

CHAPTER 19

SOME OF MY OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF NICOLAITAN LEADERS WHO RULED OVER THEIR CHURCHES

³ *Thus says the Lord God, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!*

Ezekiel 13:3 (ESV)

⁸ *Therefore thus says the Lord God: "Because you have uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am against you, declares the Lord God.*

Ezekiel 13:8 (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)

² *But we 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 everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

2 Corinthians 4:2 (ESV)

²⁰ *For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.*

2 Corinthians 11:20 (ESV)

'Sam and Judith' - a married couple I once knew who led a church and were very money conscious. They manipulated church members to give financial support.

After we left the church led by 'Rick', whom I had challenged over his dishonesty, we visited a few others to see where to go instead. One of the first churches we tried out was led by a married couple, 'Sam and Judith'. They had actually left Rick's church themselves some years earlier, having identified his carnal and controlling ways long before I did. I therefore assumed that if they had discerned what was wrong with Rick, they themselves must be good people, whom we could trust. But I was badly mistaken, and there is a lesson in that.

The mere fact that a person can discern evil in others does *not* mean that he is not evil himself. The "enemy of your enemy" is not necessarily your friend. They may only be his enemy because they see him as a *rival*, not because they are any more godly than he is. That was certainly so in the case of Sam and Judith. It turned out they were even more manipulative than Rick. They had indeed correctly identified what was wrong with Rick, but they went on to reproduce all of his ways in their new church which they set up after leaving his.

That is not as unlikely as it may sound, as the main reason they had identified his ways was precisely *because they were like him themselves*. Therefore they could see through his weasel words, and discern his real motives much quicker than I could. The familiar phrase "*It takes one to know one*" has a lot of truth in it. They could see that Rick was controlling and manipulative but their main objection was that they wanted to be the ones doing the controlling and manipulating, not the ones subjected to it.

Just because a church leader has identified deception, abuse or manipulation in other leaders does not necessarily mean he is not doing the same things himself. Indeed, one of the most effective 'covers' for a controlling leader is to speak against those things in others. That is likely to convince all but the most discerning of people that he must therefore be a leader who can be trusted, such that it is safe to

join his church. In this way many ‘refugees’ from abusive churches are tricked into joining other churches which are just as bad, if not worse, than the ones from which they fled.

Victims of abusive leaders leave one church after another, seeking honest, godly leadership, only to find the same practices and attitudes in each place. The only thing that alters with each successive church is how long it takes to identify these features. In the first church it may take 10 years. Then it might take three years in the next, one year in the next, three months in the next, and so on. That was how it was for us. In the end, we could see falseness and control almost immediately, partly because we looked for the tell-tale signs from the outset, not only after things had gone wrong.

How I discovered Sam and Judith’s love of money and their willingness to manipulate people in order to get it

When we briefly went to the church led by Sam and Judith, after leaving Rick’s church, I saw some things that made me uncomfortable, even in the first few weeks. They consistently hyped things up and promoted their own ministry in the same ‘showy’ way that Rick did. That in itself made me uneasy and reminded me of Rick. Indeed, they probably learned that approach from him. However my eyes opened properly when Sam came to see me at my office and raised the subject of tithing.

He said that he and his wife had been praying about what to do when I started to give their church ten per cent of the profits of my business! My law firm was quite large and, at its peak, it had over 80 employees. I was surprised to hear Sam say this. I hadn’t expected him to be so blunt, even though I knew he believed in tithing. However, I had by then realised for myself that tithing is not the New Testament model for giving. So I said to Sam “*Can you show me any place in the New Testament where it says we should tithe to our local church?*”

Sam began to waffle for a while with religious-sounding slogans in support of tithing. But I said that what he was saying was just man-made traditions and that tithing was nowhere to be found in the New Testament. His reply to that shocked me. He said “*Yes, but if we didn’t teach tithing, how would the Church get money?*” Sam didn’t just mean his own local church. He was referring to the Church as a whole and was acknowledging that *he knew that the Bible doesn’t teach tithing*, or contain even a single verse to justify teaching it.

He was saying that it was necessary, *on a pragmatic basis*, to teach it anyway, *because churches need money*. I had never heard such a brass-faced attitude from any supporter of tithing. I had discussed it with various people prior to this but, as far as I could tell, they all sincerely believed that it was what God wanted. They were teaching it because they believed, albeit wrongly, that it is a biblical requirement. The difference was that Sam was teaching it despite being *well aware that it isn’t biblical*.

Moreover, he wasn’t embarrassed to say so, when he realised that I knew the Bible well enough to argue the position and wasn’t going to be deceived. He was changing tack and appealing to my sense of pragmatism about the need for churches to get funds somehow, if they were to continue to operate. I was stunned by his admission, and by what it signified about the hardness of his heart. It meant that he was willing to tell deliberate lies simply to get funding. Bear in mind also that the lies he was telling were about *God’s Word itself*, and that he was telling them *to God’s people*.

I feared for him, and for how he will fare at the Day of Judgment if he doesn’t repent of this. What will Jesus say to Sam about his deliberate misrepresentation of God’s Word? Also how will Jesus view his treating the congregation as if they were a cow to be milked, rather than precious people to be served and protected? We left Sam and Judith’s church immediately after that meeting. I had already heard enough to weigh up their real nature and to realise that they were even worse than Rick. For all his faults, he had never been as brazen as Sam.

The stark difference between apostle Paul's approach to ministry, especially the handling of money, and the way in which so many leaders behave today

Sam felt entitled to twist God's Word if that was necessary in order to get people to give him money. Apostle Paul never did that. To him, God's Word was precious and he took very seriously his duty to teach it all as fully and as accurately as he could. Paul did not twist it, leave any parts out, or over-emphasise any of it, in order to get his own way. He taught what he called "*the whole counsel of God*":

²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Acts 20:26-27 (RSV)

However, Paul warned the elders of the church in Ephesus that, after his departure, "*fierce wolves will come in, not sparing the flock...*" He therefore urged them to take care of the church. That is, in any case, already the primary duty of any leader:

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)

Paul pointed to his own attitude towards money and the way he handled it. He had no love of money at all and worked to support himself financially rather than receive funding from those to whom he ministered:

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)

Paul was so concerned not to exploit anybody, or even to be wrongly accused of doing so, that he chose not to accept financial support. Yet he was fully entitled to it, because Paul was a missionary, who had been *sent*, rather than a *local* elder. So although he had every right to ask for financial support, he didn't do so. He preferred to work with his own hands, as a tentmaker, to support himself. He had no longing for money. It meant nothing to him.

As a result it had no hold over him and he could not be influenced or corrupted either by being offered money or having it withheld from him. Therefore people who had money and who could either give it or withhold it had no power over him. Nobody could ever cause Paul to compromise. He was completely free to teach the whole truth fearlessly, without any thought as to what effect that might have on his income.

Nehemiah had a very similar attitude to Paul. He refused to exploit people or to "lord it over them".

Nehemiah took the same approach as Paul. He was appointed by King Artaxerxes to be the Governor of the land of Judah. Men who had that position before him had exploited the population by taxing them heavily, taking their goods and produce and even seizing their land. But Nehemiah was not willing to exploit anybody or to "*lord it over*" the people. He and his men did the rebuilding work *themselves* rather than forcing the people to do it for them:

¹⁴ Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Ar-ta-xerx'es the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brethren ate the food allowance of the governor. ¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens upon the people, and took from them food and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. ¹⁶ I also held to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover there were at my table a hundred and fifty men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations which were about us. ¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; fowls likewise were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the servitude was heavy upon this people.

Nehemiah 5:14-18 (RSV)

When Nicky Cruz came to preach in a sports centre near my home he pressurised the audience into putting more money into the collection and also into coming forward at the end.

When I was a young believer I took several relatives to hear Nicky Cruz of ‘*The Cross and the Switchblade*’ fame. I really wanted my unsaved family to hear the Gospel from him and had high hopes of them accepting it. However, it turned out badly, partly because of the way he handled money, and also due to his hectoring manner. During the meeting the stewards came round with buckets for a collection and people put in what they wanted to give. I assume some were generous and some were not. Nicky Cruz examined the buckets when the stewards reassembled at the front.

Then, he complained that we had not given enough! The money hadn’t been counted, so he was judging the extent of our contributions by how full the buckets were. Evidently, he didn’t think they were as full as they should have been. He then told the stewards to go round again with the buckets. I could see people giving more, but I felt it was done under duress. He was pressurising them into it and I felt ashamed. I had hoped that my family, who were all in the Catholic church at that time, would be impressed by him and persuaded to accept the true Gospel.

Instead, they were put off, partly by his attitude to money, but also that he was trying to dominate us. At the end of the evening, when he made an ‘altar-call’, and not many people responded by coming forward, he told us off sternly about how he had “*come all this way*” and yet so few of us were coming to the front - as if we were letting *him* down. For us, the meeting was completely unsuccessful. My family was put off the Gospel for a long time because of him. He presumably thought the expenses of his ministry justified him in acting as he did, but I believe it was very wrong.

The appalling behaviour of the ‘money preacher’, Creflo Dollar, in urging the public to give him 65 million dollars so that he can buy himself a new jet plane

In 2015 the ‘money-preacher’, Creflo Dollar, issued an appeal to the Christian public to send him \$65,000,000 to buy a new jet aeroplane. He supposedly needed this to get around more easily in his ministry. He thought God wanted him to have it and that the Christian public should pay for it. It is hard to imagine how a man could be so deluded as to believe that, but he did. His theology of money is so warped that he has persuaded himself that wealth is one of the main signs of God’s blessing, and that he is entitled to seek it from God’s people.

Creflo Dollar came to attention on social media because of his absurd extravagance, but the publicity hasn’t prevented gullible Christians giving to him. Moreover, similar church leaders, all over the world, are pushing the same false teaching about “*prosperity*”. They are deceiving naïve Christians, even in poor countries, into giving them huge sums of money in the hope that God will repay them many times over. The “*prosperity gospel*” and “*health and wealth*” teaching are actually an abomination and an offence to God.

That said, as with most false doctrines, it is based on a half-truth, because God will bless those who are generous. However, we are not to give money if our *sole or main purpose* in doing so is to get back even more money from God in return. That is not generosity, it is covetousness and it is a wrong motive for giving. However, it is even more wrong for leaders to prey on such gullible people, who don't know the Bible properly, and to manipulate them into giving by appealing to their greed.

It is one thing for a foolish or naïve person to give with improper motives. It is even more sinful to seek to *obtain* money from those people by deception. I tremble to imagine what Jesus will say, and do, to such wolves on the Day of Judgment. Moreover, we cannot necessarily assume that that rebuke will only be given at the Judgment Seat. Having lied to and exploited countless people, they may find themselves at the Great White Throne instead. That is for the *unsaved*, and leads to the Lake of Fire.

The manipulative way in which a church leader, whom I will call 'Gregory', was appointed as an assistant minister

'Gregory' was about 40 and was at a Bible College as a mature student but was applying for a position as an assistant minister in a large Evangelical church. The Leadership Team had said the position would be advertised so that a full range of candidates could apply. However, they took a strong liking to Gregory. Therefore, instead of inviting all the shortlisted candidates to come and preach a sermon as part of the application process, they simply recommended that Gregory be appointed. Thus the other applicants were never seen or heard by the church members.

The Leadership Team said they "*unanimously recommend that Gregory be appointed*". Two other candidates had already been interviewed and shortlisted by the Leadership Team, but they were not invited to preach to the whole church. Gregory was the one the Leadership Team wanted and they were making sure he would get the position. If they had let the selection procedure run its course the whole church could have made a free choice, having seen and heard all the best candidates, or at least the short-listed ones.

That was the right way forward, especially as it had been said that the ones they were interested in *would* be invited. But the Leadership Team did not want to take the 'risk' of the church choosing one of the other candidates, so they steam-rollered Gregory through. In saying they recommended him "*unanimously*" they were hinting that anyone who did not agree was a trouble-maker. They also implied that it was urgent to make a decision. That put pressure on the more timid members.

It also made it harder for any opposition to Gregory to get organised. A bogus allegation of urgency is often used as a device by those who want to get their own way. It makes it more difficult for those who disagree to get a campaign underway and makes sure that they are the only ones with time to get organised. I don't know if the alleged urgency was Gregory's idea or theirs, but it was used to justify the change of plan.

The net effect of their actions was that they took the decision out of the hands of the church as a whole and reserved it to themselves as leaders. People also felt unable to disagree, because if they were to object publicly it would be embarrassing and could create a scene. So most just went along with it reluctantly, with only a few muted grumbles. That was exactly what the Leadership Team had expected the reaction to be. They knew they would be able to get their own way, and obtain the votes of the members, if they took this approach.

The manipulative way that a new trainee leader was 'bounced' on a church, so the members couldn't really object to him

A similar trick was used later when another new trainee leader, 'Sebastian', was brought in, with a view to him leading a new church plant. I felt he was inadequate and lacked leadership ability. But the

Leadership Team liked him and felt they could work with him. What they really meant was they would never get any trouble from him. He was never going to set the world on fire, as he had very little talent, but neither would he ever disagree with them. If he had been applying for a job in my law firm, even at a very junior level, he wouldn't have got an interview.

Yet, the Leadership Team were determined to have him, so they put him forward in a similarly manipulative way. They had to allow a vote by the whole church, as the Constitution required it, but they fixed it so that there was little option but to go along with what they proposed. Instead of just asking us if we wanted to appoint Sebastian, as a stand-alone question, they joined several questions together as package. The combined proposal was whether the new church plant should go ahead, should the wider church support it, should Sebastian lead it and should he be paid a salary?

The church was offered a single 'Yes or No' answer to *all of those questions combined*. There was no option to approve of the church plant as a concept, but vote no to Sebastian leading it. There was also no option to vote for him to lead it, but without a salary, or only on a part time basis. They made sure it was all-or-nothing because they knew the church plant idea had a lot of support but that Sebastian himself was a much less attractive prospect. They left the members with no option but to approve his appointment as part of the overall package, or call off the whole church plant entirely.

That was manipulative and devious. Instead of seeking the views of the whole church, they were effectively imposing their own view. Also, instead of allowing a genuine free choice on each separate issue, they turned the whole thing into a sham. Many who voted for the whole package would have chosen not to appoint Sebastian if it had been possible to vote issue by issue. The Leadership Team were well aware of that. It was precisely why they did not offer the option of a church plant without Sebastian leading it, or without him being paid.

The manipulative way in which another trainee minister was bounced onto the church by the Leadership Team again pretending there was a great urgency to vote

Some may think I was misinterpreting the motives of the Leadership Team concerning Gregory and Sebastian, or seeing a pattern where there wasn't really one there. If so, consider this next episode which arose shortly afterwards. Another young man, 'James', was being put forward by the Leadership Team to become a trainee minister. There was a different set of facts here, as James was capable, motivated and had a lot to offer. The problem was the finances of the church were not sufficient to justify yet another trainee minister.

It was not long after Sebastian had been appointed and the church hadn't even been able to afford to pay for him, let alone James as well. The church was struggling, due to the recession, but also because of having too many paid staff. One of the signs of an 'empire-building' leader is the desire to keep on appointing more and more staff. They want their church to be bigger than the other churches in the area. To such empire-builders, the cost of funding these staff is not a problem. It is assumed to be the duty of the wider membership.

The role of leaders, in their view, is to spend the money and the members' job is to pay the bill. They were like the pigs in George Orwell's "*Animal Farm*", making plans which required the long-suffering horse, Boxer, to work harder and harder. Money was scarce, and they ought to have considered it carefully, but they called an emergency Members' Meeting and claimed they urgently needed a decision. They said James needed to give a full academic term's notice to leave his current job. We later discovered he actually only needed to give *half* a term's notice, which some of the leaders must have known.

Thus there was plenty of time for the finances to be examined. But they *didn't want* scrutiny, which is why they rushed the decision through. A few months later it emerged that the church was unable to pay the extra salary for James, or even Sebastian. The Leaders then asked the members to give even more.

They must have known this shortfall was likely when they appointed James. If not, they should, have known, and they would have if they had allowed questions to be asked. But they didn't want awkward questions, or for anybody to suggest that James' appointment be postponed.

Influencing the votes at Members' meetings by posing questions in this manipulative way - "*The Leadership Team unanimously think XYZ. Do you agree?*"

When voting at the meeting the members were simply asked: "*The Leadership Team unanimously think X,Y,Z. Do you agree?*" I believe that was manipulative. They should have just asked the members what they thought, and sought their *input and advice*. Instead they were pressurising them to simply give their *endorsement*, in the form of a closed 'yes-or-no' question. There was no real request for the *views* of the members. They only wanted our *votes* and did not ask whether we saw any issues, hazards or problems, or had any other questions or concerns of our own.

Neither did they ask if any of us felt the proposal should be modified in any way. The yes-or-no format was too stark and did not help to open up a general discussion. Indeed, it was expressly designed to *prevent* that. Their aim was not merely to inform us that they all agreed about it. It was to pressurise us to accept the proposal without any further debate, and without seeking to modify it. The aim of the Leadership Team was not to involve the members in any meaningful consideration of the issues. It was only to get their own decision approved, as required by the church's constitution.

They saw it as their job, as rulers, to do all of the thinking, and ours to agree with them. That is not the approach of a servant leadership, but of a controlling one. There is nothing wrong with leaders taking the lead and informing the wider membership of their own views and their recommendations. That is absolutely fine, in itself. Everything depends on *how* it is done, and on the *heart-attitude* of those making the recommendation. A real leader, with a genuine servant heart, is not determined to get his own way.

He will therefore suggest, advise, urge, warn, persuade, exhort, and so forth. But he does so in an attitude of humility and openness and with *a willingness to be questioned, challenged and contradicted*. In fact, a true shepherd positively *wants* to hear the views, and the advice, of those whom he is leading, even if they disagree with him. Indeed, he especially wants it then, because that is when it is most needed. For example, we were recently trying to think of a new name for our small house church. We therefore asked the whole membership for suggestions.

When we met to consider the suggestions, we positively asked for modifications and further proposals. We were not just 'willing' to receive these. We genuinely wanted them. I was also anxious not to rush anybody, so I suggested, on two occasions, that instead of putting the existing options to a final vote, we should wait for the next meeting. I wanted to give the quieter members more time to weigh up the proposed new names in private, or among ourselves, and to think of any reasons why they *didn't* sound right, or *shouldn't* be used.

In particular, I didn't want anybody to feel rushed into a decision, or into accepting anyone else's opinion. I especially wanted to avoid doing what the Leadership Team had done in the church we used to attend. I was also conscious that all the suggestions for new names had come from leaders. I didn't want anybody to feel embarrassed about disagreeing with any of these, or to think that it would be awkward to do so. Thus I urged people to point out any disadvantages to any of the names we were considering.

Another thing I did, which I think helped, was to ask for their current views of the proposals, but without putting it to a formal vote. I said: "*People can sometimes feel pressurised when taking a final vote. So, let's treat this as an informal expression of how you currently feel, and we won't treat the result as binding. Therefore, which of the proposed names would you choose if we were to vote on this today?*" Then I read out each of the proposed names and a particular one emerged as the clear front-runner.

We then adjourned the final decision to the next meeting to give people a chance to reconsider, in case anybody felt rushed. When we did take a formal vote on it later, the same name was chosen. But it was a useful exercise. It helped to make people feel more relaxed and free to express their views and reservations, rather than just go along with whatever the leaders were saying. It also made sure that nobody was pressurised. Also, the new name was felt to be one which we had *all* had a genuine hand in choosing. Nobody felt it had been imposed upon them,

The crafty way in which the Leadership Team tried to ensure that ‘Gregory’ was appointed as Senior Minister by making him the only candidate

This is another story about ‘Gregory’, an assistant minister in a church I used to be part of. The Senior Minister, Carl, was leaving, so his position was going to become vacant. Gregory was keen to take the role and the Leadership Team wanted him. So they set about making sure he would get the job. The proposal was that applicants for the position of Senior Minister would be taken “*only from the existing full time ministers of the church*”. That may sound like a ‘pool’ but it actually consisted of only two assistant ministers, one of whom, ‘Norman’, was exceptionally lazy. He had also had time off for stress and was, by this stage, on even lighter duties.

It was obvious that Norman would never apply for the position, so Gregory was, in effect, the only real candidate. Nevertheless, it was presented to the church as if it was a choice between Norman and Gregory. The Leadership Team then called a brief meeting at the end of a Sunday service, and said they wanted to limit the pool of candidates to the existing staff of the church, Norman and Gregory. But they were well aware that Norman would never apply for the position. His name was only kept in the running to give the false impression that the Church would be offered a choice.

Gregory was going to be the only candidate, as they already knew, and fully intended. It was not a formal Members’ Meeting, so no official vote was taken, but they wanted to see whether they would get away with limiting the ‘pool’ to just Norman and Gregory. Even a manipulative leadership team can sometimes feel unsure as to whether they have gone too far. They wanted to avoid the embarrassment of formally proposing Norman and Gregory as the only candidates, only to have that rejected.

So, they used the age-old technique of obtaining advance warning of dissent in the ranks by running the idea ‘up the flagpole’ and seeing how many ‘saluted’. If not too many objected they would feel safe to go ahead and make the formal proposal at a proper Members’ meeting. If not, they could retreat and reconsider their approach, without losing face, because it would never have been a formal proposal, but merely a ‘thought’. They discovered they had gone too far. The members were in an assertive mood and some of them spoke up, which was unusual.

They urged the Leadership Team to rethink their approach and to open up the application process by advertising the position nationally, to allow external candidates to apply. That should have been done in the first place. At least it should in the case of that church, given that they were operating a traditional model of paid church leadership. My own belief is that it is unbiblical to operate in that way and that they should actually have had unpaid local elders. But, be that as it may, the point is they were operating a traditional system and were seeking to manipulate its dealings.

At the next full Members’ Meeting the feelings of the wider membership were even more intense. There was a lot of pent-up frustration about the ongoing financial mismanagement and the repeated appeals for more giving to get the church out of one crisis after another. That discontent burst out and several people, who never normally said a word, asked sharp questions and raised objections. It must have been a chastening experience for the Leadership Team. They had probably expected some slight agitation, but were not prepared for what they got.

Some of them looked visibly shaken. Of course, it would never have happened if they hadn't taken the members for granted for so long and treated them as if they were taxpayers, who could be called upon endlessly to pay more and more. The leadership had gone too far and it resulted in a letting off of steam on a scale that the church had not seen for a long time. That said, it didn't make any difference in the end. The Leadership Team went ahead with their own plans, ignored the members' views, and did not advertise the position.

It is possible that some individuals on the Leadership Team may have had other applicants in mind that they would have wanted to consider, including external candidates. If so, their feelings were not made known to the members. A particular man, whom we will call 'Ivor' had been a Trustee of that church, but had resigned in the past because he was uneasy about how its decisions were being reported to the wider church. On more than one occasion, the church was told that the Trustees' recommendation was "*unanimous*".

Yet Ivor knew that it wasn't actually unanimous because he himself had disagreed, or expressed reservations, or others had. But the membership were never told any of this. Ivor could have stood up at a Members' Meeting to protest about how things were being inaccurately portrayed, but he never did. He was gentle and he didn't want to cause a scene or embarrass the other Trustees or the Leadership Team. So, he just quietly resigned, without revealing any of his misgivings in public.

Even after the meetings, the Leadership Team still ignored the members' views and only interviewed Gregory.

The Leadership Team may have been chastened by the impassioned mood of the members. But they obviously weren't chastened enough, because they proceeded to completely ignore the members' wishes. They made some soothing noises, and purported to listen, but then went full steam ahead with their original plans. For a time they continued to give the impression that Norman was still a potential candidate. But nothing was done to advertise the vacancy, or to seek further candidates in any other way.

After a while, even Norman's theoretical candidacy disappeared, as he was appointed to another role, in youth work for a national organisation. He must have known for a long time, and so must some of the other leaders, that he was never actually going to apply for the position of Senior Minister. Yet, nobody said anything. It suited their purposes to keep up the appearance of a choice for as long as possible. When Norman accepted that youth work role, Gregory became the only candidate. But they still did not advertise the position, even though that had been specifically asked for at the full Members' Meeting.

They just rode the storm until it passed. They knew the unrest would die down after a while, and it did. People realised they were not going to be listened to and stopped protesting. Therefore, the Leadership Team got their man in the end. Gregory was appointed as the only candidate, although some voted against him, even though no other name was on the ballot. The reason I am telling these stories about Sebastian, James and Gregory is that the conduct of the Leadership Team was wrong. If it had occurred in some business or political party, it would have been said to be corrupt.

Yet, God expects far less from unbelieving businessmen and politicians than from Christians, especially leaders. What those leaders did was wicked because they consistently over-rode the wishes of the members and made sure they got their own way. They knew more than unbelievers know and they are, therefore, expected to operate to a higher standard. They may not realise it, but God holds them (and you and me) accountable. We may all be surprised at the Judgment Seat to learn what He thought of such devious tricks, all of which He sees and remembers.

The manipulative way in which the Chairman of Trustees at a Members' meeting prevented any contrary view being expressed

Maybe you feel the examples I am giving are just one-off incidents and don't prove any wider pattern. If so, let me give another example of what happened in a church Members' meeting some years ago, after 'Sebastian' had been appointed as a trainee minister. Shortly afterwards, the church found itself in another financial crisis and the leaders called a Members' meeting to discuss it. In the meeting shortly *after* Sebastian's appointment, the financial problems were brought to the members' attention. The meeting was chaired by one of the Leadership Team, 'Bernard'.

It was a meeting to discuss a serious financial shortfall. At a personal level, Bernard was a very charming, extrovert, friendly person and an absolute pleasure to be with. I emphasise that, because even delightful men like him, *when operating in a leadership role*, frequently adopt manipulative tactics and pressurise people into doing what the leadership wants. Therefore don't make the mistake of thinking that anyone who is charming and friendly would never do that. They can, and they do. Indeed, it is common, because the very model of church leadership enables, and even encourages, them to be manipulative.

The expenditure of the church was now greater than the income, and something had to be done. One option, and probably the right one, was to look open-mindedly at redundancies, pay cuts, or at least reducing the hours of the staff. In any business, or even in a charity, those possibilities would have been considered, but not in that church. Bernard began the meeting by telling us about the financial shortfall. But, before the members had any opportunity to speak, he made it very difficult for anybody to suggest any pay cuts, reductions in hours, or redundancies.

He said emphatically, as if it was self-evident, "I know that none of you will even want to consider pay cuts or redundancy. That would, obviously, be out of the question and none of us would want that." Saying that, right at the start, had a crushing effect. It made it impossible for all but the bravest person to then speak up and suggest any of those things. I believe he knew it would have that effect, and that that was precisely why he said it. He wanted all contrary views to be silenced at the outset by making anyone who disagreed look like a bad person, with no compassion.

If redundancies and pay cuts were so unthinkable, why did he need to say it at all? If a thing goes without saying, it doesn't need to be said. He said it to put the question out of bounds, and to pressurise members into silence. Otherwise, somebody would have raised it, and he did not want to allow any chance of that. The Leadership Team wanted the problem solved in one way only - by the members giving more money. So, Bernard's first task was to first rule out any discussion of reducing expenditure.

Step two was for the leaders to pressurise members into giving more money, and it worked. After that meeting some of them gave even more and the shortfall was temporarily solved. Some might call that a happy ending and assume that God must have been pleased. But I think He was grieved that His people were being milked, like a herd of cows, simply so that leaders could get what they wanted. I believe God also showed me a little of how He felt about the sly way that meeting was conducted, not only by Bernard as the mouth piece, but by the whole Leadership Team.

I felt appalled and was angry on the members' behalf. Yet very few of them had any idea that they were being exploited and manipulated. Some may have felt something was wrong, but they were probably unable to put their finger on it and would have assumed they must be mistaken. I felt that God also impressed it upon me that I needed to write about it so that others, who are being similarly manipulated in other churches, would have their eyes opened. I believe God wants them to see what is being done in churches all over the world, how it is achieved, and why it is wrong.

Several months later, the church rushed through the appointment of James, and the same financial shortfall arose again. I believe the leaders had known that that would arise, just as it had when Sebastian was appointed. At any rate, when that next crisis arose, the leaders solved it in the same way. They

put pressure on members and manipulated them into giving yet more. In the 'crisis' meeting, when explaining how this new shortfall had arisen, Bernard said "*The Leadership Team has recently given pay rises to all the staff*".

One person at the Members' meeting that night was too timid to say anything, but later she said privately "I did wonder why they gave them all pay rises in the first place, given that there was no money, and especially as there's a recession. Hardly any of the members are getting pay rises in their jobs". That must have occurred to others, but none of them had the courage to say it at the meeting. So the leaders got away with it, as usual. Moreover, nobody ever asked the members if they wanted the leaders to get a pay rise. It was all done behind the scenes by the Trustees.

There is a crucial difference between skilful, diplomatic chairmanship and the manipulation of a meeting or group.

Bernard had manipulated a members' meeting to get what the Leadership Team wanted. In doing so, I believe he misused his position as the Chairman. That requires us to ask what a chairman is entitled to do when chairing a meeting. He has to lead to some extent, and to guide and manage those present, but how far can he go? What can he not do, and when are the lines crossed, such that he moves into manipulation rather than chairmanship? I have chaired many meetings in business, politics and churches, and I would say that the legitimate objectives of a chairman are:

- a) To maintain order and civility within the meeting and prevent people misbehaving.
- b) To achieve the purposes of the meeting and to ensure the agenda is covered properly and fully so that sound decisions can be made.
- c) To keep the discussion relevant, and in line with the agenda, so that the conversation is not side-tracked into irrelevant issues.
- d) To protect the meeting from those who would hijack it, manipulate its outcome, or prevent others from being heard.
- e) To ensure that all views are heard and that every section is allowed to speak, not just those who support the leadership's opinions or proposals.
- f) To limit the time taken up by the confident, talkative members and to ensure adequate time is given to the quiet, timid members.
- g) To act with integrity on behalf of *all* people concerned, not just one sub-section with whom he personally agrees, or whose favour he seeks.
- h) To keep the meeting within the letter and spirit of the procedural rules and never to abuse the procedures to achieve his own purposes.
- i) To make possible the expression of contrary views and criticism so that the church or other organisation gets to hear things which need to be heard, not just the party line.

Above all, a chairman needs a strong sense of right and wrong, and has to be guided by conscience. His aim must always be to act with integrity and without fear or favour. He needs to be keenly aware that God is taking note, not only of what is said and done, but also of any underlying motives or hidden agenda. If Bernard had conducted himself properly he would have been aware of the Leadership Team's objection but he would have said, at least to himself:

"I am here tonight to serve the overall interests of the whole church, not just the leaders. Moreover, my job is to enable every member to express their views, not to persuade them to accept the leaders' views. Therefore, I will not serve my own purposes, or those of any person or group. Neither will I unfairly curtail any person's freedom to speak."

One leader I knew used to count the members' votes on his own, in another room. Then he disposed of the ballot papers, so nobody could verify what he said the result was.

This occurred in a different church, led by 'Norris', the full-time paid leader, with a group of unpaid elders below him. He used to blatantly fix the votes, not just manipulate people over how to vote. He literally took the ballot papers away with him, into a side room, and counted them on his own. Then he even disposed of all the ballot papers, so that nobody could ever check what he said the result had been! Nobody was present with him to verify the count, as is obviously necessary in any properly conducted vote. He made sure of that.

Yet, none of the members were bold enough to object, or to question his honesty, in case it might cause offence. They assumed it would be wrong to make such a suggestion, or even to imply any impropriety. Therefore, nothing was ever said and he just carried on. Unsurprisingly, Norris never lost any argument. The votes always seemed to go his way. He simply made up whatever figures he wanted. Or he could dispose of some of the ballot papers from unhelpful people who had voted the 'wrong' way and then write out new ones, in the privacy of the counting room.

It is extraordinary enough for that to happen, but it is even more amazing that nobody ever objected. They didn't dare. Norris knew that, and traded on it. He knew it would take an exceptionally assertive person to say: "*We think you might be fiddling the counting of the votes, so we'd like to have someone else there with you to watch you and check the figures*". That is what should have been said, but it never was, and he knew it never would be. Manipulative people are highly skilled at knowing what they can get away with and how unassertive, or gullible, their victims are.

They can also sense how much the people currently know and whether their eyes have opened yet. I can remember various occasions when I have realised what a leader was doing, or what his real motives were. As soon as that occurs they can instantly tell that you know what they are doing. Their whole demeanour then alters. They begin to regard you with suspicion and contempt, not because *you* are doing wrong, but because they know that you have realised that *they* are. From that point on, they will see you as a threat, and treat you as such.

The manipulative use of a prayer meeting about finances to "guilt trip" members into giving more money

When Carl's church was in a financial crisis they called a prayer meeting. That is reasonable enough, in itself, but the problem is it turned into an attempt to make members feel guilty. They were "got at" and made to feel responsible for the crisis and that they should give more money. That is a vital warning sign. Be wary of any person who makes you feel *guilty*. It is not a valid way of influencing others. We can appeal to people, inform them, and even persuade them. But we can never do so on the basis of making them feel guilty if they choose not to help.

Any appeal which is conducted in that way is not of God, because it is manipulation. God *convicts* people, by pointing out their sin and urging them to repent. But He never causes us to feel guilt or condemnation. That is what Satan does, which is why one of his names is the 'accuser'. Therefore, whenever such tactics are used, have the discernment to see it. Moreover, have the confidence to trust your judgement, and the courage to act upon it, by refusing to give. God does not want you to be manipulated, whether by guilt, condemnation, or any other way.

He wants all financial giving to be done in genuine freedom, by those who freely choose to do so. God wants all giving to be a pleasure and to be done joyfully. Any form of manipulation whatsoever is the very opposite of what God wants. It does not honour Him if you give in to it. Be brave and refuse to give anything at all to a manipulator. On the contrary, go even further. Stand up and ask them what they are doing and tell them to stop it. They are not working for God, but for themselves and are pursuing their own interests, not His.

‘Mark’ was so traumatised by the reaction he got when he questioned a church leader that he was still phobic about doing so, over 50 years later.

If you are in any doubt about the damage that can be done by abusive, domineering leaders, consider what happened to ‘Mark’. He was in his mid-seventies when he told me his story, but he was still affected by an incident which occurred when he was seventeen, nearly sixty years earlier. I came to learn of this because I noticed how nervous Mark became if there was any possibility of upsetting a church leader, or of being taken to be questioning or contradicting them. I therefore probed a little to find out what he was so phobic about and why.

It emerged that when he was seventeen he had questioned the pastor of the church he was then in. The pastor did not like the question and tore into Mark, slapping him down and putting him “in his place”. Mark learned from that incident that you must never question or disagree with pastors. He found the incident so traumatic that he was still emotionally scarred by it, six decades later. It was still affecting him, not only at an emotional level, but in how he conducted himself within the church, especially when speaking to, or about, leaders.

It shows how much damage can be done by an abusive leader, especially to those who are young, timid, sincere, or naïve, and see the leader as an “authority figure”. A leader does have authority, *but not of that type*. It is primarily the authority to serve and to put himself in danger for the sake of the congregation. He also has the right to warn, advise, help and teach. However, he *never* has a right to command, abuse, use, exploit or control. Every leader needs to realise all of that and to reflect regularly on what Jesus will have to say about his leadership style at the Day of Judgment.

The mere fact that a leader is charming, extrovert and sociable does not mean that he can’t be a manipulator or controller.

This is a really vital point, which needs to be strongly emphasised. If not, you may fail to recognise manipulative or controlling leaders because they seem to be too ‘nice’ to behave in such ways. In my experience, some of the most devious, manipulative, controlling leaders I have come across were also charming and extrovert at a personal level. Thus they could be fun to be with, and yet still behave very wrongly. That is not always the case, but the point is that it can be, and often is.

Indeed, why would it be otherwise? A leader who wishes to manipulate and control others is hardly likely to come across as odious and rude, if he can help it. At least he won’t want to do so, until and unless you have seen through him and discerned his real purposes. Then he will show you his teeth, but generally not before then. Be wise enough to see this point and to judge everybody, including leaders, by their fruit, the integrity of their character, and their handling of God’s Word. Never do so on the basis of their personality, humour, charm or ‘niceness’.