



SERVANT SHEPHERD

Avoiding Spiritual Abuse
as a Pastor

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CONTENTS

| | Page number |
|--|-------------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| 1. What is spiritual abuse? | 5 |
| 2. Examples of abusive leaders in Scripture | 8 |
| 3. Common roots of spiritual abuse | 11 |
| 4. The right kind of authority | 14 |
| 5. Boundaries to leadership authority | 17 |
| 6. Responding well when spiritual abuse has occurred | 20 |
| A hymn for leaders | 24 |

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Introduction

It is simple to dismiss the subject of spiritual abuse.

It is rationalized away as follows. 'Therapy culture dominates modern life. Much of our behaviour and attitudes have become shaped by society's emphasis on the fact that you must never hurt anyone's feelings. People have become over-sensitive and over-react when church leaders are a little brusque in their challenges or direct in their sermons. These days it is too easy to play the "victim card."'

But whereas our cultural environment has affected the churches, and not every claim to have been mistreated by those in positions of leadership is true, nevertheless the Bible itself warns against church leaders misusing their power.

Never darken the doors of a church again

Shockingly and sadly, physical and sexual abuse within the church is a reality. This booklet is not meant to address those cruel, complex and criminal actions which hit the headlines. It is about more ordinary matters. There are lesser degrees of misbehaviour and bullying on the part of leaders, which can leave people deeply hurt emotionally. Sometimes it results in their faith in Christ in pieces – perhaps wrecked irreparably. Some who have been enthusiastic Christians vow never to darken the doors of a church again.

When this happens, God is angry. Listen to his words against those leaders who should care for his people, but actually injure or neglect them: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! ...You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally...I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock,' Ezekiel 34.1-10.

In a parable, the Lord Jesus warned those who are 'put in charge of the servants in his household' that if they are wicked and 'begin to beat their fellow servants', they can expect severe punishment at his Second Coming, Matthew 24.45-51.

The apostles frequently warn church leaders against 'lording it' over God's flock which has been entrusted to their care, 2 Corinthians 1.24; 1 Peter 5.3; 2 Corinthians 11.20.

We are fallible and sinful

The subject of spiritual abuse needs to be taken seriously by pastors. We believe all people are sinful, including church leaders and elders like us. We are all quite capable of ill-treating people, either inadvertently or knowingly. We all have a tendency to cover up our failings. We need to look at ourselves.

This booklet will help us begin to think through this hugely important matter, that we might be faithful and wise in our pastoral care. The Lord is able to make us good shepherds of his sheep for his glory and the benefit of his flock.

1: What is spiritual abuse?

Some people dispute the usefulness of the term spiritual abuse. But the following definition helpfully clarifies and grounds the topic.

‘Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it.

‘This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requests for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.’¹

Key components

It is worth noting some of the key components in this definition.

- It covers a broad range of possible unjust behaviours in which the perpetrator habitually treats people, whether deliberately or not, as lesser beings, cf. Genesis 1.26, 27.
- It involves the desire to demean or control others on the part of the abuser, with the facts of what is going on being kept under wraps, cf. 2 Corinthians 4.2.
- It uses (or rather misuses) the Bible and the God-given authority of a church leadership position to accomplish these things, cf. Mark 10.42; 2 Corinthians 4.5.
- This abuse of power results in people being hurt emotionally and their faith harmed.

A leader might behave like this towards the people of his church for a number of reasons.

It may be that he is naturally an overbearing and quick-tempered man who has somehow (wrongly) ended up in ministry, Titus 1.7. It might be that he has an un-crucified egotistical attitude towards ministry which sees the church as simply a

¹ *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, by Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, SPCK, 2019, page 22

vehicle for his own reputation and his idol of 'success'. It may be that he has convinced himself that he is so gifted and so crucial a man that somehow the advance of God's kingdom is tied up with him and that to stand in his way or question him is to resist the purposes of God. It may be simply because a pastor is perpetually tired and irritable. These are just some well-springs of abuse.

Who is meant to serve whom?

Whatever the exact reasons for abuse, the bottom line is that leadership is being conducted in an unjust and self-centred way. The concern is to control people rather than to cultivate them and help them to grow as Christians. People are used or intimidated, not served by such leaders.

There is nothing wrong with ambition in ministry. But notice how Jesus explains how this is to be expressed. 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,' Mark 10.42-45.

The temptation to misuse power faces all pastors. Therefore, we must all beware.

The tools of abuse

It is sadly true that every tool in a pastor's ministry kit, with the possible exception of private prayer, can be used to subtly exalt self and push through our own agendas and therefore become a means to potential spiritual abuse.

The pulpit can become a podium for the self-promotion of the preacher and a means by which people are told what to think rather than helped to discover and be convinced of the truth of God's word for themselves, Acts 17.11.

Private counselling can be a tool for a church member becoming increasingly dependent on the pastor rather than being encouraged, with God's help, to stand on their own two feet. They feel unable to make any decisions without the pastor's say so, 2 Timothy 3.6.

Public prayer can become a crafty propaganda broadcast, denouncing those in the congregation who fail to see things the pastor's way. 'Lord, open their eyes.'

Bring them to repentance!

A controlling pastor may well try to pack his leadership team with 'Yes men' and impressionable acolytes rather than having men who might hold him to account. This team becomes an elite group and the carrot of possible admission to that special group or its fringes acts as a lever with which to influence and exploit people. There is an 'insider' / 'outsider' dynamic used to manipulate or push people around.

Paul David Tripp says this: 'Here is the scary reality. In ministry the way you pursue your idols is by doing ministry.'² And when pastors pursue their idols people get damaged.

Covering up

Spiritual abuse does not only mean hurting people, it extends to leaders covering up what has happened. Power is misused to hide mistakes and suppress exposure or enquiry. Leaders can censor what is to be divulged to the church.

Individuals are leant on to keep quiet. Potential 'whistle-blowers' are told 'It's not like that. It's just your perception.' They are encouraged to doubt themselves. Yet they know what they know. This can be mentally disturbing for people. The term sometimes used is 'gaslighting'.

The 'motives' for hiding the facts are said to be such concerns as to protect the reputation of Christ, or the unity of the church or 'not rocking the boat' of the Lord's blessing and the urgency of mission. But this really won't do. The kingdom of God can never be allied to injustice or falsehoods, Psalm 94.20.

Those who do have the temerity to raise questions or try to delve into the facts of what has gone on can be dismissed as sinful gossips or divisive troublemakers who don't know the true facts. And it is emphasized that Scripture condemns such people, Titus 3.10,11. This is spiritual abuse.

² LEAD: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church, by Paul David Tripp, Crossway, 2020, page 90

2: Examples of abusive leaders in Scripture

Spiritually abusive leaders are found among the people of God. All through the Bible we find examples of leaders who misuse their power.

Old Testament

The three great leadership offices in Israel were those of prophet, priest and king. In each category we repeatedly find those who misuse their office, often for some kind of personal glory or gain. Here is just a sample.

Prophets

We are warned against those prophets who think so much of themselves that they mistakenly believe that their own imaginations are on a par with the word of the LORD, Ezekiel 13.2. There are those who, more crassly, simply shape their declarations to please people, promote their own popularity, and feed themselves, Micah 3.5-7. They are leaders who despise justice and replace it with what appeals to them, Micah 3.11.

Priests

Eli's sons acted as priests at the tabernacle in Shiloh. Of them we read that they abused their position and 'slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting,' 1 Samuel 2.22. For 16 years the priests misused the gifts of cash meant for the repair of the temple during the days of King Joash, 2 Kings 12.1-8.

Kings

Samuel warned Israel that if they had a king to rule over them, his power would almost inevitably morph into oppression and they would cry for relief, 1 Samuel 8.18. David abused his position in trying to cover his adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband killed, 2 Samuel 11.14,15. Solomon's reign ended in oppression. His successor, young Rehoboam, split the nation through his insensitive attempt to 'lord it' over his people, 1 Kings 12.1-17.

New Testament

Awareness of the possibility of self-serving leaders seems to increase as we enter the NT.

Famously the Pharisees tied heavy burdens on their followers and would not lift a finger to help them, while desiring prominence for themselves, Matt. 23.4-7.

Infamously, Judas, the apostle, fell from his privileged calling as he abused his position in betraying his Master for personal gain, Matthew 26.14-16.

Paul warns the churches against appointing those as their leaders who have shown themselves to be overbearing, quick-tempered or quarrelsome, Titus 1.7; 1 Timothy 3.3. He particularly sets himself against the appointment to leadership of those prone to pride, 1 Timothy 3.6. Pride is the mark of the devil.

We are told on many occasions to beware of false teachers. Those who exploit God's people are false teachers, 2 Peter 3.3. Jude sees them as characterized by arrogance, 'shepherds who feed only themselves,' Jude v8, 12.

All this is a million miles away from the pastoral care of Jesus who said, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light,' Matthew 11.28-30.

Saul

Perhaps a particularly enlightening example of an abusive leader in Scripture is that of Israel's first king.

Strangely, sometimes God's blessing on a church triggers the misuse of power. King Saul began as a humble man, chosen by God, 1 Samuel 10.21, 22. But having a victory over the Ammonites and a taste of glory, he could not get enough of it. God had blessed and Saul began to bask in the attention that came his way. He wanted more, even if it meant hurting others. He was desperate to keep his public profile, 1 Samuel 15.30, 31 and jealous of all rivals, 1 Samuel 18.7-9, persecuting David and mistreating his faithful son Jonathan, 1 Samuel 20.30-33. He was a leader who abused others for the sake of prominence.

He had actually taken the road of a narcissist. In his book *When Narcissism comes to Church*,³ Chuck DeGroat notes six primary characteristics of the narcissist to watch out for and it is possible to see them all in King Saul.

- All decision-making centres on them
- Impatience or lack of ability to listen to others

³ See *When Narcissism comes to Church*, by Chuck DeGroat, IVP(USA), 2020

- Delegating without giving proper authority or with too many limits
- Feelings of entitlement
- Feeling threatened or intimidated by other talented staff
- Needing to be the best and brightest in the room

Sadly, some pastors and elderships walk the same path. A preaching ministry is blessed by God. People get saved. A church grows. Humility and ascribing all the glory to God, somehow gets forgotten. The congregation put their leaders on a pedestal. People are talking about this church and the pastor and his leadership team adore it. And if they have to exploit or coerce willing helpers behind the scenes or deal roughly with others who are 'in the way' to get done what they think needs to happen, so be it. And that becomes, not just a forgivable one-off, but a regular occurrence. They have become jealous for their reputation and suddenly individuals don't matter. You begin to hear things like, 'Well you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.'

3: Common roots of spiritual abuse

Scripture declares that ‘the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?’ Jeremiah 17.9. Notice that phrase, ‘above all things’. Because this is the state of our sinful hearts it is impossible to uncover all the roots of abuse definitively. Here we can only suggest three common factors. These are related to ecclesiastical polity, pastoral personality and congregational vulnerability.

Ecclesiastical polity

Even the apostles saw themselves as ‘only servants’ 1 Corinthians 3.5 – not lords. But many cases of spiritual abuse come about because a leadership team has adopted an unbiblical and un-Christ-like view of their power in the church, Matthew 20.25-28. To cut a long story short, only they are to make the decisions and they construe any disagreement with or questioning of their decisions as rebellion and a sin which must be repented of. Their view of their authority, which is often deceptively cloaked as being ‘for the good of the church’, has actually painted them into a corner which will inevitably lead to spiritual abuse. They Rule – with a capital R. This attacks both the dignity of their people as made in God’s image and the congregation’s status as the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12.27; Galatians 3.26; Matthew 18,17, 18. It is ‘heavy shepherding’.

A frequently quoted verse with such authoritarian leaders is this: ‘Obey your leaders and submit to their authority,’ Hebrews 13.17. That settles the question for them. They are to be obeyed in whatever they decide as long as it is not overtly sinful.⁴

However, that is to forget the context. The readers of Hebrews have already been told to ‘remember your leaders who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,’ Hebrews 13.7,8. These original leaders were of a previous generation. But they serve as rubrics for all subsequent leadership; hence the connection between their lives and Jesus, who never changes but is always the same. Their work was to speak, teach and live the word of God – the Scriptures. And that defines the role of leadership. Of course, the church is to obey their elders and submit as they teach God’s word.

⁴ Another verse they use, quoted way out of context, is Psalm 105.15: ‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.’

But these authoritarian elders insist they are to be obeyed in the same way that Scripture should be obeyed in areas where Scripture gives freedom and allows for liberty of conscience, Galatians 5.1; Romans 14.1-15.7. This is bound to lead to spiritual abuse.

Pastoral personality

Some pastors (and elders) do not aid but actually obscure their people's personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian's identity, and therefore security, is intrinsically vertical. 'Our citizenship is in heaven', Philippians 3.20. 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!' 1 John 3.1. We access these magnificent blessings by faith in Christ as we 'fix our eyes on Jesus', Hebrews 3.1; 12.2, and his finished work.

Functionally, church leaders should enable us to 'see Jesus', John 12.21. But some pastors can actually hinder things by drawing people's eyes to themselves. People's attention shifts from the vertical to the horizontal. This happens in two different ways.

First, a bright, joyful, gifted personality understandably attracts people. Some pastors are naturally charismatic characters. You mean no harm to anyone, but people's tendency is to idolize you. But if you are a good pastor you will not try to capitalize on that selfishly. In fact, you will do your utmost to play yourself down and to play Jesus up, John 3.30. You will humble yourself, Philippians 2.5-11. You will use your giftedness to point to Jesus.

But *second*, a dominating pastor or elder will also cause us to look horizontally for our identity and security. He makes us desperate for his approval and sometimes even afraid of him. We will be more concerned about what he thinks of us than what Jesus thinks of us and has done for us. 'And what people fail to understand is that wherever you look for identity will then exercise ruler-ship over your heart and, in so doing, will direct the way you live your life'.⁵

When a pastor's personality, good or bad, controls and rules our attention, a kind of spiritual abuse is occurring because he is obscuring Christ from us.

⁵ See *LEAD: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church*, by Paul David Tripp, Crossway, 2020, page 164

Certainly, if he has already unfairly given people a hard time, they will find it extremely difficult to listen to his preaching or hear the message of Christ through him. They will be functionally robbed of their identity in Christ. When they come to church, their first thought is of the pastor, not the Lord Jesus.

Congregational vulnerability

Pastors need to be kind. We should have a very compassionate heart for all our people. With that in mind we need to realize that there is a particular group of people within our churches who it is very easy to abuse and exploit, sometimes almost without knowing it.

I am talking about those who come from a broken background or who are, for some reason, fragile and emotionally in deficit. They may be those whose earthly family is dysfunctional and has not treated them well. They may be those who are single and who are lonely and desperate to feel wanted and part of a family. They may be those who have suffered injustice instead of love at the hands of others. Often these dear people, more than others, look towards the church to be their family. They are not wrong to do that. Christ's church should be a family, a home and a refuge, for all his people, Mark 3.31-34. Think how often the apostles address the members of a church as 'brothers and sisters'. Christ's new commandment is that we love one another as he has loved us, John 13.34, 35.

But if these folk look upon the church as their family, then they will often regard the pastor or leaders of the church as fathers in that family. Again, there is a sense in which that is right, 1 Timothy 3.4,5. In their vulnerable condition they will have a particular need to feel accepted, wanted and welcomed by you. You are their 'father'. Some of them would do almost anything for you. That gives you great power over them and therefore an awful responsibility not to misuse the regard in which they hold you and the position they have given you in their lives. To do anything less than love them is to abuse them. If their church lets them down, at a human level, they have nowhere else to go.

If we have that 'fatherly' position in people's hearts, Paul tells us how we must use it. 'You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory,' 1 Thessalonians 2.12.

4: The right kind of authority

We live in a world which has become explicitly self-centred in its approach to life. In Scripture, the last days are seen as inhabited by people who have generally become 'lovers of themselves,' 2 Timothy 3.2. Life is seen as about fulfilling your own dreams, ticking off the items on your bucket list. In such a society, all authority tends to have a bad press. Not only can it be used unjustly, but also it may well stand in the way of you in getting what you want.

But God has put authority structures within the world – in the state, the church and the family. Church leaders *do* have an authority (under God's word). They *are* meant to influence, guide and help shape people's lives. But, let's remind ourselves that the kind of authority exercised in the church should be markedly different from that practised in a sinful, self-centred world.

At the Last Supper, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus said to those about to become his apostles: 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves,' Luke 22.25-27.

Wrong roads

Here are two ways of using authority of which our world is very aware and are used to get results. But they are out of place in God's church.

The professional approach

We are familiar with this from the business world. Customers and staff have rights according to a contract. To be 'professional' is to be detached and deal with people solely in terms of the legal provisions. It is just and correct, but there is to be only superficial interaction – no emotion and no involvement with the person. It is, in fact, to deal with people as if they were sub-human, for God has made people with emotions and for relationship, Mark 12.29-31. Many church people feel spiritually abused when they are treated 'professionally' by the leadership. It is just and correct, but there is no love or 'brotherliness.'

The martial approach

Here we have the use of strong-arm tactics. The state has to use military force to defend the citizens of a country, Romans 13.1-7. Criminal gangs use threats and

bullying to achieve their ends and the police have to oppose them with the full force of the law. But using force is inappropriate for the church. As we have seen, leaders are not to 'lord it' over the church, 1 Peter 5.3. The words 'lording it' are related in the OT to Adam and Eve's subduing the animal kingdom, Genesis 1.28 and Israel's conquest of the Promised Land, Numbers 21.24; 32.22. When we threaten or bully the people of the church in some way, we treat them as beasts or enemies.

Paul's words to church leaders faced with opposition are these: 'And the Lord's servant must not quarrel, instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance...' 2 Timothy 2.24,25.

Familial authority

There is a different kind of authority which shapes people and influences them for good. It is loving authority, which is perhaps best illustrated by that of a father for his children.

Church leaders are men who should 'manage their family well', 1 Timothy 3.4. A father wins the respect of his children not via tyrannical threats or cold contractual dealings. He wins them by love. He is a servant shepherd of his family flock. They love him and he loves them. They respect him, knowing that he will always seek to do his best for them, even at personal cost to himself. It is this sort of fatherly authority which is the blueprint for church leadership (and no other). 'If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?' is the apostle's rhetorical question, 1 Timothy 3.5. If you do not love God's people, and in particular the people of your own congregation, you should not be in church leadership, Philippians 1.8.

That is not to say there is never to be any firm correction of church members. God the Father disciplines us, his children. But that discipline comes from a loving heart, Hebrews 12.6. He affectionately intends our good. The reason most church discipline today misfires, and fails to bring those who have gone astray to repentance and back to the church, is because the context of fulsome love is frequently missing. It doesn't feel like the leaders are disciplining you because they love you but because they are irritated or embarrassed or defensive or want to get their own back! The offender simply walks away with the justifiable thought, 'who wants to be part of such an unloving church anyway?'

Two kinds of wisdom

Good leadership requires godly insight. The argument of James 3, with its emphasis on how we use our words, applies principally to the role of teachers or pastors in the church, James 3.1.⁶ The chapter famously closes by comparing two kinds of wisdom – the earthly and the heavenly, James 3.13-18. Let us remind ourselves of the contrast:

Earthly wisdom

Bitterness
Envy of others
Selfish ambition
Boasting
Lies / denial of truth
Unspiritual / of the devil
Results in disorder and evil

Heavenly wisdom

Pure and Peace-loving
Considerate of others
Submissive
Full of mercy
Impartial
Sincere
Results in peace and righteousness

Let these two lists monitor of your pastoral dealings, your elders' discussions and your church meetings. The right kind of authority for church leaders flows from 'the wisdom that comes from heaven,' James 3.17. The use of this wisdom by leaders will win the respect and trust of church members because it is Christ-like. We won't have to 'call ourselves Benefactors', Luke 22.25. Such authority commends itself to everyone's consciences.

⁶ See *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, by Ben Witherington III, Apollos, 2007, page 481

5: Boundaries to leadership authority

The general philosophy which Jesus gave concerning how we treat other people is, of course, summed up in his well-known words, 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets,' Matthew 7.12. This encapsulates Jesus' new commandment of love very practically, John 13.34.

How do we want to be spoken to? How do we want to be treated? This approach respects the dignity, value and humanity of other people and applies to the work of church leaders just as much as it does to other Christians, if not more so. This formula for action sets godly boundaries on how leaders are meant to conduct their leadership.

Here are three principles to bear in mind regarding the limits of leadership authority.

Biblical sufficiency

The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, which reflects the general view of Reformed churches, states: 'The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or tradition of men.'⁷

The sufficiency of Scripture is declared by the apostle Paul: 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,' 2 Timothy 3.16,17. Christian teachers need nothing other than to teach the Bible in all its aspects to the church. It is wrong for pastors and leaders to try to bind people's consciences to anything which is not explicitly Biblical. Advice is one thing; insistence on obedience is another.

Personal liberty

God's word does not specify everything down to the last detail. It delineates a bounded space of right belief and behaviour. But within that space Christians

⁷ *The Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689*, Chapter 1, paragraph 6.

have freedom, John 8.31, 32. Thus there are areas in which Christians are at liberty to think for themselves and even take different points of view. This is to be respected by leaders. Thinking for ourselves in a godly way, is part of Christian maturity and church leaderships should promote maturity.

An example of this freedom is whether or not to marry. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul explains the pros and cons concerning matrimony. For himself, he has decided it is wisest to stay single, but he leaves other people free to decide for themselves, 1 Corinthians 7.7; 36, 37. We find a similar freedom as Paul discusses different approaches to matters of conscience in Romans 14.1 – 15.7, where in particular he forbids some from trying to push their views on others. This breaks the law of love. If even an apostle does not insist on his agenda in such areas then today's church leaders must not either. If they do, they are abusing their power.

Leadership transparency

There is a proper place for confidentiality when it is helpful. But generally speaking, we find Paul encouraging as much transparency as possible in the work of Christian leaders. 'We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God,' 2 Corinthians 4.2. Especially in matters of finance, Paul was keen always to be seen to do what was right, 2 Corinthians 8.20. He continually exercised himself to have a clear conscience, Acts 24.16 and was able to declare to the Corinthians, 'We have wronged no-one, we have corrupted no-one, we have exploited no-one', 2 Corinthians 7.2.

Expectations between church and leaders

Here is a suggestion. It may be helpful for a church to set out in a document the mutual expectations of the leadership and the membership. This should be agreed by everyone and be made explicit to those joining the church or becoming leaders of the church.

Such a document, rooted in Scriptural attitudes, might be roughly along the following lines:⁸

- *Expectations that the leaders have of members*

To pray for leaders and encourage them / To accept the doctrinal standards and

7 I am generally indebted to my friend John Horrocks for these thoughts.

constitution of the church / To listen carefully to leaders' proposals and evaluate them according to Scripture / To ask questions about proposals in a brotherly, respectful way / To support proposals wherever possible / To graciously explain why they cannot support what they deem unwise / To vote in a church meeting according to their own judgment / To generally support the activities of the church and undertake tasks requested of them / To support the church financially through regular giving / To share with leaders ideas of what they think might be helpful for the church / To recognize that leaders have different pressures on their time and make allowances / To recognize that leaders have their own struggles and prayerfully encourage them in difficult times / To be generally submissive and recognize that leaders must be allowed to lead / To inform leaders if they foresee problems developing in the church or with leaders' proposals / To discuss church business with other members with a heart that seeks the good of the church / To generally accept and support wherever possible well formulated changes and the decisions which are agreed by the church

- *Expectations that the membership have of leaders*

To lead by example, teaching, persuasion and love and not by commands and demands / To uphold the doctrine and follow the procedures of the church constitution / To provide honesty and integrity in all their dealings with church members / To take prayerful, reasonable but not intrusive interest in the lives of all church members / To support and care for church members, especially as they face difficulties in life / To respect the role of the family and not take over responsibilities normally kept within the family / To explain as thoroughly as possible proposals they make to the church as leaders / To listen carefully and in an open-minded, friendly way to issues that the members raise / To accept good proposals from members and not reject them simply because they have not originated in the leadership / To explain the reasons when such proposals are rejected / To show appreciation for members who take on works for the church and not to overload them / To admit when the leaders have made mistakes and apologize for them if necessary / To give church meetings as full as possible an account of issues which they are handling / To run church meetings in a cordial and unbiased way / To give church members sufficient notice of any proposals so they can think them through and discuss them / To ensure that minutes of church meetings are accurate.

Abiding by such agreed procedures could bring peace and joy to many churches.

6: Responding well when spiritual abuse has occurred

Sometimes leaders need to say ‘sorry.’ But many find it almost impossible to put their hands up and admit ‘we got it wrong’.

Why is that? After all, Scripture shows us plenty of leaders of God’s people who mess up and have to repent. Abraham, the very father of the faith, gets it wrong about Hagar but was at least prepared to eat humble pie before his wife Sarah, Genesis 16.6. Moses, marked by his humility, was not at all quick to defend himself when he was accused (even falsely) – he let the Lord do that, Numbers 12.3, 8. Sometimes, in the heat of the moment, he did get it wrong Deuteronomy 32.51. The apostle Paul publicly apologized when he had reacted badly to Ananias the high priest, Acts 23.5.

Pride

The first motive for being unwilling to apologize may be a worry that if they are seen to get too many things wrong, perhaps they are not very good leaders. No one likes ‘could do better’ on their school report. They think admission of failure might discourage the church. However, the answer is not to indulge in a cover up but to pull their socks up and do better. But the bottom-line motive for the ‘spin doctors’ of leadership, of course, will be old fashioned pride. Having to admit to failure pains the ego. But not to take the humble path is very dangerous. It was pride which transmogrified God’s servant, a glorious angel, into the prince of demons, 1 Timothy 3.6.

Trust

The vital ingredient for all good leadership is to win and deserve the trust of the congregation. The church has appointed you because they believe they can trust you. If they trust you as leaders then they will be willing to be led. But to insist you have got it right, when it’s quite clear you have got it wrong is to destroy that trust. (It’s even worse if the whole truth has been covered up and only comes out later. God’s people will then feel they have been deceived and betrayed – and how can they trust you then?)

But on the other hand, if leaders humbly acknowledge when they have made a mistake, in the long run, that will mark them out as honest men. They are not perfect (who is?) but they are straight in their dealings.

This encourages a church. Where there is such well-founded trust it also makes it

easier for the church to receive God's word when the pastor has to talk tough and be straight about the people's sins, because they know he loves them and is genuine, Proverbs 27.6. Not only so, but a humble apology can often clear up a situation, fellowship is restored and the church allowed to move on in harmony.

Caring

When there has been an occurrence of spiritual abuse, we need to care for those who have been hurt. Here are ten points (which require thoughtful expansion) to bear in mind.⁹

- Actively listen to the story and show you are taking it seriously
- Ensure the individual knows they are valued
- Do not immediately minimize, judge or defend the wrong or the church
- Be clear about the limits of confidentiality
- Let praying together about the situation be in the person's choice
- Avoid rushing to Matthew 18.15-17 on confronting the bully / bullies too quickly
- Do not use 1 Timothy 5.19 to immediately silence an individual's accusation
- Do not rush people to get them to forgive and reconcile too quickly
- Discuss the situation with those tasked with 'safeguarding' in the church if necessary¹⁰
- Ensure there is a robust procedure for dealing with abuse

A pastor or leadership team should think these things through for themselves in the light of Scripture. But let me comment briefly on three of these.

With regard to Matthew 18, if someone has been deeply hurt or traumatized by what has been said to them or the way they have been treated they will probably need some time to recover and become emotionally and spiritually strong enough to even think about talking face to face with those who have wounded them. This may take weeks, even months. Also, if it is something the whole eldership has got wrong and needs to be challenged about, that person should not be on their own when these things are talked through together. They need a friend / friends with them.

⁹ See *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, by Dr. Lisa Oakley & Justin Humphreys, SPCK, 2019, page 103

¹⁰ The relationship between elders and the safeguarding officer is sensitive. There must not be a power-play between the two. Some advocate an elder being the safeguarding officer, but others feel that he would not then be objective.

1 Timothy 5.19 reads, 'Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses'. This apostolic command is meant rightly to protect church leaders from unjust accusations. However, it must not be misused to cover up wrongdoing in which the hurt person was the only one present. Often abuse of all kinds takes place in one-to-one situations with no other witnesses. But that does not mean it should be dismissed. What Paul is after here is not the letter of the law of having another witness, but a proper and thorough investigation. Where there are no witnesses it may be right to pursue other lines of thought. 'Has this person making the accusation ever done such a thing before? Do they have a record of being a faithful and honest church member for many years?'

A first line of defence against, and procedure in dealing with, spiritual abuse is accountability. Make sure that a leadership team is not dominated by one or two men but includes within it those who will ask questions and not back off until they have straight answers. The kinds of characters who are tough enough to defend the truth of the gospel against error should also be those who are prepared to ensure integrity within the leadership, Titus 1.9; 1 Timothy 5.20.

Independent enquiry?

It should be possible to settle disputes and bring peace to the church by acting internally. Certainly, the apostle Paul expects that, 1 Corinthians 6.1-6. This may involve leaders and ordinary church members trusted by the congregation addressing the problem together.

However, sometimes brothers and sisters from outside the church may be required to address the problem fairly, in a way that is just and seen to be just. God is holy and therefore justice matters in his churches.

It may be that leaders (or others) from a nearby sister congregation, with the same form of church governance can help. If the church where the trouble has occurred is part of a trusted denomination or association of churches, they may be invited to get involved.

Two things need to be true of those invited to arbitrate.

First, they should be those in whom both sides of the trouble have confidence. If a church leadership has been accused of spiritual abuse, it will not settle problems in any way if that same leadership have appointed the arbitrators. It will not be seen as independent.

Second, make sure that those who are part of the independent enquiry actually have the time and the heart to do a thorough job. Troubles within churches are messy. It is understandable that those tasked with sorting things out might be tempted to skate over problems, or simply align themselves with one side in order to get their job over and done with. Don't appoint busy or pressurized people to this work.

‘May the God of peace,
who through the blood of the eternal covenant
brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great Shepherd of the sheep,
equip you with everything good for doing his will,
and may he work in us what is pleasing to him,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory for ever and ever.
Amen’
Hebrews 13.20,21

A Hymn for Leaders

Loosely to the tune *Blessed be the Tie that Binds*

Good leaders aren't there for themselves
Or to hide behind library shelves
To insist on their plans
Give a rap on the hands
To anyone who questions or delves

You are not some kind of elite
Who can never accept a defeat
Don't bully with threats
For God never forgets
Acts which are full of conceit

The church is the body of Christ
Which cost him his great sacrifice
So don't tell them lies
Pull wool over their eyes
Or be knowingly less than precise

For if you're an elder or pastor
You may just be courting disaster
When power is misused
And people abused
Just remember who's really the Master

Malcolm MacGregor
John Benton
2020