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A Disciple's Foundation of Spirit and Truth

Dangers of hyper authoritarian and cult-like churches

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Sailing in Dangerous Waters

The Church is sailing in dangerous waters, lost in the tides of humanism, enlightenment and New Age teachings. Its halls and chambers are filled with greed, lust, and the hunger for power, status, wealth and recognition.

The Church is in state of apostasy, allowing same-sex marriages, all the while placing man's agenda on a higher pedestal than the Kingdom of God. Paganism and New Age teachings are still rife in its midst. Why is this so? Because modern day spiritual leaders have placed themselves on this god-like platform, and according to them, they are not allowed to be rebuked, reproofed, or corrected. The Church is on an ego trip, blinded by the entrapments of power, status and wealth.

Funny enough, it as if it is shock to hear about spiritual abuse in the Churches, as if it is something "new".

The problem is, it is not new but it has always been with us ever since the Church became an institution and structuralised. And spiritual abuse is not only happening in a few isolate churches, but in reality, if you study the dilemma for example of the clergy and laity divides you will notice that spiritual abuse is not so uncommon but a huge problem.

It is because of the Churches lack of discernment, ignorance and the prevailing attitude of turning a blind eye to iniquity that we have chosen to ignore the danger signs of spiritual abuse and the pending impact on believers. It is the same with the issue of simony, which is the modern-day way of trying to pay for an office in ministry, or trying to bribe God for spiritual gifts. Simony is never taught on, or never discussed, because of the Church's lack of wisdom and discernment. Similarly, we have chosen to accept the divide that exists between the laity and the clergy, which is also a fallacy.

Spiritual abuse, often subtle, is hardly a new phenomenon and is clearly evident from day one in the

Catholic Church for example. After all, if the priest has the supposed power to absolve and pardon when it comes to sins, you can imagine what a power trip any priests must be on! And then you had the practices of indulgences, where people tried to pay their way into heaven! And so the Church became rich because they exploited people's blind ignorance and lack of wisdom. But the Protestant Church is not any better – today you have the one pastor system.

This spiritual leader lauds over the congregation, and he or she determines who ministers, how they minister, what doctrines are allowed and many other operational functions. Because of this totalitarian structure, spiritual warfare is no longer on the agenda because pastors or spiritual leaders have simply rejected the idea of the devil or demons.

A gathering of saints should be a place of mentoring, nurturing, empowerment, discipleship, and above all, for each and every believer to live out their ministry, especially beyond the four walls of the church building. It should not be a place of manipulation, exploitation, intimidation, and abuse. For example, how many believers aren't bullied into becoming members of a church, even though that is not even Scriptural? How many believers aren't forced to only move in a certain ministry, as determined by the leadership?

Take for example 1 Corinthians 14: 26 What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.

Paul speaks here about a healthy church structure where the holy priesthood functions as one, and not where only a “selected” few does the ministry. This is confirmed by Acts 2: 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles'

teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Yes, Paul did write about the role of the overseers (bishops) and the deacons (1 Timothy 3), but this was in reference to appointing some to keep an eye over the behaviour of the believers, including their own, and making sure God's Truth is kept pure at all time. This is why he made mention of the importance of the character of such men, who will then ultimately not be abused by power or be deceived or who would be prone to exploitation and manipulation.

We have to remember we read about deacons and bishops and then we immediately place it in context of modern day church structures. 2000 years there was no such church structure, or the clergy vs laity system. Across Jerusalem, Asia Minor, Greece and Rome were scattered believers trying to survive persecution and being ridiculed. Men were appointed as deacons and overseers to try and keep some form of order, especially those who were Jews who accepted Jesus. Yet, what was happening at that time was far removed from the structures of the Catholic or even Protestant churches.

We are also well acquainted with 1 Corinthians 12: 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all

interpret? 31 Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

Since we have structured the Church, we have also structured 1 Corinthians 12 into fixed offices to lead the Church! Paul writes about apostles and prophets and about the different gifts, but nowhere does he even mention any form of structure. After all, this passage is about the unity of the Body of Christ and how everybody has a part to play.

You simply cannot find in the writing of Paul the concept of a clergy lauding over laity – that is modern-day invention that started with the structuring of the pastor office during the Reformation. Yet we have taken this Scripture for example and made a doctrine out the five-fold ministry. Yet Paul never formally talked about a five-fold ministry that rules and reigns! It is simply an invention of man. It is the same with those who formalise the gifts of the Spirit and the offices of servanthood. There is so much religion and traditionalism in the churches that we cannot even see when we have blindly followed a doctrine that is the invention of man's imagination.

The problem is we don't really know how the Church should run anymore because of our religion and traditions! We are so focussed on church buildings, services, sermons and church membership we are beyond radically abandoning our ways to again listen to God.

The big problem spiritually when it comes to spiritual abuse and hyper-authoritarian churches is dealing with the dangers of silencing God. It says in "1 Thessalonians 5: 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt."

So often you will find in such church environment where the spiritual leader (s) lauds over the congregation like a task master that man ultimately takes the place of God and thus become a god to the people. Therefore what happens is that the flow of the Holy Spirit is quenched and the work of the Spirit is stifled.

Think about this – the Spirit came to lead us in all truth, so if there is so much difference regarding the truth, then where is the Spirit in the Church? The answer should

be quite simple. The Spirit has been quenched and not allowed to operate because of the controlling and manipulative nature of some church environments where the leadership overrides the work of the Holy Spirit.

Also take note of verse 20 where it speaks about treating prophecy with contempt. The prophetic word, when truly spoken in the Spirit, has always existed to lead and guide the people on the right path. Sadly, the devil has countered the prophetic movement with counterfeit deception in the form of misdirected and misguided prophecies.

False prophets and false prophecies abound in the Church. Yet, when a true word is spoken to guide the Church on the right path of truth, many times such a word will be dismissed or argued against by those who seek to maintain control. Thus, you will find often in hyper-authoritarian churches the Truth of God is also manipulated for own gain, even at the expense of the Holy Spirit and even at the expense of prophecy being heard and acted upon. True prophets are treated like rebels and misfits because they challenge the religious spirit!

Sadly, the Lord many times is not allowed to operate even in His own church because of man wanting to take the central stage, resulting in spiritual abuse, the contentment of prophecy and the quenching of the Holy Spirit. As soon as a person feels that man wants to override the work of the Holy Spirit on a personal level, then this is a clear sign of spiritual abuse. When man insists his truth shall alone be adhered to, even when it contradicts the voice of the Spirit, then spiritual abuse is evident. When one feels constantly manipulated, controlled and exploited for the agendas of man at the expense of the Kingdom of God then spiritual abuse is rife. We need to wake up and take note of spiritual abuse in all forms.

Jesus made it blatantly clear He is the Lord of the Church and not man. We are all the Church on earth, and yes, some have been appointed to act as guardians and overseers in Spirit and Truth, but not to act like gods or to

take the place of the Lord. There is a fine line when being led by a mentor as a form of discipleship and when having to submit to blind obedience. As we will discuss later in this volume of work, discipleship is very important for church growth, but there is a difference when people are equipped not to become disciples of the Lord but rather to become puppets of a church group/denomination.

This again reminds of the prophetic imagery the Lord once showed about a puppet on a string. Question remains, who is pulling your strings? God or man? One is supposed to be discipled in order to disciple others, while one is supposed to be mentored to become a mentor. But all of this is done under the headship and authority of God. It should be done completely in Truth and in the Spirit.

Yet, so often you find that someone is discipled in the ways of certain church group or denomination, instead of the ways of the Lord. This therefore reminds of a cult.

Members of a cult are also mentored and discipled to follow the leader and to blindingly follow the leader. Discipleship and mentorship is for the purpose of bringing someone into maturity of the Lord so that they may walk in the presence of the Lord in order to build the Kingdom of God on earth.

But when we disciple someone to follow the church constitution, or the church doctrine, or the vision of man all at the expense of the Truth of God, or the vision of God or God's plan and purposes, then it smacks of a cult.

We need to beware of spiritual abuse and how it taste so often of a cult! God should always remain in control, and His will, way and truth is final and shall not be compromised.

Listen to Jeremiah 8: "How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?

9 The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have? 10 Therefore I will give their wives to other men and their fields to new

owners. from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. 11 They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace.

It is clear from this Scripture that we are dealing with priest and prophets who have their own agenda, who practices exploitation, and who pretend all is well yet clearly there is something terrible amiss.

Again, notice verse 8: "How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?"

What you dealing with here is the false interpretation of God's Truth and the subsequent false teaching of such interpretations. And the people actually thought they were wise because they thought they were walking in the Truth of the Lord [at the time embodied in the Law of Moses] but were actually holding onto something false. Is this not the case of what is happening these days in the Churches?

Doctrines are formulated based on man's own agenda and wisdom, formulated based on rational interpretation and such doctrines are falsely spoon fed to the masses. In the meantime, the congregation thinks they are wise because they are "learning" and are being taught the truth, yet in the meantime the "scribes" – who are the preachers and teachers of today – are handling God's Word falsely.

In Jeremiah 8, the pastor's prominence was thus more important than the legitimate needs of the congregation. He was also declaring deception, crying "peace, peace" when there is no peace. In other words, in our modern day context, many believers who sit in Sunday services think everything is alright by clearly there are terrible misconceptions afoot. Discernment is required.

Churches have become like businesses and the congregation the client who needs to buy the product, which is the "Gospel". So the pastor, who acts more like a CEO than a spiritual leader, has to sell the "product" otherwise his "business" will not flourish. And so staff meetings focus on marketing initiatives that will bring

more people—who will bring in more tithes and offerings—into the sanctuary. Church services become about external appearances, thus whitewashed tombs that are full of dead men's bones.

Jesus addressed spiritual abuse in His day. Beyond His warnings about the Pharisees, Jesus also pointed out ravenous wolves. These ravenous wolves look like anointed prophets, but their motives are dastardly. Today, the spiritually abusive Pharisaical pastor has a long list of rules and demands and little grace for those who don't rise to the occasion.

Often Scripture is quoted out of Psalm 105 or 1 Chronicles 16 about not judging God's anointed. Yet, if you read these passages in context, this has to do with Israel as a people who were favoured and had a Covenant with God. It was about not killing or harming God's people. It had nothing to do with the anointing or the offices of priests.

"Do not touch God's anointed" is but another example of how spiritual leaders have twisted Scriptures in order to "control" and "manipulate" the flock to adhere to their teachings, even if it means disobeying the Holy Spirit or ignoring the Truth of the Lord. As soon as someone wants to say something in terms of corrections against the leadership, often such a person will be seen as being cynical, sceptical, rebellious, or simply have a critical or negative spirit. Such a person will be then rebuked for wanting to speak the truth (if the truth came from the Lord)!

And this is what has happened to God's true prophets – they have been silenced for they have been labelled as rebellious and out of God's will. After all, the institutionalised Church is a huge machinery, so surely the argument goes it has to be right and the rest wrong? Again, this refers to Jeremiah 8. As we will see later when discussing cults, this mentality of exclusivism and the idea of us-vs-the rest is a key characteristic of a cult.

God's true word is constantly undermined by the deceptive workers within the church – intentionally or

unintentionally – and by the workers of iniquity.

In Ezekiel 2, you will find Ezekiel's calling to be a prophet: 3 He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. 4 The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' 5 And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them. 6 And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. 7 You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. 8 But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you." 9 Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, 10 which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

So often, as the Lord has revealed in my spirit, it is they who carry God's true word who are seen as the rebellious ones who are too stubborn to walk in the truth of the totalitarian pastor. In the case of Ezekiel, God reminded him that Ezekiel is not the rebellious one but he needs to go and address those who are stubborn. Ezekiel is bolstered by the Lord's command to keep speaking to truth, even though the rebuke or correction (represented by the scroll) may be filled with lament, mourning and woe.

We have after all become so scared to offend or rebuke, steering away from any words of lament, mourning and woe! We preach love yet forget to fear the Lord. The reality is, people within the church needs to be corrected or rebuked in Spirit and in Truth, because there is only blessing and God's favour when we are in His will. What benefit is there to allow someone to continue out of God's

will, walking in sin or idolatry or deception, just for the sake of not wanting to offend?

We have to realise more than ever there are those within the Church, who as in the days of Ezekiel, are in fact the rebellious one for walking their own path, seeking their own truth, and declaring their own doctrines. And yes, many of them are in fact the leadership, and many of them are in fact so stubborn and blinded by arrogance and pride that they refuse correction.

The result is that if they continue to work their deception, then scores of believers who make up the congregation will be deceived and remain in spiritual bondage. So if we continue to let people preach and teach deception, not rebuking or correction because of the fear of man or guilt or not wanting to offend, all that are allowing is for the blood of those who are in turn being deceived to come upon our hands.

Again, we refer to Ezekiel 33. Renewal of Ezekiel's Call as Watchman: The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, 3 and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, 4 then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head. 5 Since they heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, their blood will be on their own head. If they had heeded the warning, they would have saved themselves. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.' 7 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them

from their ways, that wicked person will die for[a] their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. 9 But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

The teaching of Jesus on not judging has also been grossly misunderstood, for while we cannot judge someone for who they are and while we must be careful not to judge by our flesh or by our humanity, we must, however, move by the Spirit and correct those, and ourselves, when they are inflicting harm to the Kingdom of God or walking out of the will or the truth of the Lord.

We need to address fallacies and deceptions for people in the process are getting spiritually abused and hurt. Even worse, if we ignore the abuse of the deception, so many believers land up spiritual captives to the ploys of the devil.

To correct and to be corrected is not about punishment, because there is a blessing and favour when we are in the will of the Lord. Anything beyond the will of the Lord is where the devil roams. We all have a duty as God's watchmen and His servants to stand up for God's truth, and we must all be held accountable to our sisters and brothers in Jesus.

Paul understood this concept, and he was not shy to rebuke or to reproof, because erroneous teachings, false word, immoral behaviour and disrespect acts like a cancer that spread throughout the Body and reflects negatively on the Kingdom of Heaven. Sure, there needs to be the respect for those who are in the anointing of God and in a certain office, but such respect does not mean blind silence and allowing an error, an iniquity or a sin to be overlooked. We are involved in a spiritual war, but we need to make we do not contribute to the spiritually fallen!

Even Peter wrote about the dangers of the "false teachers" spreading their lies and deceptions. 2 Peter 2: False Teachers and Their Destruction: 1 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be

false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. 2 Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. 3 In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness[b] to be held for judgment; 5 if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; 6 if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; 7 and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless 8 (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— 9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment. 10 This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings; 11 yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not heap abuse on such beings when bringing judgment on them from the Lord. 12 But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish.”

As soon as anybody is “beyond” correction, or reproof, therefore being beyond being held accountable, then pride, ego and arrogance is active which leads to deception.

Satan is the master at deception and he attacks every believer daily. He has been busy with this work since the days of the Paradise, and he knows how fragile mankind is.

This is why we need to remain accountable, lest we are deceived beyond the point of knowing we have been tricked.

A lot of people believe in certain doctrines to be the truth, but once the deception is revealed then truth dawns and sets us free. Jesus after all came to set the captives free (Isaiah 61). And it doesn't matter how long a person has walked with the Lord, or has been in ministry, or his status in the Body of Christ, such a person must be willing to listen and accept rebuke or correction if needed. And this is problem in the Body of Christ – there are many spiritual leaders who claim they are beyond such rebuke or correction, while others will say they have close advisors to whom they are accountable.

In reality, one should accept rebuke or correction from anybody when the Lord speaks, be it the janitor of the church, or even a child. Our close confidants often know us too well and often speak out of loyalty or even in the flesh, yet at times we need to hear it straight from someone who holds no such loyalty.

But in the Churches many of the spiritual leaders are not accessible, unlike Jesus, and no one with a word from God is allowed to approach the “high and mighty” because of crazy doctrines such as “not touching God’s anointed”. God has always and will continue to lead His Church by the prophetic, yet the true prophetic voice is not allowed to operate in the Churches, because the prophetic word brings correction and judgement where the Church has stepped out of God’s will and Kingdom. The truth at times do hurt, but it also sets us free.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul deals with reports of incest in the Church. “1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. 2 And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? 3 For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is

present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. 4 So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? 7 Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. 12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

Paul addressed the matter of incest by dealing directly with the dangers of leaving sin to go unchecked. He therefore makes the point that sin is like yeast that affects the entire batch, thus meaning that sin in general when not addressed within the Church can become like a cancer affecting the entire Body of the Lord on earth. He even goes as far as to highlight the need to “expel the wicked person”.

In Galatians 2, Paul rebukes Cephas (Peter): 11 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged

to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? 15 "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles 16 know that a person is not justified by the works of 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 the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. 17 "But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. 19 "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

When it comes to the Body of Christ, to the Kingdom of God and His Truth, there is no room for silence or passivity when it dealing with heresy, falseness, deception and iniquity. It will run like a cancer in the Body, afflicting all that it touches. It needs to be addressed spiritually, and always in love and in truth.

In the case regarding the dispute with Peter, the matter that was being addressed is if a Christian, whether be a Jew or Gentile, is required to keep the Mosaic Law. Peter was seen as being hypocritical, first eating with Gentiles then withdrawing from them. Paul on numerous occasions in the book of Galatians deal with the issue of law and faith, and how the law than entangle one spiritually.

To Timothy, Paul said the following: 14 Keep

reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 16 Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. 17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. 19 Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

Paul was not in the game of selfish criticism and seeking to harm other people's reputation. He was addressing heresy and false actions because it affected the Church, and it made a mockery of the truth of the Lord.

Now, if we do not wish to listen to Paul, then let us listen to Jesus who says in Matthew 18 regarding dealing with sin in the Church: 15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. The words of Jesus in verse 17 echoes the words of Paul, when He talks about expelling the wicked person.

There are many ways man and ultimately Satan will use to pervert the Word of God. False teachers and prophets will continue to deny the Saviour of whom the Scriptures speak (2 Peter 2:1). Others will distort or dilute the Scriptures (2 Corinthians. 2:17; 4:2; 2 Peter 3:16). Some will add to them or take away from them (Revelations 22:18-19).

Still other will doubt the Word, scoffing at its promises or warnings (2 Peter 3:3-4).

Consider for example how false prophets are consistently rebuked throughout Scriptures, for after all, they sow deception. Sometimes, such deception is intentional and sometimes it is not (read for example Ezekiel 34).

Consider also “Deuteronomy 13: Worshiping Other Gods: 1 If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, 2 and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” 3 you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. 5 That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you. 6 If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your ancestors have known, 7 gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), 8 do not yield to them or listen to them. Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them. 9 You must certainly put them to death. Your hand must be the first in putting them to death, and then the hands of all the people. 10 Stone them to death, because they tried to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 11 Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again.”

Compare this to the teaching of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11 when dealing with false apostles: 4 For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

It is therefore clear Paul urges the believers to take a stand against deception, lies, deceit and apostasy. The Body of Christ should after all not be excepting such deception easily.

Without a doubt God's Truth is under attack. In 2 Peter 1, Peter, knowing that his days were numbered, reminded his readers of those truths which they had already learned (cf. vv. 12-14). Peter stressed two other truths regarding the Word of God in his second epistle.

The Word of God is a certain word, a Word to which God Himself gave testimony, and of this testimony Peter was a witness. The Scriptures are a sure word from God, not cleverly devised tales (2 Peter 1:15-19). Furthermore, since God's revelation was given to men through those who were guided by the Holy Spirit, the interpretation of God's Word should never be novel and unknown to the Christian community at large (1:20-21).

We should expect that a proper interpretation of God's Word has the confirming testimony of godly men through the ages. No new or novel interpretation is to be expected, just as no new revelation is expected.

In John 16:13 our Lord promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth and therefore all believers. "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him" (1 John 2:26-27).

Paul says in Acts 20: 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare

the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”

This reflects the words of Jesus in “Matthew 24: 24 For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

In 2 Timothy 2, Paul deals with the issue of false teachers: 14 Keep reminding God’s people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 16 Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. 17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

In Titus 1, Paul issued the following rebuke: 10 For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. 11 They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

Keeping in mind that indeed pride comes before a fall and because of the current milieu where arrogance and pride is fostered, it is no wonder that with the lack of rebuking and correction we face the very real danger of a lot of erroneous doctrines being allowed to flourish. And when one such “doctrines” of lies are spoken by men and women who act like gods and who refuses to be properly rebuked, then you have a very dangerous situation indeed.

Striving for Unity in the Church

Paul fought for unity in the Church, which comes by walking in one Truth, one Spirit and one Faith. He realised the dangers that existed that could oppose such unity, such as false doctrines, poor leadership, legalism, religious obsessions, and the exaltation of the selfish agendas.

Take for example what he wrote in Ephesians 3: 11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Take note of the following: “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Unity of the faith and in the knowledge of Jesus is what ultimately unifies the Church. Whatever is dividing the Church is not so much the lack of unity on faith but the knowledge of the Son that should lead the Church on a path of maturity and therefore living in the fullness of Christ.

How can there be such unity when the Church is divided on many issues, which clearly reflects a lack of unity in the knowledge of Jesus. And such division is a result of the ego of man taking central place, leading to

hyper-authoritarian structures and false doctrines such as hyper grace, prosperity (tithing) and the class difference between laity and clergy just to name a few.

Indeed, churches of today are saturated with New Age teachings, rationalism, enlightenment, paganism, and even secularism because it seeks to conform to the will and demand of man, not God.

Paul mentioned what happens if there is a lack of unity in the knowledge of the Son: “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.”

It is no wonder the Lord has spoken in my spirit about the lack of wisdom and character in the Church. Wisdom and maturity blossoms when we are united with the Lord in His way, will and truth. There is a lack of maturity because churches, especially leadership, teach all kinds of false doctrines as a result of the ego becoming bigger than the Truth of the Lord.

Ever noticed how many people are prophets these days? There is a frightening amount of false prophecy in the churches leading people astray. And sadly, because of the lack of proper discipleship in the churches, which is lacking because of maturity among leadership, people are deceived all the time by false doctrines and teachings. Even worse, believers are simply not getting to know the Lord, or form a true friendship with God because of the authoritarian role of the pastor who acts as a mediator between the congregation and the Lord. There is simply a lot of immaturity in the churches today, which breeds foolishness, ignorance and even rebellion against God’s Truth.

Again, listen to what Paul says: “15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in

love, as each part does its work. It is all about Jesus and His Truth, and not the truth of man. It is about His Kingdom, and not ours. When we move in His Truth, we move in unity and maturity.”

Indeed, there is a lack of maturity because people are uniting with the teachings of a man, or the constitution of a denomination instead of moving in the will of Jesus who is the Head of the Church

Paul urges for a life submitted to Jesus, by which comes maturity and strength of character. Take for example what he says in “Colossians 2: Spiritual Fullness in Christ: 6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. 9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. 16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. 18 Do not

let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. 19 They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. 20 Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: 21 “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? 22 These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

Take note of verse 8: 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

Paul places strong emphasis on living in the fullness of the Lord, which means living in complete submission and obedience unto Him, not man. This is why there is so much division and heresy in the churches today, because of man has taken the centre stage, thus turning the church many times into some kind of cult where the leader's methods and teaching override the Truth of the Lord. Paul warned against legalisms, traditions and false doctrines that will lead people astray. Remember, for this reason he wrote in “Galatians 5:1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Also take of Philippians 2 when Paul wrote about Imitating Christ's Humility: “1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy

complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

Paul’s message is therefore clear. We will remain in the Truth as long as we remain true to the Lord and therefore walk in His Truth.

This is why in his letters to the church in Colossae and Ephesus about the importance to imitate the Lord and to walk in His ways. Take for example Ephesians 4 when he speaks about instructions for Christian living, which one will find reflects in his writing to Timothy and Titus. “17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. 20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. 25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. 29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who

listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Unity in the church blossoms when we are first united with God, and His way and His truth.

We need to submit to such truth, and then be led by such truth so that are united as the Body of Christ.

Traces of a Cult-like Nature within Churches

Some may say this is a bit of far-fetched notion to jump to the notion of a cult or a sect (after all, they are preaching Jesus), but if one looks closely at the characteristics of a cult and sect then the leap is certainly not that great. Such a scenario becomes a possibility because of the hyper-authoritarian structures of some churches, where the pastor takes the pivotal role of leadership, lauding over the people like a 'god'.

Webster defines a cult as, "A system of religious worship or ritual ... devoted attachment to, or extravagant admiration for, a person, principle, etc."

After all, let us reminded from the onset that Church leadership are these days pursuing personal agendas and goals, making millions in profit, yet by all accounts the congregation are manipulated and controlled to act, speak and behave according to the doctrine and constitution of the specific denomination.

Let us also understand from the outset that we are not speaking here about apostasy, which refers to the rejection of Christianity by someone who formerly was a Christian. The term apostasy comes from the Greek word *apostasia* ("ἀποστασία") meaning defection, departure, revolt or rebellion. It can be described as "a wilful falling away from, or rebellion against, Christianity". Thus, apostasy is a theological category describing those who have voluntarily and consciously abandoned their faith in the God of the covenant, who manifests himself most completely in Jesus Christ.

What we find in Churches when it comes to spiritual abuse is not so much apostasy, since Jesus is still being preached, but rather the grievous use of manipulation and control to get church members to blindly follow a specific leader, even at the expense of adhering to the direct voice of God. A cult is not merely about contradictions to the Truth, but it also has to do with the

distortion of the Truth for own gain, and it has to do with the charismatic nature of a leader affecting others to follow his agenda and “truth”.

And so it is true that if one looks at the common religious cults in the world, such as the Restoration of the 10 Commandments and even Mormonism for example, how these charismatic leaders will twist the Scriptures for own gain and benefit. For example, in Scriptures, the Pharisee party which was represented in Antioch and the Jerusalem Council tended to focus only upon the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Law. It was not by accident that James chose to prove his point from the Prophets (Acts 15:15-18), citing from the Book of Amos specifically. It is so easy these days for denominations and church leaders to focus on one subject or topic, twisting it to enforce a false doctrine.

Prosperity teaching is huge in Protestant churches, but clearly a lot of Scriptures are twisted and distorted to enforce the concept that believers must seek great wealth (for example Malachi 3 that God will open the windows of heaven if one tithes).

Apart from a cult, you also get a sect, which implies a subgroup of a religious, political or philosophical belief system, usually an offshoot of a larger religious group. Although in past it was mostly used to refer to religious groups, it has since expanded and in modern culture can refer to any organization that breaks away from a larger one to follow a different set of rules and principles.

Therefore, with this in mind, consider that Jesus said He IS the Truth, Way and life. There is no other truth except the Truth of Jesus. Churches have these days compromised by walking in partial truth and justifying such a partial truth. Therefore, if there is ONE and ONLY Truth, being Jesus and what He taught, how is then possible that in the Protestant movement you get hundreds if not thousands of denominations? As the Scriptures clearly state, there is one faith, one Church, and one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). We also have to remember that Jesus is

the head of the Church, not man. We are called to be shepherds, which mean to serve and not to RULE. Therefore, if there is one Truth, then every other denomination that is not 100% in alignment with the Truth of the Lord is a sect.

And we are talking here about fundamental Truths of the Kingdom, not differences created by religion. When we argue over what clothes to wear to Church, or what day to serve the Lord, or if drums are allowed at a church service, then we are dealing with man-made religious issues. Such issues tend to divide us because it focusses on the ego and the arrogance of man's need for control.

Fundamental truths deal with God as the Trinity, His Kingdom, His laws and His teachings. It deals with the Holy Spirit and with the Covenant. Yet, churches are divided on defining the Trinity, on the work of the Holy Spirit, on the teachings of Jesus, on His laws and so on. After all, we still preach tithing, replacement theology, cessation (work of the Spirit has ceased), homosexuality is not a sin and so the list continues. If we fail to walk in the complete Truth of the Lord then we walk in idolatry, therefore witchcraft because we choose rebellion which breeds iniquity. Over the centuries, Churches have constantly interpreted Scriptures, which gave been filtered through personal perceptions, points of views, life experiences, education and personal agendas. If we, however, deny ourselves and carry the cross, thereby in submission listen to the Lord and not our imagination or the senses of the flesh, we will hear the Truth of the Lord and walk in such Truth.

Remember, it says that the worshippers of the last day must worship in spirit and in truth. After all, the Holy Spirit was poured out to lead us in all Truth (John 16), but based on the Churches attitude towards the Holy Spirit it is not surprising the Church has lost the way. We are talking here about the arguments surrounding cessation versus continuous (if the Holy Spirit still works today in every believer), while you still find these days that believers do

not know who the Spirit is, how to walk in the Spirit or how to be led by the Spirit. This is because we have shunned the Spirit because we chose a path of control and seeking our own brand of truth. So yes, we get a lot of denominations these days that act like a sect or a cult because people are following a person, instead of seeking Jesus above all who the Truth is.

Jesus is our only Teacher yet we choose to follow another teacher to show us the way. Jesus says in “Matthew 23: 8 But you are not to be called rabbi (teacher), for you have one Teacher and you are all brothers.”

John reminds us of the following truth in 1 John 1: 27 But as for you, the anointing (the sacred appointment, the unction) which you received from Him abides [permanently] in you; [so] then you have no need that anyone should instruct you. But just as His anointing teaches you concerning everything and is true and is no falsehood, so you must abide in (live in, never depart from) Him [being rooted in Him, knit to Him], just as [His anointing] has taught you [to do].”

John 15 speaks about the importance to abide in Jesus, for then by His Wisdom we shall walk in Truth and speak Truth. Paul writes the following in “Colossians 2: 6 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: 7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. 9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”

We read the following in “Isaiah 30: 20 And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide Himself any more, but your eyes will constantly behold your Teacher.”

In this context, Isaiah spoke about the restoration of Israel, yet prophetically this also pointed to the day that all mankind will fall under the New Covenant of Jesus, who is

our only true Teacher as confirmed by Matthew 23. Let us then seek Him above all, for He is wondrous! As we abide in Him, we shall be led by the Spirit of Wisdom as declared in Isaiah 11.

Once we fall into the trap of being spiritually duped by a leader, following him without question - even forsaking the prompting of the Holy Spirit to correct our course - then we are heading down a slippery slope. And such a slope can lead to full blown apostasy.

Paul writes the following in 1 Corinthians 3 when he deals with denominations and Church leaders: “1 Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings? 5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. 9 For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building. 10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. 14 If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a

reward. 15 If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. 16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple. 18 Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; 20 and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." 21 So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

This of course supports the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7: The Wise and Foolish Builders: 24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. 26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." 28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

Here is a thought – how did Paul manage to stay on course, not being seduced by deception or becoming like a demi-god? Simple – he walked in the Holy Spirit, listened to God, obeyed the Lord and sought only to please the Kingdom of Heaven. His agenda was the agenda of Jesus. Pride and ego he sacrificed for the greater good.

Rise of the Hyper-authoritarian church structures

Before we study closely the similarities between a cult structure and some modern-day churches, let us first focus on the rise of the hyper-authoritarian church structure which has given birth to spiritually abuse and control.

After all, one of the greatest struggles mankind face when it comes to denying the Self is to give up control. It is because of pride and arrogance that we seek our own will and way above all else. With power comes the greater urges of control, and with the need of control comes manipulation.

There are three forms of Christian “witchcraft”, namely intimidation, manipulation and domination. Such witchcraft has been allowed to flourish in churches because of the hyper-authoritarian church structure, where the congregation must blindly follow the leader, without questioning, doubting or arguing doctrines or methods.

The Greek word for witchcraft is Pharmakia, which speak about witchcraft or the deceptions of idolatry. This word also implies the poisoning of the mind. If you study how a cult works, it is works on the basis of mind-control, brainwashing and the replacement of values and “truths”. In churches, congregation are not encouraged to think for themselves, or to question what is being taught, otherwise they are intimidated with “excommunication”.

It says in “Matthew 24:4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you.” And also “Galatians 5:1: Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” We are also mindful of “1 Timothy 4:1 - Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”

It is true but sad that daily multitudes of sincere and trusting believers are caught in the invisible web of religious captivation in the churches they attend, the

ministries they support and the networks they are aligned with. It has become so bad that the doctrines of these spiritual leaders will be followed without thought, even overriding the voice of the Lord.

This reminds me when years ago the Lord showed the front door of a church that resembled a mouth with monstrous teeth, devouring those who entered. This is how Churches have become, devouring 'baby' Christians, devouring those who once walked in the liberty of the Lord but now have been subjected to the pain and suffering of being bullied into blind obedience.

These faithful followers of Christ are victims of spiritual abuse, psychological enslavement, and exploitation perpetrated under the heavy-hand of hyper-authoritarianism.

That is to say, the leadership of the church-group of which they are a part is dominating, controlling, manipulating, and exploiting their followers for their own personal gain and private kingdom-building.

Sadly, therefore, through systematic indoctrination, victims have been duped into accepting as biblical and beneficial the oppressive and abusive predominance imposed upon them by unscrupulous church-leaders.

Without realizing the spiritual effect of what they are doing, myriads of sincere and faithful followers of Christ, in submitting themselves and surrendering their God-given right to self-governance or personal autonomy unto their spiritual leaders, have become "slaves of men" in blatant violation of God's explicit warning against that very thing: "do not become slaves of man" (1 Corinthians 7:23).

One of the means that man is giving up his right to be solely governed by the Lord and to become a slave of man is through church membership. We are after all members of the Body of Christ by the Blood of the Lamb, not by the ink on a paper. What actually happens is that spiritually we legally declare that we come under the "authority" of the Church to whom we become a membership, and therefore its leadership. Yes, across the world millions of believers

are wilfully enslaving themselves by signing biblically-prohibited "covenants" with their leaders that require them to effectively surrender their free-will unto their spiritual taskmasters and granting them the right to intervene in and make decisions regarding the mundane matters of their lives.

Authoritarian abuse (aka, "spiritual abuse") is one of the most widespread and troubling problems facing the Church today. Indeed, the truth is that ecclesiastical enslavement and exploitation is pandemic in many sectors of 21st Century Christendom, though those churches and ministries employing it go to great lengths to disguise and conceal it. It is because of this spiritual abuse that many of the hyper-authoritarian churches operate like a cult, where members are ultimately forced to act, think and behave in a certain way, and such a way is determined not by the Lord but by church leadership.

Hyper-authoritarian abuse is evident throughout Church history, and comes under numerous guises. In the Catholic Church, especially during the Middle Age, indulgences could be bought which was like a quick ticket to heaven. Imagine the power the Church wielded if indulgences were true!

And remember, even today, Catholic priests have the supposed "power" to pardon and absolve sin, so they rule the roost of the parishioners through control and manipulation. But today, control and manipulation is equally evident in the Protestant churches, just wrapped up in other forms of deception and treachery.

Jesus says in Matthew 11: 28 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest. [I will ease and relieve and refresh your souls.] 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am gentle (meek) and humble (lowly) in heart, and you will find rest (relief and ease and refreshment and recreation and blessed quiet) for your souls. 30 For My yoke is wholesome (useful, good—not harsh, hard, sharp, or pressing, but comfortable, gracious, and pleasant), and My

burden is light and easy to be borne.

The hyper-authoritarian system has partly its roots in the Shepherdling Movement that has certainly not gone away but is very much alive. It says in “Jeremiah 6:13-14: For from the least of them to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for gain, and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. And they have healed the brokenness of my people superficially saying, “Peace. peace,” but there is no peace.”

At the height of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, some hippies converted to Christianity. A major movement now known as the “Jesus People” or “Jesus Movement” swept through the United States from coast to coast. Not surprisingly, teenagers who sought “freedom” soon discovered that being free wasn’t so great as they thought it would be.

The catalyst that started the Shepherdling Movement was a moral failure in a charismatic ministry in South Florida. In response to this failure, four Charismatic leaders came together as the crisis response team.

These men, realising they were equally vulnerable to moral failure apart from accountability, agreed to submit themselves to each another. This mutual submission became a supernatural experience for them, and they bound their ministries together. Eventually, another member joined the core group.

These five men began to teach on authority, submission, and discipleship. The doctrine that reshaped the charismatic community was that every individual must be submitted to another person and that all major life decisions should be submitted to a “shepherd or pastor”. It became a system in which elders or “shepherds” acted as spiritual leaders responsible for the entire church.

Individual church members were assigned to specific elders and were “submitted” to them. Over time, a religious system developed in which a blind obedience to “man” was promoted.

In other words, the Shepherdling Movement arose in

the early 1970s was an attempt to solve shortcomings in the modern church. Many newly converted Christians were not properly "discipled," or taught how to grow in the faith. They were largely on their own to study the Bible, learn how to pray, and to learn how to live a lifestyle that is pleasing to the Lord. As a result, many converts apparently became "casualties," and dropped out of the church.

Shepherding was thus an attempt to correct the situation by saying that each Christian should have a shepherd for everyday guidance. This shepherd became the person's spiritual leader, counselling him and even making decisions for him. It was taught that the shepherd was God's delegated authority and therefore his advice was always to be followed. The shepherd was like God's ambassador who communicated God's messages to the disciple. To disobey God's messenger would be to disobey God, and therefore a person was to trust in the shepherd's judgment rather than his own.

The end result of shepherding is that it places the submissive person in a position of having two masters – Jesus Christ and a personal shepherd. Over time the shepherd gains more power and control over the one being shepherded, and Jesus Christ is terribly overshadowed. In other words, shepherding becomes nothing more than an idolatrous religious system.

Unfortunately, all kinds of abuse resulted from the shepherding movement.

Hand-in-hand with the Shepherding Movement that has led to spiritual abuse is the erroneous concept of spiritual covering.

Until recently, the word "covering" was not found in most Christian literature. The popularity of the discipleship and Shepherding Movement, however, has brought this to light. In the end, because of the teaching that we need to be submitted to a pastor, Christians were taught to seek God to find the shepherd that the Lord wanted for them. It was stated that when the right shepherd was found, he became the person's "covering," or

protection. Because of the "divine relationship" with this shepherd, a person was supposed to be protected from his making wrong decisions affecting the disciple. The shepherd is also supposed to protect the disciple from Satan, who might influence person into making a bad decision.

One can also only receive a blessing, healing and financial prosperity when covered, because this is supposedly the order of the Lord. If one is not under "covering" then one is also not allowed to minister. The problem of course is that once you are "covered" then the one who does the "covering" is the one who is dictating how should be ministering. Talk about spiritual control!

Yes, there are plenty of doctrines out there that are strange. One of them is that you must be covered, or join under the umbrella of an anointed servant of God. For if you are under his covering, you then fellowship and partake in his blessing.

It seems as if we are totally and utterly abusing the concept of anointing, believing this is some sort of power we can wield and impart at will. Remember, the anointing is not something attached from God, but it is the actual manifestation of the Holy Spirit upon a person and habitually working within servant of God. So are we then going to share in the anointing of the Spirit upon someone's life if we simply come under their covering, even if we are engaged in all kinds of apostasy? I think not!

Yet it is because of such ideas of partaking in the anointing on someone else's life that people are duped into do anything that the covering ministry says. After all, if you obey, you might lose your covering and therefore no longer under the covering of that anointing. And then it seems your blessing and breakthroughs are gone. Really?

Blessings come from God, not man. We need to partake with God primarily and foremost in fellowship, in prayer, in submission and abiding in Him. Then we shall be victorious. Trusting in man for protection and blessings is idolatry manifested!

Let us look at Scriptures when assessing the meaning of the word "covering" in the context in which it is meant. There are three major Hebrew words which have been translated as "covering." For someone to act as our "covering," this must encompass part or all of the meaning of these words, depending on the sense which is intended.

The first Hebrew word, sakak, means "to cover or hedge in." Figuratively, the word means "to protect," having the meaning of "to cover, defend, hedge in, join together, set, or shut up." In other words, men can protect themselves by joining together, shutting themselves up or fortifying their position, or hedging themselves in so that the enemy cannot see or reach them.

The Bible says the Lord, and not a man, is our covering in the sakak sense. Psalm 91:3 says the Lord does the following things: "He rescues you from the snares of fowlers hoping to destroy you; he covers you with his feathers, and you find shelter underneath his." (Jerusalem Bible)

The second Hebrew word that means "to cover" is kasah. The primary meaning of this word is "to cover for clothing or secrecy." It also means "to cover over, conceal." Proverbs 10:12 says that "love covers all offenses".

The third Hebrew word we find is kaphar. The King James Bible translates this word as "to make atonement," and from the same root word we get Yom Kippur, or "Day of Atonement." This root also means to "cover over, pacify, make propitiation." As opposed to kasah, which means "to cover something over," kaphar means to completely "wipe it out, annul it, and make it non-existent." The word kaphar is used in context with the blood offering of the Old Testament. Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, was commanded to slaughter the goat as the sin offering for the people, bring its blood inside the veil, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. This was to make atonement for the holy place because of the sins of Israel (Leviticus 16:15, 16).

We have to ask the question, what sense of the word

"covering" are people referring to when they say, "I am the covering"? If one looks at the Shepherding Movement, it is apparent that "covering" is used in the sense of "protection" (sakak). According to the teaching, having a shepherd is like having a divine insurance policy.

Covering" works like this: We obey our shepherd, but our action is against God's will. Yet we are "covered" through our submission to a shepherd. Because of our submission, the sin becomes an act of righteousness. If our sin could be transformed in this way, it could only be through kaphar covering. Only through kaphar, or atonement, could sin thus be removed, annulled and wiped out.

In other words, the Shepherding Movement teaches that atonement or propitiation comes through the shepherd and the authority to which we are submitted. This also of course what the Catholic Church teaches – that the priests annuls the sin.

Of course, both these teachings are incorrect. Only God is our true covering, and there is no Scripture to support the idea of covering. 1 Peter 1:18-19 makes it clear we have been brought by the precious blood of Jesus, not man's efforts. He is according to Psalm 144 our Rock, Refuge and High Tower, not man.

The idea of covering has far reaching consequences, because it forces a person to make a covenant with the church and with the church leadership. This results in unhealthy soul ties, and legally setting yourself up in the spiritual realm to be manipulated and exploited. This doctrine thus teaches that instead of saying the Lord is the covering it claims that shepherds are the covering.

In short, the Shepherding Movement casts doubt on God's ability to care for the Christian. When people put their total trust in the Lord, then other Christians can give the help and advice they need to learn how to grow as a Christian.

There is definitely a place where one allows for someone to be a mentor or the one who disciples, as in the

days of Paul, but then this cannot be done in a manner of complete control and abuse. True obedience is a matter of the heart. Spiritual abusers apply undue pressure that is not from God. That pressure is usually applied to get you to do the leader's will, not God's will.

One man who has written extensively on the hyper-authoritarian move is Steven Lambert, ThD in the book called CHARISMATIC CAPTIVATION (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform; third edition March 11, 2014).

He points to John 8: So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in MY WORD, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the TRUTH, and the TRUTH will make you FREE." (John 8:31,32; NASB)

It was for FREEDOM that Christ set us FREE; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a YOKE OF SLAVERY. (Galatians 5:1; NASB)

Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that COVER with A COVERING, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin: That walk to go down into EGYPT [symbol of captivity in Scripture], and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh [symbol of Satan and autocratic dictators in Scripture], and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your CONFUSION. For his princes were at Zoan [aka, Goshen, where Pharaoh met with Moses and Aaron; Easton's Bible Dictionary], and his ambassadors came to Hanes. They were all ashamed of a people that could not PROFIT them, nor be a help nor PROFIT, but a shame, and also a reproach. (Isaiah 30:1-5; KJV; emphases and parentheses added)

He writes the following:

Let me begin by stating plainly and directly: "spiritual covering" as theorized by the Discipleship theosophy is an absolute MYTH. No semblance of the

Shepherding teaching version of "spiritual covering" exists anywhere within the pages of Scripture. "Spiritual covering," in the vein it is presented by proponents and propagators of these hyper- authoritarian teachings, is an outright deception! It is a complete fabrication concocted by the originators of these fallacious doctrines as a supposed pretext for facilitation of entirely self-aggrandizing objectives of subjugation, domination, and control.

Indeed, what the Discipleship proponents refer to as "spiritual covering" is really "spiritual control." However, even the use of the word "spiritual" in this connection requires some qualification, because the only thing "spiritual" about this unauthorized control is that it is inspired by demon-spirits of deception and error. As we shall discuss later in Chapter Nine, what the Discipleship version of "spiritual covering" really is, is nothing less than witchcraft or sorcery. When the myth has been thoroughly debunked, as it will be within these pages, it will be clear that this doctrine of "spiritual covering," like all the other aspects of the Shepherdship heresy, is a patently false "doctrine of demons" being manifested in these last days precisely in accordance with Holy Prophecy of Scripture which foretells of deception such as this being promulgated by demons in the last days, leading to many falling away from the Lord into apostasy:

Reality is, covering causes man to become the mediator between God and someone else. The Bible explicitly says: "There is one God, and ONE mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timithoy 2:5). There is never, ever to be any "spiritual mediators" between God and men, except the Christ — Jesus Himself.

Jesus is the only true spiritual mediator between God and Man. Jesus is the only one who ever lived a perfectly sinless life, which was the requisite enabling Him to become the spotless lamb of God. He is the one who offers

us hope, protection healing and deliverance.

The hyper-authoritarian Churches have therefore replaced Jesus as the true master, which plays right in the hands of it operating as a cult. In churches today the notion applies that you have to be submitted to a pastor, then the shepherd/sheep relationships becomes permanent, to the point that it is rebellion to question the leader. Again, this smacks of a cult.

Hand-in-hand with the idea of being “covered” is the idea of having a “covenant” relationships or “spiritual family”. The idea is that when you enter into these discipleship relationships, they are permanent, and more broadly that your association with a specific group of believers is permanent.

You were in a “covenant” and if you left the relationship or the fellowship group, you were breaking a covenant. This quickly becomes a very dangerous situation: no matter how terrible your experience becomes with a group or person, you cannot leave, and if you do, you believe that you’ve broken a covenant with God, so to get right with God you’d have to go back to the abuse!

You slowly become enmeshed with the other members of the group and separated from the outside world. Your “spiritual family” becomes more important than your natural family or other believers you’ve had relationship with. You slowly become more and more isolated and more and more dependent upon the group or leader. At a certain point if your leaders do not check the pattern, it becomes a full-fledged cult.

As we will see, when we study the characteristics of a cult more closely, how often these charismatic leader or spiritual leaders in general seek to control and manipulate the flock. It is well known that once you are a ‘member’ of a Church, you are not allowed to simply quit and leave. No, the ‘shepherd’ needs to give you permission and needs to give you his blessing. Again, man takes the role of God.

How many times have we not heard that someone is not allowed to leave because he will break his covenant or

bond with the church, and is therefore not “covered” and therefore will not be blessed by the Lord? This is of course all utter nonsense!

It is the same when members of the Church are dictated how and where they can minister, as if the leadership have taken over the role of the Holy Spirit. This is abuse, manipulation, exploitation and an abomination to the work of God!

One of the greatest misconceptions is Hebrews 13:17 (ESV): Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

In the King James Bible, the word *Peitho* is used. *Peitho* means to persuade and to induce one by words to believe; it also means to make friends of, to win one's favour, gain one's good will, or to seek to win one. Therefore, this passage should be better translated as “allow yourselves to be persuaded by,” rather than “obey.” To be persuaded is far removed from the idea to “blindly obey”.

Further, the last part of the first sentence clearly states that leaders must “give an account”—in other words, they will most certainly be held accountable for whatever they have done (good or bad) by God—and He is more just than all. Again, as we see with so many church leaders, there is no real accountability.

The true prophets are ridiculed and pushed aside. They are not allowed to correct, rebuke or reproof. Again, anyone in the Body of Christ must be willing to be corrected if done by the Lord, and such a correction can come even from a child. Yet, because of the nature of church leadership where they rule with an iron fist, they only become accountable to their “friends” and “confidants”. This is not accountable, and a lack of real accountable is another characteristic of a cult.

As for the excuse not to discern, judge, or even rebuke a leader for unbiblical practices, well, that's absurd. There

are Scriptures that clearly deal with judging and discernment (1 John 4) and there are Scriptures that instruct us on how to deal with elders/pastors/leaders when a charge is brought against them (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Paul after all constantly rebuked and corrected, and even rebuked Peter! Jesus Himself took on the Pharisees and the Sadducees who operated like a sect.

But Christians must always ask two questions in regard to spiritual authority: Is this leader telling the truth? Is this leader trustworthy? Contextually, we see the principles of truth and trustworthiness in Hebrews 13:7-9: Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines.

The author therefore speaks about evaluating teaching and not to be carried away by strange teaching. Therefore, he is encouraging being critically-minded! One cannot simply accept everything that is said or preached simply because that person has a title or an education or leads a congregation. We will be failing in our duty as watchmen on the wall (Ezekiel 33), meaning all disciples have to be wary of false doctrines and should address lies and deception.

Yet, again, as in cults, the “disciples” and “followers” of the “leader” are brainwashed not to question, not to doubt or is not allowed to argue because of the false doctrine of covering and covenant. So clearly, there is no basis according to Hebrews 13:17 for people to uncritically obey spiritual leaders simply because they are in the position of leadership. The word for “submit” is not the common word used elsewhere in the New Testament for submission. Instead, it is *Hupeiko*, which is hard to define because it occurs only here in the New Testament. It really means to yield to someone’s authority, yield, give way, or submit.

Therefore Hebrews 13:17 is all about allowing oneself to be persuaded by your leaders to guide you but then to do so in accordance with accountability. Hebrews 13:17 does not imply blind obedience to spiritual authorities, nor should it ever be invoked by a spiritual leader in order to coerce or compel people to obey them.

Instead, it is a reminder that spiritual leaders in the church who are trustworthy and who proclaim the truth are in a place of persuasive guidance that fellow believers should yield to. If leaders demonstrate these criteria, we should allow ourselves to be persuaded by them for our own good on the rocky path of life.

Paul provides a model for how persuasive spiritual authority should be exercised. Paul, though an apostle, had a keen sense that his authority was based not on position or the power to punish but rather on two things: first, the truth of the message which was revealed to him from God; and secondly, the evidence of his godly character.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4: 14 I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. 15 Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

Paul makes it clear there was definitely a lack of leadership in Corinth at the time. And such leadership is defined by Paul as spiritual fathers who lead by example, for they follow Jesus. Today in the Churches there are many “leaders” but few spiritual mentors and fathers to lead people on the right path.

He demonstrates his attitude of being a servant in 1 Corinthians 4: The Nature of True Apostleship: This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore

judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God. 6 Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. 7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? 8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! 9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! 11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. 12 We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

The author of Hebrews writes in chapter 6, specifically to the Hebrews: 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

Again, the stress is on imitation, which is just a fancy term for proper discipleship. If we disciple someone in the love and strength of the Lord, then the one who is being disciple should be able to imitate the ways of the mentor.

This was the way that Jesus disciplined His 12 disciples. The 12 disciples walked with Jesus for more than 3 years, watching His every move and listening to His every word.

When Jesus departed, the disciples simply imitated Jesus. This is the same model of discipleship that Paul practiced. Paul did not seek blind obedience but by his example and conduct people were persuaded to walk in the Spirit and in Truth.

Paul's strength of character and his humility is seen for example in 1 Corinthians 9: 1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? 2 Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. 4 Don't we have the right to food and drink? 5 Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas[a]? 6 Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living? 7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? 8 Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." [b] Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10 Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. 11 If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12 If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. 13 Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14 In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. 15 But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me

of this boast. 16 For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.

Paul lived in a time when the Gospel was under heavy fire – he was opposed by those holding onto the Law, by the pagans, and by the scholars. He knew what it meant to “stand” and to remain “steadfast” (see for example Ephesians 6). No matter what was thrown against him, he stood his ground and proclaimed the truth of the Lord. And so he writes in “1 Corinthians 15: 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

The believers in the city of Corinth were constantly confronted with the paganism, mythology and philosophy of Greece, so Paul reminded them to stand and to continue standing their ground. In the ancient world, Ephesus was a centre of travel and commerce. Situated on the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the Cayster River, the city was one of the greatest seaports of the ancient world. Within the city stood the Temple of Artemis, which was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and dedicated to the goddess of the hunt.

Paul's successful ministry in this city was considered a threat to this very temple (Acts 19:27). The believers of Ephesus like the believers in Corinth thus had an uphill battle to hold onto the truth and to resist the deception and schemes of the devil.

Paul wrote in “Ephesians 6 (Kings James): 10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against

principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

On numerous occasions, Paul urges the believers to STAND, meaning hold their ground, defend the truth, and not to compromise. He reminded them that they face not just the enemy of flesh and blood, but their ultimate enemy is of a spiritual nature.

Paul stood for the Truth, walked in the Truth and sought the Truth. This is the Truth he gained from following the Truth – Jesus. Paul thus continued to set an example of what it means to be a disciple and how to disciple others in order to continue walking in the steps of Jesus.

Today, sadly, people are more concerned with titles than being a disciple, and beyond a disciple, to be a son and daughter of the Most High God, thus servants of His Kingdom. We are simply too preoccupied with our own agendas, programmes, ministries, status and even fame.

We simply cannot be JUST a disciple who follows the Lord. The Lord may lead us into leadership or He may lead us as a missionary, but whatever the Lord’s plan, small or big, for better or for worse, we should remain a disciple who seeks to fulfil the Great Commission and to discipline others. Sadly, there are those whose egos have grown so inflated that they cannot be merely disciples; they want to be something more like an apostle or a prophet. In the end, we are all servants of the Lord, no matter how the Lord uses us, for this was the example set by Jesus and by Paul.

We can never lose sight that our number one priority should be the Lord's will and for His Kingdom to come.

Paul's words of 1 Corinthians 15 and Ephesians 6 stills rings true – who will stand for the unadulterated, uncompromising truth of God? And we can only stand by His Truth when we know Him, for in knowing Him, we shall know ourselves and we shall know the wickedness of our enemy.

How we need the TRUTH of God back in the Churches, not the truth of man. How we need the love and fear for the Lord to permeate and saturate us as believers so that we arise from the spiritual valley to embrace the Lord on the mountain. It is time to rise and to stand a stand for His Kingdom and say no more – to stand and to claim back ground for His Glory. Then we shall be proper disciples whom others can imitate.

Time and time again in his epistles Paul refuses to appeal to his position as an apostle or to the potential power to punish to substantiate his claim to authority. Instead, he uses words like “urge,” “appeal,” and “you know” to persuade his readers to obey him based on the truth and his own trustworthiness.

Paul understood that his authority came first from the truth of his message. Paul commended himself to men via truth (2 Corinthians 4:1-2). He defended the truth of his ministry by saying it was based on the revelation of God (Galatians 1:11-24). In Ephesians 3:1-3, Paul appealed to the truth of his ministry via revelation. He also set forth the test for the legitimacy of spiritual authority in the book of Titus (Titus 1:1-4).

Paul thus understood that his authority rested on the trustworthiness of his own godly character and his willingness to serve and to suffer for Christ. 2 Corinthians provides many instances of Paul defending his authority, and in every case he appeals to his truth and trustworthiness. For example, in 1:12-18 he appeals to his own integrity. In 3:1-6 he says that his competence and commendation come from God. In 4:5 he says that he is a

bondsman of the Corinthians for Jesus' sake. In 6:3-10 he is commended by his character and actions. In 10:1 he says that he was meek and gentle in person with the Corinthians. In 10:8 he boasts about his authority to build up, not to tear down, but even then he doesn't want to terrify or intimidate the Corinthians with his letters (10:9).

Paul says also that leaders should not boast in themselves but in the Lord, "For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends" (2 Corinthians 10:18). In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul defends his apostolic ministry through testifying to his suffering. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul explains openly about his weakness so that Christ might be glorified. In 2 Corinthians 12:17-18, Paul testifies that he has taken advantage of no one.

Paul also acknowledges that he owed accountability in his ministry. He says that he had to give primary account to God, "In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (1 Corinthians 4:2). He says later, "my conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent; for the one who examines me is the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:4).

He also acknowledges his peer accountability by saying that he had taken his gospel message to the other apostles in Jerusalem in order to ensure that he was not in error (Galatians 2:1-10).

Paul's example is the perfect model of persuasive leadership based on truth and trustworthiness.

Blind obedience leads to enslavement

When we hold onto the teachings and traditions as taught by the world – those very teachings that in the end infiltrate the Church – then we fall into bondage and slavery.

Once we are yoked by such slavery, then we are hampered to move in the liberty of the Spirit.

And there are many such ‘bondages’ still being taught in the Church. Such devious practices enslave, and it brings us not to a point of fullness in Jesus, but to a state of slavery, until it becomes our master and thus has dominion over us. We follow such bondages that come by wrong teachings. We also allow it into the Church because of misplaced loyalty and blind obedience. The spirit of manipulation and control after all seeks to divide and disarm the Church.

A perfect example of how the commandments of man were blinding them to the Truth of God is found in Mark 7: 5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?” 6 He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. 7 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. 8 For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men - the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.’ 9 He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.”

Today, we are also rejecting the commandments of God so that we may keep our traditions! We prefer our ways above the way of God, and our truth above God. We forget Isaiah 55:8: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

Our traditions dictate how the Church must be and

how it must run. We dictate what truth is, what is proper and real. We determine doctrines to suit our needs and tastes. We hold onto Tithing even though this is clearly the Law of Moses. We hold onto Christmas even though Jesus was clearly not born on December 25 [which is actually a very pagan and unholy day!}. Yet we hold onto these traditions probably knowing it is wrong – because traditions are safe and it makes us feel safe. We are divided over traditions such as what to wear, how to worship and who knows what else. Instead of listening to the Lord we listen to our ego and we are blinded by our own perceptions.

This is the same problem the Pharisees and Sadducees suffered from. They hold onto traditions, all the while laying aside the commandment of God.

Still today, we are laying aside the commandment of God because our traditions are more important. We need to move beyond our traditions and traditional way of thinking to truly serve God and God's Truth alone. Sadly, we are our own worst enemies if we walk in deception. This is not the days of the Dark Ages when the general masses were cut off from information and knowledge. This is not the days of the Old Testament when the veil to God's Throne was still in place. No, this is now the time when the Spirit has been poured out, the veil has been torn in two and the word of God is easily accessible to all.

There are no excuses to be bound and to be yoked. God is not deaf or on holiday. We just need to reach out to Him and listen and yield. He will teach us His truth and His ways.

This is why the Spirit was poured out, so that all we call upon Him and seek Him will know the way and the truth of Heaven.

Deuteronomy 30: 10 If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your [mind and] heart and with all your being. 11 For this commandment which I

command you this day is not too difficult for you, nor is it far off. 12 It is not [a secret laid up] in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it? 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it? 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your mind and in your heart, so that you can do it.

15 See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil. 16 [If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which] I command you today, to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land into which you go to possess. 17 But if your [mind and] heart turn away and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall surely perish, and you shall not live long in the land which you pass over the Jordan to enter and possess.

Misconceptions that Yoke

Let us consider just briefly some terrible misconceptions and teachings that yoke believers every day. Again, we are yoked because we seek not the Truth from God above all.

Consider how we still have the clergy and laity system. This is bondage to the Church. The clergy do the work, and the laity sit back and idle away their time. We are the Church, and thus one Body, and so therefore we have to collectively advance the Kingdom on earth. The class system has placed the Church in bondage, for disciples aren't cultivated, new converts aren't really led personally by a mentor, and because the entire Body is not doing the work of the Lord.

We thus end up with a situation too few are baptising,

speaking the Word, reaching the lost, fighting the kingdom of darkness and setting the captives free.

After all, Isaiah 61 is for all, meaning we are called to set the captives free and proclaim the Good News of our Lord. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:28 and the call of the disciple of Mark 16:15-18 also relates to the Church as a Body.

Sadly, the pastor system has demilitarised the entire Church, for the masses aren't functioning in their gifts and talents, but have been led to believe they must only be fed the Word instead of bringing the Word to the lost.

The entire idea of a local Church has placed people in bondage, for we are no longer part of the collective Body but part of smaller body of localised people. This is bondage.

Church membership also places us in bondage, because we make a covenant with man, and so we come under their dominion instead of the dominion of God.

The religious ritual of ordination places so many people in bondage, for it allows religion and manipulation to operate, while those who are not supposedly ordained {thus the laity} are seen as inferior. Thus, we are supposed to only believe the teachings and preaching of the ordained, while doubt is placed on the word of the laity.

The matter fact that we think that the "ordained" moved in truth and integrity is a result of spiritual abuse, manipulation and ignorance! Jesus alluded to the truth that one will only know a person spiritually by the fruit they carry, not if they have been ordained or carry an education.

We also teach that women are not allowed to speak in the congregation, quoting Scripture of Paul who commands women to be silent. But we take such Scriptures out of context, for Paul was a Jew, was trained as a master of the Law, and so he was speaking from a Jewish cultural point of view (a lengthy article on this is available has been done to show how we take the Scripture out of context). In fact, the Lord is now calling for women to rise above these

narrow-minded interpretations of the Scriptures and to move in their God ordained calling.

All these bondages are traditions and misinterpretations, and unless we break the yoke of such practices we will be forever enslaved. We can only break such bondages if we truly submit to the Truth of God as taught and revealed and showed by the Spirit.

It says in John 8: 31 So Jesus said to those Jews who had believed in Him, If you abide in My word [hold fast to My teachings and live in accordance with them], you are truly My disciples. 32 And you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free.

We often just quote verse 32, but not verse 31. The Truth will set us free, but then we need to know the Truth, and we can only know the Truth when we abide in Jesus. This therefore indicates that those who truly follow Him as disciples will embrace His Truth and act upon it and by such faith and action in His Truth, freedom will then be loosened.

The Church is in general is divided and still in bondage due to erroneous and deceptive teaching because we do not know the Truth. And if we do not know the Truth, we will not be free. And why don't we know the Truth? Is it not because we do not know Truth Himself – Jesus? Is it not because we abide not in Truth?

We after all teach a lot of doctrine, but these days, it is doctrines that are determined by the truth of man and not the truth of God. We can only be free when we walk in God's Truth, and not in the truth of man.

We need to break the yoke of listening merely to man's truth by serving God above all else, and we need to listen to the Spirit instead of following the 'pastor' like blind sheep. We need to realise all servants of the Lord are called to minister and to move in the power of the Holy Spirit, no matter our calling, our office or our gifts. By separating the laity and the clergy we have caused an atmosphere of elitism, favouritism and separatism which ironically are the underlying tendencies of a cult!

By all accounts, Stephen (Acts 6 and 7) was but a mere disciple of the Lord. He was not part of the 12, yet we read: 8Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Stephen most likely would be rated as the laity of today, and so would probably be ushered into some dark corner to be silent to allow the "clergy" do their job. In the days of Stephen, the 12 apostles could be seen as the modern day clergy but in the days of Jesus the 12 did not see themselves as anything special instead they only sought to fulfil the Great Commission.

If anything, the 12 was chosen by the Lord to show we are all but flawed (Peter after all betrayed Jesus, and so did Judas; Thomas doubted the Lord) and none of us are really special, it is only by God's grace that we are saved and are called as His disciples. Problem is in today's churches the "ordained" – representing the 12 Apostles – do see themselves as special, gifted and the guardians of truth while the laity – represented by Stephen – is called to sit back and not minister. Yet we see in Acts 6 and 7 it was never the Lord's intention for only the 12 to minister (thus the supposed clergy) but for all disciples to move in God's Glory and Power.

Thus we read how Stephen full of God's power and the Lord worked great wonders through Him. This has always been God's intention – to move powerfully through His servants, no matter their status, education or wealth. There should not be the idea of clergy and laity, but only disciples of different callings, gifts and offices. All disciples, no matter their education or level of spiritual growth, are called to serve and minister as what Stephen did in Acts 7.

We should note that Stephen was full of grace,

meaning it was not by his own power that he did the work of the Lord but it was merely the Lord's free will to allow Stephen to operate in His Glory.

So often therefore in churches we get this god-like mind-set and clergy are prone to be infected by the stardom syndrome. Yet, it is by grace and grace alone that we are called by the Lord, equipped by the Lord and are called in whatever capacity to serve Him. And we must remember, all gifts come from the Lord and carry equal weight in worth and value.

Yet, because of our modern day interpretation of clergy and laity – which is incorrect – we have ended up with all kinds of doctrines on prosperity so that the pastor/clergy system can be supported, and so that the Church building can remain the centre of focus instead of the entire Bride being the holy priesthood. In Matthew 23 when Jesus spoke His seven woes over the Pharisees and Sadducees He said the following: 16 “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ 19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.

22 And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

He took on the Pharisees and Sadducees for they were so focussed on the Temple and the altar as physical structures of adoration yet not failed to see the spiritual building which is the person. Still today the building is the main focus of Churches instead of the people. Outside and inside the buildings (think also of the cathedrals of Europe) speak of beauty, grandeur and majesty, yet the

people who frequent such 'places of worship' resemble spiritual ruins of pain, heartache, suffering and loss. What a travesty! Our priority is misplaced on the physical rather than the spiritual. This is because the Church is still stuck on prestige, status and self-glorification at the expense of forsaking all earthly treasures to build the true priesthood on earth.

We are the holy priesthood (1 Peter 2), thus the Church. How then do we attend Church if we are the Church? Yes, we are called to assemble, but true Ecclesia is the gathering of the believers who are all individually the Church.

We have to understand, power corrupts, and ultimate power corrupts ultimately. A hierarchy system of church governance has never been God's order, for it breeds a system of control, and with control comes manipulation and with manipulation comes the abuse of power.

Satan is clever, for he knows that man by his sinful nature will lust after power, for the Self seeks to thrive and to rise above the masses. We cannot be foolish and deny that Satan has not had a hand in the development of church governance – he wanted to introduce a concept of hierarchy so that control and manipulation can lead to spiritual abuse. And this is what has happened over the last 1500 years.

And this hierarchy system is the one found today in all churches where the clergy rule over the laity and so a class system develops between the two. In effect this class system has demilitarised the entire church from walking in the fullness, power and glory of the Lord Almighty.

Such systems have been introduced with the introduction of special offices, such as the one-pastor system, which in itself is a false. So when did this unbiblical distinction between clergymen and lay persons come about? After all, the Scriptures are clear that all believers are part of the priesthood unto the Lord, and thus Hosea 4 implies to all believers. After all it says in this chapter the following: "My people are destroyed for lack of

knowledge because you have rejected knowledge.”

If we are guilty of not walking in the truth of God [thus His knowledge], we are guilty as His priests for rejecting His Truth.

Church historian Charles Jacobs, in *The Story of the Church* (Muhlenburg January 1, 1947), writes: "*In the beginning most of the work of the congregation was done by people who had no official position. It was voluntary service, freely rendered. By the middle of the third century, it was done by the professional clergy. Between clergymen and laity there was a sharp distinction. The clergy, too, were divided into higher and lower grades. In the higher grades were bishops, presbyters and deacons; in the lower grade sub-deacons, lectors, exorcists, acolytes and janitors. All of them were inducted into office by some form of ordination, and the idea of local organization had gone so far that in some churches even the grave diggers were ordained. Thus the work of the Church was passing out of the hands of the many into those of the few, and these few were coming to be regarded as belonging to a higher class.*"

There were several influences that contributed to this situation that has escalated today in a full blown class difference between clergy and laity. One of these influences for example is when hundreds of years ago when people converted from Judaism and from Gentile paganism they tended to bring with them the sacerdotalism of Judaism and the traditional notions of their Gentile pagan religions.

And in the post-apostolic era, the "church fathers" (especially two men from Carthage, North Africa – Tertullian and Cyprian) gradually planted the seeds for the distinction of a class of teachers and priests from the laity, until by the 3rd century the clergy was an entrenched institution.

The word clergy comes from the Greek word *kleroo*, which is used in 1 Peter 5:3 in reference to all believers - 'God's heritage'. What right has any group of men to appropriate this name to themselves as if they and they

alone, were God's heritage?

We can see the doctrine of clerisy popping up in the Scriptures, for it was part of the 'doctrine of the Nicolaitanes' (Revelation 2:6). This name comes from two Greek words; nikos (conquest) and laos (people). Hence the word can be taken to mean "Lay conquerors" or Conquerors of the Lay People. The Nicolaitanes (the clergy) were already 'lording over' the laos (the laity) by the end of the first century.

In essence John when writing Revelation warned of bishops or men of the clergy who abused their power. Some would take this as a sign that John foresaw the abuse of power by the Roman Catholic institution and the power that the bishops and popes would gain in the coming centuries.

Of course such a system of hierarchy would be adopted by the Protestants. The Nicolaitanes are first mentioned (twice) in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. According to Revelation 2 verses 6 and 15, they were known in the cities of Ephesus and Pergamos around AD 99. The church at Ephesus is commended for "hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" and the church in Pergamos is blamed for "having them who hold their [the Nicolaitans'] doctrines". Several of the early church fathers, including Irenaeus, Epiphanius, and Theodoret mentioned this group.

Among the ills of an abusive system of leader, such as the 'pastor-system', it attacks the truth of the church as a body (I Corinthians 12). All the body parts should be functioning, as God directs; but clergy forms of leadership encourages laziness, to the point where the congregation often becomes passive not active.

It also hinders the use and exercise of spiritual gifts (Romans 12). The pastor cannot possibly function all the time in all the gifts, and yet he is the single professional into whose hand the ministry has been placed. What about the gifting of the 'non- professional' believers? The clergy-laity gap inevitably therefore becomes the great

‘demobilizer’ of the saints. Such a system dampens the liberty of the Spirit (I Corinthians 14:29-30). Liberty has been replaced by clerical liturgy. There is little or no room for a ‘lay’ member to bring a message from the word as led by the Holy Spirit.

It also encourages spiritual poverty. The clerical system naturally leads to a lack of involvement by ‘the laity’, which fosters a neglect of their responsibilities in witnessing and Bible study. Men who should long ago have become teachers remain stuck at the milk stage (Hebrew 5:12).

It also leads more easily to heresy. If the one man monopolizes the church falls into false teaching, the whole church may be led astray with relative ease. Furthermore, if a Bible College becomes heretical, it can lead a whole denomination astray within a generation.

Sadly, when it comes to God’s order within Church governance, there has been a lot of corruption, manipulation and abuse of offices. Clergy’s claim of authority and prominence is based on their knowledge gained through earthly education, yet this education is one paid for by man to man - in its most subtle of forms, this is simony. Simony is the act of buying or requiring that which is divine, therefore which is not a natural commodity.

Money thus pays and buys for man a state of piety and spiritual stature. Man's calling does not come from education or social status, but from spiritual rebirth and the acceptance of the Lord as Saviour.

Such educational knowledge, which feeds from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden, is primarily gained through tertiary education, where the study of theology acts as a spiritual ticket for qualification into ordination. Such knowledge is not one of spiritual nature, or its intentions spiritual, since the clergy’s spiritual education places the church in bondage of legalism and traditionalism. Those who are truly taught by the Lord in all truth through prayer, meditation and absolute surrender to His will are those who learn the

higher truths beyond any letter of theology or humanism.

Theology in its truest meaning is the study in the discourse of gods. The study is pagan in root and nature. Man gains knowledge of the heavenly and of the earthly under the tutorship of men, learning also deceptive and intellectual forms of logic, rhetoric and reasoning. The study in theology adds merit and accreditation to the "knowledge" and "superiority" of the clergy through a form of earthly scholasticism. Theology is earthly law, not spirit.

Scholars who have studied theology become the learned and the just, yet their nature is moulded by a humanistic and philosophical essence as they seek the truth, unwittingly or wittingly, from the Tree of Knowledge. True wisdom, knowledge and understanding are not forged in such a way, but by the Lord's ways of fire, testing, suffering and purifying.

The study of theology has increased the spirit of deception's work in the church, causing the illusion that there is a class difference called clergy and laity. Education, social status and accreditation from man add an air of superiority, while the laity feels inferior. Such a class difference does not exist in the heart or mind of the Lord, yet it is advocated by clergy for it grants to them a false authority and false prominence.

Emphasis on the stature of one class (where such a specific labelling of class has granted privileges above another) allows for the deadly demonic works of oppression, manipulation and extortion to flourish within the superior class. Where pride and selfishness also abounds, as in the case of the clergy throughout history in both Catholic and Protestant, then so does the works of spiritual oppression, abuse, manipulation and extortion abound against the laity.

Such deadly demonic works have caused countless spiritual deaths while continuing fuelling demonic and pagan activity within the Body. Those "qualified" and those "educated" are deemed to have the right to lead the Lord's people, yet their spiritual leadership is in essence bought

and not bestowed upon them through the Lord.

The Lord Himself was an example of true leadership and how to lead those assigned to you into maturity. He led through example and by spending personal time with His twelve disciples. The Lord walked with them daily, teaching them, therefore becoming their mentor. We are all called to make disciples, called to walk a road with those starting out spiritually until they begin to mature. When such believers begin to understand the act of spiritual walking, then true spiritual leaders will know when it is time to let go and let God take over.

As such, today we have many church leaders, but few true spiritual fathers, and also, sadly, the leaders many times operate under law and false legalism, not true authority.

True spiritual leaders and fathers are those who lead as Jesus did. Jesus' main objective was to lead his disciples to the Father. The disciples saw the Father in Jesus, so the world must also see God in us. Jesus came to glorify the Father, yet we still choose to glorify ourselves and lead the lost not the truth but to a concept of "church".

Such a class struggle as seen between clergy and laity has become one of power, fame and wealth. Arrogance and pride feeds these dark forces. As the clergy grows in strength, so does the spiritual divide grow between them and laity? Recognition on earth without recognition in heaven is like dust in the winds, bringing forth no harvest.

Ignorance is therefore one of the greatest downfalls of the church. The Reformation caused the laity to question the clergy's actions and doctrines. They were urged to think for themselves and to spend time with the Lord. Once again, the last great Reformation will see laity question all, so that the laity will be revived and restored. As motives, actions and doctrines are questioned and corrected, so will there be a reformation among the clergy, which will lead to unity and a resurrection of the Body out of apostasy.

The study of theology and simony places a mantle of legalism, traditionalism, falseness and the binding work of

earthly law on the church. The true sons and daughters of the Lord, who seek His truth by following the Spirit, are indeed those who are set free from such operating dark forces, allowing them to operate in the heavenly to the glory of the Lord.

The Tree of Knowledge provide to those who are scholars of theology and who are ordained certain legal rights prescribed by government, such as conducting marriages or funerals. This again places church or divine authority of the clergy, or in other words, those who have submitted to the teachings of man, under legalism of the world.

To those who have studied theology, it is they who claim to have been called and are therefore worthy to fulfil the position of clergy and to undergo the right of ordination. Yet, man runs tertiary institutions and it is man who decides who becomes a qualified theologian. In this entire process there is an exchange of finances and favour - thus simony has been committed.

Such false spiritual education gained from man's hand does not lead to a higher anointing or spiritual privileges or calling upon the scholar. Such education only opens a doorway to deception. True anointing and calling comes through the spiritual rebirth and surrender to the Lord's will. It is "preached" that the true anointing and favour is upon the clergy because they have been called and hence have gained an education in theology. This is false and demonic. The Lord calls all for service and those who have been reborn carry the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord upon them as written in Isaiah 61.

The emphasis on the calling of clergy versus the calling of laity adds to the divide and demise of the Body. All calling is of the Lord and it is of equal importance, of equal weight and of equal divinity. All calling works together for the restoration and redemption of the saints so that the Kingdom may be manifested. A true calling and nature of the calling is the Lord's divine choice, executed by an action of grace.

A false understanding and ignorance pertaining to the spiritual calling adds to the fuel that feeds the fire of pride, selfishness and division. No clergy is above in favour, position, stature or importance to those called laity within the Body of the Lord. Gross incorrect use of pagan terms and customs pertaining to the office of clergy and those called laity leads to spiritual divisions caused by envy. There is no difference in truth or honour or value to those called into the folds of clergy or those called into the folds of laity. Man or more correctly, the spirit of the antichrist promulgates this difference.

The same Spirit gives all spiritual gifts, so that the Body may function according to the Lord's will and not according to the way of man. No gift can be brought or gained through sowing of seed or works or of education.

The false emphasis on the higher calling of clergy versus laity has led to the exaltation of the offices of apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers. The Lord however has with equal power and trust called the entire Body, no matter the service, gift or calling, to bear witness unto Him and to fulfil the great Commission. It is all done by His choice, not by our good deeds.

God favours no man - false teachings and doctrines has led the Body to believe that those who are in the higher position of the church, serving as clergy, thus possess the higher calling, wisdom, blessing and purpose. The Lord grants His truths, secrets, power and blessing to those who have an intimate relationship with Him - it is therefore about relationship position with Him, favoured by grace that leads one to the feet of the Father.

The emphasis on the higher calling of clergy has fuelled the spirit of legalism and traditionalism, as structures, regulations and church laws are set in place to bring about the laity's blind following and worship. The Lord calls His people to worship in Spirit and Truth, yet we worship in soul and bondage.

In order to place a higher value on a calling, we then first have to determine what the higher value is. This is not

possible. The Lord placed a value on feeding the poor, clothing the needy and helping the widows, the orphans, the elderly and the sick. He placed weighty emphasis on preaching, teaching and making disciples. He placed emphasis on character building and living godly lives. He commended those who served in the most meaningless tasks. No calling is above any other, for all acts of service glorify the Lord when done to His glory. The story of Stephen in Acts 7 proves this.

In order to place a higher value on calling, there is in doctrine then ideas taught on what are ministry. Yet ministry in its strictest Greek translation means both waiter and to serve. To minister is nothing more than to serve the Lord, His people and to serve in love those who are still seeking the Lord. We are called ministers of reconciliation, for just as Jesus came to serve and not be served, so we are called to serve. The office of minister therefore does not apply to any specialised group, be it educated or chosen by man, for the entire body is a priesthood called to minister in our unique capacity.

Thus, the doctrine of the educated and the ordained five-fold ministry has led to spiritual abuse and oppression as laity lives under the guise they are not called to function in such order of ministry. According to Mark 16, Matthew 28 and Acts 2 all saints have been called to preach, pray (intercession), evangelise, lay hands on the sick and those desiring deliverance. The true church has been built on the work of the apostles and prophets. Scriptures and the men of the Reformation prove that only two such true offices exist, for all men have been called to teach, preach, disciple and evangelize.

In order to place a distinctive emphasis that a higher calling does exist, the church has since its rebirth in 330AD continued with the practice of ordination. Through the process of ordination, clergy is set apart, sanctified and justified by man, not the Lord.

The laity follows blindly those ordained, sometimes without testing all things spiritually, which have and still

do lead to terrible spiritual oppression and abuse.

All saints of the Lord are ordained into service and thus ministry by the Blood of Jesus, by the work of the Holy Spirit and the approval of the Father. All saints have been called to also baptize, rebuke and reproof. For this reason, the work remains great and the labourers few, for the great divide caused by false teaching between clergy and laity have caused disunity in the Body and have rendered the greater army of spiritual warriors helpless by ignorance.

Laying on of hands, therefore the impartation of the Spirit, takes place for those individuals the Lord has separated for a certain task. Such a task or calling however are never higher, or of more worth or substance than any other calling. It is not a calling ordained because of greater favour, but because it has been so ordained by the Lord before the laying of the earth's foundation. It has been ordained by His sovereign will so that the Body would be prepared for the coming of the Son for the second time.

The tradition and bestowing of earthly ordination adds a distinctive air of separation in the Body, causing a false sense of what is the Lord's will. Such ordination place clergy on a higher pedestal, and thus the pulpit becomes the domain of those who are exalted in the eyes of the followers - this is idolatry.

Apart from the practise of ordination, the issuing of titles to the clergy has added to their air of superiority and "divinity". Church leaders have freely given themselves titles such as prophet or apostle, while those who have studied, have brought titles such as reverend, pastor, bishop or priests. These titles give the clergy a sense of importance, yet that title means nothing for the highest title we can obtain from the Lord is to be called son or daughter.

Ultimately, clergy have been exalted, glorified and adored ever since the "church" arose from the Roman Empire. Those in the folds of clergy have become gods, made Christ- like, given attributes of divinity and called

the true servants. There is only one Lord over the Church. There is only one true Shepherd, Teacher, Healer and King.

This is emphasized by the belief that only those ordained or those in clergy are allowed to preach a word, or even pray for someone, or even baptise. The laity is under this incredible deception that the word and authority of the clergy is so exalted that in the eyes of the Lord they are the only ones allowed to practice the divine ways. Once again, those who have the Spirit upon them, to them is given the task to do what Jesus came to teach us.

Thus, trained scholars are running legal institutions called church, uttering rhetoric speeches from elevated places, which is a form of Greek philosophizing, seeking to impress, persuade and thrill laity through the use of logic and reasoning. The Lord, His disciples and the prophets of old spoke in the voice of the Lord, by His authority, in His Spirit, not using rhetoric, reason or logic, but the truth as the hammer of conviction.

The air of superiority, driven by Satan who is the prince of the air, reigns in the heart of the apostate church for almost 1700 years. It has resulted in one-sided doctrines that have been formulated sometimes only by the most esteemed of churchmen. Personal conviction, a personal interpretation or personal experience however forms such doctrine.

The Lord has called all His children to foremost seek the truth from Him, for the Spirit has been sent to lead us in all truth. Those who abide in Him and in the anointing will be taught the truth directly by the Lord and not by man. This is true maturity. In such maturity there is no room for the Roman Empire structured churches seen in both Catholic and Protestant denominations.

All truth sets man free. Truth lies with the Lord, who is the Word and not among the legal doctrines of man. How can we find truth in doctrine when teachings of the church fathers and the reformers in particular differ? We therefore get followers of Augustine, Wycliffe, John Huss, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, George Fox, John G Lake

and so many more.

The truth is the Lord, placed in the hearts of the saints that make up the Body of the Lord. The truth is found in His Spirit, not in man's interpretations or theories. The Lord is seeking to restore this church in the final days so that it will be refined like silver, tested and magnified in all hearts who humbly serve Him.

The divide of clergy and laity has suppressed the ultimate truth, as saints still do not seek the truth from the Lord but from man. Laity however, out of passive reasons, still choose to follow the 'truths' of clergy, therefore bound themselves to legalism and traditionalism. This is the Moses syndrome, as the saints themselves do not spend time with the Lord in constant and personal watch, rather seeking from man the truth, way and life. The only way to know the truth is to know the Truth Himself; therefore through worship and meditation will we learn who the Lord is in all aspects.

The clergy's ego, pride and vanity have led to formulations of doctrines and teachings, which have caused confusion and division. They themselves live under the spirit of division and selfishness, not allowing the Body to function as one in importance, stature and truth. The only way for the pure truth to prevail is for the Body to fellowship, meet and meditate together on the truth so that the Lord will reveal collectively what is the truth and what is false. Humility and a contrite spirit are thus needed.

The spirit of traditionalism has allowed teachings and doctrines to be carried over from generation to generation, from one founding member to the follower. Such a spirit bounds the order of worship, form of worship, order of service and form of service. As teachings and "truths" are passed on, it also gets distorted, added one, re-interpreted and reviewed.

False tides of teaching

The “church services” of today are bound by tradition and legalism, formed by man. This is also true in how we view and regard evangelism and worship.

Based on the influences of the Greeks, Romans, the emerging world after the dark Ages and then the Modern World, divine practices such as teaching and preaching in Spirit and Truth have in the modern church rather become an art form. It addresses more the realm of the soul and the flesh than the spirit. This false form of preaching through entertainment and performance reaches a painful success when it manages to stir the intellect and the emotions.

The truth is not the divine goal of the “church” but the goal of the clergy is self- preservation of own doctrine. This self-preservation is done in a spirit of persuasion and manipulation (witchcraft).

The “church service” has become one of performance and show, entertaining “members”, whose adoration adds to the clergy’s air of superiority while their money feeds the coffers of the clergy. Those who are entertained and persuaded and deceived through show will stay within the folds of the congregation. Services have become embroiled in a sense of false mysticism, emotionalism and deceptive trickery, yet the glory of the Lord is not welcomed.

The measure of the clergy's work and their success is not determined by their spiritual significance or impact, but by the numbers of their congregation and their wealth. The true wealth of the servant of the Lord is a contrite and humble spirit, a godly character and true desire to carry His own cross.

Teachings on prosperity and provision have therefore been altered to feed the coffers of the clergy. The laity pays, under the guise of tithes, sowing and offerings in order to receive a blessing, a harvest, a healing, a breakthrough, a deliverance or spiritual enhancement.

Simony stands against the truth of the heart of the Lord, whose hand is upon the righteous and those who obey and submit to Him. Simony favours the self-exalted, those seeking the gifts of the Lord through the exertion of their power, fame, effort and work. The Lord seeks those who will carry their cross, who will fight for His Kingdom and the truth by shedding blood, sweat and tears.

The abuse of simony has been made legal and just through the false teaching of prosperity. The term prosperity has gained prominence through inaccurate translation of the Scriptures, the incorrect understanding of the term when used in Scriptures and the intentional falsifying of the term to unjustly add to the coffers of the clergy.

Such falsifying of Scriptures through incorrect and also intentional misinterpretation is given merit through the incorrect and misconstrued doctrines of sowing seed in order to receive, especially spiritual favour, from the Lord. The manipulative spirit of giving and sowing financial seed in order to gain is simply the spirit of manipulating the Lord.

It is written we are invited to buy spiritual wine and bread from the Lord without price or money. The saints in Revelations 21 and 22 and also Isaiah 55 are called to obtain the water and gift of Life freely. Those who are in Christ have already inherited all heavenly blessing (Ephesians 1) for the Lord's sacrifice has paid for it by His Blood. We cannot buy the Lord's gifts, His time or favour through earthly commodities but only through heavenly passion. Giving and helping the needy should be an outflow of our intimate walk with the Lord.

The gospel of prosperity and the doctrines of self-gain blessing have shifted the saint's focus to an earthly substance of need, want, instant gratification and quick fixes. The saint's call should be focussed on the heart of heaven where we are commanded to carry our cross, to welcome trial, tribulation and persecution and to die for the truth. We are called to seek the Lord's substance, His

Spirit, His values and truths to determine our passion, desire and action.

Simony has caused spiritual positions to be given and granted through favouritism and nepotism. Favour with man and the world is bought through the trade of finance, the doing of good deeds and gained by those who willingly choose to submit to natural church laws and regulations. The heresy of simony is simply to seek the favour of Lord and man through by trading in that which is temporary.

All deceptive teachings and doctrines are ultimately preached under the most grievous of doctrinal errors, which pertains to what is the true church. Clergy has been able to flaunt their power and false kind of authority for they have convinced the laity that the Church is the four walls, the foundation (of money) and a roof. Such doctrine is false.

False teachings on the "church concept" have persuaded laity that this concept is the Kingdom and the Body. This is false. The true Kingdom is still in heaven where the Father resides and it is for now being manifested through the Spirit in the believers on earth.

The true church consists of the foundation of Jesus, thus the cornerstone. The walls are made up of living stones, who are the people that are called to priesthood. The roof is the canopy of the entire spiritual world, comprising of both heaven and hell. The true church comprises of those reborn spiritually. How then can a structured and functional church, which houses both the believer and non-believer, be called the true Body or church?

The true church is then not the building and neither is it run by the structured hierarchy of Roman and Babylon leadership, but it lies in the heart of the believer and within the people is the Kingdom. The building provides only a facility for nonbelievers to be reborn into the true Church or Body and it provides for a place of meeting for believers and non-believers. Reformist George Fox called the functional churches steeple houses. True church is

where the believers meet, break bread, share the Word, pray and above all, there is the two-way activity between heaven and earth. Such is church, where the Lord is present among His sons and daughters.

As such, the false teaching of church membership is a travesty. True membership into the Body comes through spiritual rebirth. It is those who have bowed the knee to the Lord who become part of the Body, not those who sign an agreement to be part of a congregation that consists out of both believers and non-believers.

To enhance the power of the clergy, formal church membership is the order of today. Such membership is not Scriptural. The laity, who signs such a church covenant to become a member of a congregation, therefore bows the knee in spirit to a specific leader and to a certain cause. This is idolatry and spiritual adulatory.

Those who are reborn in Blood, Spirit and Water become members of the entire Body. No one can become a member through formal legislation or status or work unless He is born again. Therefore, a church member is not necessarily a true believer, neither is an ordained pastor/preacher a true believer. Only those born again in Spirit, therefore into the true Church can enter and see the Kingdom of the Lord.

The signing of a "church" covenant or "church" agreement, which is legalism and follows traditions, forces laity to follow the founding church's member's laws, regulations, teachings and doctrines. We are called to follow only the truth of the Lord, who is the Word and Spirit. The gospel of Jesus is all that we submit and adhere to, not any other gospel.

To promulgate such "truths" masquerading as a deceptive practice, those who become members of the church are given certain privileges, such as attending home groups, being baptized and falsely enjoying a spirit of belonging and protection. Again, the Lord has granted all privileges in heaven and under the sun to those who serve Him.

The structured and functional church in all its legalism. Therefore, does not carry the divine authority as taught, for it only serves as a vessel by which God's grace is exercised so that His true divine Kingdom is established in the hearts of men and women. True authority lies in the believer who have undergone the spiritual rebirth, for to them have been given the dominion over earth and in the spiritual realm, but not over man. True authority, anointing and power come not from education, wealth, status or position, but from those who dwell in the Holy of Holies.

Ignorance has caused a belief that man has authority over man, which lends its demonic power to clergy's authority. Laity believes clergy has authority over them and their lives for they believe the "ordained" has such authority. This is false. No man has such authority, only God. Leaders who live under such a deception, which is prevalent throughout clergy, believe they control man and this then leads to countless spiritual abuses, manipulations and witchcraft (control).

Since no man has spiritual authority over another man, true spiritual leaders are called to lead people to the Father, not to themselves. They are called not to rule but to serve, to guide but not to mislead, to fight for their spiritual freedom and not to put them in spiritual chains. Church leadership too often is guilty of spiritual oppression and deception as they seek to become kings over more followers within their empires, kingdoms or castles.

As such, doctrines of spiritual covering that call for blind submission are false. Submission to leadership does not lead to a spiritual authority or protection. Only when we submit under the headship of the Lord does this happen. All God's sons and daughters stand under the authority of the Lord by the covenant of grace. True authority lies within the true living church; as such this is why unity and oneness of Spirit leads us to victory.

False teaching on the absolute authority of the church

or that the church is the kingdom results in saints continuing with works related to church for it is believed that this will please the Lord. Only by doing the work of the Kingdom, for which the entire church as a Body has been called, would the Kingdom and its domain be manifested in the true believer.

The Lord admonishes that His children will not worship idols. Such idols, except for those that come in the flesh, are made out of earthly things such as wood, clay and stone. As such "church" and things pertaining to "church", are also idolized. One's calling, "church" work and "church" attendance becomes a ritual of law, replacing true worship in Spirit and Truth. When such matters become more important than our walk with God, then idolatry is committed for we idolize the "church" that is made up of wood, stone and clay.

In truth, the foundations of church denominations have been laid by the convictions of one man or a few, such as Luther and Calvin. Some denominations have grown worldwide in strength, causing a kind of church empire, while others have stayed smaller and more restricted to certain areas, therefore becoming church kingdoms. A multitude of churches however has remained singular, driven by one man's vision and purpose, becoming a kind of lone church castle. Each empire, kingdom or castle have their own structure, design, values, laws and truths, ultimately fighting for own survival.

Such a fight for the survival enhances the selfish nature of those running the steeple houses, as survival is sought through deceptive warfare, waged many times against friend. Each one of these classes of churches, be it kingdom, empire or castle seek to viciously sell their doctrine and services. This is done through a decisive marketing campaign, which sickly involves using mediums such as books, the Internet, the television and radio. These campaigns are driven by huge funds and are vicious and calculated in purpose, all for the goal of strengthening the empire, kingdom or castle. To drive these campaigns,

money is needed, hence the false prosperity doctrines and the strong spirit of simony.

The church is divided for clergy without scruple, conscience or heart fights for the commodities of money and the souls of man. Yet all that they achieve is to corrupt and kill spiritually.

Such 'empires', 'kingdoms' and 'castles' ultimately divide the Body, causing confusion, chaos and therefore weaken the saints for collective warfare.

The driving forces that divide are greed, lust and pride, as those in the Body seek to build their own empires, kingdoms and castles.

We all called to work together, to build the only and true Kingdom of the Lord, yet we maim, steal and lie within our own ranks to gain the favour of the world and the saints.

Hence, the greater the empire, kingdom or castle, the greater is the prestige, fame and wealth for those in leadership. The greater the wealth of the clergy, the more powerful campaigns can be launched and more gullible members enticed to join the "blessed denomination or congregation.

Certain rituals in the church (fuelled by traditionalism), including festive holidays such as Christmas, smack of paganism and pagan traditions. The ways of Babylon, Rome and Greece are followed to set up the empires, kingdoms and castles. The pagan ways are used to be a king, emperor or ruler who can control his people and to expand the territory through conquest.

A second and great Reformation is, therefore, needed to finally bring all truth together and lead the Body out of bondage. Such a reformation will challenge all our traditions, doctrines and customs, for only the Lord's way will prevail. His way in all things needs to be sought, as we seek true wisdom in how to get the Bride ready and pure for His coming.

It is thus true that once the Roman Church once adopted a hierarchical system of leadership, which has

allowed for great spiritual abuse and misuse of misconstrued power. Isn't this abuse of leadership also evident in the Protestant church today, as leaders wish to rule in power and be dominant instead of seeing the value in humble submission in serving the flock? We criticize and point fingers at the deadly abuses of the pope and priests, yet leaders and ministers of the Protestant faith have allowed the same spirit of control, manipulation and hunger for power to come rolling in through the church doors.

The grievous mistakes of the Roman Church were only evident after hundreds of years. The complexities of their sins were only evident in the light of GOD's works of restoration of the truth through numerous movement and revivals.

But, just as the Roman Church couldn't see their mistakes at the time so the Protestant Churches is also unable to see its mistakes. Only when GOD fully restores all truth and brings about the greatest revival for the end time harvest, will we be able to step back and clearly see how we have walked down the same path of spiritual adultery and idolatry.

Just as there is such a pride among the Protestants, so is there such a vile pride amongst denominations of the Body of Christ. For many years there was a genuine belief that certain denominations were better than others. Let us remember that GOD builds His church (singular), and that Catholics, Protestants, and all denominations will one day take hands, in repentance and in reconciliation, when GOD reveals the great truths of our pride and arrogance.

Pride and Arrogance Fuels Abuse

Because of the spirit of pride, arrogance, ignorance and self-exaltation we have a number of hyper authoritarian church structures, where man as leader is given the facility to become a god-like figure.

The 1970's movement of discipleship/shepherding introduced a number of heretic practices and doctrines (even though there was a time when it was almost oppressed).

In such movements man is called on to blindly follow man as leader (submitted to him, instead of always submitting to the one and only Shepherd and leader Jesus Christ, who is also our only and true covering).

Church structures and church leadership smack of idolatry and paganism, as men is not led anymore to God, but to man himself, to false truths, to spiritual ignorance and spiritual bondage.

Jesus came to set us free in Spirit and Truth, and those that the Son has set free are free indeed. Strict submission to leadership and oaths to churches become the norm, where we are taught to trust in man, to be accountable to each other and to obey all that are taught by our local church.

The hierarchical system in churches today, be it Protestant, Anglican or Catholic, grew directly from the structures of the Roman Empire, which was initially adopted by the Holy Roman Church. Note: A history and effect of this movement is widely available. Nothing is hidden, neither motive nor believe in the movement, for it is seen to be right (once again, notes can be provided).

2 Timothy 3 reminds us that in the last days men will become lovers of themselves and not God. The Scriptures warn us that the Self will be exalted in the last days. Idolatry is nothing more than exalting the self. The work of the philosophers is to exalt the Self.

Pride causes the Self to defend its own worth and

value. Hyper authoritarian church structures are so dominant because the leader of the church wants to protect his way of doing things, his teaching and his doctrine. The Self is thus exalted in the churches; paganism is fed because of rebellion which opens the legal door to sexual immorality.

Paganism and sexual immorality will always go hand-in-hand, for so it has been written in Revelations that those outside the walls of the New Jerusalem are those who practice sexual immorality, magic and falseness.

Waging war is not always about conquering land and the control of resources. War has many times throughout history been about preserving the Self, preserving the culture of the Self and the religion and traditions of the Self. When man wages war, it has been to preserve the Self, for defeat is the defeat of the Self. Hitler hardly wanted world domination but he wanted to preserve the Self of Germany as a nationality. However those opposed to this ideal resulted in a world war.

Similarly, church leaders will fight tooth and nail to preserve the Self by protecting their church, their denomination or their congregation, for the simple reason they don't want to let go of their way of doing things and what they believe in. Within church circles there is a war being waged, but we wage war amongst ourselves for perseverance of the Self, out of the fear that our traditions and rituals will be threatened.

Churches today aren't fighting a corporate war against Satan for they are fighting a war with each other because pride has exalted the Self to a point of a god-like need.

But the Bride belongs to Jesus and we are called to lay down the Self to serve Him and others. We are not called to preserve the Self but the Kingdom. Waging war for perseverance is simply a pagan form of warlike idolatry as we seek for our ways to survive instead of submitting to God.

We talk about driving the enemy from our land and we talk about casting demons from our cities, yet as we exalt

the Self and as we wallow in our practices of paganism and sexual immorality, we are hardly standing united under the true authority of GOD. Systematically, Satan has caused confusion about the living power of the Church, which is the faith in the resurrection power of JESUS, the living power of the Holy Spirit and the glory of the Father, by simply using his only means of warfare namely deceit and lies. This causes confusion and disorientation, which leads to a breakdown in unity, knowledge, vision and understanding.

Indeed, the devil's strategy is one of control, manipulation and deceit. Local congregations, church membership and spiritual covering are designed to exercise control and to manipulate the flock. It is reminiscent of the Roman Empire and the Church during the Medieval Age when people were exploited and controlled to the will of the beast.

The false wisdom birthed by the Greeks so many years ago has resulted modern day Church to become trapped in the web of knowledge, thereby forcing sons and daughters to abandon their pure faith for the sake of perseverance of the Self.

All the debates on holy living, spiritual baptism, resurrection of Christ, the final days, demons, the ministry of the Spirit (which are the foundation pillars of our spiritual growth as written in Hebrews 6), shows how Satan wants to lead us away from the truth. The foundation of the four beasts is one of sand that will not hold up when the righteous flood of GOD's love and judgement comes.

Martin Luther's reformation destroyed the bondage of holding onto dead works, realising it is by faith that we are sons and daughters of the New Covenant. The Pentecostal Movement and the Charismatic Movement restored the work of the Holy Spirit, yet even this has now been tainted with lies and deceptions.

We must be very careful that we walk in God's wisdom, knowledge and Truth. We can only do so if we sit at the table with Him, meaning that we know Him, fellowship

with Him and know His Kingdom. Otherwise we are satisfied with second-hand knowledge and run the risk of rejecting the true knowledge of the Lord.

The division in the church of laity and clergy is among the greatest reasons why many believers are still living in the spiritual Dark Ages. The concept of having a laity and a clergy is termed under Sacerdotalism, which is the belief that propitiatory sacrifices for sin require the intervention of a priest. That is, it is the belief that a special, segregated order of men, called the priesthood, are the only ones who can commune directly with God or the gods. This system of the priesthood is exemplified by the priests in the Old Testament. The term sacerdotalism comes from the Latin sacerdos, priest, literally one who presents sacred offerings (from sacer, sacred), and dare, to give.

Let it be noted right from the beginning thus we are all called unto priesthood and unto service, no matter our education. We are all called as disciples of the Lord, and we must all come and sit at the table of God. Sacerdotalism is but another incorrect doctrine designed to turn our faith into a religion of man's rules, traditions and regulations. And therefore, many people today are not active in the ministry because of the notion that only a select few are called to minister to the masses.

Again, IF WE ALLOW ourselves to be fooled by the religious notion that only the clergy may truly minister and that the clergy has a special place at the Lord's Table, then we are but merely foolish and ignorant. This is why the Spirit was poured out – so that we don't have an excuse and so that we are not tricked or fooled by traditions, foolishness and man's religion. If we listen and heed the Spirit, we will then serve the Lord as He desires, and we will not be dictated by man or his foolish heart.

Sacerdotalism was especially evident during the Dark Ages. However, this is an erroneous doctrine and perception. We are indeed ALL called by the Blood of the Lamb not to merely behave as puppets and being spoon fed, or kept like dogs at the foot of the table eating of the

spiritual crumbs, but we are called to get up from the spiritual floor [spiritual valley] to enjoy the fullness of God's Glory and Presence.

1 Peter 2: 4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” 8 and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”

For those who believe and follow the Lord are the disciples of the Lord, and as disciples we have been given the authority, according to the Great Commission, to ALL preach the Good News, and baptise people in water and in the Spirit. It is true that there are different offices in which we operate and we all have different mandates, but the fact is we are all part of the priesthood and we are all disciples. Revelations 1: To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

The Lord wants us to walk in His abundance and glory, and thus His life, but the devil wants to ensnare us through ignorance. We need to break free from the bonds of the devil and to seek God's Truth so that we may be effective ministers to His Name.

We may wonder why so many remain at their “own tents”. We may wonder why? Partly it is because they have never been properly disciplined and equipped to know they can enter into God's Presence, while some may just remain apathetic and passive.

This was the great problem during the Dark Days, just before the Middle Ages, for knowledge was withheld from

the people. Only the clergy had copies of the Scriptures, and so could dictate to people what the Word says – even if false. But the people were forced to agree to such a truth, even if it was heresy, because they were taught not to approach God directly and neither did they have a personal Bible. Then came the Reformation, and the printing of Bibles, and so the masses had the opportunity to read the Word for themselves and to learn what is the Truth.

Problem is, many still don't read the Scriptures or seek the Spirit for the Truth or challenge what is being taught or being preached. They are the proverbial lambs to a slaughter. This has happened partly because of years of tradition and religious indoctrination, where the clergy that supposedly "knows" the truth is the only ones who are allowed to preach the "truth", while the laity is not supposed to minister but is only supposed to receive the truth as being taught or preached.

The laity have been threatened with all kinds of incorrect teachings such as they must never challenge the word of a pastor and that they must never leave a congregation out of their own choice [without being released by the spiritual leadership] because they are then no longer under a covering. All of these things are ridiculous! One of the greatest fallacies these days is church membership.

We belong to the Kingdom by the Blood of the Lamb, not by a piece of paper we sign. Consider this – if we sign a paper declaring church membership, we actually make a vow and a covenant to that certain group, and now we forsake our true Covenant with God. How can we have two covenants? We either have a covenant with God or we have a demonic covenant with man [church membership]. It is time for the believers to wake up and shake off all the nonsense and demonic teachings and stop being exploited, manipulated and bullied.

Church leaders are threatening people with excommunication, which is an institutional act of religious censure used to deprive, suspend, or limit membership in a

religious community. Excommunication is the formal removal of an individual from church membership and the informal separation from that individual. Matthew 18:15-20 gives the procedure and authority for a church to do this. It instructs us that one individual (usually the offended party) is to go to the offending individual. If he/she does not repent, then two or three go to confirm the situation and the refusal to repent. If there is still no repentance, it is taken before the church. In modern times, excommunication applies to church membership – thus it is like revoking someone’s membership from a club.

How can we be excommunicated from the Kingdom of God? Madness! We are bound by Blood, and we can only forsake the Kingdom when we turn our backs on God. Yet excommunication is practiced by the Church as a means of discipline, instilling fear and herding the flock.

In the days of Paul things were different. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 Paul also gives some purposes behind the biblical use of excommunication. One reason (not directly found in the passage) is for the sake of the testimony of Christ Jesus (and His church) before unbelievers.

When David sinned with Bathsheba, one of the consequences of his sin was that the name of the one true God was blasphemed by God's enemies (2 Samuel 12:14). A second reason is that sin is like a cancer; if allowed to exist, it spreads to those nearby in the same way that “a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). Also, Paul explains that Jesus saved us so that we might be set apart from sin, that we might be “unleavened” or free from that which causes spiritual decay (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Christ's desire for His bride, the church, is that she might be pure and undefiled (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Paul was therefore more concerned about the dangers of mocking God, rampant sin within the body of believers, and that believers can do what they want. For this reason he was suggesting at times such a believer who keeps on

sinning must become isolated for a while so that he can become mindful of his actions and thus repent. Again, Paul's motivation was never the idea of cancelling some kind of membership, but it was about the credibility of God and His people.

Today, the Church has very little credibility because sin and idolatry is rampant within her midst. Problem is we do not address the sin, or the avocation of lawlessness or idolatry. Instead, what is more important to the churches of today is when someone does not conform blindly to the doctrine of the pastor, or follows blindly the programme of the church board. We are more concerned about keeping church members in line than addressing sin or incorrect doctrines, therefore saving them from the fire of hell. Excommunication is therefore about man and supporting his own agenda, instead of seeking a way to curb sin and to save a rebellious believer.

In the days of Paul spoke about not even associating with people who followed a different truth than the path of the Lord. It was not about denomination loyalty, but about defending God's Truth and guarding against the dangers of sin and deception. Today, we use excommunication to exert loyalty to the church. We use it as a tool of fear to keep people subjected to a certain leadership and we thus bully them into showing loyalty.

In John 9, the Pharisees excommunicated the healed man, casting him out, because he did conform to their truth. In fact, the healed man was finally conforming to the Truth of God. Yet, because of his rebellion towards the religious authority at the time, he was seen as the rebel. This is also true today – many who are conforming to the Truth of God are not in alignment with the doctrines and programmes and agendas of modern day institutions called churches and thus are seen as rebels and are threatened to be cast out. What rubbish and what madness.

We must be careful that we don't simply follow certain leaders out of fear of exploitation or because of threats. Our loyalty lies with God, and we have a duty to seek Him

and His Truth above all else. We have a duty not to be yoked by the traditions and the madness of false doctrines being preached in churches.

It is actually a good thing if we are cast out of churches that do not conform to God's Truth, for then we are being delivered from proverbial Babylon! We must see God's Kingdom above all else and nothing else.

The reality of clergy and laity is the Church is killing any real form of discipleship. It only breeds paranoia, confusion and legalism. All believers are, however, called to minister, to preach, to lay hands on the sick and to deliver people from demonic oppression. But because of the tradition fuelled by religious doctrine regarding clergy and laity, many people today aren't moving into the fullness of God but are still being spoon fed by the "clergy". And many times the spiritual food that is being spoon fed [preached, taught] is not even worth the pigs!

The Lord has showed how this false doctrine and indoctrination resemble a situation where the "clergy" acts like masters, feasting at the table of the prosperity [made possibly the erroneous doctrines of tithing, clergy and the concept of the physical Church] while the laity [the masses] are kept like dogs at the table and are only fed crumbs by will and by choice. And if you are only fed crumbs, you will surely run the risk of spiritual starvation! And these "masters" keep a tight lease on their "dogs", spewing all kinds of false doctrines as in the days of the Dark and Middle Ages to keep people confused, dazed and ineffective. They are after all only good to give their offering and to tithe!

No more says the Lord! All believers must come and sit at the Table of God, and be ultimately feasting with the Lord, allowing the Spirit to teach and to guide. It is time for the laity and the masses to arise from the floor and come and sit at the Table of the Lord.

Isaiah 60 says "Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. 2 For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the

people; But the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you. 3 The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”

In the Old and New Testament there is constant warning against those who attempt to people astray, and are even classified as “dogs”. Philippians 3: 1 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. 2 Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, 4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh.

And also Isaiah 56: 10 His watchmen are blind, They are all ignorant; They are all dumb dogs, They cannot bark; Sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. 11 Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; They all look to their own way, Every one for his own gain, From his own territory. 12 “Come,” one says, “I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; Tomorrow will be as today, And much more abundant.”

Psalms 22 says: “15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. 16 For dogs have surrounded me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced my hands and my feet; 17 I can count all my bones. They look and stare at me.”

We all know of the story of Jesus who turned over the tables in the den of thieves. “Matthew 21: 12 Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’”

This reminds one of Jeremiah 7: The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, 2 “Stand in the gate of

the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD!' 3 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. 4 Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.' 5 "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, 6 if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, 7 then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. 8 "Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. 9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, 10 and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'? 11 Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the LORD."

Time after time, we still find plenty of spiritual manipulation in the Church as 'spiritual leaders' exploit, control and deceive congregational members for own gain and benefit. This is nothing more than changing God's house into a den of thieves, for one is stealing the spiritual liberty of God's children.

Spiritual leaders act like masters who keep their congregation in line to their agenda and truth. It is time for this form of demonic slavery to be broken and for all believers to rise up and to claim their true place in the Lord. The days are coming that this order of exploitation and manipulation has to be overturned so that all people of God can take their rightful place at the Table of the Lord.

Indeed, the days are coming when these 'dogs of evil intent' who manipulate and exploit for own power and glory, will be brought low and the true believer exalted.

Similarities of Church Structures and a Cult

With everything that has been written, and considering that cults operate according to control, it is therefore not such an impossibility to compare the hyper-authoritarian church structures with that of a cult.

As we have seen, in some churches these days you will find the leaders tend to be the absolute end of all operation, while they are revered and even worshipped as prophets of God and as anointed apostles. Often, they can be strong, controlling, manipulative personalities, who demand submission, even if conflicts occur in doctrine or behaviour. Sometimes they can be looked on as God himself, thus we are reminded of the Lord's warning in Matthew 24: 4 And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.

To prove how many Churches are operating as a cult, let us begin by firstly exploring some characteristics of such cults and cult leaders.

The following is an excerpt from the book "Captive Hearts, Captive Minds: Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationship" ((Hunter House, May 1, 1994) by Madeline Tobias and Janja Lalich adapted from information compiled by Dr Michael Langone:

- * The group is focused on a living leader to whom members display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment.

- * The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members and/or making money.

- * Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged.

- * Mind-numbing techniques (for example meditation, chanting, denunciation sessions, or debilitating work routines) are used to suppress members' doubts.

- * The group's leadership dictates how members should think, act, and feel (for example members must get

permission from leaders to date, change jobs, or get married;) leaders may determine types of clothes to wear, where to live, how to discipline children, and so forth.

- * The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and members (for example the leader is considered the Messiah or an avatar; the group and/or the leader has a special mission to save humanity).

- * The group has a polarized we-they mentality that causes conflict with the wider society.

- * The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities (as are, for example, military commanders and ministers, priests, monks, and rabbis of mainstream denominations).

- * The group teaches or implies that its "superior" ends justify means that members would have considered unethical before joining the group (for example: collecting money for bogus charities).

- * The group's leadership induces guilt feelings in members to control them.

- * Members' subservience to the group causes them to give up previous personal goals and interests while devoting inordinate amounts of time to the groups"

- * Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members.

Joe Navarro, who once served in the FBI says after having studied at length the life, teachings, and behaviours of Jim Jones (Jonestown Guyana), David Koresh (Branch Davidians), Stewart Traill (The Church of Bible Understanding), Charles Manson, Shoko Asahara (Aum Shinrikyo), Joseph Di Mambro (The Order of the Solar Temple aka Ordre du Temple Solaire), Marshall Heff Applewhit (Heaven's Gate), Bhagwan Rajneesh (Rajneesh Movement), and Warren Jeffs (polygamist leader), that what stands out about these individuals is that they were or are all pathologically narcissistic.

Navarro explained they all have or had an over-abundant belief that they were special, that they and they alone had the answers to problems, and that they had to be

revered. He continued by saying that such leaders demanded perfect loyalty from followers, they overvalued themselves and devalued those around them, they were intolerant of criticism, and above all, they did not like being questioned or challenged. And yet, despite these less than charming traits, they had no trouble attracting those who were willing to overlook these features.

He also compiled a list of typical traits of the pathological cult leader (from Narcissists Among Us).

- * He has a grandiose idea of who he is and what he can achieve.

- * Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance.

- * Demands blind unquestioned obedience.

- * Requires excessive admiration from followers and outsiders.

- * Has a sense of entitlement - expecting to be treated special at all times.

- * Is exploitative of others by asking for their money or that of relatives putting others at financial risk.

- * Is arrogant and haughty in his behaviour or attitude.

- * Has an exaggerated sense of power (entitlement) that allows him to bend rules and break laws.

- * Takes sexual advantage of members of his sect or cult.

- * Is hypersensitive to how he is seen or perceived by others.

- * Publicly devalues others as being inferior, incapable, or not worthy.

- * Makes members confess their sins or faults publicly subjecting them to ridicule or humiliation while revealing exploitable weaknesses of the penitent.

- * Needs to be the center of attention and does things to distract others to ensure that he or she is being noticed by arriving late, using exotic clothing, overdramatic speech, or by making theatrical entrances.

- * Has insisted in always having the best of anything (house, car, jewellery, clothes) even when others are

relegated to lesser facilities, amenities, or clothing.

- * Haughtiness, grandiosity, and the need to be controlling is part of his personality.

- * When criticized he tends to lash out not just with anger but with rage.

- * Anyone who criticizes or questions him is called an “enemy.”

- * Is superficially charming.

- * Habitually puts down others as inferior and only he is superior.

- * Treats others with contempt and arrogance.

- * Is constantly assessing for those who are a threat or those who revere him.

- * Doesn't seem to feel guilty for anything he has done wrong nor does he apologize for his actions.

- * Tries to control others in what they do, read, view, or think.

- * Has taken away the freedom to leave, to travel, to pursue life, and the liberty of followers.

Navarro points out that when a cult or organizational leader has a preponderance of these traits then one can anticipate that at some point those who associate with him will likely suffer physically, emotionally, psychologically, or financially.

Thus, if one studies the way a cult works, and you look at how modern-day authoritarian churches operate, the similarities are startling. After all, according to some of these “god-like” leaders, their teaching is equal to obeying God. As we have seen according to the characteristics of a cult, many churches operate in such a manner. Again, let us recap.

One: The group is focused on a living leader to whom members display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment. This happens in churches across the world. These “followers” or more accurately “disciples” will even obey the leader above the promoting of the Holy Spirit! Again, the word of the “leader” must not be brought into disrepute, questioned or challenged for then one is seen as

being rebellious and out of the will of God. Absolute loyalty is demanded in such a church atmosphere, and it is seen as an act of rebellion when wanting to “quit” that church group.

Two: The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members and/or making money. Ever noticed how Churches is all about “numbers” – numbers of those attending the service, numbers of those following to the service worldwide and financial numbers (prosperity teachings). It is about quantity above quality. It is all about fame, status, and recognition. Who cares how many are saved, as long as they count towards the membership? The more members, then higher the tithing, and thus the revenue. It has become a situation of bragging rights (who has the most attendees, and who has the most cash), and so any product will be sold to appease the masses.

Third: Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged. This happens in most churches! Again, members are bullied into submission through threats such as ex-communication, and that they will lose their covering and covenant. Members are taught not to touch God’s anointed, not to rebuke, reproof or correct. Members become like blind sheep, ultimately following man no matter where the road leads, instead of following the Lord.

Fourth: Mind-numbing techniques are used to suppress members' doubts. A lot of people do not realise it, but spiritual leaders adopt a very authoritarian position by which they cannot be questioned, which results in indoctrination which is simply another form of brainwashing. And it has been shown methods of hypnosis are also used in churches through the use of one’s voice (method of preaching), and the use of lights and music. Sound familiar? The indoctrination method is easily done where hyper-authoritarian structures exist because members feel very uncomfortable to question what is being taught, for then they feel they are out of God’s will and is causing harm to the Body of Christ.

Fifth: The group's leadership dictates how members

should think, act, and feel. This is more extreme in cults, but even in some churches, people are advised who to date, how to dress, what job to take and so on. This is another form of indoctrination. What one sees in Churches especially is when one deals with ministry – members are ultimately controlled how they minister, to whom the minister and in what ministry they are allowed to operate in. Again, the guidance of the Holy Spirit is overrun by the authoritarian nature of church leadership. Leadership is supposed to mentor in Spirit and Truth, not take the place of God.

Six: The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and members: Ever heard of how people talk they are better than others, or that their pastor knows the truth, or that they are more special? Be careful for this is the elitist attitude. It is the case of us vs them and that one pastor is more special than another.

Sadly, church leadership promotes such ideas and concepts because if they are “more special” then more people will come to their church and tithe. If there is a spirit of control in a church, people are usually told their group is superior. If people choose to leave, they are shunned or branded as renegades. Sometimes, in extreme cases, people are even cursed if they leave. This cultic behaviour inflicts unimaginable emotional suffering and also divides families.

Seven: The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities. This has been discussed and this is so true in churches today. Those who are on the top of the food chain surround themselves with other confidants so that no one else really can get close to them. Such leadership is always protected – he or she simply cannot be rebuked or corrected. Accountability is also towards the confidants, who have also been bullied into blind obedience. Loyalty is demanded because of friendship and a common cause, which leaves little room for healthy accountability. Jesus was incredibly accessible and of course ultimately accountable to the Father.

Eight: The group's leadership induces guilt feelings in members to control them. As mentioned, teachings of spiritual covering, covenant and ex-communication serve as proof that people are brainwashed into thinking that if they leave the fold without permission from the spiritual leaders they will be condemned. Utter nonsense! Other methods include the fear of rejection, punishment, losing one's salvation, missing the rapture, and going to hell. Guilt, fear and intimidation are weapons used to maintain their loyalty and devotion to the group.

It might indeed take time for leaders to gain power over the new convert, but it will eventually happen. Various degrees of control can be experienced, from subtle manipulation to blatant ordering. Control is usually overwhelming and can cover most aspects of the followers' lives such as dress codes, activities, finances, time, possessions and relationships. For example, there are many legalistic churches where a person is not allowed to enter the service without the woman wearing a hat or the man wearing a tie/jacket!

It is known that in some churches that if someone fails to tithe in a church, he will be frowned upon and some extreme cases, be refused spiritual guidance or assistance by the leadership. This is blatant spiritual abuse!

There are also so many reports of pastors being allowed to get away with all kinds of strange, weird, and even immoral behaviour. This includes forcing congregants to eat grass, or beating congregants with a rod while there have also been reports of all kinds of sexual misconduct.

Such actions and behaviours have shockingly been allowed to continue within the church. Why? Because the church runs like a cult, where obedience to the pastor is beyond refuting and one simply has to blindly follow the spiritual leader no matter what. This is, however, mind-control and indoctrination at its worst.

To summarise then, a cult-like atmosphere exists within churches when there is a) little or no accountability b) spiritual elitism and c) an oppressive atmosphere.

Remember, Paul taught that church leaders should not be "violent" or "quarrelsome" but "self-controlled" and "gentle" (see 1 Timothy 3:2-3). He also instructed Timothy that the Lord's servant "must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone" (2 Timothy 2:24).

There are indeed several tell-tale signs of this cultic, autonomous attitude which can be found today, as then. Again, those who are authoritarian never find it necessary to read or regard the viewpoint of others. They reject the teaching gift of fellow-Christian contemporaries. They reject the insight and wisdom available from commentaries, and they ignore the lessons which can be learned from the history of the church.

The result is that they ignore the concept of the church as the body of Christ by making themselves independent of it.

Accountability as mentioned is limited and curtailed by forming an inner circle of confidants and friends. Yet for example, they shall listen to a prophet who speaks who is 'outside' such a circle of trust.

One of the dependable features of any cult is its distortion of the truth of the gospel, moving either in the direction of legalism (faith plus a system of rules to keep) or libertinism (no rules at all!). The cult of the Pharisee party which sought to mislead the saints in the church at Antioch tampered with the gospel by making salvation a matter of faith and works.

Consider then the following: Are you told not to question what is being taught because the leaders are honest and want the best for you so you must trust them?

Remember, in cults, questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged. How many times are people threatened that they will be excommunicated, or that the Lord will not bless them, or that they have no ministry outside the church? Remember, guilt and misinformation plays a key role in forcing people to obey, therefore to be manipulated.

At the heart of a cult-like mentality is an egocentric nature and narcissism.

Consider Reverend Moon who felt that Jesus failed in his mission to produce the "perfect children" when he was killed and that Moon himself was the Messiah appointed to finish the work and produce those children. His Unification Church will one day be the "universal (and only) church. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians that perished in a conflagration at their compound in Waco, Texas, believed himself to be a messiah (if not the Messiah), and that the history and future of his cult were written in the pages of Revelation. He controlled every move of his followers and was the only male allowed to impregnate his host of female followers.

Ego and a sense of self-importance are key characteristics that are common amongst such leaders. They also hold onto a sense of righteousness and their simplistic black and white mentality cause them to wage war against the agents of the devil; including outsiders.

As mentioned, sadly followers are indoctrinated with a persecution complex and a deep sense of paranoia towards the world. They will finally only trust and obey their one leader or organizational dictates.

As mentioned, many times the spiritual leader of such a cult, even in ministry, will profess to have some or other exclusive or divine knowledge. So the only way to truly understand or access such knowledge is by staying obedient to the 'prophet'.

The reality is that pastors of mainstream churches or independents can become cult leaders over time. That is why accountability is of utmost importance. Power corrupts, and power corrupts ultimately.

As mentioned, in cult-like churches true accountability is negated by choosing hand-picked sub-leaders based on their demonstration of loyalty to the ultimate leader rather than based on their leadership skills, spiritual acumen, and anointing and appointment by God. Thus, there is no real accountability, only a pretence of such.

Many times it is in contradiction to "1 Timothy 3: New King James Version: Qualifications of Overseers: 1 This is

a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, [c]not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not [d]covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a [e]novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

One can spot a cult-like church by the levels of control exercised, the levels of intimidation and the levels of "church discipline." Also, be on the lookout for having to make a definite and lasting covenant agreement (pledging your allegiance and financial support to the leadership and group).

Indeed, within such an environment everything fake, false or even demonic will never be truly addressed. For such dissention will be resisted and squashed. And thus, we find in the church that spiritualism, mysticism and unproven doctrines are on the rise, simply because of spiritual abuse being exerted.

Indeed, false doctrines will be allowed to continue and be upheld by church members because many times of intimidation, but also because of a replaced senses of loyalty and devotion (another sign of a cult-like ministry).

You will, however, at the same time find a lack of true personal spiritual growth and development, especially in terms of genuine faith and experiencing the abounding grace, forgiveness, goodness, blessings, kindness, and agape-love of God. This is because the leaders are leading people astray and away from God, just as in the days of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

At the end of the day, we must remember we are first and foremost submitted to God and not man. Jesus is the

head of the Church and not man. We are primarily led by the Holy Spirit, not man. Our instructions first and foremost come from God, not man. At the same time, we are part of the Body of Christ, and we need to be accountable, honest towards each other and be transparent. Again, when a man tells us to do something contrary to the Scriptures then should be treated with great caution.

Acts 5:29 (New King James Version) is the bedrock of countering spiritual abuse and being silenced through intimidation and brainwashing: “29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Our obedience is first to God, not man. If we follow man above God, then we commit idolatry.

And thus in cult-like churches and ministries, idolatry does thrive and so do rebellion, for man wants to take the place of God. Sounds like the ploy of the devil, right?

Indeed, there are just too many false doctrines in the Church and just too much “man” that has taken centre stage. Prophetic correction is already poured out, but so few are still willing to listen, for the true prophets are called judgemental, being critical and being doomsayers. God is calling His watchmen on the wall who will stand for His Truth and Kingdom, and not the truth or the kingdom of cult-like or hyper-authoritarian churches.

The Lord is calling those who fear Him, and not man. For now, here is a thought: all the cults throughout the world thrived because of a charismatic leader who refused to be approached, corrected, rebuked or reproofed. So beware - pride always comes before a fall.

We have stepped in the same trap like those in the Old Testament – ignoring God at our peril, yet God’s way shall be done, no matter our arguments, anger, or protestations.

Beware of intimidation

Intimidation in simply terms is the act of making someone else timid or fearful by real or implied threats.

Bullies for example use intimidation to force their victims to do what they want them to do.

Intimidation is something we need to guard against as it can produce an unhealthy fear that can control us. Paul encouraged his protégé Timothy to overcome the intimidation he felt in his position as a new pastor: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7, NLT).

The young are often intimidated by older, more experienced people, so Paul urged Timothy not to give way to that fear. Intimidation can silence the message God has given us, so when we give way to it, we are allowing fear to be god instead of the Lord.

One of the characteristics of the authoritarian church is intimidation, which is another term really for control.

Sadly, in hyper-authoritarian churches of control, intimidation, even in very subtle forms, do take place. And intimidation needs to be guarded against. After all, where there is a form of spiritual abuse and control, people will be told to act in a certain way, or believe certain things, or are not even allowed to speak out against things that concern them.

So often congregants will be reminded that they are under the "spiritual covering" of the leadership, thus they are not allowed to be speak out or even challenge the church governance. They are also told that as the clergy the leadership knows best, and thus one has to simply yield to whatever they teach and preach. Intimidation results from fear being instilled in congregants to what will happen if one breaks the covenant, which apparently happens when one speaks out or questions what is taught. This is merely bullying tactics used to oppress and silence the masses.

You will often find in such an environment that people are told that they are not allowed to question the pastor for then they are in rebellion. Even worse, some are told they will go to hell!

An example of intimidation is found in John 12:42. It reads: New King James Version: “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.” Some Jewish leaders in Jesus’ day let intimidation by the Pharisees keep them from following Him. The possibility of ridicule or persecution intimidated them into silence, even though they wanted to respond to the gospel.

In Luke 7:36–47 we have an example of someone who refused to be intimidated. A woman of low reputation entered a house filled with Pharisees and other male Jewish leaders, in order to approach Jesus. Kneeling down, she poured expensive perfume over Jesus’ feet and began to dry them with her hair in an expression of loving gratitude. She knew she was not welcome in the Pharisee’s home; she knew there would be protests and she would most likely be thrown from the house, but she would not be let intimidation bar her from worshiping the Lord.

Let us nothing wrong for example when we feel a certain level of intimidation when we meditate on the Lord. This is natural and called the “fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalm 111:10), and we are urged to develop it. God showed Himself to the Israelites in some frightening, intimidating ways to create this kind of healthy fear (Exodus 19:16; 20:18). Godly intimidation keeps us respectful toward the Lord and guards our hearts against nonchalance and irreverence (Psalm 22:28–29; Romans 14:11).

It is, however, when we use intimidation to gain control over another, when it is wrong. Nowhere in the Bible does it speak about one man having spiritual authority over another. Pastors cannot bully the ‘sheep’ into submitting out of blind obedience. A disciple’s loyalty

and devotion is to God and no man.

It will, however, be wise to follow the guidance and instructions of such a pastor if he truly follows in the ways of God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1 “imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” Paul never intimidated anyone to follow the true Gospel, he rather said imitate me! He could say so with confidence because he was a true follower of Christ.

A true follower of the Lord will have no need to intimidate anyone if he follows the Lord in spirit and truth. Then the Spirit shall guide, lead and convict. Thus, we are called not to intimidate but to imitate Christ so that others may imitate us! This is the basis of how discipleship works in order to fulfill the Great Commission.

We are after all called to make disciples and mentor them in love, in truth and in the Spirit of God. For if we intimidate someone to follow our path and our truth, then we are applying manipulation and spiritual abuse in the form of oppression. This is not Christlike but demonic.

The reality is that power intimidates, and those who've been granted power must use it to serve with humility (Matthew 20:26; Mark 10:43–44; Luke 22:26). Too many people in positions of power in the church use such authority to force people to follow their truth and their path, instead of being a servant just as Jesus was a servant for mankind.

We can intimidate others physically, mentally, and emotionally, using what we've been given to our own advantage. As mentioned, some church leaders practice a form of spiritual intimidation. Pastors and other leaders who demand submission to their authority, expect unquestioning loyalty, and enforce legalistic rules to control their congregations are abusing their position. This is simply wrong and a force of terrible abuse that leaves spiritual and emotional scars, trauma and heartache.

Church members should not fear punishment or humiliation for questioning church leadership. Pastors are not to be authoritarian figures, but servants: “Be shepherds

of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them, . . . eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2–3).

We are called to be bold as lions when on the side of righteousness (Proverbs 28:1). We should guard against undue intimidation by others, remembering that they are fallible human beings just like we are (Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 2:11; 23:9).

The psalmist countered intimidation with these words: "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Psalm 118:6; cf. Jeremiah 42:11).