



THE BALANCED PASTOR

Challenges in caring for the church

John Benton

Foreword

This volume is an omnibus edition of three booklets written during 2020 and 2021. They are titled, *Servant Shepherds*, *Taming Dragons* and *Freedom and Humanity in the Churches*.

The stimulus for these emerged from situations I came across in the course of my work where I considered that either church leaderships had made huge mistakes or where, in my estimation, pastors and leaders themselves were being unfairly treated.

Church leaders generally do a great job. But it is possible for them to go wrong. They may misuse the people they are meant to care for. *Servant Shepherds* was written to encourage pastors, ministers and other leaders to care for their people well and to avoid spiritual abuse. The Bible has much to say on this matter.

But there is the other side of the coin. Sometimes congregations or members of a congregation can mount attacks of various kinds on a pastor. Individuals can go out of their way to be as awkward and difficult as possible, sometimes with the motive of getting rid of a leader. This can be extremely hurtful and will test the spiritual maturity of a leader to the limit. *Taming Dragons* was written to encourage leaders to handle such situations in a Christ-like and balanced way.

The third booklet, *Freedom & Humanity in the Churches* addresses the culture of church. Sometimes problems between leaders and congregations arise because the church has lost its vision. The aim and ethos of a church have become unhealthy, in some cases claustrophobic and legalistic, instead of being full of love and truth to the glory of Christ.

The world is changing and many challenges lie ahead for the churches. I hope that this volume might be a help and encouragement to leaders and to congregations alike as they seek to navigate a good path for the churches in coming years.

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Part 1

SERVANT SHEPHERD

Avoiding Spiritual Abuse
as a Pastor

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 they 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, wise and balanced 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

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

a 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. It brings balance to 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

⁸ 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

Part 2

TAMING DRAGONS?

A pastoral response to
destructive people in the church

Introduction

Dragons are mythical creatures that breathe fire and smoke, are covered with impenetrable scales, can do serious damage and often guard great treasure.

We are using these fantastic beasts as a metaphor for difficult people in a church¹ who can mount personal attacks on the leadership or the church generally, seem often to be impervious to counsel and may well obstruct the church moving forward in its vision.

What is a dragon?

A person is a dragon not because they have different ideas from the pastor but because of their **destructive actions and words with regard to the church** and its leadership.

It is a big mistake for pastors or leadership teams to treat everyone who doesn't see eye-to-eye with them as an enemy. Some Christians are not well taught, others may be immature or thoughtless. We need to love such folk. Also, church leaders are not infallible. It is only when a person is endangering the life of a church in a wilful and determined way that we should put them in the category of dragons.

And even then, we need to be slow to see them as enemies. Dragons can be very difficult customers and cause a pastor and a church a lot of pain and heartache. However, it is worth reminding ourselves from the start, that these folk are often (not always) true brothers and sisters in Christ. They may just be well-intentioned though forceful people who, from their own point of view at least, mean good for the church. They feel strongly though they see wrongly. And they are not necessarily beyond change. We have to remember that the church doesn't have the luxury of choosing its members. The Lord chooses them for us and we must work with those he has decided to send our way.

When it comes to trying to tame these dragons the words of the apostle Paul come immediately to mind: *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...*¹, 2 Timothy 2.24, 25. If those are the apostle's instructions concerning how to deal with false

¹ I am not the first person to use this metaphor. The book *Well-Intentioned Dragons*, by Marshall Shelley, published by Word Publishing in 1985 is one of a number which I think have taken up this picture.

Teachers, surely they must equally apply as we deal with wrong-headed and belligerent Christians.

How a dragon might benefit you

And though these people may wound us deeply and give us many a sleepless night, nevertheless the Lord can use them and their opposition for our good. The difficulties they cause can be used for our wisdom and sanctification.

With regard to wisdom, the great WWII general and later US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower reportedly would not make a tactical decision until he had talked it through with someone who strongly opposed it. He wanted any weaknesses in his thinking exposed before proceeding. That kind of exercise, even involving a destructive person, can also bring insight to humble leaders of a church.

Further, opposition and the 'friendly fire' which can hit us from people within the congregation, drives us to prayer. It leads us to lean on God more, which is the way to holiness. Our own frailty is exposed by a dragon. We may come to the end of our tether and so we see our need of God and his grace in a new way. A. W. Tozer wrote, 'It is doubtful that God can use any man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.' In our weakness God's strength is supplied as we call out to him. Once again, Paul has some striking words for us in this regard: *I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest upon me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong,*' 2 Corinthians 12.9, 10. These words are particularly applicable to us as pastors when we face dragons in our congregation.

Fighting and trying to tame a dragon can be terrifying and cause us to suffer in ministry like nothing else. However, it is not all bad. It is a route to Christ-like maturity in ministry. It is the stuff heroes are made of.

1: Where do dragons come from?

To think this through will help us in our understanding of how to handle these difficult people. There are two sets of origins. One is to do with the people themselves, but one is to do with the church and the way it operates. Let's start with the church.

The Church

What is your policy concerning membership of your church?

First, we need to pursue a church polity which seeks, as far as possible, only to allow real Christians to become members of the church. If you have a mixed membership, those who are not born again and do not have the Spirit, are likely to turn into dragons at some point. Because their hearts have not been changed, they simply won't receive a thorough-going Biblical ministry and could react strongly.

Second, we can oversell the church to new people who are considering us. There's a temptation, especially in smaller churches, to be so eager for growth that prospective members are more or less told what they want to hear about the church. We can make out the church to be what in fact it is not. But it's a mistake. Those new members are likely to turn into dragons when they find that at quite fundamental levels the church is not what they thought it was. Such folk are likely to do more harm than good. 'You don't have women preachers? We didn't know you believed that!' 'You believe in the doctrine of God's sovereign election! – You're Calvinists!' Apart from being in the wrong church, they will feel deceived.

A small cohesive family is always better than a divided house, no matter how big. So, it is best to make clear that the church welcomes everyone, but it has a particular stance, a particular character, which may not appeal to everyone. Especially be up-front about your doctrinal basis. Instead of being over anxious to get people to sign up, it's wiser to say something like, 'This is the direction we're going. If you're going in the same direction, we would love to have you on board.' Otherwise, you might well be making enemies / dragons for the future.

The People

Dragons are usually made by the things that have happened to them in their past

lives. I am not shifting the blame for their behaviour from them, but often they have become the way they are through experiences of various kinds, to which they have reacted wrongly. A way of thinking has been planted in them which bears bad fruit in their lives.

It is right for a pastor to understand something of this when he is seeking to lovingly engage with them. Those impenetrable scales (and the insensitive heart?) will have grown for a reason. That flaming tongue (which can set the world ablaze, James 3.5, 6) caught fire somewhere.

Let's think of a few examples:

- Dragons may be people who have been hurt by another church leadership and are darn well making sure they are not going to get hurt again.
- Dragons may be people who have exercised some power in the church (perhaps visibly) but now feel their position threatened by the coming of a new pastor with fresh ideas and charisma.
- Dragons perhaps are people who at one time felt they had a call to ministry or the mission field, but for some reason it didn't happen and now they take out their resulting frustration on you! (Sadly, often a retired pastor who misses ministry and thinks he knows it all turns into a dragon.)
- Dragons are frequently successful business people who have simply got used to calling the shots and now have great difficulty not being in control in the church. ('A rich man is wise in his own eyes', Proverbs 28.11 ESV).
- Dragons can be needy old people, who don't feel safe in an unfamiliar, high-speed, changing, digital world and want to find security by bringing back the past. So, they dig their heels in – hard.
- Dragons may be people who have been repeatedly passed over for promotion at work, hate 'executives' and see you the pastor as a reincarnation of his boss – so he has a go at you!

And that last bullet point leads to a more general truth. It may be that people have trouble and pain in a completely different part of their lives – nothing to do with church – but just lash out at the pastor and the church to vent their frustration.

Many of these folk simply need a friend. There was a man in our own

congregation who was difficult. But once I started meeting with him for lunch now and then, he calmed down. He just needed to know that someone was listening to his point of view. Not all of the difficulties are solved as easily as that – but some are.

Sympathy for the dragon

The actions of a destructive dragon in the church understandably make us angry. But as we uncover where the dragon might have been created, we begin to take a more sympathetic and perhaps more loving (though firm) approach to them. It helps us to be more in line with Paul's exhortation to be gentle towards those who oppose us, 2 Timothy 2.25.

But there is also another more sobering reason why we need to be sympathetic towards these destructive people and try to turn them around by God's grace. Here is Paul's very serious warning concerning those who wreck or destroy local churches. *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple,* 1 Corinthians 3.16, 17.

2: What has stirred the dragon?

We have thought generally about where dragons come from, but what's brought them out of their cave? In all the best stories, dragons are often sleepy and lie low until they are roused. Something will have stirred this church dragon to anger and to action. What is it? What is the particular matter that has ignited the flames and caused the crisis? We need to know if we hope to help.

We will use a diagram to fix the main possibilities in our minds.

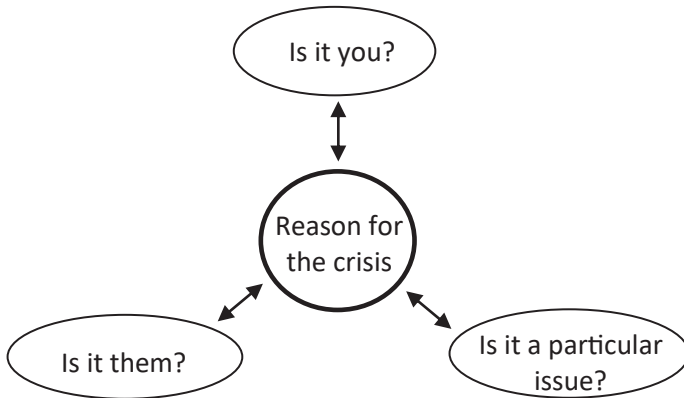


FIGURE 1

There are generally three possibilities for the cause of the crisis. We will unpack each one a little.

1. Is it about them?

Here, let's begin by asking, 'Are they really dragons?' As we have said, we need to be careful of rushing to see people as dangerous enemies. So we ask, 'What is their intention?' They are full of criticisms. You, pastor, need to assess their criticisms. Is this person simply out to hurt you? Is this a power play to get themselves more of a position or even to get you out of the church? Is it that they see it as their mission? Is there an attitude which wants to hurt the church? These are the symptoms of a dragon.

The critical point in diagnosing where they are coming from is usually the spirit and volume of their anger. If they simply explode with invective, then it is likely to be a desire to hurt you or is driven by selfish ambition or envy. James 1.19, 20 tells us to be slow to become angry (like the Lord) and that *man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

On the other hand, if they are calm and measured in their criticism, even though what they are saying may be painful, then it is much more likely that they do genuinely have a good intention. James 3.13-18, which spells out the characteristics of earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, gives us the litmus test.

Earthly / devilish wisdom is characterized by:

- Bitterness
- Envy
- Selfish ambition
- Telling lies/denying the truth
- It results in disorder and evil practices.

Heavenly wisdom is characterized by being:

- Peace-loving
- Considerate
- Submissive
- Full of mercy and good fruit
- Impartial
- Sincere
- It results in peace and righteousness.

If they are bitter and devious and out to hurt others, that's the mark of a dragon and they require a robust and firm challenge. Ask them the question, 'Are you just out to hurt me?' and see their reaction. If they are of a different spirit it will show.

Having tried to discern their spirit, then we can ask:

(a) Is it to do with their job in the church?

Everyone in a church should be willing to get involved and do what they can to help. But that doesn't mean everyone is suited to all the jobs in a church. We must try to match people's gifts to jobs, Romans 12.6-8.

If someone is aggressively pushing for a more high-profile job in the church out of selfish ambition – then it is quite clear that they are functioning in earthly / devilish mode. They need to be resisted.

Or it might not be that kind of thing. If we are asking someone to do something in the church for which they are really not equipped / gifted – then obviously it might lead to frustration or embarrassment and therefore to trouble.

Or there may be a different scenario. Is it that they are really gifted and willing people – but because they are so good at what they do, we are asking them to

do too much? They are overloaded. Perhaps as good-hearted servants they don't like to say 'no'. But we have encouraged them to take on too much. They are embittered and they have exploded with anger. Humility and understanding and saying 'sorry' is required on your part as pastor. Talk it through with them.

(b) Is the underlying problem to do with their personal difficulties?

We have already mentioned this when we talked about where dragons come from. This needs discernment. But if it is to do with their own hurts then, though they may be saying painful things, you need to gently expose the actual problem. Gently question them. Try not to cause offence. But ask, 'Are you feeling insecure about the changes in the church?' or 'Are you doing this because you are frustrated at not being in charge?' Think about whether you need to show more compassion to them or how you can support them. Become their friend so you are alongside them rather than allowing them to be in a face-off with you. This may be the way a dragon is tamed.

(c) Is it that they are being used by other people?

It can be that others in the church want to cause trouble for the leaders, but don't want to be in the firing line themselves. So instead of breaking cover, they use an easily led soul to be their puppet. They are using a marionette. Dragons can be very sly, clever creatures! The person who is sounding off to the leadership may well have a minor cause for a grumble but the dragons have stirred her up and made a molehill into a mountain in her mind so that she comes to you breathing fire. Sometimes a strong-willed woman in the church will use her husband like this. Try to get to the bottom of things.

2. Is it about you?

Has this difficulty blown up because actually you are getting things wrong? You might need to ask a trusted friend or another elder about this to give you an objective view. It is not easy to see ourselves as others see us.

(a) How are you leading the church?

Are you unnecessarily forceful? Are you running a church as if you were the CEO of a business, strutting around? Or are you someone who listens to people and includes them? Are you open and caring towards others? Or actually are you a bit of a Diotrophes who loves to be first, 3 John v11? Do you really love Christ and his sheep (John 21.15-19) or are you simply an academic who loves Bible

study and preaching for their own sake? A pastor of a church in Leeds once gave good advice to pastors about their people. He said, 'Pastor - they won't care about how much you know until they know how much you care.' It's a memorable saying and it is spot on.

Are you a leader who thinks that leadership is all about control rather than about nurturing and developing the gifts of others and growing them to maturity? Obviously there needs to be some control, but it should not be stifling. If you treat people like cogs in a machine, you will generate in them an incentive to break the machine – because people are not cogs.

Is there no space in your church for the leadership to listen? Is the lack of this what has goaded the dragon? The management of the Toyota car manufacturers in Japan, being concerned for continual improvement, painted a red box on the assembly line floor.² It was a safe zone, where you were free to say what you felt needed saying without any comeback. Employees, especially new employees, were encouraged to stand in the box and make at least three criticisms of what was going on in the factory. What the management learned from the red box was a key part of Toyota's success. Is there any mechanism like that in your church to listen to people for the good of the church?

(b) What's your personal kryptonite?

Do you understand yourself? For the uninitiated, kryptonite is a fictional material that appears in the Superman comic stories. It's a green, crystalline substance from Superman's home planet and emits a peculiar radiation which weakens Superman and makes him vulnerable. As fallen people, we all have our own species of kryptonite. So, you need to know what are things that trigger your own issues and insecurities.

Is this person, who is causing you such trouble in the church carrying your kryptonite and unconsciously tending to make you defensive and irritable so that you treat them unfairly?

For example, it might be that, being from a working-class background, you, pastor, are always suspicious of wealth or showiness. Therefore, you tend to keep them at arms' length, which gets to them. Or again, out of sinful pride, it might be that if someone else in the church is obviously gifted (even at preaching!) you see them as rivals and therefore feel you've got to somehow put them in their place to maintain your authority.

² See *Radical Candour: How to be a great boss without losing your humanity*, by Kim Scott, MacMillan publishers, 2017, page 35

You need to know yourself. Perhaps the way you are has inadvertently stirred the dragon. You may well need to say sorry and change.

(c) Are you looking after yourself?

Have you just let yourself become tired and jaded and that's brought your sharp edges to the fore and you've cut somebody?

Here's a simple list to stay okay:

- Aim to give enough time to sleep for 8 hours
- Exercise for 45 minutes a day
- Eat breakfast and dinner with your wife / family.
- Spend 30 minutes quietly with the Lord.

If you can't manage this (or your own version of something like that list) each day you will probably be an irritable man, on the edge of going crazy, giving off bad vibes and your very footfall may stir the dragon.

3. Is it about a particular issue?

Often it is a particular bone of contention which stirs the dragon out of his or her cave and into battle. We need to just cover the ground of some of possible issues that can do this.

But before we unpack this, it is worth noting that in dealing with issues, people's level of trust in you as pastor will be a crucial factor. A high level of trust in you as pastor will be helpful. If people trust you, they are more likely to listen to you before exploding and to cut the church some slack. Not only so, but trust in you will enable a smoother navigation through the problem once the storm has broken. A pastor must earn that trust by being seen to be both reliable and fair in all that he does, 1 Timothy 5.21.

(a) Is it a doctrinal matter?

If so, ask yourself, 'Is it of primary or secondary importance?' What is of first importance is spelled out for us in the opening of 1 Corinthians 15. These gospel issues include the doctrines of salvation, conversion, sin, Christ's person, atonement, Scripture, the resurrection (as historical fact) and therefore the reality of the world to come. The truth of the gospel is to be defended at all costs.

Other matters may be of importance but do not directly impinge on salvation and the heart of the gospel. Here we can afford to be more generous. However, if a dragon is propagating error concerning the primary truths of the gospel and Christian living (which flows from the gospel), then the pastor must be inflexible and get involved along the lines of 2 Timothy 2.24-26. Error over gospel issues is very serious. It kills churches and damns people. It must be stopped, see Titus 1.11-14. Matters of primary doctrine or Biblical morality may have to come to church discipline unless there is repentance, see Matthew 18.15-17. Paul warned those who persisted in preaching 'another gospel' that they would know the curse of God, Galatians 1.8,9.

(b) Is it a leadership matter?

Has a recent decision from the elders caused something to snap in the person and brought them into conflict with you and the church?

The New Testament encourages the leadership to bring big decisions concerning the church to a church meeting. The church is the body of Christ and the meeting of church members acts as the final authority (under Christ and his word) for the church. Making crucial decisions this way as a united membership is a protection against dragons because it means they cannot simply blame the pastor for the matter with which they disagree. They are at odds with the whole church.

With lesser decisions which have not come to a church meeting, again a united eldership on the decision has a similar effect. It is always good to move together as a leadership and never good to proceed when even a minority of the leaders are not in agreement. This leaves a church vulnerable to a dragon.

For any decision made there should be cogent and Biblical reasons. If a truculent dragon takes offence at a decision, the reasons for it need to be calmly and clearly spelt out. Reason with them.

Perhaps the most difficult situation arises when a member has to be disciplined by the church and one of their relatives turns into a dragon accusing the church of being too harsh. In such situations, gentleness, clarity and the need for the church to be impartial in being Biblically faithful to the Lord must be explained (perhaps more than once).

(c) Is it a practical matter?

These things are secondary and areas where we can afford to be flexible. Often, they are to do with managing change or different ideas in the church. It is here that teaching from Romans 14 and 15 on 'the weak and the strong' can be of immense help in preserving the unity of a church.

Changes, in particular, often stir emotional upset. That can be, *first*, because the new arrangements are ill thought out, or upset the routines of another aspect of the church – e.g., coffee served in the church hall immediately after the morning service might make things more difficult for Sunday School which has been meeting there during the service. Suddenly with the last hymn you may well have a dangerous coming together of hot coffee and children milling around in the same space. A Sunday School teacher may be fuming, but perhaps she has a point. More careful thinking is required.

But a *second* avenue of practical upset is to do with insecurities in the face of change – perhaps the introduction of a new Bible version, or more modern music. Teaching ministry which directs God’s people to find their security in Christ himself, rather than long established church routines, will help at this point.

Thirdly, where there is something like a building project over which there are bound to be different opinions, prayerfully look for the Lord’s guidance. Perhaps he will provide the exact money for one of the options via an anonymous gift day. Or if it is a new outreach project, try it for a limited time and see what the Lord does. If there is evidence of the Lord’s blessing on the pilot scheme carry on, if not cut it. Dragons will be honestly silenced like this. No one can argue with what the Lord himself does.

The pastor needs to be understanding and creative in response to practicalities.

(d) Is it a relational issue?

I am not now thinking of an issue between you and the dragon, but between two other people in the church, where perhaps the dragon is one of the parties or has taken sides in a dispute. Sometimes pastors take the line that they should leave relational issues alone, sweep them under the carpet and they will get better with time. That is almost never the case. Unless people make up fairly quickly then things are liable to get worse. And if left unattended, a dragon will make the most of a neglected situation like this.

A relational issue left unchallenged can sour the whole atmosphere of a church and grieve the Holy Spirit. The pastor needs to plead for mutual forgiveness for the good of the work of Christ, Philippians 4.2, 3.

3: The dragon-tamer's equipment

Truth, love and prayer are the tools we need. Note we are not first of all dragon-slayers, but hopefully dragon-tamers. Let's major on the need for truth and love in our conversation to begin with. The following diagram might help us.

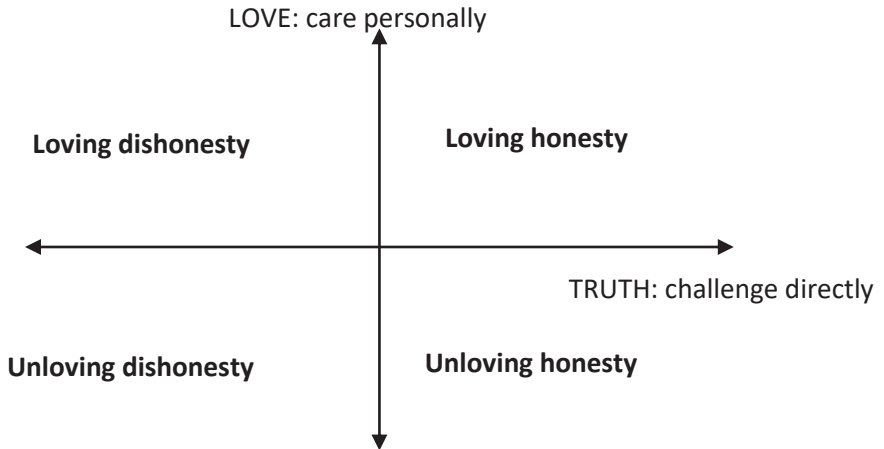


FIGURE 2

The axiomatic principle of Christian communication is found in Ephesians 4.15. We must speak the truth in love. This is the culture which pastors need to use themselves and foster in the church. Truth and love are always the best equipment.

If you don't love – have personal care for people – they feel as if you are not treating them as human beings. You are treating them the way most of them get treated at work – 'professionally' – which means 'keep your emotions out of this'. That means you are treating them as less than human. God made us all with emotions.

If you don't tell people the truth – then you are dealing with them sinfully. God is the God of truth. It is Satan who is the father of lies. It is bound to end in trouble. So there needs to be such love in the church that you can honestly challenge people about whatever the problem is – while at the same time they know you still love them, you are still for them, you are still on their side.

(However, it should be said that it is best if what needs to be done is, as much as possible, out of the public eye – exposing a dragon to others will not help them to climb down. But many churches confuse this legitimate secrecy with hiding

the truth from those we are dealing with. This is wrong. Beware of being less than caring and don't be tempted to be 'economical with the truth' or to put a certain 'spin' on things which is actually misleading).

So remember, in taming a dragon you are not there to silence all complaints. There is room to disagree in love. Nor are you there simply to be a doormat (do the 'easy thing' and just give in to their demands). Pastor, you are there to speak the truth in love in order to protect the doctrine, life and unity of the church to the glory of God.

The diagram on the previous page, Figure 2, spells out our aim. It is Loving honesty. It also highlights what results when we deviate from that.

- Loving dishonesty – there is love and care but no truth. You are so concerned to make it easy for the person that you go pussy foot and end up making it worse. It is ruinous empathy. There's a Russian story about a man who has to amputate his dog's tail (which was infected) but the owner loves him so much, he tries to do things slowly. So, he foolishly decides to cut off an inch a day! His desire to save the dog suffering too much actually leads to him suffering more.
- Unloving dishonesty – here you are so concerned not to offend that you don't tell the truth. It is manipulative. Your concern is not for them, but for you to avoid conflict. It's about you not them. So there's no care either. You sugar coat and tell half the truth in order to make it easy for yourself. But later the full truth comes out and they know you have lied to them. The outcome is far worse. You have lost their trust.
- Unloving honesty – here you tell the truth (what a mess they've made of something) but you do so in a vicious, un-Christ-like way. Your words are brutal. You want to exact revenge. Perhaps you even do it in front of other people in order to embarrass or humiliate the difficult person. There's truth, but no love. It's going to pour petrol on to the flames. It may even provoke the dragon to hit back and everything escalates. If you are being obnoxiously aggressive you are acting in unrighteous anger and the Lord is not with you. And it won't help your own reputation. You might think it will but it won't. An old piece of advice says, 'Never get into a spitting fight with a skunk. Even if you win you come out smelling bad.'

Loving honesty

This is what we should be aiming for. This is the way of Christ and a good conscience. This is the way of things God is happy to use. He is the God of truth and love.

In God's goodness, what you are hoping is that the dragon will change. This will not be brought about by merely identifying the problem and moralistically telling them to stop it and shape up. It will happen as their unhelpful behaviour is challenged in the context of exposing the roots of it and leading them afresh to the cross of Christ, where sins are forgiven and the love of God in Christ touches hearts. The cross is about the truth concerning the scale and horror of our sin in the context of the unstoppable love of God. That honesty and love of the cross must be reflected in the way we seek to deal with the dragon.

And it turns out that when people see you consistently acting in truth and love, when they know they can trust you and believe you care about them, then often 5 good things tend to follow:

- they accept and act on your criticism or praise
- they tell you what they think you are doing well and not so well in love (which is good)
- they engage in the same loving honest behaviour with others, spreading the love and truth culture
- they have new enthusiasm for the church and their role in the church
- they focus on making the church the best it can be

In order to engender that culture / spirit of loving honesty, it is helpful if the pastor (as appropriate) is honest about himself and shares something of his own vulnerabilities with folk – showing he too is human and values truth and love.

There are two other essential helps as you try to tame the dragon.

First, prayer.

We can accomplish nothing of any good without the Lord. So, prayer is essential. The prophet Samuel had to face the dragon of Israel wanting a king towards the end of his ministry. His own sons had not turned out well, 1 Samuel 8.3. Israel had pushed through having a king, which was a snub to Samuel himself, 1 Samuel 8.7. But it had also deeply displeased God. Samuel had 'lost at the church meeting.' Yet he has not only prayed for them through all this, but promises to pray on for them, 1 Samuel 12.22, 23.

Second, unity.

If the dragon finds that wherever he or she goes around the different members of the eldership he/she is getting the same answer, then it might just dawn on them that what they are doing is wrong and that they should think again.

In all of this, pastor, try to be kind and gentle in your firmness, 2 Timothy 2.24,25. Remember that more than likely, beneath those hard scales the dragon is probably some kind of wounded sheep.

4: When to confront a dragon

Confrontations usually come about when something has happened that makes you think, 'This time he's gone too far.' There's a trigger that makes you feel you must act. That's fair enough. But it's always best to step back and take a moment before girding on your sword and jumping onto your charger for the fight.

If we respond too quickly

There is a danger that we jump into a situation when our own emotions are running very high. We are angry. It might be a right anger. But with that kind of passion it will be hard to be gentle and we may say something that will stir up the problem even more. We could end up being obnoxiously aggressive. Also, it's good to take a little time to be sure of the facts. Proverbs 18.13 warns us against the fool's mistake of answering (or acting) before listening. God is slow to anger. I'm not taking this as a rule, but it is interesting to note that the prophet Nathan must have waited nearly a year before confronting David about the adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, because it is after the baby has been born that he rebukes the king, 2 Samuel 11.27, 2 Samuel 12.1, 15. But on the other hand...

If we respond too slowly

We discourage and mislead the church. 'Our elders are just letting him / her get away with it as if sin doesn't matter', they might say. Also, if we don't challenge fairly quickly then we might well allow a bad situation to become normalized or to get worse. And when we do speak to the dragon, the response might well be, 'Well why didn't you say anything before this!' Also, as time slips by, we ourselves might be tempted to just leave the situation to avoid confrontation – tell ourselves, 'time will heal' – while the Lord is actually wanting us to do something. For example, there might be a deacon and his wife who haven't been to the prayer meeting for six months or more. 'Well it's just them. I will leave it.' They will conclude you are okay with the *status quo*.

Give time to talk through the situation with elders if possible

This will give the opportunity to get another perspective on the situation and again collect facts. Sometimes other leaders have not had a chance to tell you what they know and you don't. Don't assume sin before you are sure. Together, think and pray things through using the Scriptures as your guide. Be confident that the word of God is able to equip you thoroughly for every situation, 2 Timothy 3.16, 17.

Also, remember, if the dragon is making accusations against someone – especially you or another elder – it has to be well substantiated. Normally there needs to be two or three different sources, 1 Timothy 5.19.

Again, this gives time for you to calm down. As we have tried to emphasize, it is best if the elders as a whole can come to a united approach to the whole situation. You can pray.

Also, in many situations it is best if one of the elders or some other trusted person in the fellowship goes with you to meet the dragon. Dragons can twist words. It is good to have witnesses. It may be necessary to take notes so there is a record – independently verified – of what was said.³

Give time to prepare yourself spiritually

Though we are trying to be dragon-tamers rather than dragon slayers, nevertheless as we confront the destructive person, we are likely to be fighting a battle. It is likely to be both painful and draining. We need to be ready for this. As we go to confront others, we need to remember the Lord's warning concerning hypocrisy: *Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?* Matthew 7.3-5. Before embarking on confrontation, a time of personal humbling and repentance is in order.

Also remember Paul's advice about addressing other people's sins: *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ,* Galatians 6.1-5.

You may be tempted to shy away and simply avoid the situation. But take courage from the fact that you are about the Lord's business, seeking the good of his bride, the church. It may seem a daunting task, but bear in mind also, as a church leader, that one day you must give an account to the Lord as to how you have looked after his church, Mark 13.34-37. Even if you fail, nevertheless it is best to have tried. The Lord will say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

³ The trickiest situation is where someone is making an allegation of spiritual or sexual abuse. It is unlikely that you will be able to produce 2 or 3 witnesses. These terrible things tend to happen in secret. Here the person accused person (you? another elder?) must report to the Safeguarding Officer appointed by the church who must work in cooperation with the other elders. Submit to the process. The secular authorities may need to be involved. This cannot be handled on your own privately. That is a big mistake. Though if possible it should be handled discreetly. Not all allegations are true.

We need to be brave. Our timidity will be overcome as we are prayerfully and Biblically sure of our ground. We will be emboldened if we know from God's word why this dragon needs confronting. It is most helpful, in dealing with conflict in a church, to be prayerfully and biblically sure of what we are wanting to do – to have thought through carefully from the Scriptures the reasons for what we are wanting to do and the way in which it needs to be done. This will give you a calmness and a humble determination. You are taking action not for yourself but for the Lord and his church.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of not shying away from necessary confrontations. Along with gentleness, firmness and honesty, pray for courage. And be kind and gracious. More people are changed, more dragons tamed, by caring attention, than by aggression or cold neglect.

5: After the battle

What are the possible outcomes of all this? Here are the main three.

1. No resolution

Sadly, this is often the case. The dragon frequently ends up leaving the church. This is not great. But you (and the church) have to come to terms with that. You should not aim at this outcome. 'O Lord, just get rid of them!' is not the best prayer. You would not want the Lord to treat you like that. That is not grace. The Lord's will is for his people to work things out. We should make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Ephesians 4.3. But if, after honest and prayerful efforts, the result is that they leave the church – don't beat yourself up. Romans 12.18 tells us we can only do so much. It is not all down to you. Be able to look at yourself in the mirror and say with a good conscience, 'I've tried my best.' And then move on. You have others in the flock to look after. Don't let the dragon, even after they have left the scene of the battle, continue to consume all your time and energy to the neglect of others.

2. The dragon was right

That can be the case sometimes. They had a point. At this juncture you need to be humble. Don't be a proud cleric like the Pharisees who came under the castigation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Pride in a pastor is enormously destructive. In fact, it was pride that turned angels into devils, 1 Timothy 3.6. Pride is a trap and that's why Paul counsels against appointing new converts to leadership too quickly.

Also, do not let your authority as a leader get tangled up with the idea of always having to be right. You won't always be right. And it doesn't do the church any harm to see that you get things wrong now and then. You and they believe in a gospel of grace and forgiveness, not of personal merit. We are under grace not law.

Sometimes a church leader has to catch up with his people who have seen things more clearly or more quickly than he has. A leader who takes no cues from his people is a dictator. The pastor is not a dictator arrogantly above criticism. The pastor (and the elders) is more like a president than a king. He leads, but with the consent of the governed under God's word.

3. Reconciliation

If you have been right and the dragon now acknowledges that – don't rub it in. God has been gracious to you in Christ. Be gracious to this offender just as God has been to you.

If you've simply agreed to differ with an understanding that the matter is now dropped and won't be raised again – that's fine. We do allow different opinions in a church. However, knowing you've agreed to differ will also mean being wise (though loving) concerning that person in the future. If you know they have a sensitive area, it's not good to inflame them again unless you really have to. Learn the great Christian craft of forgiveness. There may have been some very hurtful things said but you have to bring your hurts to the Lord and forgive. The crucial help to forgiveness is the gospel. The dragon has been wrong, but justice has been satisfied because Christ died for his or her sins (as well as yours). Furthermore, to continue to be an accuser is to have the attitude of the devil – the great accuser, whereas to have an attitude of forgiveness is to be like God, Ephesians 4.32, 5.1. Forgiveness is a real step to becoming more like our Father in heaven.

While we must be at one on the central matters of the gospel, the unity of Christ's church runs deeper than everyone having to agree about every single thing. The unity of the Spirit crosses all kinds of cultures, attitudes and divides. A church proclaims the truth of the gospel for all by being more than the old adage 'birds of a feather flocking together.' We are not all the same, but we all belong to Jesus.

It is also good after such a dragon battle to try, in **preaching**, to bring the church back to the centrality of the gospel. No matter what the outcome has been, the Christians under your care will need to see Jesus again. After weeks or perhaps months when there has been acrimony and people's attention has been taken up with accusations, counter-claims and church politics, it is wise to get the church back into the fresh air of the love and grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is able to bring healing to a church and restore its joy.

Part 3

FREEDOM & HUMANITY

Leaders and congregations
who grow people for Christ

Introduction

Christianity is often misrepresented as life in a straightjacket.

It is seen as a straightjacket of religious rules and regulations, often enforced by insensitive and authoritarian church leaders. Just like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, the church is perceived as heaping duties and responsibilities upon us which do not grow us as human beings but tend to crush us, Matthew 23.4.

One of the most influential songs of the 1960s was by the Canadian / American group 'The Band' and it was titled *The Weight*. It is an example of how the world thinks of the church. Superficially, the song is about the singer's experiences on visiting a town. Here are the opening lines:

*I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead,
I just need a place where I can lay my head.
'Hey, Mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?'
He just grinned and shook my hand, 'No', was all he said.*

Notice this is not just any town. It is Nazareth, the home of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a man coming to church, the 'hometown' of Jesus on earth, and instead of finding rest he is given no help. Rather, as the song progresses, responsibilities are heaped upon him. The chorus emphasizes, *you put the load right on me*. A Google search reveals that Robbie Robertson, the song's writer, said it was about 'the impossibility of sainthood' and its use in the film *Easy Rider* helped cement it as a defining song of its generation.

Again, the books and broadcasts of the writer Garrison Keiller were hugely popular with the public during the 1980s and 1990s. In his tales from *Lake Wobegon*, the local Catholic Church is named after 'Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.' And the Protestants are not much better, portrayed in antiseptic terms with their waste bins emblazoned with the text, 'Touch not the unclean thing' – totally out of context. It's making the same point.

These are just two examples of many in our culture which declare that the Christian church and its message does not grow people but bruises, restricts and represses its adherents.

Living up to our caricature?

Many of us would shed the last drop of our blood to defend the 'doctrines of grace' and that salvation is a free, unearned gift. And yet, sadly, although we preach that the gospel brings true freedom and dignity to people, churches rarely do that. They frequently live up to the caricature painted of us by the world. Behind the superficial smile and handshake at the door, there is constriction. Leadership teams are often more about self-justification and controlling people than nurturing people to maturity and joy in Christ. Congregations become discouraged and unloving.

This booklet tries to explain the tragedy of this situation and to point in a different direction.

1: A defence of the 10 commandments

James tells us that God's commandments are the 'perfect law which brings freedom,' James 1.25. Later in his epistle, the context makes it clear that what he particularly has in mind are the 10 commandments. He quotes from Jesus' summary of the law, James 2.8. He then goes on to explicitly refer to the sixth and seventh commandments, James 2.8, 11. He follows that by repeating the idea of the law that brings freedom, James 2.12.

It is the thesis of this booklet that the 10 commandments are to govern Christian living and that they mark out the boundaries of behaviour and affection, within which Christians are free and enjoy liberty before God.

We are not free to sin – to go beyond the boundaries. Sin is the breaking of God's law, 1 John 3.4. But we are free to love, to serve, to pursue our God-given gifts, to be different from others, to enjoy life, indeed to flourish as human beings within those boundaries. But we begin by briefly making a case that the 10 commandments, properly understood, are a Christian's charter of emancipation. I am aware that the 10 commandments are out of fashion in some circles. But J. I. Packer encourages us to embrace them as the rule of holiness. He writes of God's requirements in human lives and says, 'These requirements are embodied in the precepts and prohibitions of the Decalogue, expounded and applied by the prophets, the apostles and Christ himself... whose life from this standpoint could be described as the law incarnate... As Paul tells us, the law... is holy, just, good and spiritual, Romans 7.12,14.¹

The 10 words

The 10 commandments stand separate from and above all the other laws of OT Israel. This is indicated by the fact that they were spoken directly by God himself, at Sinai, to the people, Exodus 20.1,19. Other laws came via Moses as intermediary. Again, it is these 10 laws alone which were inscribed 'by the finger of God' on the tablets of stone, Exodus 31.18; Deuteronomy 9.10. Furthermore, it was these tablets on which were written the 10 commandments which were kept within the ark of the covenant, Exodus 25.20-22; Hebrews 9.4. They are foundational.

¹ *Keep In Step with the Spirit*, by J I Packer, IVP, 2005 edition, page 93

The sacrificial and ceremonial laws of OT Israel are not on the same level as the 10 commandments, 1 Samuel 15.22; Hosea 6.6; Proverbs 21.3. The 10 commandments therefore cannot be simply conflated with other OT laws and dismissed as part of the old covenant which, since the coming of Christ, have no claim upon the Christian. Instead, the NT is at pains to insist that a consistent Christian life fulfils the 10 commandments, Romans 13.8-10.

The Garden of Eden

Scripture links the 10 commandments back to origin of mankind. The 4th commandment concerning the Sabbath comes about specifically because ‘in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth...but he rested the seventh day,’ Exodus 20.11. Again, the very form – ‘You shall not...’ – of commandments 2, 3, 6,7, 8, 9 and 10 explicitly echo the command in the Garden of Eden, ‘You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...’, Genesis 2.17.

Both the command in Eden and the commandments at Sinai are spoken by God himself and are given in the context of freedom. Adam was free to eat from any tree in the garden, with just the one restriction, Genesis 2.16,17. The LORD had just set Israel free from slavery in Egypt when he gave the 10 commandments at Sinai, Exodus 20.2.

It is legitimate to see the 10 commandments as an exposition of what God created mankind to be in relation to himself. Made in the image of God, Genesis 1.26,27, we are made to know, worship and mirror God, hence commandments 1, 2 and 3 relating to true worship. God made Adam to be a worker, Genesis 2.15, and this is regulated and put into context by the Sabbath² – commandment 4. God created Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, Genesis 1.28, hence commandments 5, 6 and 7 – honouring our parents, no murder and the protection of marriage. The last three commandments 8, 9 and 10 guard the sanctity of property and truth and promote the avoidance of covetousness, all of which specifically relate to Satan’s temptation and the taking of the forbidden fruit in Eden, Genesis 3.1,6.

The 10 commandments, therefore, point back to our creation and the fulfilment and preservation of our identity as human beings. They are deeply concerned with who we really are, Romans 2.14,15.

²The change of the day of rest from Saturday to Sunday is to be expected. Redemption brings a change of calendar, Exodus 12.2.

Salvation

But, because of our sin, what was meant as a blessing became a curse to us, Galatians 3.10. In our fallen condition, all the commandments could do was condemn us. 'Under the law' we were lost and could never save ourselves. However, notice how the apostle Paul speaks of our salvation. 'But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons,' Gal. 4.4,5. Through Christ's perfect life, fulfilling the law, and his atoning death on the cross, by faith we are forgiven and possess a perfect righteousness before God. We are saved by God's grace alone. 'We...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So, we too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified,' Galatians 2.15,16.

We rejoice in this freedom from the law's condemnation. We are not under law but under grace.

However, the law is not our enemy, but our friend as we pursue the Christian life. What does the LORD say of those who enjoy the blessings of the new covenant? 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people,' Jeremiah 31.33.

And notice how the apostle Paul describes the outcome of what the Lord Jesus achieved for us at the cross: 'And so he (God) condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit,' Romans 8.4.

Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that the 10 commandments are the foundational laws of the kingdom to be lived from the heart, Matthew 5.17-20.

2: Boundaries and freedom

There are two views of freedom – the world’s and the Creator’s. This quotation about the different outlooks of Humanism and Christianity, sums this up very clearly.

‘Humanism tells us to think of ourselves as having no environment save that which science...studies; no life beyond heart-stop day and no rational goals beyond self-discovery, pursuing pleasure and lessening others’ misery in the here and now.

‘Christianity teaches us to view God as our ultimate environment; to know him in and through the persons, things and values that surround us; and to see ourselves as immortal beings of infinite worth whose calling for all eternity is to know God who made us and loved us, to love him and our fellow men in return, and to experience joy in so doing...

‘Humanism regards religion as hobbling mankind and holds that no-one is healthy in spirit until he has left religion behind. Christianity sees this view as an irrational negating of mankind’s deepest instincts and intuitions...’.³

The world looks for a freedom that means no boundaries except those we impose on ourselves. It takes an ‘it’s my life for me to do what I want with’ approach. But if we believe that God created us and loves us, we can see that to operate outside our Maker’s instructions will be the way to disaster, not freedom. Jesus said that it is the truth which sets us free, John 8.32, not having no truth or making your own truth.

The gymnast

This view of freedom is so alien to the twenty-first century that it requires some explaining.

This analogy might help us. Think of an Olympic gymnast. She is able to perform spectacular somersaults, leaps, aerial pirouettes and the like, which are way beyond the ability of most of us. She has a freedom which we do not have. She acquired that freedom, of course, by practice and discipline.

Imagine that the place she practises in is a large gymnasium. To acquire her

³ *Christianity: The True Humanism*, by Thomas Howard and J I Packer, Regent College Publishing, 1985, page 14.

freedom, she had to pursue her athleticism within the boundary walls of the gym. This is where she is safe and can develop and learn her skills. But to try to burst through the gym walls would lead to injury, maybe serious injury, not freedom. To practise in the car park might end in her colliding with a vehicle and leave her an invalid for life. Observing the boundaries meant freedom.

Just so, the commands of God give us our safe boundaries within which to practise our lives. Development and freedom do not come automatically. As with the athlete, we need discipline and determination to fulfil our potential. But ignoring the walls, pretending there are no boundaries, will lead to disaster, Romans 6.23. This helps us to see why the view of freedom adopted by secular humanism is wrong and frequently leads to disaster. Many an addict or broken family is a sad indicator of this.

But equally, going back to our initial concerns expressed in the introduction, the church is there to maintain the walls of the gymnasium but not to shackle those or put obstacles in the way of those who are trying to use the gym to become the fully rounded human beings God would have them be. Within God's boundaries, we are to be free.

'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law,' Galatians 5.22.

Doctrine and duty

The 10 commandments are usefully summarized in terms of our attitude towards God and our attitude towards our fellow human beings (there is an overlap on commandment 4).

So, asked which is the most important commandment Jesus replied, 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself,' Mark 12.29-31.

We love God because he has saved us. We have come into this life of freedom and liberty, bounded by God's commandments, by free grace in Christ. He set us free.

We love God when we worship and willingly obey him, John 14.15. We embrace all that God has revealed of himself across Biblical history, culminating in the

Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Trinitarian God – one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who loves sinners and who at the cross made the once-for-all atonement which releases us from the guilt of our sin and opens the door to eternal life, evidenced by the resurrection of Jesus, for all who will believe.

We love our neighbours as we treat them as precious souls made in the image of God. Jesus said, ‘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.

The underlying truth here is that love fulfils the law – whether it is love to God or love to our fellow men, Romans 13.8.

3: Threats to freedom and humanity

How does a church come to leave the fresh air of Biblical freedom and love?
How do we end up living out the world's caricature of church, rather than being the outposts of heaven on earth that we ought to be?

Let me suggest three roots of this tragic condition.

The loss of cultural vision

A first way in which the church loses freedom is that it becomes dull. The glorious gospel is reduced to being concerned only with the 'spiritual' side of life as if nothing else is worth bothering with. The world is seen only as a threat to our walk with God. All sermons tend to end up saying 'trust more', 'pray more' and 'evangelize more'. There is little of God giving us all things richly to enjoy, 1 Timothy 6.17. Such a church produces 'cookie cutter' Christians, in which, with the merest of differences, everyone is expected to be basically the same. The atmosphere of such a church is claustrophobic. Legitimate diversity is stifled. No-one seems free to be themselves.

But this is not what we find in Scripture. Daniel is very different from Samson, Ruth very unlike Rahab, Mary quite the opposite of Martha. By comparison with the great diversity of Christians of the past – J. S. Bach writing his cantatas, William Wilberforce battling against slavery, James Clerk Maxwell studiously mapping the science of electro-magnetism, Josephine Butler rescuing fallen women from lives of degradation – we are culturally unengaged and many contemporary Christians are downright boring. No wonder we have difficulty evangelizing – we offer so little of real interest or thoughtful challenge to our times.

Listen to Francis Schaeffer: 'The gospel is great. If you are a Christian you should be convinced that Biblical Christianity is not tawdry; it is not a small thing dealing with a small area of life...realize that Christianity is titanic. It speaks to every need of man, not by a leap in the dark but by good and sufficient reasons. In presenting the content of Christianity, Paul says there is salvation – justification, sanctification and glorification – for the whole man.'⁴

⁴ *Death in the City*, by Francis Schaeffer, IVP, 1972, page 76

The hold of legalistic religion

Salvation is by faith alone, Romans 1.17. We trust the Lord Jesus. We have no guarantee except his faithfulness. All we have is his promise to save. But the fallen religious human psyche can crave for what it sees as more certainty – to be in control of salvation itself. We desire a check-list of boxes which we have ticked and so can assure ourselves that ‘now God must save me’. This is where, in its various forms, legalism originates. ‘God is under obligation to save me because I’ve kept the rules.’ Theoretically we might know we can’t perfectly keep God’s commandments to earn salvation, but we turn our approximate keeping of the commandments (and other rules) into assurances for ourselves that we are saved or that we are the kind of people that God ‘ought’ to save – because we are ‘godly’. In this way we have taken charge of our destiny but, in effect, have departed from faith and grace.

And three things happen. *First*, we tend to make the check-list as long as possible, because the more boxes we can tick the more certainty we think we have of salvation. So, like the Pharisees, we multiply rules, perhaps about things like food or dancing or women wearing make-up etc. *Second*, we become judgmental and condemnatory, because the more faults we see in others, the surer we are that we are ‘good’ people by comparison. *Third*, within this system, many conclude that they are ‘good’ people, better than others, Luke 18.9, and become proud, distant and unpleasant.

Writing to a church where such attitudes were taking over, Paul asks, ‘What has happened to all your joy?’ Galatians 4.15. In a legalistic church, the wonder of grace disappears. This is, indeed, life in a straightjacket. But it is not the gospel.

The failure of pastoral affection

The apostle Paul describes the work of a Christian leader towards a church like this: ‘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 to his kingdom and glory,’ 1 Thessalonians 2.11, 12.

First of all, a father loves his own children, and Christian leaders should have a deep affection for the people of their congregations. *Second*, although a father should control his children, his central concern is to help and encourage them grow up to maturity, to reach their full potential. That should be the chief aim of a church leader for his people too.

But often the affection and the true aim that should govern the outlook of church leaders goes missing. When that happens, the church is no longer a happy family but becomes something ugly and oppressive. Absence of affection in church leaders can occur for many reasons.

- *Pride* A pastor can see his church as a vehicle for his own success. He does not so much serve the church as use the church. What matters is his own reputation. Elders can care more about their title than their people, Matthew 23.7.
- *Tiredness* Sometimes elders have taxing full-time jobs and seeking to care for the church as well simply becomes too much for them. They lose the joy of serving Christ and his people. They are worn out and adopt a 'couldn't care less' attitude, 1 Peter 5.2.
- *Grand designs* A leadership team can fall into focusing on 'the big picture' while losing sight of individuals in need. Churches can be more concerned to grow numerically than to care for their existing members. Building projects become more important than little old ladies who need to be visited and comforted.
- *Lack of patience* Often high-flying people with huge abilities become leaders in the church. But such people can be frustrated by those who are slow or less able in the church, and vent that frustration, 1 Thessalonians 5.14.

'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,' Ezekiel 34.4.

Above all else a church needs love in its leadership, 1 Corinthians 13.1-7.

4: The marks of a cult

The freedom we are talking about includes a freedom to be different – for people to be honest and be themselves without pretending. It embraces, for example, people being able to ask questions in the church without being labelled awkward or a troublemaker. With this in mind, it is worth thinking about some of the differences between a healthy church and a cult.

Cult	NT Church
The head of the cult is a dominant person in the group to whom others always defer	The head of the church is Jesus Christ who is now in heaven ⁵
The cult leader encourages devotion to himself / herself	Church leaders encourage devotion only to Jesus Christ who died and rose for us ⁶
The cult leader does not have any real accountability	Church leaders are accountable to the church meeting and ultimately to Christ ⁷
The ethos of a cult is control of its members	The ethos of a church is to grow its members ⁸
Leaders dictate in great detail all aspects of a follower's life	Under Scripture alone, all Christian believers have freedom ⁹
A cult tends to keep its members under as much surveillance as possible	A church cares for its people pastorally but respects privacy and conscience ¹⁰
A cult may deliberately over-ride a family's life and responsibilities	A church will respect family life and only very reluctantly step in to take issue with it ¹¹
A cult isolates people and likes its members to socialize only within the group	Christians should enjoy fellowship within church but do good in the wider community ¹²
A cult fosters a 'them' and 'us' mentality towards the world	A church sees the world as lost but reaches out in love to fellow sinners ¹³

Cult	NT Church
<p>A cult tends to be secretive</p> <p>A cult will receive members gladly but often make it extremely difficult to leave</p>	<p>A church aims to be as open as possible¹⁴</p> <p>A church is sad when people leave, but handles that in love¹⁵</p>

Most churches are not cults, but sometimes they can err by taking on some of the characteristics of a cult. Cults often take what is good in churches and exaggerate or distort these things for their own ends. Hence churches or leaders who lose their Biblical balance can take a cultish path with a consequent loss of freedom and humanity for the congregation.

Cults tend to damage people psychologically. They ultimately belittle people and crush them. All human beings are made in God’s image, Genesis 1.26, 27, and should not be manipulated or lied to in any way, but treated with respect.

Making clones

Also, cults tend to make clones – everybody in the same mould, everyone the same. Their adherents can all trot out the cult’s same pat answers to everything. They even tend to dress the same way. But this trying to make everyone the same is actually devilish. This is how C. S. Lewis puts it in an imagined directive between two devils in *The Screwtape Letters*.

‘Remember always, that He (God) really likes the little vermin (human beings), and sets absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them. When he talks about their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever...He hates to see them drifting away from their own nature... And we should always encourage them to do so.’¹⁶

⁵ Ephesians 1.21

⁷ Matthew 18.17; 1 Timothy 5.19,20

⁹ Matthew 23.9; Galatians 5.1

¹¹ 1 Timothy 5.16

¹³ Luke 15.1,2

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 16.12; 2 Timothy 4.10

¹⁶ *The Screwtape Letters*, by C S Lewis, Fount Paperbacks, 1998, page 50

⁶ John 14.15; 1 Corinthians 16.22

⁸ Romans 15.14

¹⁰ 1 Peter 5.2,3; 1 Corinthians 3.5

¹² Romans 15.14

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4.2; 8.20, 21

5: The dignity of the church meeting

The New Testament teaches a congregational form of church government, Acts 11.22; Acts 14.27; 1 Corinthians 5.4. Ultimately the church makes the decisions.

The elders, or leaders, have a certain authority in the church, 1 Thessalonians 5.12-14, but it is an authority for the good of the people and subject to the word of God and to the gathered church. Hence it is the gathered church which appoints leaders, Acts 6.3,4, and to whom leaders must answer if they go astray, 1 Timothy 5.19, 20. Among other things, therefore, the church meeting provides a mechanism for checking and balancing the leadership's power. The church meeting must therefore be treated with great respect.

The keys of the kingdom

The NT word translated 'church' is *ekklesia* – which basically means an assembly of people. In both the OT and Greek backgrounds to the NT, that word also carries a political / authoritative idea with it.

In Matthew 18.15-20 this is unpacked for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. There, a scenario of a problem between a couple of Christ's followers is explored. After two previous attempts to resolve it quietly, the final court of appeal is the church (not the elders), v17. The Lord Jesus says that the church has authority: 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' To bind or loose is the work of a judge as he applies the law of the kingdom in which he operates. He sends people to prison or releases them. Elsewhere, the power to bind and loose spiritually is related to the foundational apostles, Matthew 16.19, and is referred to as 'the keys of the kingdom.' There are no more foundational apostles today, but the keys now rest with the gathered church.

Jesus goes on to say, 'I tell you the truth that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them,' v19,20. The small numbers convey the fact that it is not size but agreement in Christ which is the crucial factor. The church gathered together and agreeing together has kingdom authority because Christ himself is there among them, v20. Free agreement together is vital.

One of the corollaries of this is that for good church government, members must be people who feel able to speak up and express their thoughts that there may

be true agreement. This requires a loving atmosphere, free from threat or coercion, and respect for each other in Christ.

What goes wrong?

Healthy discussion in the church meeting is often absent these days. Why is that?

First, it can arise from a good motive. Perhaps the church has known a period of blessing under the leadership – praise God – and there is a genuine desire on the part of members not to disturb that. But the trouble is that it can easily spill over into keeping quiet even when members know that things aren't right.

Second, it can arise when members are simply a group of shy people and the leadership has never gently but persistently encouraged them to take responsibility and contribute to a church meeting. Maybe the leadership simply feel that if they don't drive the meeting nothing will ever get done.

Third, silence reigns when members are too busy as people and just want to get meetings over with and get home. This is to fail to treat the church meeting with the dignity it deserves.

Fourth, silence can arise through a mistaken view of spirituality, which brings fear. To raise a question is not the same as being a grumbler. To raise a question is not to threaten the unity of the church. To raise a question is not to be disloyal to the leadership – it may actually come from a desire to help them.

Fifth, the silence can prevail because of a few unhelpful church members who just love the opportunity to sound off belligerently at the leadership much to everyone's unhappiness. And so, sadly, anyone with questions, gets tarred with the same brush – troublemaker.

Sixth, of course, it can arise from the **pride** among the leadership team or in the pastor's heart. They are a leadership which needs to be seen to be 'right' all the time or else they think their authority is undermined. They find means to censor

or manipulate what can and can't be said at the meeting.

Seventh, it can occur because of **fear** in the leadership. They are desperate for nothing to go wrong. So, they try to 'micro-manage' the church meeting and make sure nothing is said that might be challenging for them. Again, this comes from an eldership mindset which feels it must control the church rather than nurture it.

One another

Instead of this, Christ intended that churches should be places where, within the essentials of God's truth, there is freedom and humanity.

With this in mind, the NT is full of encouragements for the people of the church to treat each other well. Because we are all members of the body of Christ, we should love one another, John 13.34; forgive one another, Ephesians 4.32; encourage one another, Hebrews 3.13; accept one another, Romans 15.7; honour one another, Romans 12.10; build up one another, Ephesians 4.29. It is such a church which will be in the best condition to agree with one another in Christ and be the church Christ would have us be.

6: Freedom to be ourselves in Christ

The argument has been that the 10 commandments, properly understood in the light of Christ, mark out for us the safe area within which we are free to be ourselves as Christians.

We have also mentioned how that free area is to be used. The apostle Paul tells us, 'You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself"', Galatians 5.13,14.

The words of the Lord Jesus fill this out for us both horizontally and vertically. We are to love our neighbour and we are to love God, Matthew 22.37-40. Jesus said, 'If you love me, you will obey what I command,' John 14.13.

Different people with different gifts

Though we are all made in the image of God, James 3.9, God has not made us all to be the same. Just as there is diversity within the unity of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God – there is diversity within the human race. The first and most obvious expression of this fact is that we are male and female. But even apart from our gender, the Bible is clear that God knit us together in our mother's womb and ordained our days even before we came to be. He made Samson for the role of warrior he had planned for him, Judges 13.3-6, and he also made Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah 1.5. They were very different men, but God made them both. This does not mean that we are not responsible for our sins, but it does mean there is a legitimate difference of personality between people, which ought to be respected in the church.

Further, God has gifted his people differently. There are natural gifts, like those for music and mathematics, for caring and for carpentry. And there are also gifts particularly given by the Holy Spirit, for example, preaching or spiritual insight. And both of those sets of gifts are to be recognized and put to use in the church. The apostle Paul spells this out. 'Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given us,' Romans 12.4-6.

And in writing about gifts to the church in Corinth, Paul specifically warns against trying to make everyone the same or rejecting those who aren't like us. 'The eye

cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”” 1 Corinthians 12.21.

God has given a true diversity in the church, which should be cherished and held together in unity. In many ways, this diversity – not least racial diversity – is the glory of the church, Ephesians 3.6-12. The elders’ role is to help the congregation embrace legitimate differences and encourage the development of gifts and God’s grace expressed differently in various personalities. We should be free to be the people God has made us to be.

Serving one another in love

The word of God teaches us that we are not saved by good works but we are saved *for* good works, 2 Timothy 1.9; Ephesians 2.10. Because God has shown us such kindness in Christ, we find ourselves wanting to show kindness to others.

So, a common misconception of the gospel can be represented by the equation

$$\text{Faith} + \text{Good works} = \text{Salvation}$$

This is a huge mistake. But the true gospel can be represented by this equation

$$\text{Faith} = \text{Salvation} + \text{Good Works}$$

When we trust the Lord Jesus Christ, all our sins are forgiven forever, we are born of God’s Spirit and heaven is ours because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – we are saved. But this experience of God’s love prompts love towards others and so faith is accompanied by doing good. These good works will inevitably be an expression of our own unique personalities and the different gifts God has given us. Our good deeds will find different avenues because we are different people. Also, different situations call for different kinds of responses. The expertise that one person has might be just right to meet a certain crisis, when others would not know how to help.

Hence, we find in Scripture a huge variety of different activities through which God’s people express their love. Here is just a taste:

- The members of the Jerusalem church shared what they had and made sure no-one was in need, Acts 2.44,45.

- By the power of Jesus, Peter healed the lame man who begged outside the temple, Acts 3.7, 8.
- Barnabas was known for the way he encouraged others, Acts 4.36; Acts 9.26, 27.
- The church did its best to look after widows in need, Acts 6.1; 1 Timothy 5.16.
- Dorcas made clothes for people in need, Acts 9.39.
- The church at Antioch sent aid to those in Judea facing famine, Acts 11.29.
- Lydia, a business woman and the first convert at Philippi, gave hospitality to Paul and Silas, missionaries to Europe, Acts 16.15.
- Paul cared and prayed for those on board the ship that was taking him as a prisoner to Rome, Acts 27.10, 21-26; 34.
- Paul was used by God to heal the father of Publius and others on the island of Malta, Acts 28.8,9.

We find deep satisfaction as people when we are able to use the gifts God has given us to help others and to serve the cause of Christ. 'Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God,' 1 Peter 2.16. As diverse people freely and lovingly use their gifts, a wonderful humanity emerges in the church.

7: Shop window for the love of Jesus

Churches should not be held together by fear – fear of what other people think or fear of church leaders. Churches should be held together by love – love for Christ and love for one another.

When Barnabas came down from Jerusalem to visit the new church in Antioch, ‘he saw the evidence of the grace of God (and) he was glad,’ Acts 11.23. You could see that these people had been touched by the kindness and forgiveness of God. You could see it in the joy and peace on their faces. You could see it in the love and grace with which they treated one another. You could see it in their love for God in heartfelt worship. In that way, the church had become a showcase for the gospel. Loud and clear this church proclaimed and demonstrated to the world ‘this is what Jesus can do!’ It was a shop window for what the love of Jesus can do in the lives of ordinary people. It was a glorious sight. To go to church was not a burden. We can imagine that people couldn’t wait to get there.

The Spirit-filled church

The Holy Spirit works in our lives to make us more like Jesus. We are empowered to become imitators of Christ. In that sense, when people come to church, they should meet Jesus.

In one of his excellent books, my old pastor, Stuart Olyott, describes visiting such a church. Let me quote him at length.¹⁷

‘What would we find...

‘Everybody speaks to us and welcomes us! We notice, too, that everybody speaks to everybody else. No doubt some people have special friendships within the church, just like Jesus did within the Twelve. But those friendships are maintained without there being any cliques. No one feels unnoticed, undervalued or left out – whether they be men or women, old or young, local or from elsewhere, newly converted or spiritually mature, educated or illiterate, introvert or extravert. Running through the church is a deep consciousness that we “are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...all one in Christ Jesus,” Galatians 3.26, 27.

¹⁷ *Be Filled with the Spirit*, by Stuart Olyott, Evangelical Press, 2020, page 50-52

‘And notice what people are talking about! Each person is aware that their tongue exists for the praise of God, and also for the benefit of the person they are speaking to. There is conversation about all the normal things of life, but it is savoured and flavoured with references to Scripture, to hymns and to spiritual songs. Not only so, but it quickly becomes clear to us that everyone is genuinely thankful to the Lord for everything that has ever happened to them, as well as for what is happening to them now. We don’t hear a whine or a whinge from anyone. These people – all of them – are content! They are bathing every day in the goodness of God.

‘And what shall we say about their singing? There is an amazing variety in what they sing, but their great theme is always the same; it is about the Lord Himself. With their whole heart they sing to Him and *about* Him. Everybody joins in. Their interest, it seems, is not in the music as such, and certainly not in the instruments, choirs or song-leaders. This worship is not man-centred, woman-centred or child-centred. This is a congregation joining as one to fix the whole of its attention, and all of its affections, on the Triune God – the Father of each child in the redeemed family; the Lord Jesus Christ by whom they came to the Father; and the Holy Spirit by whom the Saviour lives in their individual hearts.

‘Is there anything else to be said about this church? Yes; as we get to know everybody better, we find there is no rivalry among these people. There are no attention seekers, no personalities trying to dominate, no displays of self-importance, no jealousies, no resentments, no plotting groups, and no huddles and unkind critics. Everyone in the church seems to think that everybody else is more important than they are! The deep secret place of every heart is inhabited by the affectionate fear of God.’

This is how church ought to be. This is a church where every person is precious. There is gospel freedom and true humanity.

A little heaven down here

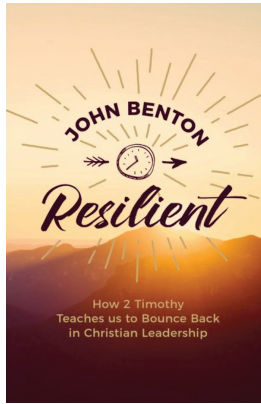
The future of the churches will not be served by the straightjacket of fear brought about by domineering leaders and condemnatory congregations. We must thoroughly and deeply repent before God of the way we have disfigured the beauty and humanity of the church through such things.

The future of the churches must lay in love. We are to walk in God’s ways and set people free to serve with all that they are and all that they have.

Our Kenyan brothers and sisters in Christ often sing a little chorus in church from which we could learn a great deal.

*The time to be happy is now
The place to be happy is here
And the way to be happy
Is to make someone happy
And to have a little heaven down here*

Jesus said, 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,' John 13.34, 35.



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