

CHAPTER 18

THE WICKEDNESS OF 'NICOLAITANISM' - WHERE CHURCH LEADERS ARE ABUSIVE, CONTROLLING, MANIPULATIVE OR DOMINEERING

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 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)

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

Zechariah 10:3(a) (RSV)

⁴⁵ *And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, ⁴⁶ “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁷ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

Luke 20:45-47 (ESV)

⁵ *They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.*

Matthew 23:5-7 (ESV)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1 (NKJV)

¹⁵ *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

Matthew 7:15 (RSV)

² *“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.*

Revelation 2:2 (ESV)

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

Revelation 2:6 (RSV)

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.*

Acts 20:29-30 (RSV)

²⁵ *But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Matthew 20:25-28 (ESV)

²⁷ *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

Matthew 23:27-28 (ESV)

Who or what were the ‘Nicolaitans’ and why does Jesus say He hates their works?

We rarely speak in terms of Jesus hating things, but one thing which He said He does hate is *“the works of the Nicolaitans”*. What were they, and what did Jesus find so objectionable about them? They were not a group, as such, and they certainly didn’t call themselves by that name. The word ‘Nicolaitan’ comes from the joining of the two Greek words ‘*nike*’, meaning ‘*to conquer*’, and ‘*laos*’, meaning ‘*people*’. Combined, these would mean *“to conquer the people”* or rather *“to rule over the people”*. The phrase occurs twice in Revelation:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. ² “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicola’itans, which I also hate.

Revelation 2:1-6 (RSV)

¹⁴ *But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality.¹⁵ So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicola’itans. ¹⁶ Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.*

Revelation 2:14-16 (RSV)

So, the word ‘*Nicolaitan*’ really refers to a type of leader, wherever they may be within the Church, not to any group or denomination. In the first century there were no denominations, but there were already Nicolaitan leaders who were dominating and ruling over people instead of serving them. It was their haughty autocratic ways that Jesus hated, and we can safely assume that He still does. Moreover, He has greater cause to do so now because their numbers, both in absolute terms, and as a proportion of the Church, must have risen vastly since John wrote Revelation.

The proper role of any leader in the Church is to be a *servant*. Nobody is ever called to *rule* over anybody. Leaders are meant to serve and to lay down their lives for the people. That is how it should be, but it is not what we see happening today. Instead, many leaders, in virtually all denominations, have an attitude of superiority and entitlement. They believe they are called by God to rule over the people, which is the very attitude that Jesus says He hates. Such men see themselves at the top of a hierarchy, over which God has appointed them as rulers.

They never refer to themselves as rulers, but they *act* as such, and that is what counts. They may well come into full time ministry as humble young men, with high ideals about serving. However, as time passes, many lose that heart-attitude and become haughty, domineering ‘*clergymen*’. Or you could say they develop a ‘*clergy-mentality*’, whereby they see themselves as different from, and higher than, the ‘ordinary’ people or ‘lay’ members. I discuss this in detail in Book 8, *“Biblical and unbiblical churches”* and would refer you to that for further study.

It is legitimate for a leader to *lead*, but never to *conquer* or *rule*. He can urge, warn, exhort, persuade, advise and plead, but he can never command anybody to do anything.

At some point, Nicolaitan type leaders start to see themselves as having the right to rule. They come to believe that they are entitled to do whatever is needed to remain in control. That includes the right to manipulate, dominate or intimidate anybody who gets in their way. Given that they see themselves as the God-appointed ‘ruler’ of that church, anyone who opposes them is, by definition, opposing God. He may also begin to see himself as the main, or only, means by which God speaks into that church.

To him, his own views then become synonymous with God’s will. Therefore, anybody disagreeing with him is disagreeing with God. These are the perverse chains of reasoning that occur in the mind of a ‘ruler’ rather than a leader. To him, his clergy status justifies all his actions. However, God never appoints any man or group to rule over any church. Indeed, even if all the elders agree, they still cannot rule, not even collectively. They can only lead.

Genuine, biblical leadership does include an element of authority, but that is very far from being absolute. The authority of an elder has to be exercised within the confines of biblical principles and godly character. An elder must always seek the *free and informed consent* of those whom he leads. Therefore, in Acts chapter 15, at the Jerusalem Council, the leaders spoke, advised, persuaded and even summed up, but it was *the church as a whole* which *decided*.

Neither James, nor Paul, nor any other leader, ever took “command” at that Council, or gave any orders. James did announce the verdict of the conference, but that had been decided by the *whole church*, not only by the leaders. Admittedly, they did so with the guidance and leadership of James, but not under his rule. That is the crucial point, which so many leaders are missing.

There is more than one way for a church leader to dominate, control, abuse or exploit people. The particular methods they choose will depend on the personality of the leader.

It would be wrong to assume that all controlling church leaders operate in exactly the same way. There are many different ways to control a congregation. The methods chosen will depend on the personality of that leader, the wider leadership structure, the size of the church, and the nature of the denomination. A man may choose to dominate, manipulate, intimidate or deceive people. Or he may use a mixture of those methods. But his overall objective is always the same, to control people.

To be dominating a leader usually, but not always, needs a strong, authoritarian type of personality. Those who have that kind of nature will tend to gravitate towards *dominating* others by means of direct pressure and forcefulness. I can think of many such men, over the years, who have overtly dominated their churches. Others are not naturally forceful, extrovert or confident and may not have a commanding personality. They may well be timid, shy, introverted and even weak.

Actually, a great many church leaders are like that, because church leadership is widely seen as a soft career choice for those who are not high-achievers. Indeed, such men often choose church ministry as a ‘career’, precisely because they are not sufficiently dynamic or talented to succeed and gain promotion in a secular workplace. For such men, *manipulation* is the preferred method, rather than domination, because it is covert and indirect and doesn’t involve confrontation. Moreover, it does not require any display of strength, or ability, or that the leader should have any gifts at all.

Intimidation as a style or method of ruling is more closely linked to domination. You could say it is one of the ways in which people can be dominated. The leader’s aim is to make people afraid, so they will not argue or resist him. Instead, they will just comply and do whatever the leader wants them to do. Fear is intentionally produced as one of the means of controlling them. Such a leader can take full advantage of people’s fear, whatever form it takes.

Deception is another method, and it can be used by all types of leaders, whether they are strong or weak, direct or indirect, and dominant or manipulative. However, deception is used most often by those who are generally more covert and manipulative. It fits better with that model of leadership. Indeed, it is probably an essential part of it, because manipulation is at its most effective when coupled with deception. Then the people are not only manoeuvred, or pressurised, but also lied to.

Some church leaders have naturally strong, forceful, personalities and they control people in a direct manner. Therefore their preference will be domination and intimidation.

If a man is naturally extrovert, confident and forceful he will tend to gravitate towards a dominating style of leadership. I once read a book by a well-known leader who spoke admiringly of another leader whom he had known when he was young. That other leader was autocratic and gave arbitrary orders which he required to be obeyed without question. The author approved of that older man's style of leadership and saw it as a model because it enabled young men to learn "*submission to authority*".

The leader would even tell the younger leaders and trainee leaders in his very large church what colour socks to wear. He saw this as a test of their submissiveness and of whether they had any 'rebelliousness' in them that needed to be extinguished. Most of the men would comply, even when told to wear white socks, which they found demeaning. The author praised this leader's approach, but it was actually emotional and spiritual abuse. That leader wanted total dominance over those young men and to crush their independence of thought.

His aim was actually to break their spirits, so that they would later do his bidding without question, even when it came to socks, which were none of his business. Indeed, one of his objectives, was to get them to obey him *even when they did not agree with or understand him*. The author saw this as a good feature, but God doesn't. In the book of Acts the Bereans are praised for the way they checked Paul's preaching, and for the fact that they *didn't just accept it unquestioningly*. Can you imagine Paul telling young men in Berea what socks to wear?

Moreover, can you imagine Paul refusing to explain his teaching, or regarding it as 'rebellion' if he was questioned? Somebody is wrong here, either Paul or the leader with the socks policy, and it isn't Paul. I heard of another story from a friend of mine. When he was a young Christian, back in the 1970s, he was on a Summer Training Programme with a Christian group which focused on discipleship. One day the leader confronted him about his tie and insisted that he change it. This was done openly, in front of others, and he felt humiliated.

My friend said it was done deliberately "*to crush my spirit*". He had been brought to heel, like a dog. From then on, he always feared that leader. It created a master-servant relationship which is unbiblical. I asked him what he now felt he should have done at the time. He said he should have refused to comply and even left the training programme if need be. I think he was right. The biblical position is we should *all submit to each other*, whether the other person is a leader or not. But we must never let anybody *dominate* us, and should resist anyone who tries to do so.

Church leaders who lack confidence, or are introverted, weak, or timid, tend to control people indirectly, using manipulation and deceit.

The mere fact that a leader is weak or timid doesn't mean he won't be a controller, or even a wolf. He will just go about it in a different way. Men of that type will still manipulate and deceive so as to get their own way, but they will do it *indirectly*, rather than directly. 'Carl' was extremely shy and introverted and he had a chronic lack of self-confidence. I thought at first that this meant he would not be a controlling leader. I therefore assumed he would be a 'safer bet' than 'Rick', an extrovert showman who loved to be up at the front, being seen by people.

However, I learned a vital lesson from Carl, which is that men like him are just as likely to become controllers. They simply go about it in different ways. They deceive rather than dominate, and they manoeuvre people rather than giving direct orders. Yet the result is the same. They still end up controlling the people, just by a different route. When I first met Carl he was an assistant minister in a large church. He could cope when he was in that role, because he wasn't the senior leader. So, at that time, Carl did not seem to me to be controlling or manipulative.

At any rate, I saw no signs of it. He was quiet, unimpressive and ineffectual, but he seemed to do no harm. However, the Senior Minister then left suddenly and Carl was appointed to take his place. This was a promotion too far for him and caused him to change. Carl struggled in his new role and became increasingly insecure and manipulative. He eventually ended up just as controlling as other leaders, despite being so painfully shy. About two years after Carl had been promoted I joined a committee within the church which was looking at overhauling the constitution of the church.

The aim was for the church to become a corporation, so as to limit the potential financial liability of the trustees. With my legal background, I felt I could help. However, I was dismayed by the way Carl operated. He said almost nothing during the committee meetings. Yet, he still made sure that nothing was ever done that could make him more accountable, or which made him feel insecure. For example, I suggested that we alter the constitution so that the person who chaired the Members' meeting would be one of the members, not one of the Leadership Team, as had always been the case.

Carl was deeply threatened by that proposal. Whereas he had been virtually silent throughout previous meetings, he suddenly became animated over this point. I had proposed it because it would make clear that one of the purposes of the Members' Meeting was to *hold the leaders to account* and to *question them as to their roles, output, effectiveness* and so on. I therefore said that it would help if the Chairman of the Members' meetings was one of the members, not one of those paid leaders, who were supposed to be being held accountable.

Carl was highly alarmed and acted swiftly to squash the proposal, together with one of the other paid staff who was also on that sub-committee. They were adamant that it must not go into the draft constitution and should not even be put to the members to consider. They said it would "*create chaos*" if the Chairman of the Members' meeting was not one of the Leadership Team. I could not see why it would, at least not from the members' point of view. But I could see how it would strike fear into the leaders' hearts if it meant they would be held more closely to account.

I also asked repeatedly for the emails from the church's lawyer to be forwarded to all of us on the sub-committee. Then we could see for ourselves exactly what he was advising and examine the reasoning behind it. The church secretary, who was also on the sub-committee, agreed to forward all of these to us, i.e. all past and future emails. But she never did. I later realised that Carl was covertly blocking this. He did not want the sub-committee to see the lawyer's emails about the new constitution, even though we were the very group that was supposed to be drafting it.

Carl wanted to restrict all of those emails to himself and to the Leadership Team, so that only the leaders would know what the lawyer was advising and why. Therefore he spoke privately to the church secretary, after the meetings, to tell her *not* to send them to us. Yet, he never said so openly, in the meetings. He did not have the courage, or the honesty, to do that but he was still determined to get his own way. Therefore all we ever got from the secretary were carefully sanitised extracts from the lawyer's emails. These were cut and pasted for us, but the full emails were always withheld.

Carl knew that knowledge is power and he didn't want us to have any. I later questioned him about it when he came to see us when we said we were not renewing our membership. Carl was unwilling to give any explanation for his conduct. He neither admitted nor denied it, but just stammered and stuttered and became angry. He said we would need to discuss it "*in another meeting, with witnesses present*". But he never arranged any meeting and neither did I. By then I could see no point in arguing with him any further, either about this or anything else.

One way in which both, dominating and manipulative church leaders maintain control is to close down all discussion and debate on any controversial topics.

Have you noticed how little genuinely open discussion takes place in most churches? That is not by accident. It is the policy of insecure leaders to close down all debate. They fear what might happen, or where it could lead. There should instead be a lot of free discussion in churches. Debate should be actively encouraged on major issues so that all points of view can be heard. Then the truth will prevail, and accurate doctrine will result, because the correct meaning of Scripture on any given point will become apparent if it can be aired openly and discussed courteously.

Scripture will always win in a fair fight, where logic and the authority of God's Word can be applied over a period of time. However, a controlling leader doesn't want the *best* argument to prevail. He wants *his own* opinions to be accepted, whether they are right or not. Therefore a controlling church leader will discourage open debate, especially if the issue is sensitive, or relates to any of the distinctive doctrines which that leader teaches. Take the issue of whether there will be a literal 1000 year 'Millennium', during which Jesus will reign on this physical Earth when He returns.

The majority view, at least in the UK, is '*amillennialism*'. That is the belief that there will not be any literal 1000 year reign on this Earth. Instead it is assumed that what the Bible says about this period is only 'figurative', 'spiritual' or 'allegorical'. They believe the time in which we now live *is* the period spoken of. To them, the prophecies about the coming Kingdom are just poetic language and the events and circumstances described will not literally happen. You will have guessed that that is not my view.

I believe the Millennium is a literal 1000 year period in the history of this physical Earth, which has yet to happen but which will, assuredly, happen in the future. Church leaders get uptight about things like this and discourage the expression of any view which contradicts their own. Thus anybody taking Bible prophecy literally is likely to be suppressed. It could be as mild as an awkward silence and a swift change of subject. Or it could be a firm slapping down by the leader, or his supporters, of anyone expressing an unacceptable opinion or raising a taboo subject.

There is an equal reluctance to allow free discussion and debate on all sorts of other issues, not just prophecy.

The same restrictions apply to debates which we might otherwise have on issues such as baptism in water, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, demonology, deliverance, eternal security, the Day of Judgment, the status and future role of Israel, whether the Church has replaced Israel, prophecy in general and whether the practices of the early Church differed from what we see today. In all these areas most churches do not even allow free discussion in private, let alone organise structured public debates, in which all views can be assessed.

Most leaders would see that as far too dangerous. They would fear that their congregations might evaluate the evidence presented by each side and then choose to disagree with the leader. To avoid that possibility, most leaders restrict their churches to hearing nothing other than their own views. That is tragic, because it has a shrinking effect on the minds of the congregation if they are denied the opportunity to hear the arguments for and against each position. The very process of handling such debates, and weighing up the arguments and evidence from all sides, has a maturing effect.

It equips people to think for themselves, with the Holy Spirit as their guide, and the Bible as their measuring rod. That is the only way that we can learn how to discern for ourselves what is true and false. God wants every Christian to learn how to think and make decisions independently, without being reliant on leaders, and to differentiate between what is biblical and unbiblical. Insecure leaders think that preventing open debate is good for the church, as it could lead to people adopting all sorts of heretical beliefs.

They conclude that safety is to be found by restricting what people hear to nothing other than that leader's own views, or the established beliefs and policies of that denomination. They will claim they are thereby protecting the people from heresy and error. Actually such a leader is just keeping his people in a kind of 'play pen' where they are fenced in and unable to go outside of the boundaries which he puts in place for them.

They will then never grow up to become confident, healthy, mature, independent-minded disciples capable of judging and discerning for themselves. They will also never become leaders in their own right, or be capable of acting as 'Bereans' and assessing men's teaching. Neither will they be able to go on to make other disciples, as per the Great Commission, since they will not really be disciples themselves. They are held back and kept as perpetual children, living on milk, and always dependent on that leader, even in the long term. That may suit the leader, but it does not suit God.

There is a big difference between upholding true doctrine and avoiding debate.

A congregation which is limited to the teaching of its own leader will become the equivalent of farm livestock which have been genetically impaired due to 'inbreeding'. That's another reason why we all need to hear people who disagree with us and who say things we've never heard before. Weighing what they say, checking it against the Bible, challenging them about it, and even correcting them, are essential parts of growing as a disciple. That is all part of how we are meant to gain maturity and discernment, and become free and independent thinkers.

It is therefore wrong for a leader to keep people 'quarantined' from hearing or discussing anything of which he doesn't approve. It might appear that such leaders are trying to protect their people, but they are usually just protecting their own ministries and incomes. They also do it to avoid being contradicted and to get a quiet life, without any threat to their power. Such a controlling approach is wicked, because it damages the Church and hinders the Great Commission.

How should a leader properly deal with questions, disagreements, and being contradicted?

How then should a church leader deal with disagreements, questions, debates and even being contradicted in public? The answer is he should take such things in his stride and even welcome them. That said, such a leader would need to spend a long time convincing people that he really does want them to feel free to question him and disagree with him, even in public. He would need to keep emphasising that he will not be offended. Unless he keeps on saying that, people will not believe him. They have been conditioned to expect church leaders to be uptight about any contrary view being expressed.

So he will need to make an ongoing effort to convince people that he really means it and that they are truly free to do these things. Then, when people do nervously start to ask questions or disagree, he needs to respond courteously and answer them seriously and in detail. He also needs to accept correction willingly and gracefully if it turns out he is wrong. Alternatively, if he is not wrong, he needs to argue for his beliefs graciously, but also confidently. Free speech does not mean that leaders have to agree with those who contradict them, or to stay silent when false doctrines are advocated.

He should also publicly contradict those with whom he disagrees, and even use it as an opportunity to restate and clarify true doctrines. Then people will see him modelling the right way to contend for the truth in public, boldly but courteously, and without muzzling people. They will gradually learn from his example how they should deal with those who disagree with them. The problem is that for this to happen most leaders would need to change radically, as they are generally incapable of any of this at present.

They would firstly need to deal with their own chronic insecurities, fears and paranoia, so as to become capable of being relaxed and confident. Realistically, that will require many to give up paid, full time ministry and to get secular jobs. Then they can operate biblically, as unpaid elders, without any fear of losing their jobs, homes and pensions, because those would no longer have anything to do with their ministries.

Abusive leaders misuse the phrase “Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!” They wrongly apply it to themselves and imply that nobody should contradict them.

If you’ve been involved in churches for any length of time, the chances are you have heard some leader use this verse:

*Saying “Touch not my anointed ones,
do my prophets no harm!”
1 Chronicles 16:22 (RSV)*

They misuse this verse by applying it to themselves, or to other church leaders, whom they are supporting. They seek to convey the false impression that every church leader is God’s “anointed”, and that we must not oppose, criticise or contradict them. It is presumptuous to apply that verse to themselves in the first place. It refers to the prophets, by which God means the *genuine* people whom He has called, and who are truly speaking for Him. It is wrong to assume, as a given, that it automatically includes *every* church leader.

On the contrary, the Bible warns us that many leaders will be wolves and hirelings. So, on that basis alone, we can rule out the idea that they are *all* God’s anointed. The aim of many who misuse this verse is to protect themselves and promote their own agenda, as if that was automatically what God wants. The problem is that a high proportion of what is done and taught in churches is the very opposite of what the Bible says. Far from requiring us to support such men unquestioningly, God wants us to stand up to them.

An insecure leader will be suspicious of anyone who has leadership potential. He will also undermine anyone who knows more than he does, or whom God is using more than him.

One of the features of insecure leaders is they knock down, or hold back, any person who presents any kind of threat to them. An example of this, from the Bible, is the way King Saul envied the young David. He became paranoid about his successes and began to undermine him to prevent him becoming a rival for the throne. At the outset, when David was less famous, Saul was happy to use him. But as his successes grew, Saul began to resent him and became increasingly wary:

⁵ And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; so that Saul set him over the men of war. And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul’s servants.

⁶ As they were coming home, when David returned from slaying the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with timbrels, with songs of joy, and with instruments of music. ⁷ And the women sang to one another as they made merry,

*“Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his ten thousands.”*

⁸ And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him; he said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; and what more can he have but the kingdom?”

⁹ And Saul eyed David from that day on.

1 Samuel 18:5-9 (RSV)

King Saul became so deeply paranoid, partly due to being demonised, that he lost control of himself at times and even tried to kill David:

¹⁰ And on the morrow an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; ¹¹ and Saul cast the spear, for he thought, "I will pin David to the wall." But David evaded him twice. ¹² Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul.

1 Samuel 18:10-12 (RSV)

Despite Saul's opposition to him, David continued to succeed, and Saul's envy increased all the more, until he became David's enemy:

²⁸ But when Saul saw and knew that the Lord was with David, and that all Israel loved him, ²⁹ Saul was still more afraid of David. So Saul was David's enemy continually.

1 Samuel 18:28-29 (RSV)

Insecure leaders feel threatened when any person in the congregation, in particular younger men, have more natural talent or leadership potential than they have. They will be wary of such men, because they fear they may become rivals, or that their abilities will expose the leader's own shortcomings. If such men join the church, that leader will deny them opportunities to do the things which enable them to grow. He fears that if he allows that talented young man to lead a group, take a service or preach a sermon, he might do it too well.

If so people might begin to compare the leader's performance with that of the up and coming young leader. He might also grow in confidence and experience, such that the congregation begin to wonder why they are paying for a full time minister when that young man is already able to do it better than him and at no cost. These risks strike terror into the heart of an insecure leader. He will therefore knock down any such person while he is still young, before he becomes a bigger threat.

As a result, many talented, anointed, confident men are denied opportunities, and even driven out of churches, due to the paranoia of insecure leaders. It is a widespread problem, but one which leaders never talk about or write about. One valid point which was made to me by 'Carlos', about whom I write in chapter 5, is that in South America it is the norm for talented young men to set up their own churches, even in their twenties, when they are far from ready. They do so because insecure church leaders won't give them any opportunities to teach, preach or lead any small group.

Thus the only way those young men can get any experience is to break away and set up on their own, which is tragic. I raise this issue so that if you are such a young man, and are being denied any opportunity to serve by a church leader, you can better understand his reasons. If you are a member of that church, and see such a young man being frozen out, encourage him to carry on regardless. You could even intervene with the leader on his behalf and try to open some doors for him.

It is wicked for an insecure leader to block the progress of up and coming young leaders and to withhold opportunities to develop.

What God actually wants leaders to do is to make *disciples*. That is the 'Great Commission' and it is not about making converts, or even church members. It is about training and equipping others to become *leaders and disciple-makers*. Then they can, in turn, carry on the Great Commission. That is why it is such a tragedy if a leader's insecurity makes him reluctant to train up others to work alongside him and, in due course, to replace him. Here is what Jesus said:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 28:18-20 (RSV)

As leaders, we are meant to be actively reproducing, and even *replacing*, ourselves by making disciples who can become independent of us and *capable of doing our jobs*. That must also mean accepting that some of them will be better leaders than we are. But why should that bother us? A leader is meant to be committed to the Great Commission, not to promoting himself or protecting his own career and income. Indeed, every leader should be aiming to train his people so well that he can make himself redundant after a few years, as they no longer need him. Then he can start a new church elsewhere and do the same again.

If he sees it in this way he will be relaxed when talented young men arrive in his church who are eager to do ministry work. That leader should think: “*Here’s a young man who has potential. He can already preach as well as me, if not better. I will now encourage him and let him speak even more often, so that he can grow. Then God can raise him higher and use him more widely.*” Every leader should think like that, not least because apostle Paul said the key role of any leader is “*to equip the saints for the work of the ministry*”. He is not meant to do all the work himself:

¹¹ And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ;¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16 (RSV)

Some of my own experiences of being held back and blocked by insecure church leaders

A leader’s role is to equip, train, encourage, assist and promote *other people* to do the work of the ministry, not to do it all himself. His aim should be to make it possible for God to raise up and use as many of *them* as possible. Assisting their development is not a threat to that leader’s ministry. It is actually *his main purpose* and he ought to be seeking to bring it about, rather than preventing it. In my younger days I suffered at the hands of a number of insecure church leaders and was blocked and denied opportunities to do things.

They saw me as a threat because I studied a lot, read the Bible assiduously, memorised Scripture, read vast numbers of Christian books and was continually engaged in evangelism. I was also eager for opportunities to preach, because I was studying all the time and learning things which I wanted to share. From the outset, I knew I had a gift for teaching and also for evangelism and I wanted an outlet for it. Some leaders were willing to let me do so, but only once. Then they blocked me after that and made all sorts of excuses. Or they kept putting me off or creating delays.

You might imagine that was because I was doing it badly, or preaching heresy, and they wanted to protect people from me. But that wasn’t the case. I knew my preaching was theologically sound, and that I had delivered it well. For one thing, I knew it because so many people told me so afterwards, except of course for the leaders themselves. I remember one occasion when I was in the church led by ‘Rick’. It allowed guest speakers, so I asked for a teaching slot. Rick agreed to this and I spoke on how we can overcome discouragement and encourage ourselves and others.

The content was thoroughly biblical and it was a message which people had never heard before. For all these reasons, it was very well received. In fact, that is an under-statement, because God anointed

that sermon in an extraordinary way. He opened the eyes and ears of the people present and really touched them. I could see that the words were hitting home and, after I had finished, there was a powerful reaction from the congregation. A queue literally formed of people wanting to thank me and to ask me questions or share their problems.

That was totally unlike what happened whenever Rick spoke, or when any visiting speaker spoke. I'm not saying any of this to boast, but simply to explain the perversity of Rick's reaction and his subsequent conduct. As I walked away from the lectern after my talk, Rick was looking at me with obvious resentment in his face. However, I didn't let that stop me. A week or two later I asked Rick if I could be given another speaking slot. But he fobbed me off. There then began a series of other 'fob offs' in which I was sent to and fro between Rick and one of the other leaders, 'Desmond'.

Rick initially told me they hadn't yet drawn up the list of speakers and would be doing so in the next month or two. He told me to speak to Desmond in about a month. So I waited and then approached Desmond, but I was then told I was too late and that they had already drawn up the list. I then waited again and approached them both a couple of months later, only to be fobbed off yet again. I was repeatedly given the run-around in this way until it became plain that they were colluding together to prevent me from speaking again.

Another occasion when 'Rick', an insecure church leader, deliberately sabotaged my sermon

Most people, would have given up at that stage, but I am unusually persistent. So I kept pursuing this and directly challenged Rick and Desmond about it. Eventually, having run out of excuses, they reluctantly agreed to let me speak again and a date was set. I prepared a talk and made sure it would last no more than 40 minutes, the standard time allotted in that church. Moreover, on this particular Sunday, something else was scheduled for immediately after the sermon, so I knew I had to finish right on time and could not go over, even by a minute.

This need to finish strictly on time was made very clear to me. I only emphasise it here to provide the context, so as to make sense of what then happened. When the time came for me to speak I walked to the front but, at that very moment, Rick jumped up and asked if he could "*just give an important notice*". I then stood to one side and he proceeded to speak for 17 minutes, despite knowing full well, because he had told me himself, that I had a fixed time limit of 40 minutes. I was therefore left with only 23 minutes to give a talk which I had carefully planned to last 40 minutes.

Everything Rick said in his "important notice" was actually unimportant. It was just a mini-sermon on a series of thoughts he'd recently had, but it was all inconsequential and non-urgent. Moreover, he repeated himself many times and spun it out for as long as he could. He sounded like a contestant on the Radio 4 programme, 'Just a Minute', in which they have to speak on random subjects for as long as they can. What he was saying was just waffle and he didn't need to say any of it, let alone spend 17 minutes on it during the scheduled slot for the speaker.

At first, I assumed his "notice" would be extremely important and also brief. But, as the minutes went by, I began to wonder where he was going with it. I then began to wonder why he was giving it at all, and especially why he was taking so long over it. Eventually I realised that his real purpose was to sabotage my talk by forcing me to edit it whilst delivering it, without any advance warning. Had I been told, even the day before, that I would only have 23 minutes, I could have redrafted my talk to fit that length of time. But doing that mid-sermon is another matter, especially when you feel upset.

I was amazed at how a church leader could deliberately sabotage someone's sermon in his own church. Yet he did, and it didn't appear to trouble his conscience one bit. I felt very unsettled by it and had to throw out whole sections of my talk and drastically reduce other parts. But I made sure I finished on time. I handled it better than many would have done, because I was an experienced public speaker due

to many years of practice in politics and in my job as a litigation lawyer. But the talk was still spoiled, as Rick had intended it to be. At least it was not as good as it would have been.

This kind of obstruction by insecure leaders has only ever happened to me in *churches*, never in any of the law firms I worked for. My bosses at work all spotted that I was eloquent and persuasive and, from an early stage, they pushed me towards litigation and advocacy. They even asked me to do their advocacy for them in cases they were handling. I was also asked to give talks on legal subjects, with bosses present. None of them ever wanted me to do badly, as Rick did.

Likewise, when I was active in politics, older men encouraged me and nobody tried to undermine me. On the contrary, they urged me forward and encouraged me to take up positions on committees. I was also asked to be an officer on the executive of the party, a councillor and eventually Chairman of the Conservative Association. The contrast between how I was treated by leaders in the church, and by bosses or leaders in my legal and political activities, was stark. They were polar opposites.

If that isn't enough to prove my case, let me cite some additional evidence given to me by a retired pastor which corroborates what I am saying. I was sharing with him my frustrations at being continually blocked as a speaker by church leaders. He then told me, quite explicitly, that my diagnosis of the problem was entirely accurate and that I was being deliberately obstructed by leaders, due to their insecurity. He then went on to confirm that what was happening to me was nothing unusual and that most of the pastors he had ever known were extremely insecure.

He even said that when a pastor goes on holiday, or has to travel, and therefore needs to arrange a guest speaker, many will make sure that the replacement speaker is not very good. They will deliberately choose people who have little or no skill so that nobody will consider the visitor to be better than he is. You may find that hard to believe, but he said it soberly and seriously, without any trace of exaggeration. He had found it to be so in his own ministry and had been told the same by other leaders.

Dealing with church leaders who are greedy for money, teach falsely about tithing, or misuse church funds

One of the biggest destroyers of Christian ministries is *the love of money*. It can cause even good and faithful shepherds to become corrupt. It can also make them insecure, manipulative and controlling as they try to increase their income, or just hold on to what they have. Anxiety about money, and the craving for more of it, starts to take a hold of such men. Eventually it consumes them, until it affects all they do and makes them a disgrace to the Gospel and a danger to God's people.

A leader is only as faithful as he is in the least noticed, most private areas of his life. One of those is our handling of money. The members of the church may not see it, but God sees it all, even the smallest acts of compromise, dishonesty and unfaithfulness. Far from being trivial, such small things are the most accurate measure of a person's faithfulness. Jesus expressed it as follows:

¹⁰ "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. ¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him. ¹⁵ But he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Luke 16:10-15 (RSV)

If a leader is not faithful in the small things, such as handling money, he will be unfaithful throughout the rest of his ministry as well. Our handling of money is an indicator of our current spiritual condition,

but it is also a cause of future moral and spiritual decline if we mishandle it. Paul warned Timothy about the terrible power that the love of money has to lead us into all sorts of other evils. It isn't just that we end up sinning in our misuse of money itself, or in how we go about getting or keeping it. It can also corrupt us in a host of other ways too, even where those seem unconnected:

⁶ There is great gain in godliness with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; ⁸ but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. ⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs. ¹¹ But as for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

1 Timothy 6:6-11 (RSV)

The answer, according to Paul, was to cultivate a heart-attitude of contentment, so as not to allow any cravings, anxieties or paranoia about money to develop. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, also warns us to keep our lives free of the love of money. He doesn't mean we should avoid money itself, only *the love of it*:

⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have;
Hebrews 13:5a (RSV)

When leaders have the love of money

I can think of many leaders who have loved money and mishandled it, and/or mistreated people in order to get it or keep it. One of the worst ways this is done is by the manipulative and self-serving way in which so many leaders teach about giving to the local church. In particular, I am referring to how they teach the man-made, unbiblical doctrine of “*tithing*” to one's local church. This practice is derived from an aspect of the Law of Moses but it has no place in Church life.

Nevertheless, tithing to one's local church is so widely taught, especially in evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, that to question it is assumed to be heretical. That is mainly because objecting to the concept of tithing to the local church is a direct threat to the leader's income. As a young believer I fully accepted the concept of tithing to the church I was part of, and I practised it faithfully for many years. It was what I was taught to do in one church after another.

As I became more mature, and as my own knowledge of the Bible grew, I realised that tithing to one's church is nowhere to be found in the New Testament. Jews tithed to support the work of the priests and Levites and the upkeep of the Temple. But that has nothing to do with local churches in the Church age. In any case, the Law of Moses ended when Jesus died. Therefore we are not under it anyway, including what it said about tithing. That provision does not apply to us any more than the dietary rules do, or the prohibition of garments made from mixed fabrics.

A Christian's duty today is not to “*tithe*” but to “*give generously*”.

Now, in the Church age, the duty of every Christian is to be ‘*generous*’. Precisely what that means in practice is not defined. God has deliberately left it to each of us to define ‘*generously*’ for ourselves, based on our own conscience and heart-attitude. Depending on who the person is, what they earn, and their other circumstances, it may mean giving less than 10%. But it could also mean giving more than 10%. God wants each person to decide for themselves, *with complete freedom*, what they personally should give in order to be ‘*generous*’. He will then judge us individually for the choices we make.

Moreover, the New Testament does not specify *who* we are to give to. That is also left entirely up to us to decide. God wants each individual to give *to whoever they choose to give to*, in accordance with their own conscience, their own personal priorities, preferences, and God's specific promptings. There is nothing in the Bible to say we should give to the local church, and still less to pay wages to *local* elders. On the contrary, the biblical pattern is for each of them to support themselves financially, not to be paid by the local church.

We don't see *local* leaders being paid anywhere in the New Testament. The only Christian workers who received financial support in the book of Acts, or the letters, were those who were *sent away from their own local church*. That is to say apostles or *missionaries*, who travel away to churches *other than their own local church*. For such men it may not be possible to earn their own living. Therefore, they can, and should, be supported. But this is usually done by the church which sent them, not the people to whom they are sent.

This is a practical arrangement. It means financial support is only given to those who need it, because *the requirement to travel* prevents them getting a job. That was how the churches operated in the book of Acts and the letters. But it soon became the opposite of how the denominational, hierarchical churches operated. Before long, they had created the concept of professional '*clergy*' who don't travel, but don't support themselves either. That led to the unhealthy and unbiblical system we have today, in traditional churches, in which local leaders are paid by their own local people.

That means they come to depend on their own congregation for their entire livelihood, plus their home, pension and car. It is not that such a funding arrangement is inherently wrong or wicked. The point is that it is *unbiblical*, as is it is not what we see done, or taught, in the New Testament. Moreover, it is foreseeably unhealthy, because it is likely to lead to other things, which are inherently wicked, such as the love of money and then manipulation, domination, control and deception.