

# Submitting to God's Ordained Authority<sup>1</sup>

Part III

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## What Can a Believer Do When Church Leadership Acts Inappropriately?

In Parts I and II of this teaching we examined the general principles of God's ordained authority here on earth and our obligation to submit to it. We also looked at the consequences to the individual believer who rebels against that authority. Now it is time to ask the question, "What can a believer do, if he or she is a member of a church, and it becomes obvious that there are significant things wrong within the leadership of the church?" This is a tough question and one that most believers must grapple with at some point in their Christian walk. (By leadership, I mean the senior pastor, and/or other members of the pastoral staff, and/or the elder and deacon boards or their equivalent.)

First let me make the point that there is no such thing as a perfect church. There will always be things wrong. Why? Because every church is run by men and women, imperfect all. I heard someone say once, "Don't bother looking for the perfect church because if you do find it, the moment you join, it won't be perfect anymore!" How true. So I am not talking about the perfect church. I am talking about what a believer should accept simply as an imperfection in the leadership, and what the believer should refuse to accept, even if it means leaving the church. In other words, where do we draw the line between what is acceptable within a church body and leadership, and what is not?

### First Guard Your Own Heart

I believe one of the overriding principles in this whole area of church life is that each of us must guard our own hearts whenever we see flaws in our church leaders. We Christians are commanded by Scripture to guard our hearts. "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." (Pro 4:23 NIV) This principle is fundamental and essential. First and foremost, we stand before God responsible for our own heart, our own attitudes, and our own actions. It does us little good in the long run if we are right in our perceptions of other believers but have a wrong or critical heart attitude.

If we don't guard our hearts and attitudes, we very quickly degenerate into judging and criticizing our pastors or other church leaders, attacking them verbally to other members of the congregation, or at least to our close friends and family members. I began Part I of this teaching by telling you about a church here in America that is going through a difficult time because some members of the congregation are trying to force the senior pastor to leave. Within ten minutes of listening to these people, Carolyn and I saw how their hearts and their spirits had become dark and critical. They had lost all perspective of Christian love and had actually become tools of the devil in this church. The amazing thing to us was that they had become so deluded that they couldn't see it. They thought they were the "real Christians" and

anyone who disagreed with them were the traitors. If these people had guarded their hearts right from the start, things would never have degenerated so badly.

### Pray for Your Leaders

One of the best ways I know of to guard our hearts is to pray for our leaders. In fact, we are told in Scripture to pray for our leaders.

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior . . ." (1 Tim 2:1-3 NIV)

As you pray, first ask the Holy Spirit if there is *anything in you that needs changing*. God always wants to work on us and these church situations are among His best tools to mature and perfect us so we can become more effective in His kingdom. Maybe it's not so much that you need to change as that you will grow more mature as a believer as you pray for your pastor and other leaders.

You should also ask the Holy Spirit if there is anything that you should do in the situation. Is there any specific action you need to take? Once you have asked that question, or as you continue to ask, wait on the Lord for an answer. Don't just do the first thing that comes into your head. The Holy Spirit may show you that you are correct in your perceptions but that your job is simply to be supportive of the church and to intercede for the leaders. I am convinced that if more prayer and less action were taken by some members of our congregations, our churches would be better off and more of our Lord's work would get done.

### Fear The Lord

One of the most dangerous aspects of becoming critical of our pastors and leaders is that we run the risk of coming out from under God's ordained authority. Hand in hand with this is the danger of losing the fear of the Lord. Carolyn and I listened to the people we mentioned earlier who were trying to force their pastor out. What became quite obvious to us early in our involvement is that these people had no fear of the Lord. They were angry, they openly attacked the pastor, they attacked anyone who disagreed with them, and they quoted Scripture in a most distorted way to justify whatever they did and said. Their words, body language, and self-righteous pride was truly appalling and sinful. I kept thinking to myself, "Don't these people have any fear of the Lord? Don't they realize that they will stand in judgment one day for what they are saying and how they are behaving?" Sadly, I concluded that the answer to my own question was, "No." They had no fear of God. That is a very scary place to be!

The worst part of the whole situation was that they were absolutely convinced that they were on God's side, doing His job for Him. Apparently they came to believe that if they were doing God's work, they could disregard and violate all sorts of scriptural principles such as love those who persecute you, turn

<sup>1</sup> I drew considerable information on this subject from John Bevere's writings in his excellent book, *Under Cover*, published by Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN. I am indebted to Bevere for his keen insights on this subject. I highly recommend Bevere's book to anyone wishing a fuller understanding of submission to God's ordained authority.

the other check, submit to those in authority over you, speak no evil of those whom God has put in authority over you, and so on. They were like those people Jesus spoke about when He said, "a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." (Jn 16:2 NIV)

Scripture tells us, "The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble." (Pro 19:23 NIV) "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." (Pro 1:7 NIV) Only a fool, or one who has no fear of the Lord, takes him or herself out from under God's established authority.

### **Understand Your Position in the Church**

One thing which will help you discern your role in whatever is amiss within the church is to firmly understand what position you hold in your home church. There are different responsibilities which accompany those in different positions of leadership. If you are part of the leadership team of the church, frankly, you have more personal responsibility to intervene in situations which are not right. For example, as a deacon or elder, or a member of the pastoral staff, it may well be that the Lord is letting you see something which needs to be corrected, or at least challenged, and that He has put you in a position so that you can be part of what He is trying to correct. Of course, being on the leadership teams implies that you are mature enough to conduct yourself in love and respect for the other offices of the church as you undertake your action. If there is a lot of flesh and personal opinion in you and not much Holy Spirit wisdom and discernment, that will quickly be seen by others and will reduce your effectiveness, as it should!

If, on the other hand, your position in the church is one of being simply a member of the congregation with no recognized position of leadership, your ability to challenge something or someone, or to bring about change, is considerably reduced. I believe people in this position are called on more to pray for the leadership. Intercession is still the best instrument of change in the kingdom of God, all our physical efforts notwithstanding. I recently heard someone say, "History belongs to the intercessor." I believe it!

### **Different Kinds of Wrongs In Pastoral Leadership**

When you first join a church, after asking the Holy Spirit to send you where He wants you to be, usually there is what I call a honeymoon period. Everything seems fine. You like the pastor and the other members of the church and you are very grateful to have found a good church home. But the longer you're there, the more you see the inner workings of the church. You start to see how decisions are made. You get a feel for the person and spirit of the senior pastor, and so on. It is at about this stage of your church membership that you start to see that all is not perfect and you begin to wonder if there is something you can do to help make things better or correct improper situations. We have all been in this position at one time or another if we have been a Christian very many years. So we begin to ask ourselves, "What, if anything, should I do?" (Because I am limited in space and time, I will confine my focus from now on to the senior pastor of a church.)

For ease of analysis, I will divide the different flaws or inappropriate behavior in pastoral leadership into three categories: 1) wilful, blatant, unrepentant sin in the pastor, 2) an unsanctified or worldly pastor, and 3) a righteous man but with serious deficiencies his leadership.

## **1. The Wilful, Unrepentant Pastor in Blatant Sin**

If you are a member of a congregation whose pastor is in wilful, ongoing, and unrepentant sin, then you should not remain in that church. By this kind of wilful sin I am speaking of sexual sin, embezzlement of money from the church, false doctrines, and so on. In my judgment, there is no question that you should leave a church lead by such a pastor. This man's ministry is unrighteous and has become tainted. This pastor is leaving his people without a proper godly spiritual covering. The question is not whether or not you should leave, but how you should leave. Do you say nothing to anyone and just leave quietly, or do you go to those in leadership around this pastor and state your concerns before you leave? If you are in a position of recognized leadership, I believe you have a duty to seek the direction of the Holy Spirit as to what steps you should take before leaving and then do what He tells you. Bear in mind that you may well not get anything changed. In effect, you may "lose" the battle, at least in your own eyes. But always remember, your only obligation is to do what the Lord tells you. Be obedient to your charge and then leave the results with God. He is ultimately in control anyhow!

I believe one rule of thumb you can use is, if you have no real proof or evidence of what you suspect the pastor is doing, it's just something you believe the Holy Spirit is showing you, you are on much less firm ground going to the leadership with your suspicions. I'm not saying you're wrong, I'm just saying that if you don't have any proof, it may well be that, after you have guarded your own heart and prayed for the pastor, you may just need to quietly leave without voicing your suspicions.

You can take comfort in the fact that God always tries to redeem His own. Never doubt for a minute that God has not, or will not, send a prophet to this wayward person, often more than once, to try to get him or her to repent and be restored. Of course, here is where the human will comes in. If he or she will not repent and turn from the sin, then God will bring an end to it in His way and in His time. Be assured that God's judgment will come on this leader.

## **2. Unsanctified (Worldly) Pastor**

Now let's suppose that, after you have attended the church for a while, you realize that the pastor is really very unsanctified in his thinking. He may enjoy hearing or even telling off-color jokes. Or maybe he isn't interested in spending his time around sanctified and mature believers. Instead, he likes to surround himself with people who always agree with him and never challenge him. He is wilful and wants his way in all church matters.

This is a harder case than the one where the pastor is simply and obviously in gross sin. We all are in the process of sanctification and not yet perfected. I believe at this point the directives of Matthew 18 come more directly into play. (We shall examine these Scriptures in depth in the next section.)

## **3. The Pastor Who is a Righteous Man But Who Has Significant Flaws in His Pastoral Leadership**

Now let's suppose that after getting to know your pastor better, you come to the conclusion that he (or she) is a righteous man in his person but that there are serious flaws and deficiencies in his pastoral leadership. For example, he may be so merciful that he refuses to confront sin in the congregation. Or maybe he doesn't

like controversy in the church so he is willing to compromise Scripture in order to keep outward peace. Or he surrounds himself with people who agree with him, who won't openly challenge him, thereby giving the appearance of harmony. These can be serious flaws in a pastor and will inevitably lead to a church that is less effective in God's kingdom than one which is pastored by a more forceful person. Or maybe the problem is just the opposite. Maybe the pastor is a godly man in most ways but is very controlling and wants everything done his way. In this case he can be overly confrontive or more quietly manipulative. Either way the pastor wants to have his way in everything.

In these situations I believe we must be very careful. It could well be that we simply don't agree with the way the pastor does things. Maybe we have a different personality and would do things differently. If that's the case, we should recognize the differences in style and personality and honor the pastor and his position as the leader of the church.

### **Matthew 18's Commands**

Ultimately, whenever we face a potential conflict within a local church, either among congregants, or between some in the congregation and the leadership, we must look to the principles in Matthew 18:15-17 as our guide in resolving these differences.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Mat 18:15-17 NIV)

I believe that whether we are in a position of recognized leadership or simply a member of the congregation, these Matthew 18 steps are open to us, as long as we do them in love, keep our heart right, and continue to pray for those with whom we disagree or who have offended us. As a member of the congregation, we have the right and responsibility to go quietly to the leader, and if that doesn't resolve things, then, after prayer, we can take witnesses with us to try again.

Let me say here that, as a general member of a congregation, I don't believe that the final step, that of taking your grievance to the whole church, is acceptable. If things don't get resolved, then I think it is appropriate to pray and ask the Lord to release you from the church so you can find another church home. The Lord may not release you right away. Remember, He may want to do some changing and maturing in you before He frees you to go. That is the Lord's prerogative. Our job is to obey whatever He tells us.

If, on the other hand, you are a member of the leadership of the church, you are in a position of responsibility to take more direct action. After praying and asking for Holy Spirit guidance, maybe you should quietly and responsibly discuss the problem with others on the leadership team to test your perceptions. Or maybe you feel you should go directly to the pastor first, and if he or she won't heed, then take it to the leadership team. Perhaps a denominational overseer or someone with apostolic oversight of the church should be brought in. I believe this is what Matthew 18 refers to in the "going public" with a grievance. By and large, we are to stay among brothers and sisters in parallel positions of leadership in these situations. To me, it must be a very rare and very serious matter for anyone in the church to go to the

congregation at large with a specific grievance against the pastor. This is the last and very drastic step and should only be taken after much prayer, consultation with others in leadership, and with firm proof of a pastor's unrepentant misbehavior.

### **Leave It With God**

In these difficult situations, I believe the ultimate conclusion we must always come to is that after we have been as obedient as we know how to be, we must leave it with God. He is the ultimate judge of whether a pastor or another in leadership should be removed. If, or when, the Lord decides to take someone out of leadership, then no power on earth can stop it. Conversely, no matter how hard it may be for us to accept, if someone continues in leadership, then at the very minimum, God is allowing it, for the moment at least. It may seem unfair. At times it may seem like the "bad guys have won." But, remember, it is ultimately God's call, not ours.

Our primary job, whether we stay or leave the church, is to continue to keep our heart right, to pray for the church, and to wait on the Lord. God *will* have a righteous church. That is not in doubt. There are times we are to be tools of that righteousness within the church, and there are times when we are to simply, quietly intercede in prayer on behalf of His righteousness.

### **How Can Church Leaders Keep Themselves Under God's Ordained Authority?**

One excellent way for all of us, whether we are a pastor or a member of a church, to stay under God's ordained authority, is to have people around us who can challenge and admonish us. Let me ask the sobering question, "Who do you allow to challenge you?" There are times, especially when we are moving in our ministry, that even when we appear to be under someone's authority, we really are not. For example, you are an evangelist sent out from your mother church to evangelize. You've been gone for three months and haven't seen or heard from your pastor or elders. You are technically under their authority, but in actuality you have a choice. Imagine for a minute that you have developed an unbiblical or fringe doctrine. Or you have fallen into an unholy relationship with someone. Who is going to challenge you? Who is going to correct you?

Or suppose you are a member of a large church of several hundred people. Just how close to the pastor and elders are you? Do you see them and pray with them several times each month? Does anyone know how you live? If one of God's people in authority isn't involved closely enough in your life to see and know what you are doing, you've slipped out from under authority, whether or not it was intentional. I believe that every Christian, no matter how mature, should authorize someone close to him or her to feel free to challenge him at any time. I have given my pastor and my wife that authority.

None of us enjoy being corrected. But it is God's way of protecting us. We must learn to love God's authority, even when it is painful. If we are unwilling to receive correction from anyone, we are in deep spiritual trouble. "This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings . . ." (2 Pet 2:10 NIV)

## Conclusion

I want to conclude by quoting from a church membership covenant someone sent me recently. This local church asks every member to sign this covenant each year. I think it is an excellent way of reminding all of us we are to love one another and resolve our differences in a godly way.

### Covenant

In obedience to God's Holy Word and commitment to practicing biblical principles, I promise: (1) to faithfully attend, (2) to support financially with my tithe and Holy Spirit directed offerings, and (3) to build harmony in the church. My ultimate goal is to glorify God through bearing much fruit, getting involved in ministry, and avoiding and resolving conflicts. I promise to follow the principle of priorities, as admonished in Matthew 18.

### Principle of Priorities

#### First Step

I will not first share a personal offense with another person. I will go to the offending pastor or brother/sister "first alone." I am committed to restoring the relationship, rather than exposing possible sin. I recognize most problems with people are personality clashes, and I will try to understand their actions based upon their perspective.

#### Second Step

If going to a person "first alone" does not resolve our differences, I promise to seek a neutral and mature individual who will listen to each of our perspectives of the problem. This person will hopefully be able to shed light on one or both of our blind spots or areas of need and growth in order to glorify God.

### Warning

I will not seek to find others who have also been offended, nor share my concerns with the potential "witness" prior to the meeting with my "offending brother." The purpose of having a "witness" is not to validate my hurt, but rather to open my heart and mind to the possible needs I may have regarding my relationship with others.

I realize my friends may naturally listen to my concerns, but also take up my offense. I will, therefore, not cause them to become a party to a possible division and disharmony because of our friendship. Whenever I feel an urge to share the offense with my

friends, I will pray and commune with God about my hurt.

### Confronting Ministry Leaders

I believe in the scriptural admonition to not rebuke an elder (spiritual leader), other than in grave matters of misconduct and open sin. (1 Tim 5:19) I will earnestly pray for and follow those God had placed in leadership over me. I will not allow anyone to criticize them without following the principles in Matthew 18 and without the specific person present. If I have a problem with my ministry leader, I will go "first alone" to him/her. I will not share my concern with anyone.

If I am still concerned after I have listened to his explanation, I will ask my pastor's permission to find a witness who will listen to our conflict. If the witness finds I have misunderstood the situation and should continue no further, I will trust God by casting my burden on the Lord and leave it there. If the witness agrees with my concern and finds the ministry leader wrong and the leader refuses to hear the "witness," we will then find a group of two or three other "witnesses" who will hear the matter and determine what God is doing through this conflict.

### Ultimate Goal

I want God's will and way to resolve my conflicts and will do as the Holy Bible teaches, regardless of my normal and natural feelings. If I continue to find fault with a ministry leader and cannot worship in "spirit and truth," I will seek to join another ministry rather than cause any conflict and disharmony. I am committed to pleasing God through resolving my conflicts, even if it means separating myself from the source of my irritations.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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