teaching, Bible study and fellowship. There is no other way. Church can only be experienced at a local level with living people who are physically present with you in the same room.

You cannot validly choose only to operate as part of the overall worldwide Church and separate yourself from all the local Christians near to where you live. I emphasise that because there are many people who think they can opt out and either do nothing or just watch church services online. That may be alright for those who are ill or elderly and are housebound, but it is not acceptable for the rest of us.

Some opt out because they have become so traumatised and discouraged by their experiences within churches that they feel allergic to church and see no alternative but to go it alone. I sympathise with them and can see why they think that is the only option, but they are still mistaken.

Without having genuine face to face personal relationships with other Christians who live nearby, we will not grow properly as disciples. The internet can be a help (and also a danger) in finding teaching and information, but we still need to relate to real human beings locally. Otherwise, you become like a solitary piece of charcoal on the outer edge of a barbeque. It will just go grey and then eventually stop burning and go out. We are exactly like that. We need the other 'coals' to keep us burning.

Likewise, we can only survive as Christians if we have fellowship with other human beings locally. We have to operate together as a local church engaging in real relationships. There is no getting away from that need, and that duty, even if we have had some very bad experiences of church in the past, as far too many of us have.

Some positive things which are still true about being part of a local church, even today.

I have painted quite a bleak picture of the way many churches are today. But it would be wrong not to look at the positive side of things as well. From 1983 when I left the Catholic church until about 1998 I had, on the whole, a relatively good experience of church life and gained very much from being part of it. I can think of two churches in particular which were welcoming and, on the whole, passionately committed.

In both of them it was possible to form some genuinely deep relationships with other sincere believers. I was in one church for nine years and another for seven. In both I learned a lot and experienced real friendship and support in many ways.

Those are just some of the things which a local church is meant to be and to provide. When it functions properly, and where the people are sincere, committed and loving, then it can give you a level of intimate fellowship and community that no secular group can match. It also provides a setting within which to bring up children as Christians and to make it possible for them to form wholesome friendships. That is increasingly difficult, or even impossible, for them to do in the secular world.

The local church also provides for the practical needs of its members (and non members) like no other organisation. On many occasions I have seen people face crises such as illness or bereavement. They have received from the local church a remarkable amount of help and support, i.e. practically, emotionally and financially.

For example, I can think of a number of families where a child or parent has been taken seriously ill and the local church has rallied round for weeks or even months and organised a rota of people to cook dinners, visit people in hospital and help with housework and even finances. I can't think of any group or organisation which would do all that other than a local church. No other group would have the motivation to do it.

I can also think of a particular man aged about 70 whose wife was suddenly incapacitated by a brain haemorrhage. She had to go into hospital and then a care home. He couldn't cope with the pressure of it all, but a group of Christians from his local evangelical church worked together to provide food, lifts,

visits, and even to come and do his gardening. Such are the things that real Christians do, even today. But there's even more to it than that.

The local church is meant to be the place where, despite all our faults, and whatever our past life may have been, we can be accepted and valued, and where we can change and grow into mature disciples. It is the God-ordained setting in which we are supposed to learn how to operate in the various ministry gifts and also in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is no suitable way, or place, in which these gifts and ministries can be properly developed other than in a local church.

The profound importance of the worldwide Church as a whole and the privilege of being a part of it

We also need to realise the immense importance of the wider Church worldwide, at a macro level, and the extraordinary privilege of belonging to it. We are part of a group which is:

- a) the '*body of Christ*' - i.e. the group of which He is the head
- b) the '*bride of Christ*' – when Jesus returns to the Earth, after the Judgment Seat of Christ, He will '*marry*' the Church, which He regards as His '*bride*'. The wedding ceremony will take place in Heaven after the Rapture and the Judgment Seat of Christ. However, there will then literally be a huge wedding feast which will take place on the Earth. This will happen after Jesus' Second Coming when He returns to the Earth bringing the entire Church with Him. Every member of the real Church will be at that banquet. We will then spend the rest of eternity as part of that uniquely privileged group. We will enjoy an intimate relationship with Jesus and the opportunity to serve Him.
- c) made up of individuals, every one of whom is a priest - not just a select few. Biblically, there is no such thing as 'clergy' or 'priests' in the sense that we see them in most churches. We are all priests, in the correct sense of the word, because we all have a direct right of access to God Himself. We do not need any man to act as our priest and to go to Him on our behalf, or act as an intermediary for us. That role has already been taken by Jesus Himself who serves as our High Priest "after the order of Melchizedek" and He does it all by Himself. Therefore, contrary to what the Catholic Church claims, we do not require any man to serve as our priest. Indeed, no such role exists in the New Testament.
- d) one day going to judge the angels
- e) going to be physically resurrected
- f) going to be allowed to assist Jesus Christ in ruling and reigning in His future Millennial Kingdom. Each of us will be given specific tasks and roles, according to Jesus' assessment of us. (See my Book 4). What an exalted status that will mean, even for the lowest of us, let alone those few who are rewarded with the very senior positions.

The vital need to protect, bless and support the genuine worldwide Church and every person in it.

If we can realise what a privilege it is to be part of the Church as a whole, it will actually alter our view of the local church as well. If the whole Church is Jesus' body, then each individual Christian, and each local church, is a part of that body. Therefore, try to see it from God's perspective and consider what infinite importance and significance they each have.

The Church is a unique and precious institution and Jesus values it very highly. He wants us to do so too, and to love, help and support every one of its members, i.e. whichever ones we happen to come into contact with, or are capable of helping, even if only from afar.

Jesus does not want us to disparage or undermine fellow Christians

Jesus has not called us to despise or condemn other Christians:

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brethren.....

James 4:11 (a)

On the contrary, we are commanded to love, encourage, help, support and build up one another. We belong to a very special and uniquely privileged group. Accordingly we all have the duty to assist each other, wherever we can:

¹Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3 (NASB)

²⁵Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbour, for we are members of one another.

Ephesians 4:25 (NASB)

³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

Philippians 2:3 (NASB)

¹² So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. ¹⁴ Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

So, this is how we are meant to be with one another, and there are still some churches in which this kind of behaviour and these kinds of relationships do exist. I've seen it and experienced it in more than one church, though I have to say that it was very much easier to find such churches in the 1980s than it is now.

The truth is it's now rare, and getting rarer, to see traditional denominational churches operating today with that kind of genuine love, warmth, encouragement, sincerity, freedom and mutual support. We shall look below at some of the things that are wrong with the Church. However, before we go further into those things, we need to emphasise that every genuine Christian, and every genuine local church, needs to be treated with respect.

We are dealing with people whom Jesus sees as precious. That individual person, or that local church, or at least some of the people in it, i.e. the ones who are truly saved, are part of Jesus' body. One day those genuine individuals, even if they are part of a traditional church, will be part of His bride. Therefore, they each have infinite value and must be spoken to, and spoken about, with great carefulness and respect.

⁹Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors.

James 5:9 (RSV)

It is as if we knew a King or President, and came into contact with his wife and children. They may well have faults and sins. They may even be a disappointment to him. However, he would still not wish us to criticise or condemn them, and he certainly wouldn't want us to despise them. He may wish to criticise, or even rebuke them himself, but it would not be our place to do so.

Therefore, if we were to get a job on his staff we would need to learn to hold our tongues and refrain from saying anything which could undermine or dishonour his family. That is pretty much how it is when we say or do things which insult or diminish genuine fellow Christians. At the very least we may wound or discourage them.

More importantly, we would grieve, and even anger, Jesus. It is just as it would be if the President of the United States heard us criticising his wife and children. None of us would dream of doing that. Yet, even as I write this now, I feel convicted because I know that I have done all the following things:

- a) criticised fellow Christians
- b) judged fellow Christians (in the wrong sense of the word, i.e. 'kreetace' rather than 'diakrino')
- c) become estranged from particular Christians over trivial disputes
- d) made what must have been unfair judgments of certain Christians, without being in full possession of the facts
- e) looked disparagingly at some of the things Christians have done for Jesus when He may, perhaps, have been pleased with them. Whether He was or not, He did not want me to disparage His people.

I have done all of these things. So have most, if not all, of the Christians I have ever met. We all seem to have a talent for wounding and undermining each other. I have wounded others and been wounded

myself many times. That grieves Jesus. He wants every part of His body to be in harmony with the rest of His body, not to be in discord or disarray. That needs to make us take greater care about how we treat His precious body and every person who is part of it.

CHAPTER 4

OUR RESPECT FOR THE CHURCH AND FOR ONE ANOTHER MUST NEVER PREVENT US CONFRONTING FALSEHOOD WHEN WE SEE IT

³*Let no one deceive you in any way.....*
2 Thessalonians 2:3(a) (ESV)

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)

¹⁶*Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes; they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.*

¹⁷*They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to every one who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"*

Jeremiah 23:16-17 (RSV)

¹³*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. ¹⁴Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.*

¹⁶*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

1 Timothy 4:13-16 (ESV)

¹⁴*Your 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
false and misleading.*

Lamentations 2:14 (RSV)

If the only thing we needed to do was to avoid offending or wounding each other, and we were given no other duties or goals, life would be simpler. But, amongst other things, we are also called by Jesus to have "*the love of the truth*" and to "*contend earnestly for the faith*".

That means we have to stand up for what is true and to withstand anyone, and anything, that is false or heretical. Even then, if those opponents of the truth were always non Christians, that wouldn't be so difficult. But, what if the people doing or teaching those false things happen to be part of the Church, even the real Church? What then?

The reality is that even real Christians, not just the false ones, are at every kind of level in terms of their maturity, knowledge, character and integrity. We are not all the same. We do not all have an equal knowledge of or commitment to the Gospel or an equal respect for Scripture or equally sound doctrine.

So, most of the time, when we contend earnestly for the faith, it is actually with fellow Christians that we need to contend. That makes it much more difficult. How can we both love and honour our fellow believers and yet stand up for the truth and defend accurate Bible doctrine all at the same time? Even apostle Paul found that difficult, so we are unlikely to find it easy.

We are commanded to stand up for accurate teaching and to oppose false doctrine

The problem is that many, if not most, of the people who are teaching and passing on false doctrines are inside the churches. It makes sense that the demons would induce such people to join churches or cause existing church members to go off the rails and start pushing heresies because that is how they can do the most damage. They are far more likely to be heard and listened to by immature Christians if they operate inside churches than if they pushed their false teachings from outside the churches:

¹⁷ I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. ¹⁸ For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.

Romans 16:17-18 (RSV)

In this next passage, Paul warns us of what is coming in the future in terms of false teachings and unbiblical practices being brought into the churches. Such heresies began to enter the churches even in the middle decades of the first century. However, in this passage I think Paul's prophecy relates primarily to the huge avalanche of falsehoods that would be introduced when the Roman Catholic church was formed in the 4th century.

I say that because he refers to them forbidding marriage, which Catholicism does for "priests and nuns". To be precise, celibacy was not brought in as a Catholic doctrine until much later, in the Middle Ages. It was done to give bishops greater control over their priests because a married 'priest' would be more likely to argue when told to move parish or to do unreasonable or improper things and more likely to disobey:

¹Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ²through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

⁶If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; ⁸for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

1 Timothy 4:1-8 (ESV)

Especially in the “End Times” or the “last days” false doctrines and false teachers will arise within the churches , not just outside them

There has always been false teaching and also false, evil, selfish and domineering leaders. They were there even in the first century which is what prompted apostles Paul and John in particular to write letters to refute their heresies and evil behaviour.

In the period of time leading up to the end, the levels of deception, false teaching and corruption in the churches are going to rise sky high. If you look around at the lamentable condition of most churches today, it is hard not to conclude that we are living in those “last days”:

¹But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ²For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. ⁶For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. ⁸Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.

2 Timothy 3:1-8 (ESV)

One of the hallmarks of the last days is that people in churches will not tolerate sound, authentic, honest Bible teaching. They can see immediately when the Bible is rebuking them, no matter how politely you try to express it. And they don’t want to be rebuked about their behaviour or corrected about their beliefs. They want teachers and leaders who will agree with them, endorse their sinful lifestyles and tell them nice things about themselves.

Again, I have to conclude that we are living in those last days because I am increasingly seeing such attitudes at stratospheric levels everywhere I go. This is especially so online where so many people have no self control and can’t endure being disagreed with. When contradicted on Facebook they reply with the online equivalent of road rage, lashing out with extreme rudeness, insults and mockery rather than calmly discuss the issues.

²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound^d teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

2 Timothy 4:2-4 (ESV)

Likewise, in Old Testament times there were some evil people and evil practices within the Temple and the priesthood

On the whole, things are terrible today and most churches are in a bad way with false teaching proliferating and the appetite for sound biblical teaching at an all time low. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there have always been some false teachers and wicked practices, even in the Old

Testament, before the Church began. So, the situation we face isn't brand new. It is just far worse than it has ever been, which is saying something, because things have always been bad:

⁴ And the king commanded Hilki'ah, the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the threshold, to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Ba'al, for Ashe'rah, and for all the host of heaven; he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. ⁵ And he deposed the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places at the cities of Judah and round about Jerusalem; those also who burned incense to Ba'al, to the sun, and the moon, and the constellations, and all the host of the heavens. ⁶ And he brought out the Ashe'rah from the house of the LORD, outside Jerusalem, to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and beat it to dust and cast the dust of it upon the graves of the common people. ⁷ And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the Ashe'rah.

2 Kings 23:4-7 (RSV)

We are commanded to beware of false teaching even if it comes from well known leaders

One of the things that inhibits sincere Christians from exposing and opposing false teachers is a misplaced sense of deference. They have been brought up to think they ought to respect church leaders, and even to "obey" them, and so they feel it would be wrong to contradict or even question what leaders say. That is the wrong way to think.

Leaders should be respected, just as we should respect everyone, but not in a docile, servile fashion whereby we switch off our discernment. Here we see Jesus warning His disciples about the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Plainly, He did not consider it wrong for Him to warn people of these men or for His followers to be wary of them:

⁵ And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷ They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, "He said that because we did not bring any bread." ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? ¹¹ How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ¹² Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 16:5-12 (NASB)

Likewise, apostle Paul did not hesitate to describe false teachers in the most robust fashion and to warn churches about them. Plainly, therefore, it cannot be said to be wrong for us to warn people today of such men and that must be all the more so if I am right that these are the "last days".

³ If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce

envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions,⁵ and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

1 Timothy 6:3-5 (ESV)

We are to confront error and wrong teaching even when the people concerned are sincere

Remember also that not all false teaching is done by “rapacious wolves” who are seeking to devour the flock. Very often the false teaching is passed on innocently by well meaning but misguided, ignorant and badly taught church members, even when they are real Christians.

Many of them are not aware that they are passing on heresies to others. Even so, they still have to be challenged and corrected, as gently as possible. However, if they won’t stop, or accept correction, then a more direct, robust and even public approach may be needed.

We are meant to correct others gently and politely, but the fact still remains that we are meant to correct each other

Gentleness and courtesy are important, even essential, but not everyone will respond well to that approach. Nevertheless, some will and with such sincere people a gentle correction will solve the problem and they will listen and change what they are telling people and adopt a biblical stance:

²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:24-26 (ESV)

However, some people will not respond well to gentle, courteous correction and will carry on teaching and spreading heresy. They will become angry with you for having the “impertinence” to challenge their teaching or their opinions or to presume that you could be qualified to correct them. They see it as you claiming to be better than them.

Sadly, many leaders think like that and are too arrogant to allow anyone to correct them, or even to question them, least of all if the person doing so is not himself a leader. Such ‘clergy minded’ leaders have an attitude that they are above ‘ordinary’ Christians and should not be contradicted. Therefore they become angry. Nevertheless, Paul tells us such men must be rebuked:

⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

¹⁰ For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. ¹¹ They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

Titus 1:7-11 (ESV)

We are also commanded to confront and oppose corruption, immorality and carnality within the church

It is difficult enough confronting false teaching and heresy in the churches. However, the problems we face go far beyond teaching and doctrine. We also have to deal with corruption, immorality and carnality within churches, and even within the leadership of those churches. I give several examples of this in my Book 6.

But confronting such wickedness and immorality creates even more anger, resentment and hostility than we can expect if we confront false teaching. Nevertheless, there is no alternative. Therefore, no matter how angry they get, such people must be confronted and if necessary removed from our churches. It is our duty:

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (ESV)

Which takes priority, love or truth?

When we find ourselves under great pressure, which is the most important objective for us to choose? Should we mainly emphasise love, or should it be truth? To some extent the question is a misleading one because it implies these things contradict each other, which they don't. Real love and real truth are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Jesus perfectly embodies both these qualities at the same time.

Even so, for those of us who have less maturity and wisdom than we need, how are we to tackle this vexed question? I have had to grapple with it many times. Sometimes I have been at a loss to know what to do for the best.

However, given our very limited wisdom where we are unsure what to do and how far to go in taking a stand, our surest and clearest guide is truth. Therefore, be guided mainly by that. Love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, but it is a slow-growing one and also less clear cut.

When we only have limited maturity, and have not yet developed much of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our character, it is harder to be guided by the imperative to love one another than it is to be guided by conscience. I have found truth an easier and clearer guide when unsure what to do because it is usually black and white, whereas love is harder to define and to put into practice and takes longer to develop in our character.

Therefore, where we are in doubt as to how strenuously we ought to contend for the faith and for sound teaching, we can make our task easier by resolving never to compromise on any important point of doctrine. We must never believe, or pretend to believe, something false just to keep the peace.

To do so would be wrong and a well informed conscience would never select that option, irrespective of the need to love one another. Indeed, we cannot 'love' people by being false, or by tolerating falsehood, especially if it has to do with doctrine. That is the very opposite of love because we are letting other Christians down if we stay silent in the face of heresy or corruption.

The reason I emphasise this is that for many people in churches today their default setting would be the opposite. They would usually choose to sacrifice truth or true doctrine in order to preserve the peace and avoid upsetting people. They justify this on the basis that it is "the loving thing to do". That is because they wrongly define love. In fact, there are times when the most loving thing we can do is to tell people the truth – even if it hurts them.

Apostle Paul provides a tremendous role model for us. He was the most gifted, and probably the most mature, of all the apostles. Yet whenever truth was at stake he never shrank from speaking out, even at the risk of offending others or causing a rift. He tried very hard to be polite and to preserve unity. Nobody tried harder.

But, in the end, Paul always took a clear, firm stand for true doctrine and to oppose whatever was false, no matter who else was involved or who got upset, even when it was Peter. Look at how Paul dealt with a particular dispute over doctrine when he saw that Peter was in the wrong. He opposed and corrected him to his face and he did it publicly because Peter's error had been made 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)

Note also the very firm way that Paul speaks out openly about other Christians and their wrong actions and false teaching in his letters to Timothy and Titus. He criticises and openly names several men including Hymenaeus, Alexander, Phygelus, Hermogenes and Philetus:

¹⁸This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare, 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 1:18-20 (RSV)

¹⁵You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, and among them Phyg'elus and Hermog'enes.

2 Timothy 1:15 (RSV)

¹⁵Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. ¹⁶Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, ¹⁷and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are

Hymenae'us and Phile'tus, ¹⁸who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some.

2 Timothy 2:15-18 (RSV)

¹⁴Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.

¹⁵Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

2 Timothy 4: 14-15 (ESV)

Likewise apostle John openly names and criticises a man called Diotrephes who had been telling lies and spreading false teaching:

⁹I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

3 John 9-10 (ESV)

Nevertheless, to put the importance of standing up for the truth in proper balance, we must remember that Paul also said that, wherever possible, *unnecessary* quarrels are to be avoided. So, we need not take issue with others over every difference of opinion on matters which are not vital points of doctrine.

Thus, for example, if someone disagrees with us about the timing of the Rapture, just let them say what they believe. By all means reply and say what you believe, but there is no need to fall out with them over such issues. That said, when we do speak up, our dealings with others, even on vital matters of doctrine, are always to be conducted with the utmost courtesy and gentleness:

²³Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. ²⁴And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, ²⁵correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, ²⁶and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:23-26 (RSV)

¹Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, ²to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men.

Titus 3:1-2 (RSV)

We are to value the qualities and giftings in every fellow believer

Every Christian, however new and immature they may be, has some role or purpose in the body of Christ. Therefore it follows that they will inevitably have one or more areas of talent or gifting, no matter how hidden or undeveloped those gifts might be.

However, most of us are only concerned about ourselves and only give any attention to promoting our own ministries. We need, as well, to be on the lookout for the potential in each other and to see the gifts and skills which God has given to those around us.

If we do we will be better placed to encourage each other and to help fellow Christians to fulfil their potential. The encouraging of others is a vital ministry in itself and one to which we are all called. We should all cultivate it, whatever else we may do. I speak of this in my Book 7 and refer to it as “the ministry of encouragement”.

Seeing the qualities and gifts in others also helps us to see their faults in a better perspective and to be more patient and tolerant about their areas of relative weakness or ignorance. It also makes us better able to see the ways that God is working in and through every true Christian, not just ourselves. There is a temptation to see one's own areas of gifting or ministry or one's own doctrinal emphasis as the most important.

If so, the ways in which God uses other Christians, or the different issues He asks them to focus upon are seen as unimportant, because they are not the things God has asked us to focus on. It is a common error to see ourselves as central and our own interests and priorities as obviously the right ones and the most important.

I have done it many times and it has also been done to me, which is when I notice how arrogant and hurtful it is. The reality is God uses every part of the body of Christ to do one task or another. Every one of those jobs or areas of focus is important even if you are not called to do those things. What we do is not necessarily more important than what others do.

We are all in the same boat, however much or little talent we have been given, and however high or low our position. Our rank or job title also makes no difference in God's eyes. We are each simply required to be obedient and faithful to Jesus in our own area of calling, whatever it may be, and, to help others in their different areas. So, a faithful piano player in a small church might receive a bigger reward than a famous evangelist who isn't so faithful.

Such an approach takes our eyes off ourselves and also helps us to promote the ministries of others. That is an approach in which God takes delight and which He will greatly bless. So, let us aim for it and try to promote and encourage the ministries of those around us, provided that what they are doing is in line with Scripture

We must not automatically assume that our theology is right

Have you ever noticed that most of the people you meet in all denominations, have the tendency to assume that what they have been taught, or what they grew up doing, is obviously correct? It is considered so completely self-evident there is no need to check it or think about it at all. That complacency is very dangerous.

To paraphrase the late Chuck Missler of Koinonea, the greatest obstacle to finding the truth is the assumption that you already have it. Instead of being yet another loyal and unthinking supporter of a denomination, we must break free of that straitjacket, go solely by what the Bible says, and exercise discernment as set out in Acts 17:11?

¹¹Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Acts 17:11 (ESV)

Apostle Paul praised the Christians in Berea because they did not allow their respect or admiration for any man, however eminent, to take precedence over their respect for the Bible. Thus, any teacher, whoever he may be, had to have his teaching checked out against the Bible to see whether it was correct. Nobody was assumed to be too senior to be checked out.

That approach will protect you from being deliberately deceived, or accidentally misled by others. It will also develop in you a capacity for independent study and thinking which will stand you in good stead. It will prevent you from being a denominational 'yes man' who just goes along with whatever he is told, without ever thinking for himself or checking what the Bible actually says, as opposed to what the denomination's position is.

The vital importance of being part of a small group, meeting in a house, for Bible study, prayer and fellowship

In addition to the need to search for a good and biblical church (see below) it is also important to become part of a small group or house group which meets weekly or at least fortnightly for Bible study, prayer and fellowship (i.e. building relationships). Many churches are far too large and therefore if you only attend the main weekly meeting, they aren't suitable to help us in making strong relationships.

However, in a small group of perhaps 5-10 people, meeting in a home, every person present can learn, participate and grow as a disciple. That is where most of the real growing is done, because that is the place in which we can be most open and active. If you are already part of a small house church then that kind of intimacy can already be achieved even in the main weekly meeting. However, if your church is larger then you certainly need to be part of a small mid week house group as well.

Most people's experience of being part of a large Church is mainly as a spectator, not as a participant. But if you are part of a small group the opposite is the case. Therefore seek for, and become active in, a small group. Be loyal to it, but also be willing to move out and look for something more suitable if the group you join is not faithful to Scripture or does not enable you to grow in maturity. Your growth as a disciple is too important for you to put it at risk by staying in the wrong group.

The extreme difficulty today of finding a genuine and biblical church led by sincere men

Given the benefits and importance of church, the undeniable fact is you need to be part of one. The real question is how to find one? The problem is these are increasingly hard to find. So what should you do? When I became a Christian in 1981 it was possible for a new believer just to walk into pretty much any Evangelical or Pentecostal church and expect to be reasonably well taught and disciplined, such that they could grow as a believer.

That is not true anymore. Things really have changed. The decline of the Western church over the last 70 years, and especially the last 40 years, would be difficult to exaggerate. There has been a collapse of integrity and of true Bible teaching within much of the apparent church in the Western world since World War Two, and particularly since the 1960s.

That decline has gathered pace and has particularly intensified since the start of the 1990s, such that now the Western church is infested with unbelief, scepticism, liberalism, wokeness, false doctrine,

mysticism, ecumenism, New Age ideas, the occult, environmental nonsense and humanistic psychology, all mixed up with fragments of real Christianity.

A mature disciple can see each of these things and can distinguish one from another. He can identify which parts of the teaching and practice of a given church are genuine and which are false. But a new and inexperienced Christian cannot easily do so. Therefore you need to pray that God will guide you and help you meet up with some genuine, non woke, Bible believing Christians near to where you live. Such people, and such churches, are still to be found dotted around, here and there, but they are not plentiful.

Some genuine churches with sound doctrine will be large, but they are now rare. Today largeness is closely correlated with falseness and therefore real believers are increasingly to be found meeting in homes or in small churches or fellowships. Often these are very small, even as few as 3 or 4 people.

The key is not to find a large church, which may seem in the eyes of the world to be 'successful', but to find a genuine one, which truly honours and teaches the Bible. It also needs to be one in which the people love and care for each other and are diligent and also discerning about keeping out false teaching and false practices.

Such genuine churches, whether small or large, are now rare. You may also think you have found one, only to discover later that it is not quite what it seemed to be. That said, you do need to be willing to put up with the idiosyncrasies and immaturity of others and to show patience and forbearance about their faults.

Hopefully they will return the favour by being patient with you about your areas of immaturity. However, that does not mean that you should tolerate false teaching or wrong practices, especially where those relate to central aspects of the Christian faith. But the need to take a stand on the accuracy of doctrine does not apply where there are honest disagreements or mistakes about minor or peripheral matters, such as who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. On such matters we are all entitled to our own opinions.

However, the decision as to whether an issue is central or peripheral is, in the end, a matter of judgement, and of conscience. God will have to guide you. However, if it is central, or if the wrong practice to which you object is seriously wrong, or sinful, then you will need to be willing to move from that church and, perhaps, to move again repeatedly, until you find somewhere genuine and faithful.

I wish I could be more encouraging and reassuring, but the truth is a number of such moves from one church to another are likely to be needed, as you search around for a valid church. Often it is only when you have been in a church for a few months, or even a year or two that the true nature and extent of its qualities or faults, or even its falseness, become fully apparent to you.

CHAPTER 5

HOW JESUS DEALT WITH THE SAME PROBLEM OF MAN MADE TRADITIONS WHICH CONTRADICT SCRIPTURE

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!”

Mark 7:9 (RSV)

In this book we are mainly looking at ways in which today’s churches are not led, structured or organised in the same way as they were in the first century. A common response to this is to claim this is just creating a needless argument about “unimportant secondary issues” of practice and that what really matters is accurate doctrine and that we preach the true Gospel.

They contend that people like me should not rock the boat by objecting to what we see as unbiblical practices. They also argue that if Jesus was here now in bodily form He would not take issue with the way we run churches and would only concern Himself with doctrine, not practice, structure or the leadership model. However, I don’t think that is true.

I believe He would have a lot to say about how our churches have departed from the biblical model practised by the Early Church and why it matters. In support of that belief I would point to the way Jesus handled the problems that had developed over the centuries in Israel with the creation of over 3000 man made laws which were imposed on the people by the religious leaders but which were not in the Bible.

These man made laws and customs were called “*the oral law*” or “*the traditions of the elders*” and they were gradually added to the Law of Moses, like barnacles attaching themselves to the hull of a ship until it is entirely covered in them.

The Jewish religious leaders claimed that these additional rules, regulations and practices, which were not part of the written Law of Moses, had instead been handed down based on things Moses had allegedly said verbally but not written. Hence the name “*the oral law*”.

That is what they claim, but it is plainly untrue as Moses never said any of those things. Quite apart from that, it is a vital principle that when it comes to doctrine we can only ever rely on what is written, i.e. on Scripture. That is the only thing which God has guaranteed to be accurate.

The Pharisees claimed that these 3000 rules were just as important as the 613 laws within the written Law of Moses and equally binding. However, in practice, they actually ended up seeing these 3000 extra rules as being more important than the written Law of Moses. They got very upset with anyone who didn’t observe them. Indeed, they were more upset with people who didn’t observe their man made traditions than with those who disobeyed the Bible.

How then did Jesus respond to this situation? Did He turn a blind eye and ignore their false teachings so as to keep the peace and avoid controversy? On the contrary, Jesus went out of His way to contradict the traditions of the Elders and to disobey them and He did it all very publicly, not just in private.

That is the main reason why the Pharisees clashed with Him and even hated Him, because He openly contradicted their teachings and practices. They particularly hated it when He broke any of their 3000 laws in full view of the public, which He did very many times.

For the avoidance of doubt, Jesus never disobeyed any of the 613 commands set out in the written Law of Moses. He obeyed the Law of Moses perfectly at all times throughout His entire life, which nobody else had ever been able to do. So, what Jesus broke was not that, but only the oral law or traditions of the Elders which were not given by God and were all man made and therefore illegitimate and false.

Even to keep the peace Jesus was not willing to endorse their man made rules and He was not prepared to set a public precedent by obeying them. Had He done so it would have been a signal to the people that these additional man made rules were valid and came from God, and were binding on the people, which was not the case. Here is one well known example of this:

¹ Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² “Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” ³ He answered them, “And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘If any one tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.’ ⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

*⁸ ‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
⁹ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”*

Matthew 15:1-9 (RSV)

Next time you read the gospels, be on the lookout for occasions when Jesus clashed publicly with the Pharisees and take note each time of what the issue was, as there were many. In the example given above the Pharisees got very angry that Jesus’ disciples did not wash their hands before eating. When you see that you might imagine they were referring to ordinary hand washing for the purposes of hygiene, and you might wonder why Jesus refused to tell his disciples to do that.

But that was not the issue at all. They were referring to the elaborate and very formal religious hand washing rituals they engaged in whereby they washed their hands all the way up to their elbows as part of a complicated ceremony with prayers and rigmarole. This was also long and drawn out and they would need to repeat the washing ritual a number of times. The truth is they mainly did all this in order to be seen by others and to look impressive.

Jesus could easily have got into line and done whatever the Pharisees did so as to keep them happy but He wasn’t willing to. He obviously considered issues like this as worthy of taking a stand on and, if need be, falling out with people over. The same thing arose with issues like walking through or alongside a cornfield on the Sabbath. Moses had never forbidden that. He only forbade *working* on the Sabbath.

However, what the Pharisees did was to hugely enlarge the Law of Moses to make thousands of other things either required or forbidden. So, for example, they reasoned that if you were to walk through or alongside a cornfield on the Sabbath your cloak might rub against some corn and the heads or even single grains of corn might fall off and this would amount to reaping or harvesting, which would be work.

Quite obviously, that was not Moses' intention when he wrote the Law. He did not regard that as work. This nit picking rule was one of the thousands of illegitimate additions to the Law which the religious leaders invented. Therefore, guess where Jesus led the disciples when they were out walking on a Sabbath – straight across a cornfield, with the Pharisees watching closely and gnashing their teeth in anger.

However, as bad as the situation was during Jesus' earthly ministry in terms of the illegitimate extensions made to the Law of Moses, I would say the situation we face today in the churches is even more serious. I believe therefore that if Jesus was to walk into a church today, or if any of the apostles were to do so, they would be even more alarmed and concerned than Jesus was about the man made "traditions of the Elders".

Taking an extreme example, imagine apostle Paul walking into a Roman Catholic church today. At his first glance he would probably assume it to be a pagan temple, especially as he looked at the statue of Mary which is identical to the statues of the goddess Semiramis whom pagans worshipped in their temples all over the Empire. She was the original "Queen of Heaven", whose title the Catholic church transferred to Mary.

The worship of Mary is based entirely on that, and the title "Queen of Heaven" comes solely from paganism and is never given to Mary anywhere in the Bible. Indeed, the practice of worshipping this false goddess is condemned in the Bible long before Mary was even born. Those who worshipped Semiramis used to bake cakes for her. This evil practice is what Jeremiah is referring to in this passage:

¹⁸ The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.

Jeremiah 7:18 (RSV)

The pagans simply changed the name of the statue from Semiramis to Mary. So, Paul would see the paganism of the Mary statue immediately. None of this is surprising given that the Catholic church is undeniably based upon a mixture of paganism and some elements of Christianity. They literally took over the pagan temples and used them as churches after Emperor Constantine's alleged conversion. Then in thousands of temples the statue of the goddess Semiramis was simply renamed as Mary.

That is also the real reason why the Catholic church has priests. They are not based on the model of Old Testament priests working in the Temple in Jerusalem. As you will see clearly if you carefully scour the whole New Testament letters and the book of Acts, the Early Church *did not have any priests of any kind*. The leaders were known as elders, bishops or overseers which are just three words describing the same person and they had no priestly function of any kind.

Likewise, apostle Paul would have held his head in his hands with horror at seeing things like:

a) the mass

- b) sacraments
- c) oral confession to a priest
- d) infant baptism
- e) bishops ruling over many churches, as opposed to one house church being served by several bishops as the Early Church did
- f) purgatory
- g) worship of Mary
- h) praying to “saints”
- i) praying the rosary with endless repetition and mindless words
- j) limbo
- k) indulgences, whereby you give money to the church to purchase a reduction of your time in purgatory
- l) dictatorial, hierarchical leadership or “haughty prelates” as John Wycliffe called the Catholic bishops who opposed him
- m) celibate priests
- n) nuns who are likewise celibate
- o) praying in front of statues and relics

And the list goes on and on of things the Catholic church does which are not in the Bible and which were not done by the Early Church. There is also a long list of things which are in the Bible but which they do not do or believe. You might brush this aside, however, as having no relevance to you on the basis that you are not part of the Roman Catholic church because you are an Anglican, or a Methodist, or a Baptist, or Pentecostal, or part of a reformed Calvinist or Lutheran church.

But think again, because all of these various denominations, although they differ from Roman Catholic churches, retain many of the man made unbiblical practices which the Roman Catholic church invented. So, although the reformers threw out a lot of false doctrines and false practices in the Reformation, they didn’t get rid of all of it, to put it mildly.

Therefore, while a Calvinist or an Anglican or indeed any of these denominations might imagine they have eliminated all the falsehoods of Catholicism, I can testify that they haven’t. And I feel more qualified than most to recognise the similarities because I was raised as a Catholic and didn’t finally leave it until I was 21.

Consequently, I can recognise the influences of Catholicism in all these churches, even though their own members assume that has all been removed. But if we put doctrines to one side, the main similarity is in terms of the hierarchical structure which they all have, the method and style of leadership, and the structure of each local church.

So, for example, every church I was ever involved in before I started a house church had the following features, all of which are taken straight from the Roman Catholic model:

- a) a special building which creates a financial burden for the congregation

- b) a leader or group of leaders who are paid by the church, thereby creating yet another financial burden which did not exist in the Early Church
- c) the church is part of a denomination which means the wider national organisation governs or at least influences what that church does rather than each congregation making all its own decisions
- d) the leaders are classified as “clergy” and are considered to be different from, and higher than, the ordinary lay members
- e) many (not all) continue to practise infant baptism
- f) the leader or leaders do almost everything and the congregation are largely passive spectators

The point is that all of these practices, which originate from Roman Catholicism rather than the Bible, are unbiblical. I believe Jesus would have objected to these things just as strongly, if not even more strongly, than He did the Traditions of the Elders about which He clashed with the Pharisees.

When I make these objections many people’s response is to argue that even if these practices are unbiblical and were unknown in the Early Church, they are “harmless”. So, they may not be what the Early Church did but it’s OK for us to have these practices because they are not inherently sinful. I agree that these things are not necessarily sinful in themselves but that is not the issue. The real questions are:

- a) does God want the churches to operate in these ways?
- b) are there any harmful consequences to operating in these ways even if such harm is not intended or foreseen?

My contention is that there are harmful consequences due to the removal of God given safeguards which the biblical model of church provides. I shall discuss these in subsequent chapters when we look at domination, manipulation and control which almost invariably arise in a traditional clergy based church structure leading to abuse of the people.

CHAPTER 6

HOW THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH WAS CREATED

*¹⁷ Therefore come out from them,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch nothing unclean;
then I will welcome you,*

2 Corinthians 6:17 (RSV)

Anyone brought up in the Roman Catholic church is told that it is the “one true church” and that it began in the first century with apostle Peter as the first Pope and then an unbroken line of popes who came after him, each of whom inherited his absolute authority.

Certainly, when I was a teenager I pictured Peter as the Pope and other apostles like Paul as ‘cardinals’. In fact, that is a completely false picture of the Early Church and it was never like that. There were no such people as popes, cardinals, archbishops or even bishops, or at least not as they are now defined within Catholicism or even within other denominations. They didn’t exist.

Leadership in the Early Church was based *within* each local church. Other than the 12 apostles who were a unique one off group of men *who were not replaced in the next generation*, there were no leaders higher than the elders in each local church. There were differences in function i.e. what their ministry was, such as apostle, evangelist, prophet, Bible teacher, but no differences in levels of authority. Each house church governed itself.

There was nobody higher up who could send out instructions and orders from some regional or national ‘head office’. Each church was led by one or more local elders, usually two or three of them, and they were just mature men. That is what being an elder really means.

The Greek word for an elder is *presbuteros* and it really just means a *mature man*. However, the New Testament also uses another Greek word, *episkopos*, which is translated as *bishop* or *overseer*. But the point is these were *the very same men* as were called elders. It is just an alternative title or description for an elder, depending on which aspect of their role you are focusing on, i.e. their maturity or their function as overseers.

So, every elder was also called a bishop or overseer, keeping watch over the house church and providing leadership and teaching as a group of leaders within each house church. And, of course, they were all unpaid, unless they were gifted full time Bible teachers or if they were sent out far away as missionaries. The vast majority supported themselves by having a job, or they were retired men, and they led the house churches in their spare time, when they were not at work.

That is one reason why it was felt best to have a number of elders, not just one, so they would be able to share the workload given that they were not working for the church full time. So, each elder might only be able to put in 5-10 hours per week, or perhaps less, but taken together the 2, 3 or 4 elders combined could do more than 20-40 hours a week if need be.

That was how the churches of the first century all operated. They were small, they met in houses and the vast majority of leaders were not paid. Also, *decisions were made by the church as a whole, not by the elders*. Indeed, this continued all the way through to the early 4th century when Emperor Constantine came to power.

He claimed to have been converted overnight from paganism to Christianity after allegedly seeing a vision of the cross in the sky after which he won a major battle for which he gave the credit to the God of the Christians. When this happened he effectively instructed all the pagans to join the churches. So, overnight, hordes of unconverted pagans came flooding into the churches, simply because they had been told to, or because they saw it as the way to get on in life, not because they believed the Gospel.

So, overnight the churches of the 4th century became a mixture of genuine Christians and unsaved pagans. The most genuine and discerning of the Christians refused to go along with any of this. So, they separated themselves from Constantine's new church and continued to meet in houses as they always had.

But many, and probably most, went along with this change, even seeing advantages in having the support of the Emperor, not least the ending of persecution. Therefore, they became part of the new model of church which was a syncretistic mixture of Christianity and paganism. They lacked discernment or their consciences were not strong enough, or they lacked the courage, to take a stand and refuse to compromise.

Moreover, now that the pagans were supposedly part of this new church, they began to meet alongside compromised Christians in the former pagan temples which they had used previously. So, all of a sudden, the churches were now meeting in large elaborate former temples rather than domestic houses.

And these former pagan temples became the model for what we still see today not only in the Catholic church but also all of the denominations, to one extent or another. You will surely agree that no church building you have ever seen looks like a domestic house. Even the plainest of them are large, even if they are not ornately decorated.

In addition to being contaminated by a huge influx of pagans and suddenly having a very different type of building, the changes Constantine brought in created other major differences from the Early Church. In particular, the much larger size of these new churches and the far higher numbers in the congregation meant they required full time paid leaders.

Therefore, we see the beginnings of the "*clergy class*" which was above the ordinary people. We also see them imitating the practices of pagan priests thereby introducing the concept of priesthood into Constantine's new church.

So, these new style leaders of churches were not only full time and paid. They also called themselves "*priests*". However, this priesthood which they claimed for themselves did not exist within the book of Acts or the New Testament letters. It was not even based on the Old Testament concept of priests, the ones who served in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The priests in the Catholic church were *based upon the pagan priesthood* which the new members of this church had always known from when they were pagans. Indeed, many of the men who took up

these positions as priests in the new Catholic church had previously been pagan priests in the pagan temples.

This false new church quickly developed into an authoritarian, hierarchical arrangement with rulers rather than leaders, and all set out in a clear chain of command with the Pope, then cardinals, archbishops, bishops and then priests ruling over the people.

But now, by their new definition, a bishop was not just one of a group of three or four elders leading a small house church. To them, a bishop was one who ruled over a large ‘diocese’ containing very many local churches and therefore he was an exalted authority figure, not a servant.

Therefore, the whole problem of abusive, controlling, authoritarian leadership with church leaders dominating their congregations is traceable back to this catastrophic event in the 4th century. This not only affects the Catholic church but all other churches too which operate on a similar authoritarian, hierarchical basis.

The result is that many ordinary members are exploited and crushed by leaders, the very people who, in the biblical model, are meant to be their servants and protectors. I will not deal here with all the other pagan ideas and practices that entered into the newly formed Catholic church, as most non Catholic churches have dispensed with most of those.

So, it is primarily with the unbiblical structure, leadership model and emphasis on special church buildings and paid clergy that this book is concerned. That is because those errors have contaminated almost all churches, even if they have rid themselves of all the other doctrinal heresies of Catholicism.

When the Reformation came in the sixteenth century with men like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and later John Calvin, they were reasonably successful at eliminating false doctrines concerning heresies such as saints, Mary, purgatory, aural confession, indulgences and so on. But they almost all retained the Catholic model of church structure and leadership, albeit with minor adjustments. In particular, they kept the catholic invention of “clergy” and “laity”.

So, they kept the model whereby one man is in charge, and he works full time, ruling over the church which meets in a special building, not homes, and with himself under the control of a hierarchical national leadership of all the churches in that denomination. In other words, they are the direct opposite of how the Early Church was structured and led.

CHAPTER 7

THE SO CALLED “CHURCH FATHERS” – WHO WERE THEY AND HOW DID THEY CONTRIBUTE IN LEADING THE CHURCH AWAY FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL?

³ As I urged you when I was going to Macedo'nia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴ nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; ⁵ whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons by swerving from these have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

1 Timothy 1:3-7 (RSV)

I want to deal briefly with this issue of the so called “Church Fathers” because they are becoming increasingly fashionable at present and many naïve people are being led astray by the focus placed on these men. I address this theme in some detail in a talk I gave in the teaching series on my Book 3, “How to Study the Bible and why you should”. I recommend that audio talk to you as many have found it helpful.

Let me firstly define what I mean by the phrase “the Church Fathers” as, without an explanation, most will assume I am referring to the apostles who wrote the New Testament and established the Early Church. However, that is not what is meant by the phrase. It refers instead to a series of men who came later from the 2nd to the 5th centuries primarily.

It is claimed by their advocates that these men were “closest in time to the apostles” and therefore their writings carry added weight and should be seen as highly authoritative. I don’t accept that. On the contrary, many of the errors and heresies which contaminated the Catholic church, and other churches too, came from these men.

Take, for example, Origen who lived in the 3rd century. It is he who is largely responsible for inventing what is known as the “allegorical” model of interpreting Scripture as I explain in detail in my Book 3. This approach rejects the idea that the Bible means exactly and literally what it says concerning prophecy. They claim that we should instead see a figurative, allegorical or “spiritual” meaning in place of the plain, literal words.

In this way a wide assortment of false teachings have arisen concerning Bible prophecy, which is important because prophecy makes up about 30% of the entire Bible. The confusion is further compounded by the fact that those who believe in the allegorical approach differ enormously on what the alleged “spiritual” meaning is for each passage of prophecy.

That’s because every man is free to think up his own hidden allegorical meaning that he imagines is contained within the text. The one thing they all know for sure is that when it comes to prophecy, the Bible never simply means what it says, as I believe it does.

This man, Origen, is assumed to have enhanced authority and to be credible simply because he lived long ago, at a time close to the founding of the Church. But what never seems to occur to the supporters of Origen and the allegorical school of interpretation is that:

- a) the apostles themselves, the men who wrote the New Testament, were also “close in time to the founders of the Church” - *because they were the founders*. Therefore, why not simply listen to them and allow them to explain themselves in their own words in the pages of the New Testament?
- b) Every form of heresy that has ever existed had already come into existence, at least in its basic form, in the first century, even in the AD 40s and 50s, i.e. during the very lifetimes of the apostles. Indeed, it was to counteract such heresies that many of the letters of the New Testament were written, especially by Paul and John. So, if heresies of every kind were already running rampant in the AD 50s to 90s, why would we assume that men living in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries were somehow more protected from heresy than we are today in the 21st century?

Another major example of a so called “Church Father” is “Saint Augustine”. The irony is he is claimed as a pillar of the Roman Catholic church, given the huge influence he had on the development of their doctrines. But he is also pointed to as the main inspiration for John Calvin in his establishment of reformed Calvinistic teachings, especially in relation to “predestination” and the denial of the existence of “free will”.

How strange is it that both the Catholic and Calvinist churches should end up pointing to the same man as their hero and inspiration? That alone surely tells you that one is skating on very thin ice relying on anything Augustine said. He is not a hero. At any rate, he is certainly not my hero. He was, instead, a profoundly confused and misguided man and we would do much better if we simply ignored him completely and focused on the Bible.

Indeed, I object to the very phrase “the Church Fathers”. They were not its “fathers” as they lived 100-500 years *after it had already been founded* by the apostles. Therefore, if we are forced to discuss them, a better name would be “the Church great, great, great, great grandchildren”.

Please beware of these men, and of those who espouse them and refer to them in reverential terms in support of their beliefs. Instead, be wise enough to realise that *God wants you to focus on the teachings of the apostles themselves*, in the New Testament, not on what other men later said about them, whatever century they lived in.

You might imagine that everyone would immediately agree with me that the Bible itself is our only totally reliable source document when it comes to formulating our theology. But they don’t. Many people today give equal weight to these so called “Church Fathers” of the 2nd to 5th centuries.

Indeed, many go further than that and effectively elevate these men to an even higher place than the apostles. So, in practice, they would put more weight on what Augustine said than on what Paul said, though they would deny that if directly challenged. However, I have read their books and heard them speak and that is the clear impression they give.

In large part, I think their motive for focusing so heavily on the Church Fathers instead of the apostles is that the teachings of these men agree with their own opinions whereas those of the apostles do not. So, they allude to them because they cannot maintain their arguments by referring only to the Bible as

the writings of the apostles do not support them. But the writings of the so called Church fathers do. If there was ever a warning sign, that is clearly it.

However, it is also largely based on pride, vanity and the craving to appear to be more sophisticated than those of us who rely solely on the Scriptures. In their confused minds they see themselves as being a cut above the likes of me because I only have the Bible, whereas they have the Bible *and the Church Fathers*. That makes them that bit more impressive and fashionable than conventional people like me who focus on the Bible.

Therefore, my advice is to ignore the writings of the so called Church Fathers and of those who advocate them. Anything good or true that they may have to say had already been said by the apostles. Therefore, it isn't needed. And anything extra or different, which was not said by the apostles *was not said for a good reason*.

If God had wanted it to be said and to form part of our doctrines and practices, He would have inspired one of the apostles to write it. The fact that He didn't do so is highly significant and is a clear warning sign for us to steer well clear of such additions. Therefore, leave these men and their teachings well alone.

The writings of these men, which advocate doctrines and practices not found in the Bible, or which exaggerate what the Bible says, as on the issue of God's sovereignty and predestination, are not authentic. They are very similar to the "Traditions of the Elders" which the Pharisees taught and which Jesus rejected and refused to obey.

Be guided therefore by His approach and have the confidence and good sense to focus on the Bible alone. And be wise enough to realise that the mere fact that a book is old does not make it any more likely to be biblical than a book written today. Only the content matters, not the age. If it agrees with the Bible it is true, even if it was written yesterday. If it disagrees with the Bible then it is false, even if it was written 2000 years ago.

If you ever feel yourself being attracted to a teaching or practice because it is presented as being more sophisticated or intellectual than what other people have, then beware. That is a clear indicator that the teaching, or the person advocating it, is using your pride and vanity to ensnare you. There are no circumstances in which we should believe a teaching or adopt a practice in order to sound clever or look impressive. That very motivation alone is a clear warning sign telling you to keep well away from it.

So, never seek to be sophisticated or to appear clever. Don't try to impress anyone at all. Let your only objective be to learn the Bible accurately, for its own sake, because truth matters, and because it is God's Word, not because it might cause other men to be impressed by you. Realising that one simple point alone would save multitudes of people from deception.

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.

Ezekiel 34:1-5 (RSV)

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.

CHAPTER 9

WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PAYING MONEY TO LEADERS? ARE WE SUPPOSED TO “TITHE” TO OUR LOCAL CHURCH?

¹ We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedo'nia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (RSV)

³ Honor widows who are real widows. ⁴ If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. ⁵ She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; ⁶ whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Command this, so that they may be without reproach. ⁸ If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

1 Timothy 5:3-8 (RSV)

How did the Early Church handle money in the first century?

I want to try very hard to be careful, precise, honest and comprehensive in the way I write this chapter. I say that because a lot of what is taught about giving money to churches and whether local elders/leaders/ministers should be paid salaries is twisted to suit the agenda of the person doing the teaching.

I want to try my best to avoid that and to deal with virtually every verse in the New Testament which touches upon this issue of money even if it appears to go against my own view. I am not here to try to win an argument but to be faithful and 100% honest in examining and explaining God's Word. That is a heavy responsibility which can't be messed around with.

So, you will already have seen that I do not believe local elders, who do not travel, or whose ministry does not require them to be full time, should ordinarily be paid any salary. An example of a local elder who needs to minister full time might be a highly gifted Bible teacher whose skill and knowledge are well known in the city or county where he lives and he conducts weekend teaching conferences which require him to spend all week studying and preparing. So, he's local, but not restricted to one church.

I believe ordinary local elders were very rarely paid in the first century unless there was something exceptional about their ministry or their circumstances which required them to work full time in ministry even though they did not travel.

So, the average local elder might serve a house church of perhaps 10-30 people and would receive no pay. That requires me to deal head on with the various passages which speak of not muzzling the ox when he treads out the grain and how “*the labourer is worthy of his wages*” etc.

I don’t want to ignore such verses but I do want to argue that in the vast majority of cases their context and application is those *men who have itinerant ministries* not men who serve a small house church. The command not to muzzle the ox therefore mainly applies to those who travel as Bible teachers or evangelists or apostles and are in a different town every week such that they can’t possibly get a paid job.

My contention is that the verses which refer to such travelling teachers/apostles etc are regularly misused and misapplied in today’s denominational churches to give the impression that they apply equally to leaders who stay at home, in their small local church, as local elders/bishops/overseers. I maintain that those men, who were of course the vast majority, were generally not paid anything.

I believe I am supported in my argument by the fact that the New Testament never makes any reference to paying a salary to the leader or leaders plural of each local house church. I would contend that it never refers to paying such men *because it was never done* and we don’t tend to talk about things which we don’t do and which never happen.

Of course, my opponents who support the traditional model of church might argue from the same silence that it means the very opposite. i.e. that the practice of paying local elders was so widespread it didn’t need to be mentioned. I recognise that arguments from silence are dangerous but it seems to fit my argument far better, particularly when you ask yourself how a small house church consisting mainly of poor working class people and slaves could afford to pay every leader.

Those who disagree with me, which is basically all the traditional denominational churches, argue that such men were paid then and should be paid today. However, I think you will find, once we have closely examined *all the passages*, that their argument doesn’t stack up overall. But, of course, you must be the judge of that.

What does the Bible say about paying money to men in full time ministry?

Let’s begin by looking at a detailed passage which could be said, on the face of it, to contradict my stance and to support the traditional majority view concerning paying local leaders. However, when we inspect it more closely, and in particular when we compare it with other passages, I believe we will find that Paul is actually teaching the opposite of what most people in the denominational churches claim he means. I refer to the passage 1 Corinthians 9:1-18. However, let us look firstly at verses 1-14 and then return to deal with 15-18 later.

¹Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ²If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.³This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?⁸Do I

say this on human authority? Does not the law say the same? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? ¹² If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ¹³ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:1-14 (RSV)

Let me start by addressing head on *why* I claim that this passage and many others which advocate paying leaders are talking almost entirely about men who *travel around*, not men who stay in their local church, unless as we saw, they are exceptionally gifted Bible teachers who work full time in study and teaching but serve only the churches in their local area or city. This is the pivotal issue about which we must make up our minds if we are going to form any view on this issue of paying local leaders.

Let's look initially at verses 1-6 above. Take careful note in that passage of *what kind of leaders* Paul is referring to. Again and again, he refers to himself and others *who are apostles*, which means, effectively, “*those who are sent*” or, as we could call them today, “*missionaries*”. The operative point is that all apostles travel. They never stay put in one place for longer than a few months (unless, like Paul, they are in prison).

Then, in verse 4, Paul says “*Do we not have the right to our food and drink?*” But the question here is who are the “we” that Paul refers to? I believe the answer is clear. He means the same people he has just been talking about in this passage, i.e. *himself and other apostles* – all of whom are men who travel.

This interpretation is further confirmed in verse 5 when Paul says “*Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*” Again, all of these men were apostles who travelled around the Empire, with the exception of James the Just, Jesus’ younger brother who was so highly respected he was effectively viewed as the leader of the entire Jerusalem church.

So, if James the Just was paid (and there is no suggestion that he was) it would be because he was not just a local elder in a house church but was seen as an eminent Bible teacher who taught full time and couldn’t be a carpenter or builder any more. Bear in mind also that Jerusalem was a big place and having a teaching role in the whole city, and probably much of the rest of Israel, was quite unlike being an ordinary part time elder in a small local house church. It must have involved some travel too.

Ask yourself also why Paul would speak of these men being “*accompanied*” by their wives unless they are continually travelling? You don’t need to assert your right to have your wife with you if you stay at home. Therefore, undeniably, Paul is still talking about men whose ministry requires constant travel.

Verse 6 leads in to the vital group of verses 7-11 which make the famous point about not muzzling oxen when they tread out grain. That is a metaphor for not refusing to financially support ministries such as his. But note that verse 6, which gives us the context for that next section, refers to Barnabas and Paul, *both of whom were apostles* who constantly travelled, not local elders.

So, again and again, the context and setting for Paul's teaching on financial support for men's ministries is apostles, i.e. missionaries, church planters, itinerant evangelists and Bible teachers. It is consistently that way and no explicit mention is ever made, either here or in any of the other passages, about giving financial support to local elders who stay at their home church, except possibly 1 Timothy 5:17-18 which we shall examine shortly.

Finally, I would point to verse 14 which refers to "*those who proclaim the gospel*" as deserving to get their living by the Gospel, i.e. to be paid for their ministry work. Some might argue that we have here an ambiguous verse with some "wiggle room" which allows us to argue that the right to receive financial support also extends to all local elders who don't travel but who do sometimes proclaim the Gospel.

But that interpretation doesn't work and it can't be referring to them. The expression clearly means those whose ministry focuses upon preaching the Gospel to the heathen in *new places* which are so far *unreached*. It doesn't mean preaching the Gospel from time to time in your local church where you are an elder and where the Church is already established. At any rate, that is overwhelmingly likely to be the correct way to interpret the phrase and it makes vastly more sense than if we try to apply it to local elders.

However, if you read this same passage quickly, wearing 21st century denominational lenses, and especially if you assume that Paul and Barnabas are ordinary, typical church leaders, no different from any others, you could be forgiven for concluding that it supports the idea that all leaders should be paid salaries.

Look again at some of the phrases Paul uses which could be said to support the traditional denominational stance, though only if, in my view, you misunderstand them. If you already believe in paying local elders and if you just look at the verses at face value without delving any deeper to find out who exactly they are aimed at, they do seem to support the payment of all leaders everywhere:

- a) "*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?*"
- b) "*For it is written in the Law of Moses 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake?*"
- c) "*If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more?*"
- d) "*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel*"

So, if you read this passage quickly without concerning yourself with the context, and without noticing that it refers throughout to travelling apostles, then you could use it to support your belief that local elders should be paid. You would do that by assuming that Paul is talking about all leaders, not just those who travel.

That is exactly what the advocates of the traditional model of church do, without ever realising, or caring, that they are squeezing their own theology into the passage. They are like Cinderella's

stepsisters squeezing their feet into the glass slipper, rather than approaching the passage with a genuinely open mind and allowing it to contradict their long held beliefs and familiar practices.

A difficult verse from my perspective which appears to contradict my stance

Paul makes this statement to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 in which he defends the right to be paid. But the vital question is to whom is Paul referring and exactly which type or types of “labourers” does he mean? In particular, in this verse, which I consider to be unique, since I can find no other saying the same, Paul refers to *elders*, not apostles or travelling Bible teachers etc.

What, therefore, does he mean exactly? Is this one solitary verse reversing all the other passages and making financial support apply to local elders who don’t travel and who don’t have to be full time for some other reason? We have to face that question, or at least I do if I am to maintain my stance.

¹⁷Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.”

1 Timothy 5:17-18 (NKJV)

So, I am willing to accept that this verse refers to elders, not apostles, and that it advocates them being paid. However, it is noteworthy that Paul speaks particularly here of those who “*labour in the Word and doctrine*”. What do you think he means by that? In my view he has in mind elders who, though local, are especially gifted as Bible teachers and who spend a very high proportion of their time in Bible study and teaching.

Although there are many men, including non elders, who are capable of preaching a short sermon occasionally in a local house church with perhaps 10-30 members, they would not be capable or confident enough to preach for a whole weekend at a city wide conference involving several local churches combining together.

Different men have differing levels of giftedness. So, a man might well be capable of preaching a simple sermon every few weeks to a small group but not capable of doing so regularly, or to large groups or even conferences, where he teaches for the whole weekend, giving a series of talks which may have required 100-200 hours of study and preparation.

It is like the difference between an ordinary person who is capable of making dinner for a family of four and a proper chef who is capable of cooking food for a whole restaurant night after night, or even for a wedding banquet. Likewise, a man may be able to preach to 10-30 people for 40 minutes but not to 500 people for a whole weekend.

My point is that a controversial verse like 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (controversial because I cannot find any other verse which specifically refers to paying “elders” as this verse does) needs to be seen in its wider context. And I would describe that wider context as a large number of other verses which are all explicitly or implicitly referring to apostles and to other men with travelling ministries.

Do bear in mind as well that all of these travelling apostles and evangelists are also elders. They all have that title as well as ‘apostle’, ‘prophet’ etc. So, in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 I think Paul is choosing to use the word ‘elders’ but he only has in mind a sub set thereof, i.e. the elders who travel.

There are no other verses, as far as I can see, which are referring to elders as 1 Timothy 5:17-18 does. So, we need to be careful how we interpret the verse and how far it extends in its application. Therefore, in my opinion, when Paul refers to “elders” in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 he doesn’t mean all local elders but only those who have exceptional ministries, such as a full time Bible teacher serving many churches in the local area, whose ministry requires them to be full time.

An example might be a gifted Bible teacher who would not be able to teach a whole weekend conference if they also had to do a secular job, as they would not have the study time needed to support such a teaching ministry. So, such an exceptionally gifted local elder would be entitled to be paid but the same cannot be said of every other ordinary local elder whose ministry does not extend beyond the 10-30 people in his church.

Some might interject here and say that this is an argument for combining small house churches together to form big churches which enable a leader to be paid and to have time for study. However, that is not what the Early Church did. Instead, they continued to meet in small house churches throughout the first three centuries, until Emperor Constantine arrived on the scene.

When I have heard traditional pastors teach on the subject of giving to the local church, tithing and supporting leaders financially, these passages we have looked at are the main verses they usually go to, although only at face value with no deeper scrutiny as to their meaning and application.

They also carefully avoid other verses which more narrowly define which types of leaders are being referred to. Instead, they imply that these verses apply to all leaders engaged in full time church work, regardless of whether they remain in their own local church or travel around.

However, that is a crucial omission and, in many cases, a dishonest one, because I believe it becomes even more clear as we look at other passages that Paul is generally talking only about leaders who travel around and are not in their home town where they can get a paid job to support themselves.

Quite obviously, if you are a travelling evangelist or Bible teacher going from town to town throughout the Empire, or if you are an apostle, which means “*one who is sent*” i.e. a “*missionary*” who sets up new churches where none existed before, then you can’t realistically get a job. You therefore have to be supported financially by somebody. That was usually done by the “sending churches” back home which sent them out as missionaries, not by the churches they planted.

The argument therefore boils down to this one question: When Paul is speaking of paying leaders does he mean all leaders, even if they stay at home? Or does he generally only mean those who travel far away from home and keep travelling, i.e. *those who are sent*? The answer to that question settles the whole argument. Why then is this question not even asked?

And when that question is asked online, by people like me, why is it shot down in flames so the debate can’t even take place? The answer, of course, is that there are enormous vested interests at stake here with millions of church leaders whose whole careers, finances and lifestyle would be radically changed if we concluded that local leaders/elders/pastors in the first century were not paid and that we ought to adopt the same policy.

Nevertheless, Paul chose not to make use of his right to receive financial support. He preferred to pay his own way by working part time as a tentmaker.

Having made clear that men who (in my view) have traveling ministries, or specialist ministries which require them to be full time, deserve to be paid and can consider it a right, Paul actually chose, in his own case, not to claim any of his rights to financial support. Let me make clear though, right from the start, that his own personal choice to pay his own way by working part time as a tentmaker was a *purely individual decision*.

It does not mean that other (travelling) leaders are under any duty to imitate him in that or to refuse financial support. Those who are entitled to be paid are entitled to be paid. The only question for us therefore is who are they?

¹⁵But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it

1 Corinthians 9:15-18 (RSV)

I believe Paul's reasons for separating himself from the whole business of financial support and choosing to fund himself (at a very basic subsistence level) by tentmaking was because he wanted to avoid any possibility of being misunderstood, resented or falsely accused.

He knew there would have been absolutely nothing wrong with accepting financial support, even at a generous level. But he did not want to allow even the appearance of impropriety or exploitation which could have led to false accusations and arguments. So, overall, he felt it was safer, better, and less hassle, for him to support himself.

⁶Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. ⁹It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-9 (RSV)

We hear this policy spoken of again in Acts 18 which refers to Paul going to Corinth where he stayed with Priscilla and Aquilla because Aquilla was involved in the same trade as Paul as a tentmaker. So, during his visit Paul effectively worked for Aquilla in making tents.

¹After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. ²And he found a Jew named Aq'uila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them; ³and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked, for by trade they were tentmakers.

Acts 18:1-3 (RSV)

This self funding policy of Paul's is then referred to again in Acts 20.

³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Acts 20:33-35 (RSV)

And the consistency of Paul's policy of paying his own way is made clear by this verse showing that when Paul stayed in Rome for two years, even though he was in prison, it was all at his own expense:

³⁰ And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,

Acts 28:30 (RSV)

In this next passage from 2 Corinthians which comes within a letter in which Paul is rebuking the Corinthian church for various other things, we see him make a couple of interesting points about how he handled money when dealing with the Corinthian church in particular:

⁷ Did I commit a sin in abasing myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel without cost to you? ⁸ I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and was in want, I did not burden any one, for my needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedo'nia. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. ¹⁰ As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine shall not be silenced in the regions of Acha'ia. ¹¹ And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

2 Corinthians 11:7-11 (RSV)

Paul points out that he never sought any financial support from them for himself, i.e. while present in Corinth ministering to them. He says that he preferred instead to allow other churches to help him financially so that he didn't need to ask the Corinthian church for anything.

So, we see evidence that, at least on this occasion, Paul was willing to accept support, albeit that he obtained it from others rather than burden the Corinthian church. Paul's reason for choosing not to ask, or even permit, the Corinthian church to give him any financial help was that he was angry with them for their misconduct especially with particular leaders in Corinth.

In effect, he was not willing to receive any money from them because some of those leaders were false and he did not want to do anything to appear to validate or endorse them or make himself beholden to them when the main ingredient of his message to Corinth was rebuke. This reasoning emerges more clearly from the following passage, i.e. verses 12-15:

¹² And 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. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So 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)

The next passage is a much happier one in which Paul acknowledges the generosity and faithfulness of the Philippian church which stood loyally with him when he was facing very hard times and was in great need. At that time, no church other than the Philippians gave him financial support.

¹⁰ I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me; you were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. ¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. ¹³ I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁵ And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedo'nia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only; ¹⁶ for even in Thessaloni'ca you sent me help once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift; but I seek the fruit which increases to your credit. ¹⁸ I have received full payment, and more; I am filled, having received from Epaphrodi'tus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:10-19 (RSV)

In this next passage from 1 Thessalonians, Paul gives greater clarity about his policy when dealing with churches and his great reluctance to make himself a burden to any of them. He again asserts his right to be financially supported but he tells them he chose not to make any demands of them but rather to support himself financially by working night and day to be able to fit in all the ministry work as well as tent making:

³ For our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness, nor is it made with guile; ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ For we never used either words of flattery, as you know, or a cloak for greed, as God is witness; ⁶ nor did we seek glory from men, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. ⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

⁹ For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers;

1 Thessalonians 2:3-10 (RSV)

Accordingly, when one looks at Paul's reluctance to receive financial support, even though it was his absolute right, it has to colour the way we see his approach to the payment of leaders generally. So, if we are faced with the choice between believing that Paul supported paying a salary to all leaders, or mainly limiting it to those who travel, it makes it harder to make the assumption that he supports it in all cases.

The very tone and heart attitude which Paul displays makes me lean towards believing he would wish to minimise, not maximise, the number of leaders who receive a salary. Of course, that isn't proof of

anything but I believe it more strongly supports and matches my interpretation of the passages which deal with paying leaders rather than the stance taken by the traditional churches.

It was one thing for Paul to fund himself by tentmaking but he had no wife or children and so he could get by on the equivalent of a subsistence allowance, just covering food and clothing and basic essentials. But not all men could do that, especially if they had families, and so such men, if they were called to travel to pursue their ministry, were entitled to be paid.

That therefore includes travelling Bible teachers, evangelists and apostles who were operating as missionaries, planting new churches and bringing the Gospel to new areas. But clearly, if a man was made an elder in his own local church in his home town, with a membership of only 10-30, there was no need for him to give up his secular job as a plumber or bricklayer etc. He could very easily work as a leader part time and carry on with his job and support his family without needing even a penny from the church.

That being so, why would such a man want to resign from his job and look to the local church to gather money from its members to match the wage he used to earn in that job? It would make no sense at all, which is probably why we never hear of it being done. I realise that is an argument from silence, which we always need to be careful with, but it does seem obvious.

How could small house churches with 10-30 members possibly afford to pay their elder(s)?

Consider the chances of them being paid in practical terms. Let's imagine a house church with even 30 members. Let's also suppose that 10 of those members are housewives with no income and perhaps two are retired. Out of the 18 others, let's suppose that eight of them were very lowly paid or even slaves with no income at all so they couldn't afford to pay anything significant. That leaves only ten wage earners.

Therefore, that one local elder would have to have his salary paid by ten members in practice, not 30. How could they each afford to contribute one tenth of a man's salary? And that assumes there is only one elder, whereas there were often a group of 2, 3 or even 4 elders in a local house church.

On that basis, the idea of paying all of them becomes totally impossible. Few people have ever thought through the practicalities of this in financial terms but when you do the case for paying all leaders becomes very hard to sustain.

Again, some will argue that this is an argument in favour of joining house churches together and making larger churches which can afford to pay the pastor/elder and even to buy a building as well. However, although that might appear to solve the financial problem, *it is not what the Early Church actually did* and those who argue for large churches need to ask themselves why the Early Church didn't agree.

What about tithing to our local church? Does the Bible command that – or even mention it?

If you are a member of a traditional church, and especially if you have been for some decades, you will probably have come across teaching to the effect that God wants each of us to give 10% of our income to our local church. That was taught in every church I went to during the 1980s and 1990s though I think it has been less vigorously pushed in recent years.

The idea is based upon the practice of tithing (giving one tenth) which was part of the Law of Moses and was observed by the Jewish people. However, the Law of Moses completely ended when Jesus died, as I explain fully in my lengthy article “*Has the Law of Moses ended?*” which is on my website, plus in my commentary on Galatians.

The article’s title presents it as a question because so many people believe we are still subject to the Law of Moses. However, I believe I prove beyond all reasonable doubt in the article that the Law most certainly ended at Jesus’ death. That being so, the obligation to tithe also ended at Jesus’ death.

Quite apart from that, the tithe had nothing to do with the Church and all the money went to support the Temple in Jerusalem, the Aaronic priesthood and the work of the Levites, not local churches. There never was, therefore, any valid connection between the Church and the practice of tithing and no tithe money ever went to any church or to any Christian (Messianic) leaders.

It was only centuries afterwards that the traditional, hierarchical, unbiblical churches began to teach that Christians should tithe to their own local church and to imply, or even directly assert, that the Bible requires this. But in fact it doesn’t. I can assure you that if you scour the entire New Testament with a fine tooth comb you will not find even one verse which commands, or even suggests, that we should tithe to our local church.

No such verse exists anywhere, not even one! If you don’t believe me, please check it carefully for yourself. I guarantee you won’t find any support for the practice of tithing to your local church anywhere in the New Testament, not even by the most indirect deductive reasoning.

Why then do we see many (not all) of the traditional, denominational churches teaching tithing to the local church? How can all those churches be wrong and I be right? I think the answer is simple. Their teaching is not based on the Bible but rather on the traditional practices of their church or denomination, i.e. “*what we’ve always done*”. And, as most people will agree, “*Anything that we have always done and are familiar with must be right – or we wouldn’t have done it.*”

That kind of thinking may satisfy most people and convince them that what they are doing is right. But it is not acceptable to me. Neither is it biblical. Indeed, it is the very opposite of how we are meant to assess what we are told and work out what to believe. We must only believe *what the Bible says*, not what men say or the traditions and customs we have always known. Their ancientness and our familiarity with them is no basis for considering them to be valid.

I told the story earlier of Steve, the leader of a church we briefly went to, who came to see me a few weeks after we had started coming to his church. He told me that I should be tithing 10% of the profits of my law firm to his church. Unfortunately for him, he picked on the wrong chap because I knew the Bible and had thought long and hard about what it teaches about giving. That was primarily because I felt God had called me to a ministry of financial giving.

However, although I was very much in favour of financial giving, I knew the Bible does not teach tithing to the local church. So, I challenged Steve to show me even one verse which supports his stance on tithing. He was taken aback by my confident reply and was completely unable to cite any verse – because there are none. He then admitted the New Testament does not teach tithing to the church.

But then he said the shocking words “*But if we didn’t teach tithing, how would the church get money?*” I was shocked by the brazen frankness of his response because I had never heard anyone be so open before about the fact that they were deliberately misrepresenting Scripture to get money – and justifying doing so.

I had heard many leaders advocate tithing to the local church, with varying degrees of honesty, because I am sure many of them believed sincerely that it is what God wants. But I am sure that some were well aware that they were twisting Scripture. They just didn’t admit it openly as Steve did, not that he was sorry for it. On the contrary, he was fully justifying his tactic.

I had another debate, though a much healthier and more honest one, with the late Chuck Missler in 2008 when I went on a tour of Israel which he was leading. Each night he used to do question and answer sessions where the audience of over 100 could ask him anything they wanted to.

He was a great Bible teacher, with massive knowledge of the whole Bible. Moreover, he was a completely faithful and honest man. But I have to say he had a blind spot on this issue of tithing to the local church. He believed it to be the right thing to do and he advocated it.

This issue arose one night when one of the other people on the tour raised the issue of tithing and asked for Chuck’s view of it. When he spoke in favour of it I joined in to disagree with him and a debate followed, mainly between him and me. Initially, Chuck assumed that by opposing tithing to the local church my motive must presumably be that I was reluctant to give or didn’t want to give that much.

But I assured him that was not the case and that my issue was not reluctance to give but my belief that the Bible *does not teach* tithing to the local church and that it is a purely man made practice based solely on tradition and custom, not the Bible.

I told him that my reading of the New Testament led me to conclude that God does not command us to tithe to the local church, or to anyone else and that God’s approach to financial giving for Christians is that it should be:

- a) generous, not stingy (in fact “hilarious”)
- b) calculated by us, not prescribed for us as a fixed sum or percentage, as our own freedom is paramount
- c) given to whomever we choose, with complete freedom, not to the local church or any other specified beneficiary
- d) that our own families should be our main focus for support
- e) then widows, orphans and the poor and needy
- f) with a strong emphasis on helping such poor and needy believers inside churches, not unbelievers
- g) and yet there is nothing wrong with also giving to unbelievers if we wish to. They are simply not the priority.

I then concluded by challenging Chuck to point to even one verse in the New Testament which commands, or even implies, that we should tithe to our local church. Of course, he couldn’t do so because there is no such verse. But because Chuck was a totally honest man, (unlike Steve) he freely

conceded that. Instead he argued that the practice of tithing to our own church is, nevertheless, a good one and works well and should be encouraged.

Ultimately, the difference between us was that Chuck had been brought up to tithe. He had been taught it since childhood and it had entered into his bone marrow as an obviously good thing to do. Thus, I believe he did not even question it but just accepted it as a given because he was so familiar with the practice.

That was actually an unusual stance for Chuck to adopt because, on so many other issues, he had an exceptionally original, enquiring mind which went back to Scripture and challenged all sorts of conventions and practices in the churches. But, somehow, he overlooked this one.

By the way, I am not attacking or criticising Chuck. He was a great man. But it serves to illustrate the point that if even he can have a blind spot about God's Word then we all can and we need to humble ourselves and be willing to be corrected if we are wrong.

Am I attacking traditional churches and saying that God won't use them or bless them?

I can answer that question immediately by saying no, I am not attacking any of these churches or saying God won't use them. Of course He uses them, unless they are apostate, and He will certainly not reject a church or a pastor just because they choose to follow the traditional model of church instead of what I maintain is the biblical approach.

We all make mistakes and I don't want, or expect, God to reject me and my ministry just because of my mistakes and areas of ignorance. None of us are perfect and none of us get everything right. So, I believe the men who pastor local churches and are paid for doing it will be blessed and rewarded by God, to the extent that they are faithful, preach the true Gospel and care for their people, even if their church structure isn't biblical.

That is what really matters and I freely concede that I would prefer to see a faithful pastor who cares for his people but is unaware of the issues I am raising in this book than an elder in a house church who has all the right structure and isn't paid but who doesn't preach the true Gospel or care for his people. I hope I am making that point clearly enough.

Nevertheless, that is not an argument for ignoring or rejecting what the Bible says. And as for the faithful pastor who is currently operating in an unbiblical, traditional church model, I believe that he and his people would be even better off if their church was to change to a biblical model, to appoint more elders, share the load, sell the building, and perhaps split into two or three separate house churches.

But if they don't and they choose to carry on with the traditional church model, I will not attack them or disparage them or deny the good work that many of them do. I have no grudge against them and am only trying to set out an alternative approach, which I believe is the biblical approach, and asking people to consider moving to it because I believe they would do even better and so would their members, if they did.

What then does the New Testament teach about financial giving if it doesn't teach tithing?

In the chapter so far, I have already looked at several verses relating to money and giving, and you'll surely agree that none of those require us to tithe to the local church, or to anybody else. I now want to go through some remaining verses which make up pretty much all that the New Testament has to say on financial giving in order to prove my point that tithing to the local church is not taught anywhere.

³² Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 4:32-37 (RSV)

I also briefly refer to this issue in chapter 15 below when addressing the question of whether the Early Church practised a form of communism where they all gave all they had to the apostles. I quickly establish that they didn't and that in fact they all retained complete ownership of their own property at all times and were under no obligation to give any of it to anybody, whether before or after they sold the land.

However, let's look at what this passage, Acts 4:32-37, tells us about the giving done by the Early Church. It emerges clearly that their strong emphasis was on making sure that nobody in any of the churches was in poverty and to encourage those who had wealth to share it eagerly (but always purely voluntarily) with those who were needy.

They certainly did that and, moreover, so did Barnabas who was himself a leader and, for a time, Paul's mentor and senior partner in their apostolic missions work. Therefore, instead of the church giving money to Barnabas, he sold a field and gave the sale proceeds to the apostles for them to pass on to the poor.

Note therefore that:

- a) They all retained full private ownership of their property. (This emerges even more clearly if you read Acts 5:4 which I examine in chapter 15.)
- b) They gave whatever they freely chose to give and nobody told them how much it should be.
- c) The beneficiaries were the poor, not the leaders and not the church. All the money was passed on to poor individuals, not to the church itself.
- d) The apostles administered the money designated for the poor, at least in these very early days, but they didn't use any of it for themselves personally or to fund their work.

Let us look now at Paul's letter to the Romans:

²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints. ²⁶ For Macedo'nia and Acha'ia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem;

²⁷ they were pleased to do it, and indeed they are in debt to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. ²⁸ When therefore I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been raised, I shall go on by way of you to Spain; ²⁹ and I know that when I come to you I shall come in the fulness of the blessing of Christ.

Romans 15:25-29 (RSV)

Again, what we see here is a collection being organised by the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to help the poor and needy in the churches in Jerusalem who were struggling with a famine. So, although apostle Paul was going to deliver the gift to the poor Christians in Jerusalem, which he was travelling to, none of the money was for his own use.

He was just the man who delivered it. And of course, as usual, it is not described as a tithe, is not compulsory, and no instruction is given at all as to how much people should give. It is left entirely up to each of them to decide – as we shall find in every other passage.

Let's look next at 1 Corinthians 16:1-3.

¹ Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 16:1-3 (RSV)

In this passage Paul is again dealing with the issue of the famine that was happening in Jerusalem and he tells the church in Corinth, just as he did the Galatians, to put some money aside on the first day of each week and save it up ready for when he comes so he can collect it and bring it with him to Jerusalem to help the needy Christians there. But note what Paul is *not* saying:

- a) He isn't asking for money *for* the church in Corinth – so they aren't being asked to give to their own church.
- b) He isn't asking them to pay money to any leaders in Corinth or anywhere else, and certainly not to himself.
- c) He isn't specifying any amount or percentage.
- d) He isn't even commanding them to give at all. He is just advising them on when to give if they want to and how to gather it up most efficiently so as to save time and effort when he gets to Corinth. He is being purely practical and administrative, not giving any commands or creating any duties.

Let's now turn to 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 in which Paul is yet again discussing the famine in Jerusalem and praising the churches in Macedonia for their generous response to that crisis which he wants the Corinthians to imitate:

¹ We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedo'nia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can

testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—⁵ and this, not as we expected, but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. ⁶ Accordingly we have urged Titus that as he had already made a beginning, he should also complete among you this gracious work. ⁷ Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you excel in this gracious work also.

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰ And in this matter I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire, ¹¹ so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not. ¹³ I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, ¹⁴ but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. ¹⁵ As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (RSV)

Similar themes arise here so let's again list what Paul is, and isn't, saying:

- a) He praises the *joy and generosity* of the churches in Macedonia who, despite being in hardship themselves, still wanted to give to support the Christians in Jerusalem who were in even more severe hardship and famine.
- b) The Macedonians gave *according to their means*, not in accordance with any rule or command about what the amount or percentage should be.
- c) They gave *of their own free will* so there was no compulsion, command or instruction of any kind. It was entirely up to each individual to decide whether to give anything and, if so, how much.
- d) Paul explicitly states, for the avoidance of doubt, that he is *not giving any command* (verse 8).
- e) Paul's aim is not to burden anyone but to help create more equality by arranging that those who are currently enjoying abundance should help those who are currently in want so that later, if the situations are reversed, the giving can go in the opposite direction. In that way, any temporary poverty in one church or area can be eased by those who are not in poverty, to everyone's advantage.

The strong focus in the Early Church (but not today) on Christians giving to support their own families

Look how strongly Paul expresses himself when he speaks of a Christian's duty to support his own family, by which he means the extended family, i.e. grandparents, parents and widowed aunts or other relatives. Remember, there was no such thing as social security benefits so a widow in particular would be in real trouble if she didn't have a family willing to support her. The same would apply to elderly or infirm parents or grandparents:

⁸ *If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

1 Timothy 5:8 (RSV)

Paul goes on to give quite detailed instructions for how to deal with widows, i.e. those who did not have families to care for them. His key concern is that all widows who are genuinely in need should be supported. But he is also very concerned that this burden must fall first on the relatives, not the church. The church's job was to support those who had no relatives, as we see below:

⁹ *Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband;* ¹⁰ *and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.* ¹¹ *But refuse to enrol younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry,* ¹² *and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge.* ¹³ *Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.* ¹⁴ *So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us.* ¹⁵ *For some have already strayed after Satan.* ¹⁶ *If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are real widows.*

1 Timothy 5:9-16 (RSV)

Would you agree that this emphasis on an individual Christian's duty to financially support his own extended family is not present in the Church today? I have never heard any preacher even mention it, let alone emphasise it. Any talks I have ever heard on giving have focussed on the need to give to the church, not to our families.

When I have raised this issue, it has been pushed to one side dismissively as if that is just a matter for individuals to consider, not for the church to express a view on. And yet Paul emphasised it very strongly while saying only a modest amount about supporting travelling ministries and almost nothing (other than possibly one verse) about supporting local elders.

Indeed, I am reminded of an incident which illustrates the modern church's totally different attitude towards supporting our own relatives. A Christian man, aged about 40, came to see me at my law firm because he had heard I was a Christian lawyer. He didn't know me and I had never met him before. He then told me that his parents needed legal help but couldn't afford to pay for it and he was therefore looking for a Christian solicitor who would be willing to act free of charge.

The point was this man and perhaps his siblings, considered it to be my duty as a Christian lawyer to help his parents free of charge. But the thought never entered his mind, until I pointed it out to him, that there was another way to look at it, as per 1 Timothy 5:8, i.e. *for him to pay the legal fees!*

Somehow, his experience of church and his theology placed upon me a greater duty of care towards his parents than he had himself – even though they were complete strangers to me. He was a bit stunned when I pointed out that it was his duty, and his siblings', rather than mine and he was somewhat struck dumb.

We now come to a passage which is often preached on, though not always honestly or in accordance with its real meaning. Again, Paul is talking to the Corinthians and praising the Macedonian churches for their generous response to the famine in Jerusalem:

¹ Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the offering for the saints, ² for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedo'nia, saying that Acha'ia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³ But I am sending the brethren so that our boasting about you may not prove vain in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; ⁴ lest if some Macedo'nians come with me and find that you are not ready, we be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren to go on to you before me, and arrange in advance for this gift you have promised, so that it may be ready not as an exaction but as a willing gift.

⁶ The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

*“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever.”*

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; ¹² for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ Under the test of this service, you will glorify God by your obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others; ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God in you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

2 Corinthians 9:1-15 (RSV)

Again, Paul praises the Macedonians for their generosity and, again, he emphasises that the money was given purely voluntarily, not in response to any command or rule and that it was “*not an exaction but a willing gift*”.

Paul then goes on to give what I view as his clearest and most important piece of teaching on how financial giving should, and should not, be done and on the enormous blessings that God gives to those who give generously. In fact, it was this passage, especially verses 6-12, which inspired me to enter into what I call the “*ministry of giving*” many years ago.

Indeed, one reason why I set up my own law firm was in order to provide a vehicle to enable me to be give financially on a much larger scale. There can be no doubt that God blessed that project by causing my law firm to prosper and to grow exponentially in response to the giving I did. I speak of this in some of my other books and talks.

This passage, especially verses 6-11, are often preached on but I have noticed that sometimes they are given a slant which is not honest and which does not appear in the text itself. That is these verses,

which point to the blessings that God will send to anyone who is generous, are presented *as if they were talking about giving to the church – which they are not*.

These verses are actually just proclaiming the great benefits that come from generous giving, particularly the benefit to the giver, and making the following specific points or promises:

- a) Anyone who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, meaning that a man reaps what he sows and that giving money away is viewed by God as sowing seeds. So, if you don't sow any seeds, because you don't give, then He won't give you anything back either so you won't reap anything. And if you only give sparingly you will only reap a small harvest.
- b) Conversely, if you sow bountifully by giving generously, God will cause you to reap bountifully as well, meaning He will cause you to prosper and succeed and to get your money back again with a lot more on top as a bumper harvest.
- c) We must each decide, entirely for ourselves, how much to give, and to whom, and it must not be done reluctantly i.e. begrudging it, under compulsion, or in accordance with a rule or command. Any of those things make the gift involuntary and thus it can no longer be classed as being done freely and cheerfully, which is what God wants. You have to get hold of this vital point, which is that God loves generosity and freedom and for people to give solely *because they want to*. He wants you *to want to give*, just as He wants to give, because He wants you to be like Him and generosity is a key part of His character.
- d) If you do make up your mind to give generously, and if that is your genuine desire, then God will provide for you in abundance. Then you will always have enough of everything and will always be capable of giving generously. He will ensure you are made able to afford it – if your heart's desire is to give generously, but not if you just obey commands and rules about giving which is effectively no different from paying income tax.
- e) God will not only replace what you give by giving it back to you, but He will *multiply it exponentially* so that you are not merely repaid or compensated but *enriched*.

I hasten to add, however, that although God promises to multiply what we give and to send it back to us, *that must not be our motive for giving*. We must not treat God like a vending machine where we only put money in because we want something back from Him for ourselves. That would be squalid and grasping and would not please God.

Instead, our giving must be solely *because we want to* and in order to help the poor and needy, or missions work or impoverished relatives etc, *not to get something back for ourselves*. There must be genuine generosity in our hearts such that we take pleasure from the act of giving and enjoy it.

Moreover, don't get the idea that when God promises to multiply your giving and return it to you it means He will do so immediately by return post. He might do, if you are a very new believer just starting to give and He wants to encourage you. But it is more likely that God will return your money to you months, years or even decades later.

He keeps meticulous accounts and might reward you in your sixties for giving you did in your twenties such that you have no way of remembering your giving or connecting the two things. But God does remember and He will never fail to reward any act of genuine generosity.

But I think He might well ignore any giving done purely in order to induce Him to give it back to you as with the “money preachers” who are always talking about how to get rich. God is not willing to be used or manipulated in that way. Therefore, just focus on giving generously and enjoying it and leave it to God to think about repaying you whenever it suits His purposes to do so.

So, we have been through all these verses, and would you now agree with me that none of the verses we have seen are telling us:

- a) to tithe to our local church
- b) to give anything at all to our local church, i.e. *for its own purposes*, but only ever for it to serve as a collecting point to gather money to send on to the poor and needy elsewhere, as with the famine victims in Jerusalem
- c) to give money to *local* leaders/elders/bishops/overseers, whatever you want to call them, but only for those men who have specialist ministries which require them to be full time or who *travel* far from home with itinerant ministries who cannot, therefore, get a job to provide for themselves and their families
- d) that there is any compulsion or command to give - it is always presented as being 100% voluntary
- e) that there is some specified sum or percentage that we should give – it is left entirely up to us to decide on the amount
- f) that there is any specific person or group *to whom* we must give. It is left up to us to decide whom we believe to be the most needy – except that we are told this *must include our own families* and are given general guidelines about widows and orphans etc.

In view of all that, would you therefore agree with me that there is no biblical basis for what millions of churches are teaching, namely that:

- a) our giving should be to the local church (whether or not they specify the amount or percentage)
- b) the money given to the local church should be used to buy and maintain a building and to pay the salary of the *local* pastor/leader/minister, even though *he does not travel* or is not a full time Bible teacher.

At any rate, if you think there is a biblical basis for the above practices, can you set out what that basis is and point to verses, or even one verse, which is a clear authority for that belief? Try it. But if you can't, then wouldn't you agree that you need to rethink your beliefs in this area and question what you have been taught and what you have always done in your life so far?

CHAPTER 10

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

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

1 Corinthians 16:16 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hebrews 13:17 (RSV)

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

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

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

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (ESV)

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

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

Philippians 2:28-30 (NASB)

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

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

Deuteronomy 17:8-13 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Acts 17:11 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John 9:24-34 (ESV)

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

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

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

Therefore, leadership in the Church is of a type that must always be consistent with each member exercising their own discernment and retaining their own personal freedom and autonomy. The

obedience required of us is therefore voluntary, not compulsory, and subject always to each member's higher duty towards God, his own conscience and his own critical faculties. We must always think for ourselves, even when dealing with leaders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We therefore see such domination, exploitation and control happening in all sorts of ways, both small and large, depending on the personality of the leader and the extent to which he has been changed by taking on a traditional leadership role. Very often idealistic young men start out with a genuine desire

to serve but their experiences in churches, not all of which are their fault, cause them to become suspicious, insecure and paranoid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some people actually prefer to be ruled rather than led

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

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

More to the point, it is not what they are used to and what they have grown up with. So, they cleave to what feels familiar and therefore stay within the hierarchical, traditional church model. They then shy

away from anything which would make them more personally accountable for what they believe and do. It just seems easier to sit back and be ruled over.

I liken such people to domesticated rabbits, who have become tame and dependent. They are then incapable of foraging for themselves, and the idea of having a master seems comfortable. But trying to feed themselves from the Bible and making decisions and judgements for themselves feels alien and difficult.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In any case, when one looks closely at the “anointing” which these men claim to have, as if God has personally chosen them to lead, it does not hold water. They themselves chose to go to a Bible College and they chose to apply for assistant minister positions in churches. So, the reality is in most cases they put themselves into church leadership rather than being “chosen” and “anointed” by God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ ***So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans***
Revelation 2:15 (ESV)

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

a) ‘*Nikos*’ which means conquest or victory

b) '*laos*' which means 'the people at large,' as distinct from their priests or rulers. It is the same word from which we get the English word 'laity'

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

Note also that Jesus says He 'hates' their deeds. That demonstrates that to Jesus, oppressive and overbearing church leadership is not a mere foible which should, ideally, be avoided if we can. It is a deeply damaging and evil trait which needs to be resisted wherever we see it, whether in others or in ourselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jeremiah 20:1-2 (ESV)

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

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

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

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

Philippians 1:15-17 (RSV)

Many church leaders are seeking to be recognised and to be prominent, because there is a craving within the fallen human nature to be significant. That carnal desire will cause some men to use any methods that will help them to maintain their position and status. Many leaders are more interested in holding on to their own position than in helping other people to grow and fulfil God's calling in their own lives.

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

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

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

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

Philippians 2:19-22 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Peter 2:1-3 (ESV)

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

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

2 Peter 2:14-16 (ESV)

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

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

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

Revelation 2:14 (ESV)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Trustees,

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 1. To understand people and be effective in pastoring them, one needs to have had sustained experience of ordinary working life i.e. being in a long term job like nearly everyone else. Most people spend about 50% of their waking life at work, where they face a wide range of problems, pressures and issues that can stretch a person to their limits. If a church pastor has not experienced enough of those things, he may lack the ability to effectively minister to people in relation to about half of what their lives consist of.*
- 2. Spending many years in ordinary employment enables one to experience the rigours and hard knocks of the world out there, and to learn how to deal with it all. This includes, amongst other things:*
 - a. Working with difficult bosses and colleagues, including some who are harsh, unfair and even corrupt*
 - b. Meeting deadlines, sometimes unrealistic and stressful ones*
 - c. Handling clients/customers and the demands they can make*
 - d. Other work related disciplines, which are not always required to the same extent in ministry life e.g. meeting sales/output targets, getting up early, working shifts, taking work home, complying with regulations, being accountable for how our time is used, and so on.*
 - e. Dealing with issues of conscience (e.g. telling the truth even under intense personal or commercial pressure, dealing with dishonest colleagues/bosses, learning how to act when required to be around ungodly/carnal/sordid conversations etc.)*
 - f. Workplace bullying, manipulation and inappropriate rivalry*
 - g. Juggling work, home and church obligations when the demands of each add up to more than 100% of a week*
 - h. The stresses of looking for and finding a job*
 - i. The pressures of living with job uncertainty/possible redundancy*
 - j. Competing to win promotions*
 - k. Learning how to lead and supervise unbelievers*

1. *Dealing with staff discipline/dismissals*

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

3. *It is wrong to assume if someone goes into ministry that it is inevitably for life. Many things are just for a time, and that is equally true of ministry. We need to give God complete freedom to move us into and out of ministry work whenever He pleases. It cannot be viewed as a permanent "career". Therefore, everyone needs to have a trade or profession to which they can return at the drop of a hat. Otherwise:*
 - a. *A person can realise in their 30s, 40s or 50s that ministry is not, or is no longer, the right thing for them and/or that they have burned out or become ineffectual and/or insecure. But they can be trapped in ministry due to lack of training and experience in any other job, such that they feel there is no alternative but to soldier on.*
 - b. *A church or organisation can, likewise, feel trapped into keeping someone in ministry, where they perceive there are problems, but they feel that the minister has no other work options and they don't want to cast him adrift.*

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

4. *Where a person realises that ministry is no longer the right thing for them, and yet they can't move out of it, that can be a dangerous position for all concerned. At best they could become ineffectual. At worst, they could deal with their frustration and insecurity by becoming controlling and manipulative in order to defend their position from perceived threats. That would damage those in their care, as well as harming themselves. This is not a merely hypothetical scenario. It is a surprisingly widespread problem in churches, and produces tragic consequences.*
5. *It is not biblical to go straight into ministry without having genuinely learned a trade. Jesus was a builder. So were His brothers, James and Jude. Apollos was a lawyer, Luke was a doctor, Matthew was a tax collector, and Peter and most of the others were fishermen. Paul was a tent maker. In fact, every Rabbi, no matter how eminent, had to learn a trade or profession. It was obligatory, even for Paul, a very high flier, who trained under Gamaliel. Therefore, learning a trade was by no means unique to Paul.*
6. *It is wise for a person in ministry to make sure that they always have the option at any point in the future of becoming self funding by working part time. That keeps them financially independent and also keeps their skills up to date. Paul funded his own ministry by working as a tent maker. However, that option is not possible if one has never learned any profession or trade to begin with, or if one has only ever had a very brief career. Merely to make a start in a job for a couple of years is not the same thing as thoroughly learning something.*
7. *In our experience, (in law and business analysis), a professional person cannot be said to be genuinely trained and independent in their job until they have worked for at least 7 years. Until*

then they still need supervision and wouldn't have enough confidence and experience to be able to take a gap of several years and still be able to return to the same or a similar job.

- 8. The most practical time to learn a profession or trade is when one is young. It is very hard to break into the job market, and even more so into a profession, if it is left till later in life.*
- 9. Time spent in employment is also needed to test and confirm the genuineness of a person's calling to ministry and to see whether they have built up enough of a stockpile of skills, character and experience to be sure they are ready for it.*
- 10. Time spent in employment allows a young person to grow up and to become more mature in their character and faith. This enables them to be more effective, balanced, understanding and realistic when they do eventually go into ministry.*
- 11. If one aspires to a church leadership role, one also benefits from having spent a number of years as an ordinary member in the main body of a church without a leading role. Otherwise, how can a person know what it is like for all the other people who are not leading? Having been a trainee, xxxxx has already moved straight into a quasi leadership role at 21 and has by-passed the normal membership stage.*

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

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

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

I hope these thoughts are of some help.

Yours sincerely,

Sean Kehoe

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)

CHAPTER 12

FALSE TEACHERS AND ABUSIVE, MANIPULATIVE OR DOMINEERING LEADERS

¹⁴And the LORD said to me: “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.

Jeremiah 14:14 (RSV)

*⁹For they are a rebellious people,
lying sons,
sons who will not hear
the instruction of the LORD;
¹⁰who say to the seers, “See not”;
and to the prophets, “Prophesy not to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,
¹¹leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel.”*

Isaiah 30:9-11 (RSV)

*⁴Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men;
her priests profane what is holy;
they do violence to the law.*

Zephaniah 3:4 (ESV)

*³¹the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule at their direction;
my people love to have it so,
but what will you do when the end comes?*

Jeremiah 5:31 (RSV)

*¹¹“Both prophet and priest are ungodly;
even in my house I have found their wickedness,
says the LORD.*

Jeremiah 23:11 (RSV)

What to do when you notice abuse or false teaching, depending on whether you are in a leadership position yourself

If you are not a leader and are just a young or new member of a church, then there is a very little you can do to correct any false teaching or wrong practice. You have no power or influence and you may even be in danger if you stay in that church and try to contend against those false teachings.

One risk is that you would end up being deceived yourself. Another risk is that your attempts to contend for the truth from such a junior position would lead to you being attacked, undermined and slandered by leaders. I have seen that happen to a number of people, including myself, and have heard of it from many more. It isn't safe and can easily leave you feeling violated.

Therefore, you would do best just to leave that church and look for another. But look carefully, because the new church may well have the same problems too. I have made that mistake myself and have jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Indeed, I have done so more than once.

However, if you are a leader yourself, it would probably be your duty, at least for a time, to stay in that church and try to correct any false teaching and confront the abuses and wrong practices of members and fellow elders. Look at apostle Paul's letters. He was continually tackling such situations in the various churches with which he was involved. Whenever possible he tried to correct things that were wrong and to appeal to others to change their ideas or actions.

Sometimes he succeeded, but not always. On some occasions he failed completely and was not listened to. In particular he was attacked and slandered when he tried to tackle the 'Judaizers'. They were teaching the false idea that Gentile converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised and become Jews as well as Christians. He faced this kind of hostile opposition at Philippi:

¹For you yourselves know, brethren, that our visit to you was not in vain; ²but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philip'pi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the face of great opposition.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 (RSV)

In fact, everywhere Paul went he faced opposition, though most of it was from misguided religious people, rather than from the world:

²⁴Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; ²⁶on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; ²⁷in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

2 Corinthians 11:24-27 (RSV)

However, if you are currently in a junior position, rather than being a leader, it is generally unwise to stay in a bad church in the hope that you can change it. It is almost certain that you will fail, particularly if you are a young believer. It will only result in you getting hurt.

The position would be different if you were a very mature believer, in a leadership role, holding on and fighting for the real Gospel in a situation where a church has been taken over by wrong doctrines and wrong practices. But, you cannot even hope to do any of that as a young believer. The chances are you will achieve little or nothing.

If you can see that there is a leader who is standing up for the truth, then it may well be right for you to stay just to support him in his efforts to uphold true doctrine. But, if no mature leader is doing that you could not do it on your own as a young believer.

The different types of characters who become leaders of churches

It is not safe or wise to assume that all church leaders are honest men, seeking to do their best to serve and lead God's people. Some are, but many are not. Let us examine the three main types of leaders that the Bible speaks of, i.e. shepherds, hirelings and wolves. Every leader will largely fall into one of these three categories. Look first at how Jesus put it:

¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

John 10:11-15 (RSV)

Shepherds

This is the group that Jesus Himself was in. It refers to those genuine men whose priority is not themselves, or their 'career' but the sincere desire to look after the people in their care and teach the Bible faithfully. These are honest men who diligently do their duty, always putting the people first and themselves last.

Such leaders are what we desperately need, but they are rare. To be a leader like this a man needs to be humble, honest and mature and to have already largely succeeded in crucifying his own flesh nature. That is not easy. Peter describes for us what a genuine shepherd should be like:

¹So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ²shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

1 Peter 5:1-4 (ESV)

Conversely, Isaiah speaks of what a false shepherd is like, i.e. a man who isn't a shepherd at all because he is a leader who has no understanding and looks after himself, rather than the people in his care:

*¹⁰ His watchmen are blind,
they are all without knowledge;
they are all dumb dogs,
they cannot bark;
dreaming, lying down,
loving to slumber.*

*¹¹ The dogs have a mighty appetite;
they never have enough.
The shepherds also have no understanding;
they have all turned to their own way,
each to his own gain, one and all.*

Isaiah 56:10-11 (RSV)

A shepherd needs to have been well taught himself and to have a sound knowledge of the Bible. A leader who is a genuine shepherd can be trusted because he doesn't want power, money or status. He is not looking for anything other than to obey Jesus' command to look after His people, and to serve and protect them. The ultimate Shepherd was Jesus. His perfect ministry exemplified what a real pastor should be like:

*¹¹He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

Isaiah 40:11 (ESV)

²⁰Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,

Hebrews 13:20 (NASB)

²⁴and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

1 Peter 2:24-25 (NASB)

⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

1 Peter 5:4 (NASB)

In this next passage apostle Paul describes his own self-sacrificial approach to ministry. Everything he describes is the hallmark of a genuine shepherd, and the opposite of how a hireling or a wolf will behave:

³ We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

2 Corinthians 6:3-10 (RSV)

A genuine shepherd is not ambitious for himself and does not seek to build himself up or obstruct the ministries of other men. By contrast, a hireling will oppose talented young men whom God wishes to raise up. Hirelings will resist their ministries because they feel threatened by them and are envious of them. That attitude is all too common in our churches, where insecure hirelings will prevent gifted men from developing into leaders.

Note however the very different attitude shown by apostle Paul towards his junior colleague, Titus, and how he praises him and creates openings for him to serve. Far from being threatened by Titus, Paul positively wants his ministry to prosper and grow. He feels none of the competitiveness and insecurity that is found in hirelings:

¹⁶I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you.

¹⁷For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. ¹⁸And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. ¹⁹What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. ²¹For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. ²²In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:16-23 (RSV)

Paul speaks further about this selfish attitude when he refers to men who preach “from envy and rivalry”. He means they see themselves as if they were in a secular commercial job in a law firm or bank and they are competing to be seen as being more successful than other men. They are not shepherds whose only concern is for the welfare of the flock. Instead, their focus is on themselves and advancing their career.

¹⁵Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.

Philippians 1:15 (RSV)

Hirelings

Hirelings are probably the largest group. These men are neither wolves nor shepherds. They are the kind of man who is selfish, weak and cowardly. He does not put the interests of the people ahead of himself. He puts himself first every time. However, he is not intentionally seeking to do harm or to attack people, so he isn't a wolf.

He has no desire to do damage deliberately. It is just that if he is ever put in a position where he has to choose between what is best for the people and what is easiest for himself, he will immediately choose the latter. He will always take the line of least resistance. His desire to be popular, to have an easy life, and to avoid effort, difficulty or conflict, takes priority over everything else.

A hireling sees church leadership as a career. To him it's just a paid job from which he earns a living and supports his family. Instead of seeing himself as doing God's work, he sees himself as earning a wage. Therefore, he does not care about people like a genuine shepherd does and he is entirely willing to “tamper with God's Word”.

¹⁷Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

2 Corinthians 2:17 (RSV)

¹Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Moreover, a hireling cannot be bothered to find out what God wants for His people. Therefore, he is 'stupid' as he does not seek God's guidance or know God's Word thoroughly:

***²¹For the shepherds are stupid,
and do not inquire of the Lord;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.***

Jeremiah 10:21 (RSV)

If a church leader is a hireling he is the same as a man who is merely hired by the hour to look after another farmer's sheep. He does not see those sheep as his own and he will not put himself to any inconvenience for them. Neither will he endure any hardship or danger for their sake. By contrast, a real shepherd sees the sheep as his own and will lay down his life for them if need be, just as Jesus did.

That is why He called Himself 'the Good Shepherd'. A real shepherd cares for the sheep as he would care for his own children. He views them as his personal responsibility. It is like the difference between a parent and a babysitter. Even the best babysitter will never view the child in their care as a parent does.

A parent will not hesitate to stay up all night with a sick child, even if they have work in the morning. The anxiety for the sick child's welfare will weigh heavily upon them. Yet, a babysitter will just head off home at 10:00 pm when their job is done and will not give the sick child another thought. The apostle Peter urges us not to act like a hireling but like a shepherd, if we have any pastoral responsibility:

² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

1 Peter 5:2-4 (NASB)

In many ways church leadership can be an ideal career for a hireling. Few jobs involve less accountability. Therefore, if a church leader is lazy and wants to do as little work as possible, he is ideally placed to get away with it. It is most unlikely that anyone will confront him about his laziness in the way they would in any commercial job.

He will be left alone to get on with doing as little as he chooses to do. Most people will assume he is probably putting in long hours of work unseen and give him the benefit of the doubt. I know that 'Rick' the church leader I challenged about his misconduct and dishonesty, was also unfaithful in his use of time. Therefore, for example, he would regularly sit and watch DVDs during the day when everyone assumed he was working.

Rick's church also organised a supposed "evangelistic" trip to witness to holidaymakers at a seaside resort abroad which the congregation paid for. That trip involved several young people who were trainee church workers. However, it emerged later that they did barely any evangelism and spent the vast majority of the week just sunbathing on a beach. They had evidently picked up the same lamentable work ethic that Rick had.

When a hireling is in leadership the people in that church will be neglected and will not be fed properly. It is not that the hireling wishes to harm them. He simply *doesn't care about them and cannot be bothered to put himself out or endure any difficulty or danger for their sake*. Therefore the people will suffer the consequence of his indifference and idleness. But God will hold such leaders fully accountable for the harm they do and for the damage they fail to prevent:

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. ⁶My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

Ezekiel 34:1-6 (RSV)

Many Christian ministers both begin and end their ministries as hirelings. Such men go into Christian ministry just looking for a career. They have an interest in 'religion' but they also want a paid job and to generally promote their own interests. They put their own welfare ahead of the people and ahead of the truth.

Therefore, even though they do not necessarily have any evil intentions, the results of their ministries are meagre. They will always compromise on the truth if taking a stand would be costly or painful. Under such men any church will decline in quality and become lukewarm. A hireling will not teach the truth because if the truth is taught openly it will always get a leader into trouble, and a hireling is not willing to face that, or even to risk it, as it brings no benefit to him personally.

So, any part of the Bible which is controversial, or politically incorrect, or goes against current orthodoxy, will be ignored. A hireling may not necessarily teach lies deliberately. They will just ignore the truth if it is controversial and stay silent when it is their duty to speak. Hirelings will only say what it is safe to say and the people want to hear, not what they need to hear.

They know that most people just want to be flattered and entertained rather than confronted or convicted. So they give the people what they want. They do not care enough for their people to be willing to take the flak that comes from telling them the truth rather than giving them what they want.

¹ I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. ⁵But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 (NASB)

The hirelings are probably the largest group, at least in our own day in the West. They therefore do the most damage because there are so many of them and they are harder to identify because they are not

outright opponents of the Gospel. But look how God sees them and the harm they do by not being genuine shepherds:

⁷ “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; ⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰ Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

Ezekiel 34:7-10 (RSV)

Wolves

In the earlier passage from John chapter 10, Jesus speaks about 'wolves' coming in and deliberately harming and scattering the flock. He also refers to such wolves in Matthew 7:

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. ¹⁸ A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits

Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)

Wolves are not unbelieving outsiders from the world. The wolves who will come in to attack and scatter the flock are men who purport to be Christian leaders. In fact they set themselves up as pastors, teachers and prophets and they positively seek to lead God's people astray or at least to use and exploit them for their own profit.

That is why they do so much damage. If they merely persecuted the church from outside, they would do far less harm. However, because they come into the church and take up leadership positions within it, their capacity to do damage is multiplied many times over.

So, a wolf is not an unbeliever operating outside of the church. He is a phoney Christian operating from within. That means he is a false person posing as a Christian, and seeking a leadership position. They are listened to and believed precisely because they seem to be Christians. They appear to be working for God and for the church.

Thus the people under them put down their guard (if they had ever put it up) and are not vigilant to watch out for or resist such men. Apostle Paul warned Timothy about these men and how they operate in a carnal and dishonest way, opposing the true Gospel, whilst purporting to be Christians themselves:

¹But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. ²For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people. ⁶For among them are those who make their way into households

and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses,⁷ who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.⁸ As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith;

2 Timothy 3:1-8 (RSV)

¹²Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,¹³ while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.

2 Timothy 3:12-13 (RSV)

I once had a strange experience with a female church leader whom I considered to be a wolf. I got involved in an online conversation in which she was pushing what I call the “prosperity gospel” and urging everyone to give to their church. I replied to her contradicting her ideas and saying that we are not commanded to tithe to our church.

I also warned people against what I call “money preachers” whose preaching is focused on raising money for themselves by promising that God will bless you if you give to them. To my surprise she then came back online with a warning to all those participating and said, “*Be aware that Sean Kehoe is a false teacher and does not believe in the resurrection.*”

I was taken aback by this, especially as the resurrection had not even been mentioned in our debate. So, this dishonest woman knew perfectly well that what she was saying about me was a complete lie but she was willing to say it just to protect her income.

She saw at once that what I teach about giving would destroy her income if people were to hear it and believe it. Therefore, I classify her as a wolf, not just a hireling, because she was so willing to lie. I should add of course that, as a woman, she ought not to have been leading a church to begin with.

It is primarily against such false leaders that the true shepherds have to take a stand if they are to protect the sheep from false teaching and false practices. The hireling, however, will never take such a stand. He will never stand up and oppose false teaching, even when he knows it to be false. When he sees a wolf coming, as Jesus said, he just leaves the sheep and flees, letting the sheep be scattered and snatched.

A hireling does not care whether a false teacher is leading people astray. However, a real shepherd is grieved by it and will take action, even if it is costly and dangerous for himself. I therefore have great admiration for men who are willing to stand up and confront those wolves and to speak openly about them too, so as to warn the people.

The late Dave Hunt of the Berean Call was a prime example of such a man. He told the truth fearlessly and took a lot of abuse for doing so. Sadly, some of that flak came from naïve, misguided Christians, many of whom were genuine believers who just did not realise what was going on. But, most of it was from compromisers and hirelings.

Such insincere men particularly objected to Dave Hunt openly naming those wolf like leaders who were teaching and practicing falsehood. But that is exactly what the apostle Paul did, and so did the apostle John. They openly named the wolves and warned the people, even at great cost to themselves. Therefore, so did the late Dave Hunt. (See his website www.thebereancall.org).

There are few Christian leaders, anywhere in the world, as brave, honest and selfless as was the late Dave Hunt. The prophet Jeremiah was similarly brave when he confronted the false prophet Hananiah. Note also how stern God's message was for that false prophet:

¹⁵ And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hanani'ah, "Listen, Hanani'ah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶ Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the LORD.'"¹⁷ In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hanani'ah died.
Jeremiah 28:15-17 (RSV)

¹⁵ Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name although I did not send them, and who say, 'Sword and famine shall not come on this land': By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed. ¹⁶ And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword, with none to bury them—they, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out their wickedness upon them.
Jeremiah 14:15-16 (RSV)

And note how direct God Himself is in saying that these false prophets are liars and that He did not send them. Evidently, God is just as blunt as apostle Paul in stating the facts about false leaders:

⁸ For 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 which they dream ⁹ for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.
Jeremiah 29:8-9 (RSV)

Moreover, Jesus gave us further warnings about these false leaders who would come into the Church. He told us to beware of them and to be on our guard, and that we would know these people by their fruit. The point is we have been warned so many times that false leaders would emerge that we can hardly claim to deny that it happens or even to be surprised by it. On the contrary, we are meant to be expecting such men and to be constantly on the alert watching out for them:

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. ¹⁸ A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)

Apostle Paul gave a similar warning to the church in Ephesus that such wolves would inevitably come in:

²⁸ Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.
Acts 20:28-31 (RSV)

Jude also gives this warning about those people who purport to be believers and who will gain admission to the churches and then bring in licentiousness and deny Jesus Christ. In other words, they seem to be part of our churches but they are actually carnal and false and are not genuine believers:

³ Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴ For admission has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jude 3-4 (RSV)

Jude goes on to describe these false people more fully and to say what will become of them:

¹⁰ But these men revile whatever they do not understand, and by those things that they know by instinct as irrational animals do, they are destroyed. ¹¹ Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain, and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perish in Korah's rebellion. ¹² These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly carouse together, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; ¹³ wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever.

Jude 10-13 (RSV)

Given that Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jesus, Paul and others repeatedly warned us of these wolves, and told us to be on our guard, it is peculiar that in the Church today we have not only put our guard down but we resent the men who are honest enough to expose the false teachers. They are criticised for “creating division” when all they are actually doing is helping us by warning us about wicked men.

Therefore, in the modern Western churches the only people who are condemned are those who seek to stand up for the truth, i.e. the real shepherds. Meanwhile, the wolves and the hirelings are accepted and admired or at least quietly tolerated.

And even when it is proved beyond all doubt that a man is a false teacher, or even corrupt in his morals and finances, few if any Christians feel angry about their falseness. Certainly, they do not attract the hostility that is directed at men like Dave Hunt who exposed the wrongdoers. It's odd and perverse, but that is consistently the way most people react.

That is the state of affairs at the moment, which explains why Jesus had to give the warning so starkly. He knew that many of us would ignore Him. Most of us just assume that every church leader we meet is an honest man, without testing or checking anything. But why would Jesus and Paul give the warnings at all if such an assumption was meant to be made?

CHAPTER 13

WHY ARE SO MANY CHURCH LEADERS INEFFECTIVE AS PREACHERS?

⁵²Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."

Luke 11:52 (ESV)

*²¹For the shepherds are stupid,
and do not inquire of the LORD;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.*

Jeremiah 10:21 (RSV)

The general standard of teaching and preaching in British churches is lamentably poor. I don't just mean the worst speakers. I mean the average speaker. Most of the men who preach in our churches have little or no ability to do so. I have observed the following features in at least 70% of the speakers I have listened to, and probably more:

- i. They have no natural teaching gift so they aren't skilled in the art of conveying a message in a clear, lively, interesting way. So, they are trying to do something at which they are not naturally skilled. Of course, this problem of being asked to do something you aren't good at happens occasionally in the secular workplace too, but far less often than in churches.
- ii. They don't know the Bible very well, to put it mildly.
- iii. They haven't studied or prepared much before giving the talk. A man who has done his homework thoroughly is far more relaxed and is able to speak off the cuff, unrehearsed. He can 'ad lib' and speak directly to the audience and alter his message to reflect their responses and questions. By contrast, a man who has not prepared diligently will tend to stick rigidly to a written script and read it out word for word, which is one reason why they are so dull. That is much easier to do and requires less 'surplus knowledge' than it takes to speak from memory or from skeletal notes, without the 'help' of a verbatim script.
- iv. They are boring and lifeless. Partly this is because they haven't prepared properly and don't know their subject. Partly it is because they aren't sufficiently interested in it themselves. They had to look around for something to say, or needed to be given a topic to speak on, because no specific topic is burning away inside them. They are not consumed with any issue. Thus, they cannot convey any interest to the audience because they are not even gripped by the message themselves. Many even go so far as to print off someone else's sermon from the internet and read it out word for word without having done any study at all. Therefore, it will inevitably sound dull and lifeless because it is not their own message and they feel no passion about it. It's an insult to God and is also an insult to the audience.
- v. They don't really believe the Bible. They do believe, up to a point, but it isn't real to them, so it does not grip or excite them. Thus, they cannot convey conviction or enthusiasm when they themselves have little or none. They hold their beliefs tepidly. Only a man of conviction can

really hold an audience. He can interest and rouse people on literally any subject provided he is genuinely passionate about it himself. But very few preachers are that committed, or take the Bible that seriously.

- vi. They purport to speak on a certain passage but then don't. So, a passage is read out, for example, Romans chapter one, but then they will just speak about whatever they wish to say, not about what is said in the chapter that was read out. They just present their own ideas and beliefs, rather than expound upon what God is saying. The point is that what God says is always interesting and engaging, *if the speaker actually speaks about the passage.*

But the man's own opinions, stories and experiences are not necessarily of any interest. Nobody wants, or needs, to hear other men's opinions or hobby horses. Neither will God bless or anoint any sermon which consists only of that. God blesses the faithful expounding of *His own Word*, not the expounding of the preacher's own opinions.

God wants us to explain *what the Bible says*. Yet, the reality is most sermons are largely just the ideas and opinions of men and they bear little or no relation to the passage that has been read out. This is not a rare occurrence. It is the norm. Most men do it that way. But it is a grave insult to God's Word that we should choose to expound on what we think, rather than on what God says.

- vii. They are often seeking to amuse and entertain, rather than to expound God's Word. Have you ever noticed how many men start a 40 minute sermon by telling jokes or stories for 5-10 minutes, or even more? Then, even after that they continue to digress frequently onto irrelevant side issues and try to be amusing. They appear to believe that the object of the exercise is to entertain the audience, or to impress them. But the real purpose of a sermon is neither of those things.

God does not call us to be entertaining. He calls us to faithfully expound *what He is saying* in His Word. That said, He has no objection if, as a bi-product of faithfully expounding His Word, we also happen to say something amusing. There's no harm in that. In fact it can be a good thing, *provided it's not what we are aiming to achieve.*

Indeed, if a man is genuinely serious about expounding the truth of God's Word, I have noticed that God will often put into his mind amusing or interesting points or anecdotes. But it's always *spontaneous, not contrived*, and it's never done to glorify the speaker. Plus the witty comment will be relevant to the sermon. Too many men wish to impress and to be liked. But that must never be our aim, or we will just be a man - pleaser, rather than a man who pleases God.

- viii. Far too many preachers are trying to sound intellectual so as to impress the audience, especially if the church has a lot of members who are highly qualified. I remember two churches we attended in a university city and both churches had a lot of university lecturers plus doctors, lawyers and teachers. I noticed that in both churches many of the preachers seemed, in my view, to be going out of their way to insert into their talks a lot of long, complicated words and to speak in a complex, obscure, academic manner. They also made excessive references to Greek or Hebrew words and to grammar, tenses etc when it wasn't really needed. Sometimes references to the original language are valuable, even essential, but not if your goal is just to impress people.

I have heard many men who just wanted to sound clever and educated. But that approach is always disastrous for a speaker and makes his talk boring, pretentious and impenetrable. Thus, he will lose the audience and their minds will wander. At its heart this approach is all about vanity and pride and I am convinced God will not bless it, because He will not bless any man who is trying to glorify himself rather than God. It is not His will for the speaker to sound clever. His will is for the speaker *to convey the truth of God's Word in a clear, faithful, accurate manner* and that is actually best achieved by being as simple as possible rather than being complicated.

In my own preaching, I always seek to avoid long academic words. Or, if I must use them, I explain them. And I try to speak so that the message can be understood clearly by anyone, no matter how little formal education they have. I believe that is what God wants and that He is actually disgusted by any man who is using the sermon as a vehicle to bring honour to himself by sounding intellectual. Besides that, it never works and nobody is ever impressed anyway so it's a sad waste of time. I often say that I try to pitch the level of my talks as if I was addressing a meeting of the Shirebrook Miners' Welfare, a working men's club in the coal mining village where I grew up.

- ix. On average, church leadership tends to attract a lower calibre of man than is attracted to the secular workplace. I think this is partly because the church is seen as an easier career path where the rigours and demands are not so high and where less talented men can find a job and keep it. By contrast, if they had become a lawyer, accountant, engineer, shop manager etc then far more would have been demanded of them by their employer and failure to maintain the required standard would result in dismissal.

But that does not apply in most churches and even a man whose performance is consistently abysmal will be allowed to keep his position. I can think of an FIEC church where concerns arose about the laziness and ineffectiveness of a youth leader called Nick, whom I referred to earlier. But any question of even confronting him, let alone dismissing him, was instantly rejected by the leadership team. They all knew he was lazy and unproductive, but I think the other paid leaders actually took some reassurance from that fact because, while ever he remained in the church it meant they would never be considered the weakest link.

They also wanted to avoid setting any unfortunate precedent whereby it might come to be expected that leaders should work effectively and be held accountable. They immediately saw danger for themselves in that. So, they chose to do nothing. Yet, of course, in any secular workplace Nick would have been warned, then monitored and eventually dismissed for his own lack of effort. So, church leadership attracts men who lack ability and confidence and are looking for an easier life. This may sound harsh, and there are obviously exceptions, but I am convinced from long experience that there is a lot of truth in it.

- x. They lack the courage to tell the truth, or to tackle controversial or unpopular issues. Thus, such preachers play safe and aim to please their audience, rather than just say what God's Word says. But a cowardly leader will always be seen as dull, whereas a man of conviction who openly nails his colours to the mast will be interesting even to those who disagree with him. Those who play safe and always avoid controversy are seen as boring and insipid, which is exactly what they are.

- xi. Most of these men are probably not called to teach or to preach at all, even if they are called to pastoral work. However, because of the fact that most churches are led by one man who is paid, he feels obliged to justify his pay and position. Therefore, such men feel they must do everything themselves, even if they have no aptitude for some of the tasks. They assume, or have been taught, that they are supposed to be the one who does all the teaching and preaching. Indeed, that is often required of them as a condition of employment when they are appointed.

But the biblical model of church usually involves a number of different men coming forward at different times to teach and preach on whatever topic or issue they feel God is laying on their hearts as a burden. When it is done that way it means that of the 5-15 men in the church, there may be 2 or 3 or even 5 who sometimes speak.

When they do, even if they are not gifted speakers, which most men obviously aren't, they will generally say something fresh and alive, which really matters to them, and which they have received directly from God. But if they have no such message they will not speak at all. They will stand aside and let some other man speak, who does have a fresh message about which he feels passionate. That is how God wants it to be, which is obviously right when you stop and think about it.

- xii. Even if they do have a natural teaching or preaching gift, they speak too often, i.e. virtually every week. But only a man who is a genuine born teacher can do that, i.e. someone who has the ministry gift of teaching and can speak with knowledge and passion about the whole Bible. Thus, if a man is not a naturally gifted preacher then even if there are rare occasions when they do have a message to give about which they are really passionate, that is the exception. Most of the time that is not the case and they are just going through the motions. They have yet another speaking slot to fill and are just scratching around trying to find something to say. They have nothing specific to share about which they feel a deep conviction or excitement because, apart from anything else, they speak far too often.
- xiii. The pastor or leader is so insecure he will not allow any other man to speak unless he feels sure that man has even less of a teaching or preaching gift than himself. Thus, ironically those who have no gifting can actually find themselves being regularly sought out by leaders and asked to speak. They probably never realise that they have been chosen precisely because they aren't good at it and therefore won't embarrass the leader when comparisons are made.
- xiv. The pastor or leader may have other gifts, such as administration or pastoral work etc, but no teaching or preaching gift. Yet, because the traditional model of church requires that one man should do it all, he feels obliged to preach as well, even though he knows in his heart he is not good at it. Most men know deep down if they are useless at something. So, in a sensibly organised house church, elder A might be good at teaching so he focuses on that, whereas elder B is good at pastoral work, and elder C is good at music and worship. So, they each focus on their strengths and only preach when it feels right.

But if they have grown up believing that a pastor has to preach every week, then they see no alternative. They assume it is their duty. More probably they guard it as their territory because, if they ever let others do it, they fear that questions would be asked as to why they are being paid. But, of course, such questions are exactly what should be asked.

CHAPTER 14

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

¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ 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 20th and 21st 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:

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² 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.”¹³ 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:

¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, ¹⁹ 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.

CHAPTER 15

HOW TO START AND LEAD A BIBLICAL HOUSE CHURCH

³⁰ And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none.

Ezekiel 22:30 (RSV)

How to find, or set up, a biblical church

I have said a lot about the great advantages of a biblical house church, structured and led as they were in the first century, but how do we actually find one? The reality, at least in the UK, is that they are rare because the vast majority of Christians, even the most genuine ones, have no idea:

- a) that we are supposed to be in house churches
- b) how to find one nearby even if they do know it is the right model

So, the vast majority of Christians persist in attending unbiblical traditional churches, despite their dissatisfaction with them. They just see no practical alternative.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there are very few house churches. Therefore, after making a thorough effort to ask around and search for them near your home, the only realistic answer may be for you to start one yourself. Even as you read that, you are likely to think “*But I couldn’t possibly start a church. I’m not ordained and have never been to Bible college.*”

Even in saying that, you would be revealing the extent to which you have been brainwashed, like a domesticated rabbit, to believe that you can’t forage or provide for yourself and that you need to be cared for by professionals because you just aren’t qualified or worthy to do it yourself. But you may well be qualified and even if you aren’t, the chances are you know someone in your locality who is and you could help them to do it.

Therefore, if you have begun to realise the problems of traditional churches and your eyes have started to open, it is likely that you know a few people nearby who feel similarly and are just as frustrated with church as you are. Start to talk to such people and ask them whether they would be interested in starting a biblical house church.

Many will not have the nerve to break free and will prefer to stay where they are, in traditional churches, with what feels familiar, despite all its faults. But a few people may have the good sense and the courage to join with you. In this way, you might find 2 or 3 or even more who are willing to try. That is all you need. You do not have to start with 10 or 20 or 30.

As we saw in the verse above, be willing to “*stand in the breach*”, even if you are the only one who is willing to try to create a new house church, and no matter how unworthy or unqualified you feel you are.

Just a handful of members is all you need to begin with, or even for the long term if that is how it turns out. Moreover, it does not have to be you who becomes the first elder of the church, even if starting

the church was your idea. It could be that one or more of the people you contact are mature enough to be an elder, even if you aren't, or if you are a woman.

But there is no need to rush into appointing elders, even though the appointment of one or more elders is needed for a group of Christians to be able to call themselves a church. What I mean is you could just start to meet for a few weeks or months as a Bible study and fellowship group or as a prayer group, without having any elders and therefore not being a church.

That will give all of you the chance to weigh each other up and assess (diakrino) who, if anyone, is suitable to be an elder. If nobody is, then don't appoint anyone and just continue with your informal Bible study group or prayer group while you pray for God to send along a suitable leader to join you so that you can become a church. I believe He will.

At least in that period of waiting before you become a church, you will have the benefits of meeting together with other committed believers in a setting where everyone is allowed to participate and grow.

What if nobody in your house church has any gifting for preaching?

This is a common problem because only a tiny percentage of the population has the skill, knowledge and maturity to be a regular, solid Bible teacher who preaches most weeks and never runs out of material because he is able to expound on the whole Bible. What you will find at a local level is a few men who, although they don't have the ministry gift of being a full time Bible teacher, are capable of preaching *from time to time, not every week*, on topics which God lays on their heart.

Such men are perfectly capable of preaching occasionally in a local house church, even though they are not gifted enough to preach every week or at a large conference. But what if you don't even have that? What happens if you have 5-10 members of whom half, or even most are women and who therefore are not permitted to teach men? Also, what if the few men you do have are not mature enough to preach at all, not even to a very small group?

In that case, the solution is very simple, especially nowadays, because you can just play a sermon which is available online from a gifted Bible teacher, such as the men I recommend on my website. That way any house church, however small, can have access every week to the best Bible teachers in the world. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. God does not demand that all preaching must be done by a member of the church.

He is perfectly happy for you to take that sensible step of importing that skill into the church from outside. Do not forget that even if none of you have the maturity and knowledge to preach, you will all have the ability to do some or all of the other things that a local house church involves, i.e. worship, fellowship, sharing, praying together and helping each other.

And even on the worship, if you don't have anyone who can play a musical instrument there is no difficulty in just using ready made music from the internet to accompany your singing. Most well known hymns and choruses have been recorded and you can use them freely. That works very well and your church can sing along to the recordings. But, in all the other things you will have no need for external help.

When and how should elders be appointed?

Hopefully, I have got the point across that the appointment of an elder is not a matter of urgency and there is no need to rush into it. Indeed, it would be very unwise to do it with any kind of haste. Just be content not to have any elders for a while, *and thus technically not to be a church*, until you are all satisfied that you have found a man who meets all the criteria and is suitable to be appointed. Let's look at what the Bible says an elder must be like:

¹ The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task. ² Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, ³ no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; ⁵ for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; ⁷ moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 (RSV)

As you can see, there is no requirement for an elder to be a great intellectual or to have any formal academic qualifications. So, that demolishes the idea that leaders must have been to Bible college. There is no requirement for that at all. What apostle Paul focuses on is that the proposed elder must be of *good character* and that he is *mature* and *trustworthy* so he can be relied upon.

Thus, he need not be academic but he must be mature. Therefore, he must not be a recent convert because if he was, how could he be mature? Paul refers to the same theme again in his letter to Titus and, again, there is no mention of any need for academic qualifications. However, a prospective elder (or bishop) does need to know the Bible, have sound doctrine and be of good character:

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, ⁶ if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. ⁷ For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; ⁹ he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.

Titus 1:5-9 (RSV)

As for how an elder is appointed, there is no need for any elaborate or formal ceremony. Neither is there any need to involve leaders of other churches. That would be ideal, but it is unlikely that there will be any other existing house churches nearby who are willing to have their elders "lay hands" on your proposed new elder. More to the point, no leader of any traditional denominational church would be willing to assist you. Neither would you want them to. Your wish is to be biblical and independent. Therefore, just appoint your new elder yourselves within your own house church.

It is not an "ordination" of the kind the traditional churches engage in. On the contrary, the elder can be appointed just by the members of your house church coming together and recognising that he has the maturity, character and sound doctrine that is required for an elder and by asking him to become

their elder and then appointing him to that role. You have to start viewing yourselves as legitimate and worthy to start a church.

If you look online about the “ordination” of elders in traditional churches, it tends to revolve around formal ceremonies with “bishops” from outside the church doing it. By “bishops” they mean men who are in charge of a “diocese” made up of many churches or at least a senior person in the hierarchy of the denomination. That is not required. You can do it all yourselves and when you recognise him as an elder then he can begin to function as such and God will recognise him.

How should meetings be conducted?

It may be that this question is putting you off starting a house church as you feel you don’t have the experience or the “professionalism” to conduct a “church service”. But the point is we are meant to have meetings, not “services”. There is no need for any elaborate liturgy or special forms of speech or prayer. It’s just a meeting in an ordinary house as you all sit around the room on settees and chairs.

It is not formal, complex or liturgical. Therefore, you are well able to do it, as is every Christian, provided they stop assuming they are disqualified because they are not an ordained clergyman. You are free to conduct your meetings in the way that best suits the people in your church. So, you don’t have to do things in exactly the same way as my house church does.

In fact, we ourselves don’t always do things in the same way. Indeed, we try not to. We move things around and change the format to please ourselves. Likewise, we don’t always have the meetings on a Sunday morning. In general we do, but not always, and we might change it to be a Saturday morning or a Friday or Monday evening depending on people’s other commitments.

So, mostly we meet in the mornings, but sometimes we meet in the evening. Therefore, it’s very flexible and that is perfectly alright. Concerning the format of a meeting, we usually begin with a cup of tea when people arrive and then get started, usually with a time of singing and worship. Then we have a time of sharing and contributions from everyone as they raise issues, events, problems, prayer requests, things they have noticed in the Bible and so on.

It is therefore varied and flexible and different things are raised each week. But it’s good because it allows everyone to contribute and to refer to passages of Scripture which they have come across during the week. That then gives everyone the chance to share and to begin to learn how to teach in a simple way at a local level. It also enables them to find out whether or not they are gifted in teaching, in which case they can seek to do more.

After that we have a sermon which is usually from me. But that is only because I happen to be a full time Bible teacher and author, which is most unusual. In most house churches there will not be such a person. Therefore, the preaching is likely to be shared between a few different men who each take turns. Or, they might use audio or video recordings of sermons from the internet instead. All my sermons are free to download.

Every option is valid, depending on your circumstances. But sometimes we don’t have a sermon and we have a Bible study instead, for example working section by section through the book of James with everyone free to contribute to the discussion. By the way, we do sometimes switch the order of the

meeting around so that we start with the sermon and do the worship and sharing time afterwards. Every permutation is valid and sometimes we also have communion, though not every week.

What about dealing with problem people?

I don't know whether you have noticed this, but all churches tend to attract a disproportionate number of disturbed, damaged, broken, eccentric people, some of whom are a handful to deal with. They may be disruptive to the meeting and to the church as a whole. There is no simple quick formula for how to deal with them.

In some cases the people are hurt and God has sent them to your church so that you can help to care for them and give them a chance to overcome their problems, recover from their emotional wounds and become whole healthy people again. That is the ideal and we need to aim for that if we can. However, some people's problems are so severe and their personalities are so disturbed that they become a drain on the whole church and stop it from functioning.

Sometimes that is not their fault and they can't help it. But in some cases they are actually demonised people who have been sent by the demons with the express purpose of using them to disrupt and even destroy your church. This is why we need discernment so we can tell which situation we are facing because the answer to that will determine how we deal with them.

Accordingly, if you think the person is sincere but troubled then do your best to help them. The Church is meant to be a hospital for people who have been wounded by life (and in many cases by churches) and it is our duty to try to help. That said, it isn't just wounded or disturbed people that make their way into churches. There are also people who are painfully shy and quiet and barely contribute anything.

And there are compulsive talkers or attention seekers who just want to be the centre of attention and have an audience. There are also people whom we might call "the unlovely" because they are difficult to be with and don't possess social skills. All of these people find their way into churches and we have a duty, *up to a point*, to help them and to be patient with them over their annoying habits and ways.

However, there are some people who don't take any advice, don't respond to help and just continue to be a nuisance and to spoil the dynamic of the meeting. With such people, after a sizeable period of time trying unsuccessfully to help them but with them continuing to be a nuisance, it may become necessary to tell them to stop coming.

While we have a duty to help the inadequate and the wounded, we also have a duty to all the other members whose experience of church is being disrupted week after week. This is an area where a house church has a major advantage over a traditional church. That is because any church (at least in the UK) which has charitable status and receives refunds of tax money on members' donations is obliged by law to let anyone attend church meetings because such churches are classified as public buildings.

But that is not the case when you meet in a home and are not registered as a charity. The house owner is then perfectly free to deny entry to any person and for any reason. Indeed, he does not need to have a reason, because it is his own home and he can exclude from it anybody whom he does not want to let in.

That freedom to exclude anybody we wish to exclude is a major benefit even at the best of times, but in these strange days we are now living in, with the loss of free speech and the aggressive pushing of the woke agenda, we need to be doubly careful as to whom we let in to our homes.

It is not just because of the trouble caused by mentally disturbed people but also the more sinister threat posed by people who are servants of Satan and want to join your church for the express purpose of destroying it. And if you think such people don't exist, then think again.

Therefore, although we need to be compassionate and patient with those who can be helped, we also need to be robust and assertive with those who can't and who are only seeking to do harm. If you haven't had any experience as an employer or as a supervisor or boss of multiple staff, you may find the prospect of needing such assertiveness rather daunting.

But you need to start to learn how to confront and tackle people and, if need be, to exclude them. If not, they are possibly going to ruin your church. But if you really can't bring yourself to do this, it may be there is another man in the church who can do it and isn't daunted by it. That's the advantage of making use of everyone's skills rather than one man having to do it all.

Ironically, if these damaged people attend a very large, traditional church they create fewer problems because they are much less noticeable amongst 200-500 people. Also, because traditional churches don't allow participation or questions from the congregation, the wounded or dysfunctional people tend to remain quiet. But in a small house church they can more easily take over the whole meeting and disturb and distract everyone until it ceases to function.

Of course, the first thing you should try is to speak to the disruptive person and ask them to refrain from taking over the meetings. And you can try to counsel them and pray with them to seek to resolve their personality problems. However, if you have tried all that and got nowhere then there may come a point where the only option left to you is to ask that person to leave because they are so disruptive. You need to see that as one of your legitimate options and not to feel guilty about it.

Do you have to meet in a house? Is any other type of venue acceptable?

When I say "house church" it is an expression rather than a rigidly defined term. So, although most churches in the 1st century met in houses, they didn't all do so. Some met in barns or outbuildings or schools, and so on. It may be that in your case a time may come when the numbers have risen such that you can't all fit in a house, but you don't yet want to split into two churches.

In such a case it would be perfectly alright to hire a suitable room in a primary school, hotel, or other building which might fit your members more comfortably. For example, the church we attended in the 1980s and early 1990s met in a primary school and it worked perfectly well. So, the last thing I want to do is to suggest that there is a rigid requirement to meet in homes and nowhere else.

You are free to do what seems best to you. That said, the church we were in back then had about 60 members, such that we were too big for a house. However, if that church had continued to grow to say 100 people then I do believe it would be best to split it and form two or three house churches.

The problem is that too much growth of membership will inevitably spoil the dynamic and you will cease to have a house church. Instead, you will have the beginnings of a traditional church with all the

disadvantages that brings. You will also find, unavoidably, that the quieter, less confident people cease to play any active part in meetings and a clergy class will begin to arise, even if you don't call them that.

Although a house is the obvious choice, at least to begin with, while your church is small, there is no reason why you can't choose an alternative venue if that is what your members want. So, for example, we have over the years hired scout huts or village halls or primary schools to meet in when they aren't being used.

Some people hire a conference room in a hotel. Those can be got quite cheaply on a Sunday as there are no business meetings taking place. One or other of these options may prove helpful if none of your members has a large house and you are too numerous to fit in a small house.

I believe God is very flexible, practical and realistic about this. Therefore, if your church grows to more than say 20 members and none of your houses are big enough to accommodate all of you I think God is very relaxed about you hiring a village hall, scout hut or school etc to meet in if your members don't want to split in half and have two smaller churches instead.

Splitting in half would be a perfectly valid option and many will choose it. But hiring a bigger venue is also acceptable, provided you don't grow so big that you lose the intimacy and wide participation by members that can only be got if a church stays relatively small. The key thing to avoid is buying a large traditional church building which then creates a financial burden for the members in funding its purchase and maintenance.

Be realistic in your expectations of a house church

I need to emphasise that although the house church model is biblical and is, in my view, the right and best way to conduct a church, that does not mean that a house church can never have any problems. I believe it will have fewer problems (and more advantages) but not no problems.

So, it is not a magic formula which makes every member into a perfect disciple and eliminates all conflict, arguments or problems. What we can say, however, is that the house church model is the best place to deal with those problems and they are more likely to be solved there than in a traditional church.

Therefore, be realistic and don't look at the prospect of a house church through rose tinted spectacles such that you picture it as idyllic. It won't be. There will still be problems but they will be the right kind of problems, the ones God foresaw and which He wants you to deal with, as opposed to the man made problems which were created by the traditional, unbiblical model of church.

What about taking communion? How should it be done and how often?

The first point to make is that God has given us great freedom and flexibility in terms of how and when to have the bread and wine. There is no liturgy to follow and it does not need to be conducted by the elders. Anyone can lead when you have communion. Therefore, in our church, I very rarely take the lead when we take communion because I want others to get the opportunity to do it.

So, we alternate each time with a different person leading. That helps to bring more variety to how we do it and it develops the confidence of the less mature members. Don't get any ideas, therefore, that it must be done by the main leader, as in the Catholic church and many Anglican churches where they believe it needs to be done solely by the "priest".

Remember, there is no such thing as priests. Moreover, don't accept the idea that the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Jesus Christ. They don't. That is completely false and mistaken. The bread and wine are simply emblems to help us to remember Jesus Christ, i.e. who He is, what He said, what He did *and also what He is going to do in the future*.

That last point is important because I have observed that many people have somehow picked up the idea that in communion there is only one thing we are to remember and speak of and that is Jesus' death on the cross for us. Of course that is hugely important and it should often be the thing we focus on when we "remember" Him, but not always.

I have said to our church that remembering Jesus is much wider than that and includes all sorts of other hugely important facts about Him, who He is, what He is, what He said, what He did and what He is going to do. Let's remind ourselves of what Jesus said at the last supper which, surprisingly, is most clearly set out by Paul in 1 Corinthians, even though he wasn't at it.

Jesus obviously told him about it subsequently in one of their many face to face meetings when Jesus appeared to him and probably also while Paul was in Heaven which he visited and came back from. I write about Paul's visit to Heaven more fully in my other books. We know it was Jesus Himself who told Paul what happened at the 'Last Supper' because Paul writes "*for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...*"

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (RSV)

Note that Jesus says above "*.....Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*" From those words we can deduce the following:

- a) Jesus doesn't tell us *how often* to have the bread and wine. He simply says "*as often as you drink it ...*" which clearly implies that it is something we will do repeatedly but without Him telling us how often that should be. Therefore, I believe it is wrong to say, as many do, that it should be done every week. I see no basis for believing that. Therefore, in our church we take communion every few weeks but not every week. That is our personal choice but your church is free to do it differently.
- b) We are to do this *in remembrance* of Him but we are not told that it is only His death that we are to remember, as many people suppose. I believe He means for us to remember and speak about all

sorts of other things that He said and did, and also what He is going to do. Realising that makes communion a much more varied and interesting thing to do.

Therefore, I have asked our members to take turns to lead the communion and to bring to our remembrance whatever event, words or characteristics they want to focus on that day, including prophecies about what Jesus is going to be and do. So, of course we remember His death but there are many other things we can remember as well, and it is good to do so as that prevents communion becoming repetitive.

- c) Note also the words “...you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes”. This is an important endorsement of the practice of proclamation which is something all of us should do, but which most of us never do as we have never heard of it. I have done a set of four talks on proclamation which can be downloaded from my website. I also write about it at some length in my Book 7 and I strongly urge you to look at both of those.

Proclamation is not a prayer, it is a declaration which we are meant to make with faith, assertiveness, and even aggression. We are not saying it to God but to the whole world around us and, in particular, to what the Bible calls “*the heavenly places*”. That is the place, high in the Earth’s atmosphere, where Jesus is seated and to which all the angels (and demons) have access.

So, by proclaiming the Lord’s death you are not merely referring to it, but boldly announcing to all who can hear that you rely on His death and are saved by it and that He is coming back to rule the whole Earth from Jerusalem. By doing this, you not only fix the facts of this more firmly in your own mind but you are also declaring to the angels and demons what you believe and what you are basing your life on. And doing that has great power. It’s a big subject which, sadly, is unfamiliar to most Christians.

However, we do need to be careful when taking communion to reflect soberly on what Jesus went on to say about what happens when a person takes communion “*in an unworthy manner*”.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—

1 Corinthians 11:27-33 (RSV)

Put briefly, what this passage is saying is that taking the bread and wine is a very powerful act because of everything it signifies. So, if we take the bread and wine while we are living a carnal, sinful lifestyle or are at loggerheads with other Christians in the church and refuse to forgive them, or if you take it with flippancy and disrespect in your heart, then beware because such attitudes may bring God’s judgment down upon you.

I think the phrase “*without discerning the body*” is a reference to the fact that this bread and wine is being taken within the context of a meeting of a church, a part of Jesus’ body, and the very setting gives

even more importance and gravity to what is being eaten and drunk. Of course, nobody is likely to be unaware that he is in a church meeting. But what he might well do is forget the sacredness of that group in Jesus' eyes and so take the bread and wine while forgetting or ignoring his duties to his fellow church members.

Therefore, don't take communion glibly or frivolously or in a casual disrespectful manner. Not only show respect to Jesus whom we are remembering but also be in the right relationship with His Body, i.e. the other members of your church, while you are doing it.

So, don't take communion while you still have unresolved disputes with your fellow church members or while you are hating, abusing, slandering or exploiting them. Get things resolved before you take communion again. Therefore, if you have unresolved issues or disputes, then simply refrain from taking communion until you have resolved them. This is a very serious issue because Jesus tells us it can otherwise lead to illness and even death. Please refer to my audio talks on communion which are on my website.

Another question which arises is whether communion must be had with real alcoholic wine or just grape juice or Ribena. The answer is, yet again, that you are totally free to do what best suits your church. So, if you have one or more members who have a drink problem and are trying to avoid alcohol then it may be better for your whole church to just take grape juice. Or you could offer a choice of either so those with a problem can avoid wine.

What if your house church is so small you can't make enough friends?

I delayed starting a house church because my wife wanted to remain within a larger church we had been attending for some years where there was more scope to make friends. That issue didn't matter very much to me because I am perfectly happy being alone with my books. But, like most women, my wife has a major need for relationships with other women.

Eventually, we resolved it by starting the house church while she met her need for additional friendships by attending the mid week ladies group meetings at that large traditional church, though not its Sunday services. I mention this because it may be an issue for you, given that house churches are small.

That smallness has major advantages which I have discussed in this book, but it also has some disadvantages, particularly for women, as they want a wider circle of friends than men want or need. Therefore, it's worth bearing this in mind and perhaps resolving it as we did by my wife getting involved in external groups, clubs or societies whilst being in a small house church. By anticipating this potential problem you can address it before it creates difficulties.

What if your house church grows so much that you split it and create a second church? Is that new church independent or under the control of the parent church?

Let's imagine your house church outgrows your homes and so you resort to renting a village hall or scout hut but then you find that even that isn't big enough? You might choose to split your house church of perhaps 40 members and create two churches each with 20 members. But if so, who is in charge of the second church? Are they independent or under the control of the first church, like a child?

You see this happening with large traditional churches which arrange a “church plant” by setting up a smaller church nearby. When they do, they always treat it as an offshoot of the “parent” church and keep close control over it. But I don’t think that is right. Any church, however small or new, is a church and is therefore completely independent and self governing.

Therefore, if your church splits in two on a perfectly amicable basis then each half, provided they both have at least one elder, is a church in its own right and is not to be managed or controlled by the parent church. Each church can, of course, keep in touch and have some joint meetings if they wish and also share speakers and so on, but they must each govern themselves.

Are churches meant to “*hold all things in common*” as we see in Acts 4?

I have already touched upon this issue in Chapter 9. Some people have argued that the account set out in Acts chapters 4 and 5 means that the early Church operated a kind of communism such that they gave away all their money to the church and nobody was considered rich or poor because they “*held all things in common*”. Consider this passage:

³² Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Acts 4:32-37 (RSV)

At first sight it does sound like a commune where nobody had any private property. However, when you look more closely, and if you read on into chapter 5, you realise that was not the case. What the Early Church did was to show great generosity towards any members of the church who were poor and needy. Therefore, through the enthusiastic willingness of the richer members the needs of the poorer members were met such that “*there was not a needy person among them.*”

As we look more closely at how they operated, as shown in the alarming death of Ananias who was struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit, we see that everyone actually continued to have ownership of their own property and money. Although they joyfully made large and generous gifts to help the poor, at all times *their property remained their own* until and unless they freely chose to give it away.

Look closely at the next passage and the explanation Peter gives for Ananias being struck dead. It was not because he held back some of the proceeds of sale of the land for himself. He was perfectly entitled to keep part of it, or even all of it if he chose to. His sin was not holding back money as so many people wrongly imagine, but that *he lied to the Holy Spirit*.

¹ But a man named Anani'as with his wife Sapphi'ra sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Anani'as, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And

after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”⁵ When Anani'as heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

Acts 5:1-5 (RSV)

So, it is quite wrong to conclude that the Early Church gave away all their property and owned nothing. They plainly didn't and this is made very clear by Peter when he says to Ananias “*While it remained unsold did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?*”

What Peter means is that at all times the property was Ananias' to deal with in any way he chose, i.e. to keep part of it or all of it with *no obligation to give any of it to the church*. It was solely for lying that he was struck dead. Therefore, what are we to conclude overall about the Early Church's attitude towards the private ownership of property?

Clearly, the answer is that God fully endorses the concept of private property and there is no command to give it all away. Neither is there any command anywhere in the New Testament to give away any specific sum or any percentage.

What God wants, and what the Early Church exemplified was for Christians to be *generous* and to enjoy giving to the poor and needy. He doesn't want it to be an obligation as under a communist regime, but a pleasure so that giving is purely voluntary and is not forced on anyone. Perhaps the position is best expressed by apostle Paul:

⁶ The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

***“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever.”***

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; ¹² for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God.

2 Corinthians 9:6-12 (RSV)

Therefore, the Early Church were not communists. They continued to own property but they were not only willing but eager to use some of their wealth to help the poor, with the focus being the poor *within the church* so that every believer was looked after. Let me give you an example of this from our house church.

Some years ago, a single woman in her fifties who was on a very low income got into trouble with the Council because she couldn't afford to pay her council tax and the arrears had built up to £2,000. So, the rest of us in the church organised a collection and raised the full £2,000 to rescue her. We did it entirely voluntarily and without any obligation, but we were happy to help and so we did it joyfully.

Apostle Paul also gave some helpful advice as to how this giving to the poor and needy in the churches should be organised. He suggested that rather than arranging collections every so often it is best to set some money aside each week so that when a need arises the money is already there to meet it. But note how Paul makes clear that this is to be done to give to *the poor and needy* within the churches, *not to leaders*. On that occasion, the money was sent to where there was a famine at the time.

¹ Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 16:1-3 (RSV)

What is the role of women in the church?

God made men and women different and in very many ways. Indeed, I am told there are over 2,500 differences between males and females affecting every part of our make up and personality, not just anatomy. One of the differences is He wants leadership in the Church to be reserved only for men. That includes the ministry of teaching in the local church which should only be done by men.

This is not because God hates women or doesn't value them or is prejudiced against them. It is because He designed men to be leaders and to take the great responsibility of teaching in the church because teaching involves having authority to handle God's Word. Therefore, the roles of elder and teacher, including the preaching of sermons, are reserved solely for men, not women.

⁸ I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹ also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire ¹⁰ but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

1 Timothy 2:8-14 (RSV)

Of course, that is not to say that women should not say anything at all in church. Paul is talking about the ministry of *teaching God's Word* via the sermon because that involves authority and He does not want women to have authority over men in the church. So, a woman should not preach the sermon but there is no reason why she should not take part in sharing experiences or verses, contributing to discussions and asking questions.

There are various reasons for this provision but the one which Paul raises here is that women are more prone to being deceived than men are, i.e. on average, not as an absolute. That is partly because women operate far more through their emotions and feelings than men do. Men operate far more through their minds, not their emotions, as I discuss in some detail in my Book 7.

So, in general terms men primarily think but women primarily feel, i.e. relatively speaking. Obviously, they both do both, but in widely different proportions. Therefore, when it comes to handling God's Word and expounding on it to the congregation it is safer if that is done by men as their emotions are less involved in the process and so they are less likely to be deceived.

What about spiritual gifts? How should they be used in church?

When I first became a Christian 43 years ago, far more churches allowed the use of spiritual gifts, i.e. tongues, prophecy, words of wisdom, words of knowledge etc. But now they are very rarely used in most churches. There are many reasons for that including the following:

- a) The drastic decline in the quality and integrity of churches and church leaders has rendered many churches too immature and carnal to be able to operate safely in the gifts or to weigh and measure others when they do so.
- b) There has been a sharp change of mood in many churches such that more people are wary and suspicious about spiritual gifts and they won't allow them to be used. So, they have gone out of fashion.
- c) Individual Christians are far less mature and knowledgeable about the Bible than they were in the 1980s. Thus, far fewer individuals are suitable to be trusted to operate in the gifts in public as they are so immature.

The net effect of all this is that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have effectively ceased to exist in most churches and I see no prospect of that changing any time soon in the traditional denominations. The only place where the spiritual gifts can safely be used now is in the house churches where people genuinely know each other instead of being virtual strangers or at most acquaintances, as is the case in many large traditional churches.

The spiritual gifts are most safely used where everyone knows the person giving the prophecy or interpretation etc so they can have a basis to feel confident that he is a sound, sensible, genuine Christian. I say more about the spiritual gifts and give some examples of them in operation in my Book 1.

How to deal with disputes in churches?

If you are in a traditional church with 500 members then, for all its faults, there is at least the advantage that you can keep out of the way of people you don't like or who have offended you. But if you are in a house church with 5-20 members there is nowhere to hide. You are all there in a circle in the living room and any dispute or fall out between members will be like an open wound affecting not only the two disputing parties but the whole church.

The way a traditional church handles disputes between members is basically to do nothing at all. Then the two disputing members are left to their own devices. In practice, what usually then happens is the innocent party leaves the church because they find it intolerable. But the guilty party is likely to stay because he has a much thicker skin and feels no shame about his actions.

That outcome is not good and certainly isn't fair. It means that wrongdoing is not punished and good behaviour isn't rewarded. The biblical way to handle such disputes was given to us by Jesus Himself:

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to

listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Matthew 18:15-17 (RSV)

So, the procedure operates in three stages, as follows:

- 1) You go to see the other party on his own, one to one, and “tell him his fault”. That means you honestly and assertively, but with self control, tell him what he did that has wounded or offended you. Hopefully, that will resolve matters without needing to involve anyone else.
- 2) If the other party won’t listen to you and nothing is resolved then return a second time but this time with one or two witnesses accompanying you so they can hear everything that is said. Then the witnesses can help you to know whether you are right or wrong and also confirm the facts of what was said if the dispute reaches the third stage.
- 3) If the other party still won’t listen to you or deal with the issue then you are to take the dispute to the whole church to be decided by them. Then the church as a whole, perhaps 5-20 people decide who is right and who is wrong. (And remember that it is possible they will decide that *you are wrong*, or are being unreasonable.) Perhaps the party who is in the wrong will then finally accept it, and repent, apologise and make restitution if damage has been done. But, if not then the innocent party is to “*let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*”. That is a euphemism meaning you should all have nothing to do with him. In other words, he is to be expelled from the church so he ceases to be a member.

That may sound like a harsh outcome but it is far better than the alternative which is that the church keeps out of it, does nothing, and allows the wrongdoer to continue to attend meetings. If they did that it would be very hard on the innocent party and he would probably just leave the church himself as it would be too uncomfortable to be in the same room as the unrepentant wrongdoer.

Doing something and making a decision may therefore seem more harsh than doing nothing. But a decision not to act is just as much a decision as a decision to act. It is effectively a decision to resolve disputes by always causing the innocent party to leave the church. That is hardly a recipe for harmonious church growth. It is also very unfair.

In short, our aim should be to achieve justice and to allow justice to be seen to be done by openly attributing blame to the wrongdoer and exonerating the innocent party. That is very necessary when a person has been wronged and is an important step in the process of getting over it. Yet, it is never done in the majority of churches because they are far too large for this third stage to take place in front of 200-500 people.

Plus, most traditional paid clergymen would not want the controversy or the hassle and awkwardness of delving into disputes and openly identifying who is guilty and who is innocent. They are squeamish about that and would prefer not to get involved. But the point that virtually nobody seems to see is that

by keeping out of it they are denying justice to the innocent party and making it hard or even impossible for him to remain in the church. And that is a great injustice to him and a failure in their duty.

This little known and rarely practiced procedure from Matthew 18 may sometimes be awkward and embarrassing, but it is far better than the alternative, which is to do nothing. Moreover, it is what Jesus told us to do. What need is there, therefore, for us to debate the pros and cons of this approach *when we have a direct command to do it?*

Above all, it shows the vital need for churches to be small, such that everyone knows everyone, because the Matthew 18 procedure would be utterly impractical and impossible in any other context or venue, as evidenced by the fact that no large traditional church ever obeys this command of Jesus. Indeed, if you were to ask them to do it they would refuse.

We actually get further guidance on this issue of disputes from apostle Paul who gives more radical advice on how legal disputes between church members should be tried and decided by the church, not by secular courts. Again, that can only be feasible if you are part of a small house church where everyone knows everyone.

¹ When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ If then you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who are least esteemed by the church? ⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no man among you wise enough to decide between members of the brotherhood, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?

1 Corinthians 6:1-7 (RSV)

Realistically, this radical approach to litigation can only work in the context of a dispute within a church between two people who are both known by the rest of the church. Otherwise, how could anyone know whether either party really was a genuine Christian or is just pretending to be? So, I believe Paul is only speaking about disputes of that type and in that narrow context.

He doesn't mean a dispute with a man who lives elsewhere and is not in your church and yet he claims to be a Christian. How could you possibly know whether he is a real Christian or not? If it was our duty to write off the debt of anyone who claims to be a Christian the world would soon get to know that that is all they need to say to have any debt waived if it is owed to a Christian, even if he is a stranger whose car they ran into.

That would be absurd and God does not make absurd commands. He meant this command to be workable and practical. So, I believe this instruction from Paul only applies within that narrow context, where both parties are *members of the same house church* and are well known by all the other members.

Therefore, if a man is not a member of your church but claims to be a Christian, I believe you are free to go right ahead and sue him. I suppose you could offer him the option of having the dispute dealt

with by your church but I feel sure he will reject that as they are not known to him. So, practically speaking, 1 Corinthians 6:1-7 just wouldn't work with such a person.

How should a house church make decisions?

We have just seen that decisions as to who is right and who is wrong in a dispute between person A and person B are made by the whole house church, not just by the elders. That is why the Matthew 18 procedure ends with the whole church hearing the facts of the dispute and coming to a decision as a group.

That will come as a surprise to many Christians who attend traditional churches and they will struggle even to imagine such a meeting. It would seem surreal. All they have ever known is for all the decisions to be made on their behalf by leaders. Yet, there it is, set out very clearly in Matthew 18, possibly one of the most ignored passages in the New Testament, even though it was said by Jesus Himself.

But, we do see something reminiscent of the Matthew 18 procedure being put into practice in Acts 15 in the dispute between apostle Paul and the Circumcision party over the issue of whether Gentile converts need to obey the Law of Moses and, in particular be circumcised.

The context is different here because this dispute or decision making process is occurring within the whole of the Jerusalem church, which is larger than a single church. Also, it relates to theology rather than being a personal matter involving debt or injury. But the point is *the church as a whole made the decision*.

So, there were probably more than 100 house churches involved, all coming together to hear the arguments from both sides. Yet, the same approach was involved. Paul spoke and so did the representatives of the Circumcision party, followed by senior members of the Jerusalem church. And the whole proceedings were chaired by James the Just, the brother of Jesus.

By the way, that was despite the fact that *apostle Peter was present* at the meeting which demolishes the idea of him being the “first Pope”. Had he been what the Catholic church claims he was then the final decision would have been made by Peter alone and everyone would have obeyed him on the basis of his “papal infallibility”. But that isn't what happened. We see from the account in Acts 15 that the final decision was made by the whole church in Jerusalem:

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

Acts 15:22 (RSV)

Admittedly, the speeches were made by senior leaders and the summing up came from James the Just as Chairman, but ultimately it was the church as a whole, i.e. all the people gathered hearing the debate, which made the decision and then sent men to Antioch to announce it.

So, not even the apostles or even Peter himself felt entitled to just lay down the law and decide on behalf of the people. They knew the decision had to come from the whole Church. Therefore, take that as your example when decisions are needed in your church on major matters. Let the members as a whole decide, not just the elders.

What about church discipline in the event of heresy or immorality? How are members to be disciplined or even expelled?

This is another subject which is virtually never mentioned, let alone preached on, in traditional churches. Leaders don't feel comfortable even talking about church discipline and even less so about implementing it. Indeed, you might be uncomfortable yourself as you may feel it sounds rather bossy, whereas we have been saying a lot about avoiding domination, control and authoritarian leadership.

So, let me make clear that this issue of church discipline has nothing to do with being authoritarian. Indeed, it is not even done by the leaders but rather by the church as a whole. Therefore, the right way to see it is as a whole church sensibly defending itself against individual members who are being immoral or spreading false doctrines.

The only alternative to taking action in those circumstances is for the church to sit back and do nothing, and to allow misguided or even wicked individuals to destroy the church. Therefore, while nobody should enjoy expelling a member, it is sometimes unavoidable if you want to defend the church for the sake of all the members. Let's therefore see what Paul had to say on this:

¹ It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (RSV)

We see, therefore, that Paul does not advocate that the man be merely warned or rebuked but that he be *expelled from the church*. But note that he is doing something very immoral indeed by having sexual relations with his deceased father's second wife, i.e. his stepmother. That is so disgraceful that Paul instructs that the church move straight to expulsion. But then Paul goes on to make some disturbing further comments which are virtually never preached on in traditional churches:

³ For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment ⁴ in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

1 Corinthians 5:3-5 (RSV)

Paul makes two rather strange remarks:

- a) He says that he personally has "*pronounced judgement*" on the immoral man
- b) He instructs the church that they should "*deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.....*"

We must ask, therefore, what exactly does Paul mean?

When Paul refers to pronouncing judgement on the man, he is referring to his unique authority as an apostle, and indeed as the most gifted and knowledgeable of all the apostles. God gave to Paul, and to the 12, a level and type of personal authority that He *did not give to the rest of us*, not even if we are elders.

So, nobody today can claim to have the same kind of authority which Paul and the 12 apostles had. The highest position today is to be an elder. There is nothing higher than that, at least in terms of authority, although there are different roles in terms of ministry gifting such as apostle, teacher, prophet and evangelist.

So, Paul has concluded that the case is proved that the man has committed this exceptionally wicked act, without even hiding it, and that he is deserving of God's judgment, just as we saw in the case of Ananias and Sapphira who were struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. Note that in that earlier case apostle Peter was directly involved, as Paul is doing here, in pronouncing God's judgment on the wrongdoers.

Moving now to Paul's second point, he tells the church that they (not him) should now deliver the man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. What Paul means by this is that in view of his wickedness and unrepentant brazenness, he should have taken away from him the spiritual protection that comes from being a member of a local church.

In other words, a church is like an umbrella and if you are a member of that church you come under the protection of that umbrella such that many aspects of demonic attack which would otherwise have come upon you are kept off you so they don't harm you. That is one of the many advantages of being part of a local church. The point is that this passage illustrates the huge importance of being, or not being, part of a church. It can literally be the difference between life and death.

Therefore, if that protection is removed, the man is effectively handed over or delivered to Satan. And, as we see, this may result in the destruction of his flesh, i.e. his death. So, this is a very serious matter, and such a sanction is not to be used over minor offences but only the most blatant and disgraceful.

Note, however, that even this judgement in terms of the church handing the wrongdoer over to Satan has a redemptive purpose, i.e. "*that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*". The meaning of this is that although he may die, his death may prevent him degenerating even further into deeper levels of depravity which might have led to the loss of his eternal life at the final judgment.

Paul then goes on to give more general advice about how to deal with immoral people in the church:

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; ¹⁰ not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)

Paul instructs us not to associate with immoral men but he doesn't mean unbelievers outside in the world. He means immoral men *inside the church*. The reason is that it is only when immoral men gain entry to the church as members and are allowed to remain in it that they can do any significant harm. From the outside they are no great threat and indeed the outside world is full of such men.

But the local church is meant to have none of them and that can only be achieved by driving them out. That kind of decisiveness and direct action may make you feel uncomfortable, which is why traditional

churches don't do this. But you must be willing to take these steps and especially so if you are a small house church where the damage that can be done by such a person is so much higher.

Of course, when we speak of these standards of conduct and morals that are required of a church member, we are not referring to visitors or enquirers who are still unsaved and are coming along to church at our invitation to find out more about the Gospel and being a disciple. Little or nothing is required of them, other than not to seriously disrupt the meetings.

But if they get saved and become a member then they will be expected to live in a moral way and to avoid bringing disgrace on the name of Jesus. However, we would need to be patient with them as they grow because they may take some time to come to terms with being a disciple and to move away from the habits and lifestyle they previously had.

