

O P E N C H R I S T I A N P R E S S

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE AGE

Exposing Modern Deceptions, Counterfeit Christianity, and the Church's Captivity to the Spirit of the Age

PART III

COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIANITY AND THE CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

CHAPTER 13

False Shepherds, Spiritual Tyranny, and the Ensnaring of the Innocent

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Abstract

This chapter examines the corruption of delegated spiritual authority into personal domination. Building upon Chapter 12's analysis of commercialised ministry, celebrity systems, financial opacity, brand protection, and institutional self-preservation, it asks how a leader claiming to represent God can acquire such power over conscience that sincere and intelligent believers defend conduct they would recognise as coercive elsewhere. The chapter argues that spiritual authority becomes tyrannical when a stewardship received under Christ is converted into jurisdiction over the consciences, relationships, bodies, resources, movements, and destinies of other people. Through sustained exposition of [Jeremiah 23:1-4](#), [Ezekiel 34:1-16](#), [Matthew 7:15-23](#), [Matthew 23:1-36](#), [John 10:1-18](#), and [2 Corinthians 11:12-15](#), it develops a biblical theology of authority that is delegated, ministerial, accountable, scripturally bounded, and cruciform. It distinguishes firm pastoral leadership from spiritual abuse, church discipline from coercive control, confidentiality from secrecy, honour from idolatry, and forgiveness from automatic restoration to office. Historical, sociological, psychological, organisational, and safeguarding research is employed critically under Scripture to examine personality cults, prophetic intimidation, religious grooming, financial dependence, sexual exploitation, public humiliation, isolation, digital control, institutional betrayal, and the reasons followers may remain or defend abusive leaders. Particular attention is given to African Christian settings without reducing the problem to one continent or tradition. The chapter also presents the strongest defence of forceful leadership, affirms due process and protection against false accusation, and proposes a constructive programme of safeguarding, reporting, repentance, restitution, governance reform, and long-term care. It concludes with an urgent summons to protect Christ's flock, recover accountable shepherding, and remain ready for the appearing of the Chief Shepherd.

Keywords: spiritual abuse; false shepherds; coercive spiritual control; pastoral accountability; church safeguarding; institutional betrayal; rapture readiness

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When the Shepherd's Staff Becomes a Chain

A shepherd carries a staff because sheep need guidance, rescue, defence, and correction. The same staff can draw a wandering animal away from danger, lift one from a crevice, and stand between the flock and a predator. Its meaning depends upon whose hand holds it, which direction it moves, and whether it serves the life of the sheep.

A staff becomes a chain when guidance is converted into ownership. The shepherd no longer points toward safe pasture but ties the flock to himself. He decides where every sheep may walk, whom it may approach, what voice it may hear, and whether it may leave. He may still call the restraint protection. He may explain that wolves wait beyond the gate, that the sheep are too immature to discern, or that departure from his enclosure is departure from God. Yet the instrument once given for service has become a mechanism of possession.

The transformation may be gradual. A believer first seeks prayer, counsel, and instruction. These are ordinary Christian goods. The pastor listens, opens Scripture, and helps the person obey Christ. Trust grows. The leader is invited into questions of courtship, work, illness, family conflict, money, and vocation. Nothing is necessarily wrong. Wise shepherds accompany people through such matters without pretending to own the decisions.

Then the centre shifts. Advice begins to sound like revelation. Disagreement becomes dishonour. A private concern is reported as rebellion. The believer learns that decisions must be “confirmed” by the leader, that blessing remains inside a spiritual covering, and that questioning a command may expose the family to curses, sickness, poverty, marital failure, or demonic attack. The pastor’s interpretation of God becomes more immediate than Scripture. The leader’s approval becomes more emotionally powerful than conscience. Christ is confessed as Lord while another voice acquires practical jurisdiction.

Chapter 12 examined the commercial and celebrity structures that can make such domination difficult to challenge. A leader who controls the brand, revenue, platform, appointments, property, family succession, and public narrative possesses more than influence. He may control the institution through which complaints must travel and the community on which complainants depend. When that institutional power is joined to claims of anointing, prophecy, spiritual fatherhood, healing, deliverance, or exclusive access to God’s will, the result can become a religious enclosure whose walls are built inside the conscience.

The present chapter therefore moves from the public machinery of ministry to the intimate captivity of the person. Its central question is not merely how churches become commercially captive. It is how a person claiming to represent God acquires such power that sincere, educated, prayerful, and morally serious believers defend behaviour they would recognise as controlling, exploitative, or abusive in another setting.

The answer requires more than the language of scandal. It requires a doctrine of authority, a theology of conscience, an account of vulnerability, a sociology of charismatic power, a psychology of dependency, an ethic of evidence, a practice of safeguarding, and a church willing to repent. Above all, it requires the return of every shepherd, congregation, board, family, donor, and institution beneath Jesus Christ, the Shepherd who owns the flock because He purchased it with His blood.

The governing claim is severe but necessary: spiritual authority becomes tyrannical when a leader converts a stewardship received under Christ into personal jurisdiction over the consciences, relationships, bodies, resources, decisions, and destinies of other people. False shepherds present personal loyalty as loyalty to God, questioning as rebellion, disclosure as betrayal, dependence as discipleship, fear as reverence, exploitation as sacrifice, and institutional protection as defence of the gospel. Such leadership does not merely misuse a good office. It counterfeits the Chief Shepherd, wounds Christ’s flock, obscures the gospel, and ensnares vulnerable people through sacred language.

This argument must immediately be protected from its opposite distortion. Pastoral authority is real. Churches require elders, teachers, correction, discipline, doctrinal boundaries, and ordered life. A believer’s preference is not sovereign. An unpopular sermon is not abuse because it exposes sin. A refusal to endorse an unbiblical relationship is not coercive control. A pastor who warns against destructive conduct is not tyrannical merely because the warning causes discomfort. The age described in earlier chapters often treats every limit as violence and every demand for obedience as oppression. The church must not baptise expressive individualism by making personal autonomy the final judge of spiritual care.

Yet the misuse of the term abuse does not make abuse imaginary. Scripture itself speaks with terrifying clarity about shepherds who feed themselves, scatter sheep, bind heavy burdens, love first place, devour houses, disguise predation, and turn divine office into private advantage. The answer to authoritarianism is not leaderless Christianity. It is authority returned to its Owner.

Authority Beneath the Chief Shepherd

Christian authority begins with a confession that excludes every rival: Jesus Christ is Lord. He is not first among religious managers. He is the eternal Son through whom all things were made, the incarnate Word, the crucified and risen Saviour, the Head of the church, and the coming Judge. No pastor, prophet, apostle, bishop, founder, teacher, spiritual father, counsellor, deliverance minister, or prayer specialist shares His mediatorial office.

The distinction is not ceremonial. It determines the moral shape of ministry. In [John 10:1-18](#), Jesus contrasts the shepherd, the stranger, the thief, the robber, and the hired hand. The true shepherd enters rightly, knows the sheep, calls them, leads rather than drives them toward his private advantage, and places his life between them and danger. Jesus then identifies Himself as both the gate and the good shepherd. The sheep enter salvation through Him. They recognise His voice. He lays down His life for them willingly.

Every human shepherd therefore serves within a relationship that already exists. The believer does not belong to the pastor and then, through the pastor, to Christ. The believer belongs to Christ, and the pastor serves that prior belonging. The pastor's authority is derivative, bounded, and accountable. It cannot be enlarged by personal charisma, institutional success, family lineage, extraordinary testimony, wealth, miracles, titles, or crowds.

Jesus directly rejects the governing model of the nations. In [Mark 10:42-45](#), rulers “lord it over” their subjects and powerful people exercise authority over them, but “it is not so among you.” Greatness is redefined as service, and first place as slavery to all. The Son of Man Himself did not come to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. Christian leadership is therefore not secular domination with Bible verses attached. Its authority is cruciform. It spends itself for the good of those entrusted to it.

Peter applies the same pattern to elders in [1 Peter 5:1-5](#). They must shepherd God's flock, not under compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, and not by lording it over those entrusted to them but by being examples. The phrase “those entrusted” is decisive. A trust is not ownership. The flock remains God's. The elder will receive the crown of glory when the Chief Shepherd appears, which means the present leader remains under future inspection.

Paul gives the same account in [Acts 20:17-35](#). The Ephesian elders must watch themselves before watching the flock. The Holy Spirit has appointed them as overseers to shepherd “the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.” Wolves will arise from outside, and men will arise from among the elders speaking twisted things to draw disciples after themselves. The danger is not only false doctrine in abstract form. It is the redirection of discipleship. Instead of helping people follow Christ, the false teacher draws them after himself.

This is why biblical qualification emphasises character before spectacle. An overseer must be above reproach, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a bully, not quarrelsome, not greedy, and well regarded by outsiders ([1 Timothy 3:1-7](#)). Titus requires the elder to be blameless, not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not greedy, but self-controlled, righteous, holy, and disciplined, holding firmly to the trustworthy message so that he can encourage with sound teaching and refute contradiction ([Titus 1:5-9](#)).

A leader may possess unusual gifts and remain unqualified. A person may preach with power, attract a crowd, recount supernatural experiences, produce moving testimonies, and build an impressive institution while lacking the moral character Scripture requires. The New Testament does not instruct the church to balance abuse against anointing, as though spiritual usefulness purchases exemptions from holiness. Gifts never become payment for character.

The author's earlier work has repeatedly defended this centre of gravity. Sangwa (2026a) argues that a true servant strengthens dependence upon Christ rather than making himself spiritually necessary. His recent treatment of apostolic authority similarly insists that every contemporary claim to revelation, strategy, or spiritual rank must bow beneath the apostolic Word, and that modern apostolic language can create a spiritual aristocracy when ordinary believers are trained to obey personalities rather than Scripture (Sangwa, 2026b). This chapter extends those arguments from doctrinal testing into the structures of domination.

Pastoral authority is therefore delegated rather than possessed, ministerial rather than sovereign, accountable rather than immune, bounded by Scripture rather than private revelation, and ordered toward edification rather than personal enlargement. It is recognised through character, doctrine, service, fruit, and accountable calling, not through the leader's ability to make himself appear indispensable.

What Spiritual Abuse Is, and What It Is Not

Precision protects both the wounded and the innocent. An undefined accusation can be stretched until every exercise of authority becomes suspicious. A narrow definition can be drawn so tightly that patterns of domination remain unnamed. The church needs language disciplined by evidence and Scripture.

Spiritual abuse is the misuse of religious authority, sacred texts, spiritual claims, institutional structures, or alleged access to God in order to control, exploit, silence, terrorise, or violate another person. The distinctively spiritual element lies not only in the location of the abuse but in the use of God, salvation, judgment, blessing, Scripture, calling, church belonging, or eternal destiny as instruments of power. Contemporary safeguarding guidance often describes it as a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context, while warning that holding a firm theological position is not itself abuse (Church of England, n.d.-a; Methodist Church, n.d.).

Spiritual tyranny is the wider system in which a leader or leadership group claims practical sovereignty over conscience and uses sacred legitimacy to suppress accountability. Abuse may occur in one encounter. Tyranny organises the environment. It establishes who may speak, which facts are admissible, whose suffering matters, how loyalty is measured, and what price dissent will carry.

Coercive control is a patterned restriction of another person's agency through intimidation, surveillance, isolation, dependency, punishment, manipulation, or credible threat. The pattern matters. A single disagreement, a boundary, or an unwelcome decision is not by itself coercive control. The term describes an accumulating architecture in which choices remain formally available but become spiritually, socially, economically, or psychologically dangerous.

Religious grooming is the gradual use of trust, sacred status, exceptional attention, private access, secrecy, escalating demands, and spiritualised obligation to prepare a person or community for exploitation. Grooming does not always begin with obvious hostility. It may begin with affirmation: “You are unusually gifted,” “God has shown me your destiny,” “You are like a son or daughter to me,” or “Others will not understand what God is doing between us.” The person is made to feel specially seen before being trained to surrender ordinary protections.

A personality cult is not the same as lawful respect for a faithful leader. Scripture commands honour for those who labour well. A personality cult arises when the community is organised around the leader's exceptional identity, unquestionable interpretations, curated biography, family, suffering, claimed revelations, and personal approval. The leader becomes the practical centre through whom God, truth, opportunity, and belonging are distributed.

Institutional betrayal occurs when an organisation on which people depend fails to prevent wrongdoing or responds to disclosure in ways that deepen harm, such as denial, concealment, retaliation, conflicted investigation, victim-blaming, destruction of evidence, transfer of offenders, or protection of reputation over people (Smith & Freyd, 2014). The betrayal is not merely administrative. In a church, the institution claims to represent truth, holiness, mercy, and the body of Christ. When it sacrifices the wounded to preserve itself, it violates the very moral world that made trust possible.

Trauma is another term requiring restraint. Not every distressing church conflict produces a clinical trauma disorder. Christians should not diagnose people casually. Yet research on abuse by religious authorities documents spiritual, emotional, psychological, relational, and physical consequences, including fear, shame, loss of agency, distrust, disrupted religious practice, alienation from God, and damage to identity (Durkin et al., 2025; McGraw et al., 2019; Perry, 2024). These harms can be intensified because the person who violates trust is perceived as God's representative and because the institution that should provide refuge may defend the offender.

A trauma bond is sometimes used to describe strong attachment formed through alternating fear, reward, exclusion, reconciliation, threat, and relief. The expression can illuminate why an abused person returns or defends the leader, but it must not become a universal diagnosis. Human loyalty is complex. People remain for family, theology, gratitude, uncertainty, livelihood, hope, love, fear, lack of alternatives, or a sincere conviction that departure would be wrong.

Safeguarding names the policies, practices, responsibilities, and culture by which a church prevents harm, recognises risk, receives disclosures, protects children and adults, responds lawfully, preserves evidence, ensures accountability, and supports those affected. It is not a secular intrusion into ministry. Properly ordered, it is one practical expression of shepherding. A church that prays for protection while refusing basic protective structures contradicts its prayer.

Several distinctions must govern the chapter. Shepherding is not ownership. Obedience is not servility. Submission is not the surrender of conscience. Correction is not humiliation. Discipline is not coercion. Honour is not idolatry. Spiritual fatherhood is not personal possession. Confidentiality is not secrecy. Loyalty is not complicity. Unity is not enforced silence. Forgiveness is not concealment. Reconciliation is not the automatic restoration of trust. Restoration to fellowship is not restoration to office. Sacrifice is not exploitation. Persecution for righteousness is not the ordinary consequence of misconduct.

These distinctions preserve the church from two opposite errors. The first is authoritarianism, which calls domination biblical authority. The second is autonomous individualism, which calls every unwanted limit abuse. Both enthrone the self, one in the leader and the other in the follower. The biblical alternative places both beneath Christ.

From Sacred Office to Unquestionable Personality

Spiritual tyranny is not a modern invention, though modern media and organisational systems can enlarge its reach. Its genealogy begins wherever a human steward confuses delegated office with personal possession.

The Old Testament repeatedly places religious and political leaders under divine judgment. Israel's kings were not autonomous monarchs. They remained covenant servants. Priests did not own the sanctuary. Prophets did not manufacture revelation. When leaders seized what belonged to God or used office to consume the people, the Lord did not protect them from examination merely because they were anointed.

[Jeremiah 23:1-4](#) opens with a woe against shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of God's pasture. The charge concerns more than ineffective administration. Those entrusted to gather have dispersed. Those called to care have driven away. The Lord declares that He will attend to them for their evil acts and personally gather the remnant. Divine judgment and divine rescue belong together. God opposes false shepherds because the sheep remain His.

[Ezekiel 34:1-16](#) offers the most sustained prophetic indictment. Israel's shepherds feed themselves rather than the flock. They consume milk, wear wool, and slaughter the fat sheep, but they do not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bandage the injured, bring back the strays, or seek the lost. They rule "with violence and cruelty." The sheep scatter and become food for wild animals. God therefore stands against the shepherds, removes the flock from their mouths, and promises to search, rescue, gather, feed, bandage, and strengthen His sheep Himself.

The passage reveals the anatomy of abusive leadership. Exploitation is not only what the shepherd actively does to the sheep. It is also what he refuses to do while consuming the benefits of office. Neglect, failure to protect, refusal to pursue the wounded, and indifference to scattering are moral acts. A ministry may contain no recorded command to abuse and still create conditions in which vulnerable people remain undefended while leaders are fed.

The prophets also expose the use of divine speech as an instrument of power. False prophets announce peace where there is no peace, speak visions from their own minds, and strengthen evildoers so that no one turns from wickedness ([Jeremiah 23:9-32](#)). The abuse of spiritual authority therefore includes both harsh domination and flattering permission. Some leaders control through terror; others control by telling powerful people what protects their interests.

Jesus' conflict with the scribes and Pharisees in [Matthew 23:1-36](#) continues this prophetic tradition. He recognises their teaching position yet condemns the contradiction between speech and conduct. They tie up heavy loads and put them on people's shoulders while refusing to lift a finger. They perform works to be seen, enlarge religious symbols, love places of honour, seek public greetings, and desire titles that establish rank. They shut the kingdom in people's faces, travel to make converts, manipulate oaths, neglect justice, mercy, and faithfulness, clean the outside while remaining full of greed and self-indulgence, and devour widows' houses under cover of long prayers.

Jesus' condemnation is not anti-authority. It is authority speaking against counterfeit authority. He forbids the conversion of religious title into a hierarchy that eclipses the Father and Messiah. "You have one Teacher," "one Father," and "one Instructor" do not abolish all human teaching or ordinary fatherhood. They forbid the spiritual absolutising of human rank. The greatest must become servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled.

[Matthew 7:15-23](#) warns that false prophets come in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves. They are recognised by fruit. The image is exact. The disguise is not incidental. Predation requires resemblance to safety. A wolf outside the flock provokes flight. A wolf wearing the visual language of belonging can approach without resistance.

The passage also dismantles the assumption that extraordinary ministry proves divine approval. Some will appeal to prophecy, exorcism, and miracles performed in Jesus' name, yet He will declare that He never knew them. The issue is not whether every supernatural claim is false. The issue is that spectacular works cannot replace obedience, relationship with Christ, and the fruit of righteousness. Spiritual performance may coexist with lawlessness.

Paul gives the apostolic counterpart in [2 Corinthians 11:12-15](#). False apostles are deceitful workers disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. The deception is unsurprising because Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. The church must therefore refuse a childish binary in which evil always appears ugly and truth always arrives without charisma. Religious deception often presents itself as unusual holiness, sacrifice, spiritual depth, revelation, or power.

The same pattern appears in [3 John 9-11](#). Diotrephes loves to have first place, refuses apostolic authority, spreads malicious words, withholds hospitality, stops those who wish to receive faithful workers, and expels them from the church. His domination is sustained by control of access, narrative, and membership. He does not merely hold a wrong opinion. He makes his own primacy the organising principle of the community.

These biblical portraits establish a diagnostic pattern without creating an infallible checklist. A forceful personality is not necessarily a wolf. A leader may be reserved, wounded, socially awkward, administratively strong, or publicly successful without being abusive. Nor does every failure reveal deliberate predation. Pastors sin, misunderstand, lose patience, make poor decisions, and require correction. The difference lies in pattern, fruit, response to truth, use of power, and willingness to submit to accountability.

Church history then shows how the biblical danger can be institutionalised. As Christianity moved from persecuted minority to socially established religion, clerical offices acquired legal, sacramental, educational, and political power. The development was not uniformly corrupt. Institutions preserved Scripture, trained ministers, cared for the poor, resisted heresy, and sustained worship across generations. Yet sacred office could also acquire practical immunity. Where access to grace, absolution, education, social legitimacy, or burial appeared concentrated in clerical hands, spiritual dependence could deepen.

The Reformation challenged several forms of ecclesial monopoly by recovering justification by faith, the priesthood of believers, vernacular Scripture, and the accountability of church tradition to the Word. Yet Protestant communities did not escape domination. State churches could enforce conformity. Independent founders could create private kingdoms. Revivalists could claim exceptional authority through conversions and manifestations. Mission structures could combine spiritual leadership with colonial, educational, financial, and cultural power. Charismatic communities could treat gifts as evidence of rank. Non-charismatic communities could make doctrinal expertise or institutional office equally immune from challenge.

Modernity added new mechanisms. Weber's (1978) account of charismatic authority helps explain how a leader's perceived extraordinary qualities can produce personal loyalty distinct from ordinary rules. Followers obey not merely an office but a person believed to carry unique calling, revelation, courage, power, or destiny. Charisma can serve faithful mission, particularly in times of crisis. It becomes dangerous when personal authority resists routinisation into accountable structures or when the structures created around the leader merely preserve his primacy.

Mass broadcasting, conference circuits, publishing, and now digital platforms expand this dynamic beyond local pastoral knowledge. A leader can become spiritually intimate to millions who are unknown to him. Repeated exposure creates familiarity. Curated testimony creates credibility. Gatekeepers control access. Algorithms reward certainty, drama, conflict, and extraordinary claims. The celebrity system examined in Chapter 12 can therefore become the outer shell of spiritual tyranny. Visibility supplies authority; authority supplies access; access supplies dependency; dependency protects the platform.

The genealogy is not a conspiracy. No hidden committee designed every authoritarian church. Different traditions, cultures, and personalities arrive at similar patterns through different routes. The common movement is the relocation of final spiritual jurisdiction from Christ and Scripture to a leader or inner circle that cannot be meaningfully corrected.

The Manufacture of an Unquestionable Leader

Unquestionable authority is usually built before it is enforced. A congregation learns how to see the leader. Stories, titles, rituals, testimonies, architecture, language, and access all contribute to the construction.

Exceptional titles may serve legitimate description, but they can also establish distance. "Apostle," "prophet," "archbishop," "general overseer," "oracle," "major prophet," "spiritual father," or "set man" may be used to imply a rank whose judgments cannot be evaluated by ordinary believers. The problem is not the syllables. It is the jurisdiction attached to them. A title becomes tyrannical when it means that the bearer receives a different standard of evidence, morality, correction, or financial accountability.

The leader's biography may become sacred history. Childhood dreams, miraculous survivals, prophetic encounters, dramatic call narratives, persecution stories, and testimonies of sacrifice are repeated until the community interprets criticism through them. If the leader was uniquely chosen, then opposition appears to oppose God's choice. If he suffered to build the ministry, then accountability appears ungrateful. If he carries a national or generational mandate, ordinary governance appears too small for his calling.

Gatekeepers then manage proximity. The leader is surrounded by assistants, armour-bearers, protocol teams, security personnel, family members, and senior disciples whose status depends upon access. Restricted proximity can be necessary for safety and workload. It becomes spiritually formative when nearness is treated as anointing, when gifts purchase access, or when those closest to the leader become interpreters of his will.

Public honour can likewise move from gratitude to liturgy. Special seating, prolonged introductions, compulsory standing, repeated applause, birthday offerings, luxury gifts, titles recited before every mention, and testimonies centred upon contact with the leader can teach the congregation where glory is expected to gather. No single act proves idolatry. The pattern reveals what the community has learned to love.

Spiritual-father language requires particular care. Paul could describe himself as a father through the gospel ([1 Corinthians 4:14-17](#)), and faithful mentors may exercise deep formative care. A spiritual parent serves another person's maturity in Christ. The relationship becomes corrupt when fatherhood means permanent hierarchy, financial obligation, control of marriage and vocation, inherited access to ministry, or the inability of an adult believer to disagree without being labelled rebellious.

Human parenthood itself is accountable to God and ordered toward maturity. A father does not remain faithful by preventing an adult child from becoming responsible. Spiritual fatherhood that creates perpetual infancy contradicts its name.

Claims of exclusive access to God complete the structure. The leader is said to hear what others cannot hear, see what others cannot see, carry a grace others must receive, possess a covering others cannot leave, or hold keys to destinies that God will not release independently. The believer's relationship with Christ is then functionally mediated through the leader.

Sangwa's warning about prayer specialists identifies this substitution precisely: mutual intercession is biblical, but the danger begins when believers are trained to think God is distant unless a special person intervenes, confirms, covers, or breaks something over them (Sangwa, 2026a). The same dynamic can occur through prophecy, counselling, deliverance, or ordination. The human servant becomes necessary in a way the New Testament reserves for Christ.

Congregations participate in this manufacture. Some followers want a leader who will remove the burden of discernment. They desire certainty without patient study, direction without responsibility, protection without mature faith, and blessing without the ordinary risks of obedience. The leader promises to hear God for them. In return, they surrender judgment and later defend the system because their own hopes are invested in it.

Donors, publishers, conference organisers, politicians, theological institutions, and media workers may strengthen the immunity. Invitations appear to verify character. Book sales appear to verify doctrine. Political access appears to verify national calling. Honorary degrees appear to verify scholarship. Crowds appear to verify fruit. Repetition creates legitimacy even where no one has examined the private life, governance, finances, or treatment of the vulnerable.

The unquestionable leader is therefore rarely self-made. He is co-produced by appetite, admiration, institutional interest, fear, and religious imagination. This does not reduce his responsibility. It expands the circle of repentance.

The Theology of Fear

Spiritual tyranny does not always require physical force. It can govern through threatened meaning. A person remains outwardly free while believing that departure will expose a child to death, a marriage to collapse, a business to ruin, or a soul to demonic attack.

Threats may be explicit: "You will die if you leave," "Your family will suffer," "God will remove your covering," "Anyone who questions this ministry is cursed," or "Your illness followed dishonour." They may also be implied through selected testimonies. Stories circulate of former members who became poor, sick, divorced, mentally unstable, or dead. Ordinary suffering is interpreted as divine confirmation that the leader was right.

The method creates a closed system. If the follower prospers, the ministry is proved. If the follower suffers, rebellion is proved. No possible outcome can disconfirm the leader. Theology has been converted into an unfalsifiable instrument of control.

The concept of spiritual covering is often used in this way. Scripture teaches mutual belonging, pastoral care, authority, accountability, and protection in the church. It does not teach that a particular leader functions as a metaphysical roof without which a believer loses access to divine protection. Christ is the Head. The believer is sealed by the Holy Spirit. The church is a body of mutual dependence, not a pyramid in which grace flows from the personality at the top.

Prophetic surveillance deepens fear. A leader may claim to know what members say in private, who doubts him, which family is considering departure, or what hidden act produced a present misfortune. Some information may come through ordinary observation, assistants, social media, pastoral records, or gossip. It may then be presented as supernatural revelation. The effect is the same even when the claim cannot be verified: the believer feels watched by a leader whose knowledge appears to merge with God's.

Biblical warnings about judgment must not be confused with such intimidation. Prophets truly announced consequences for covenant rebellion. Pastors must warn that sin destroys and that final judgment is real. The distinction concerns object and purpose. Biblical warning directs the conscience to God and calls for repentance from actual sin. Manipulative prediction directs the conscience to the leader and calls for personal submission. One says, “Obey God.” The other means, “Obey me or God will punish you.”

Fear also operates through salvation. Members may be told that leaving this congregation means leaving the true church, forfeiting election, rejecting the Holy Spirit, or becoming apostate. A ministry’s institutional boundary is made identical to the boundary of Christ’s kingdom. The leader becomes gatekeeper to eternal life.

This is a functional denial of the gospel. There is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)). The church proclaims Him, disciplines in His name, and guards His teaching, but no local leader becomes the door of the sheep. Jesus is the door.

The last-hour context makes such fear more potent. Prophetic excitement, geopolitical instability, economic anxiety, disease, war, and rumours of final events can make believers seek certainty in a powerful personality. A leader may present himself as the watchman whose instructions alone will keep followers safe. Yet rapture readiness cannot be outsourced. No prophet stores oil for another person’s lamp. No spiritual father can repent on behalf of a follower. The nearness of Christ should free believers from human bondage, not intensify it.

When Scripture Is Taken Hostage

Abusive authority rarely announces itself as rebellion against the Bible. It more often quotes the Bible selectively, detaches words from context, and turns texts given for the protection of God’s people into shields for leaders.

“Do not touch my anointed ones”

[Psalm 105:15](#) is frequently used as though it prohibited questioning, investigating, correcting, or reporting a minister. The psalm recounts God’s covenant faithfulness to the patriarchs while they were few, vulnerable, and moving among nations. Kings were warned not to harm them. The text concerns God’s protection of His covenant servants from violent oppression. It does not create a clerical class immune from biblical testing.

The anointed kings of Israel were themselves corrected. Nathan confronted David’s adultery and murder ([2 Samuel 12:1-14](#)). Elijah confronted Ahab. John the Baptist confronted Herod. Paul confronted Peter publicly when Peter’s conduct contradicted the gospel ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)). Scripture cannot mean that anointing abolishes accountability when the same Scripture repeatedly places anointed people under correction.

David and Saul

David’s refusal to kill Saul in [1 Samuel 24](#) and [1 Samuel 26](#) is also misused. David refused private vengeance and would not seize the throne through murder. Yet he named Saul’s conduct, fled danger, gathered evidence, appealed before witnesses, and refused to remain under lethal control. He honoured God’s jurisdiction over Saul without pretending Saul was safe.

The lesson is not that victims must stay near dangerous leaders until God intervenes. It is that justice must not become personal vengeance. Safety, truthful speech, lawful reporting, and distance are compatible with refusing retaliation.

“Obey your leaders”

[Hebrews 13:17](#) commands believers to obey leaders and submit because those leaders keep watch over souls as those who will give account. The verse affirms real authority. It also defines its purpose and limit. Leaders watch over souls; they do not possess them. They will give account; they are not immune. The command appears in a letter that repeatedly fixes faith upon Christ, the great high priest and unchanging Lord.

Obedience cannot require sin. The apostles refused authorities who commanded disobedience to God ([Acts 5:29](#)). A leader who commands deception, concealment, sexual conduct, financial exploitation, unlawful action, or violation of conscience has exceeded biblical authority. Submission to God may require refusal.

Accusations against elders

[1 Timothy 5:19-21](#) protects elders from unsupported accusation by requiring two or three witnesses. It then commands public rebuke of those who persist in sin and solemnly forbids partiality. The passage therefore protects both the elder and the church. It is not a mechanism for refusing every complaint that begins with one person’s testimony.

A complainant’s report may require safeguarding action, preservation of evidence, independent inquiry, and efforts to identify corroboration. The witness requirement concerns the establishment of a matter, not permission to ignore a disclosure. Deuteronomic law itself required careful investigation ([Deuteronomy 19:15-21](#)).

Honour and rebuke

[1 Timothy 5:1](#) tells Timothy not to rebuke an older man harshly but to exhort him as a father. It governs manner, not immunity. The same chapter orders the rebuke of sinning elders. Respectful speech and serious accountability belong together.

Rebellion and divination

[1 Samuel 15:23](#) declares rebellion to be like divination in the context of Saul's disobedience to God's explicit command. Samuel speaks against the king. The verse was not given to Saul so he could call Samuel rebellious. Its authoritarian misuse reverses the narrative: the disobedient ruler borrows the prophet's words to silence prophetic correction.

"Do not judge"

[Matthew 7:1-20](#) condemns hypocritical judgment while commanding discernment. The hearer must remove the plank, recognise dogs and pigs in the immediate context, enter the narrow gate, and beware false prophets known by fruit. Jesus does not abolish moral evaluation. He purifies it from hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

Matthew 18 and private confrontation

[Matthew 18:15-17](#) provides a process for ordinary sin between believers. It is not a universal procedure requiring a child, vulnerable adult, counsellor, employee, or alleged victim to confront a suspected abuser privately before seeking protection. It does not cancel safeguarding duties, civil law, evidence preservation, or the church's responsibility to protect the vulnerable.

Private confrontation may be unsafe, may enable intimidation, and may alert an alleged offender to destroy evidence. Churches must distinguish ordinary interpersonal conflict from alleged crime, abuse, exploitation, and serious misconduct.

First Corinthians 6 and civil authorities

[1 Corinthians 6:1-8](#) rebukes believers who take ordinary disputes before pagan courts rather than seeking wise judgment in the church. It does not create a private religious jurisdiction for crimes or safeguarding concerns. Paul himself appealed to Roman law and civil rights when appropriate. [Romans 13:1-7](#) recognises governing authority as a servant appointed to restrain wrongdoing.

Civil institutions are fallible and may act unjustly. Their fallibility does not authorise church leaders to conceal suspected crimes. Church discipline addresses communion, doctrine, repentance, and office. It cannot imprison, investigate with the powers of the state, issue medical care, or replace lawful processes.

Scripture must therefore be released from captivity. The Bible does not protect leaders from the Word's judgment. It protects the church by placing leaders beneath it.

When Counsel Becomes Control

Pastoral care necessarily enters ordinary life. Scripture speaks to marriage, work, money, sexuality, parenting, suffering, health, justice, and relationships. A pastor who refuses every practical question would abandon part of his calling. The decisive issue is whether counsel serves responsible obedience to God or converts the counsellor into an extension of the leader's will.

Wise counsel explains biblical principles, listens to facts, acknowledges uncertainty, distinguishes command from judgment, encourages appropriate expertise, and leaves room for the believer to act before God. Controlling counsel presents preference as revelation, demands disclosure beyond necessity, punishes disagreement, and predicts spiritual harm if the advice is not followed.

Courtship provides a common example. A church may rightly teach biblical marriage, warn against unequal yoking, address sexual immorality, and help couples examine character. Control begins when a leader selects spouses, prohibits marriage for personal reasons, demands private information unrelated to qualification, or claims that no marriage is valid without his prophetic approval. Consent becomes fragile where refusal threatens expulsion, loss of ministry, family disgrace, or curses.

The same pattern appears in divorce and reconciliation. Churches should defend covenant, confront abandonment and adultery, pursue repentance, and resist a culture of disposable marriage. They must also protect people from violence, coercion, and serious harm. A pastor who orders a person back into danger without competent assessment may preserve the appearance of marriage while abandoning the person within it. Spiritual authority does not require the vulnerable to prove faith by remaining accessible to harm.

Medical decisions require similar humility. Pastors may pray, encourage, visit, and help believers consider moral questions. They are not ordinarily physicians. Telling a member to stop medication, reject surgery, avoid mental health care, or refuse evidence-based treatment on the basis of an untested revelation can place life at risk. Faith is not proved by contempt for providential means. Chapter 4 already distinguished trust in God from the rejection of medicine.

Leaders may also attempt to govern education, employment, relocation, business contracts, political voting, inheritance, clothing, diet, fasting, or friendships. Some counsel may be wise. The moral line is crossed when the leader claims divine certainty where Scripture has not spoken, benefits materially from the decision, or uses spiritual punishment to secure compliance.

Control of movement and relationships is especially significant. Members may be told not to visit family, consult outside pastors, read independent sources, seek legal advice, or speak with former members. The stated purpose is protection from "contamination" or "rebellious voices." The practical effect is informational enclosure. The leader's interpretation becomes difficult to test because alternative witnesses have been excluded.

A healthy pastor does not fear mature believers. He teaches them to search Scripture, seek wisdom, receive counsel, recognise limits, and answer to God. He may strongly disagree with a decision while refusing to impersonate the Holy Spirit.

The Financial Net

Chapters 11 and 12 examined prosperity doctrine and commercialised ministry. Spiritual tyranny adds a more personal dimension: money becomes a cord tying the believer to the leader.

The cord may be created through compulsory gifts. Members are told that honour requires money, that a father's grace is accessed through offerings, or that a leader's birthday, travel, vehicle, house, clothing, or medical costs must be financed as proof of loyalty. Voluntary generosity is converted into a loyalty tax.

First-fruits teaching may be used to demand a person's first salary, first profit, annual income, or unexpected payment. Christians may freely give sacrificially. Scripture does not authorise a leader to identify himself as the necessary recipient of a payment whose refusal invites divine loss.

Financial disclosure is often asymmetrical. Members must report income, debt, assets, business opportunities, and giving. The leader's finances remain private. A person who asks for audited accounts is accused of carnality. Such asymmetry reveals that "accountability" means visibility below and secrecy above.

Pressure to borrow, sell property, surrender wages, transfer vehicles, or give money needed for food, rent, medicine, or school fees can be presented as radical faith. Testimonies of miraculous return are publicised; stories of loss remain hidden. The leader's promise may never be written, leaving the giver without recourse.

Unpaid labour can also become ensnaring. Churches depend upon volunteers, and voluntary service can be beautiful. Exploitation begins when labour is demanded without limit, refusal is punished spiritually, workers are deprived of rest, or professional skill is appropriated while leaders live from the value produced. "Sacrifice" becomes the word by which those with power consume the time of those without it.

Dependency can be structural. The ministry may provide housing, employment, school fees, immigration sponsorship, business contracts, health assistance, or credentials. These goods may express genuine care. They also create leverage. A member who questions the leader may risk home, livelihood, legal status, education, community, and spiritual identity at once.

Economic dependence complicates consent. A person may technically agree while understanding that refusal will produce severe consequences. This does not erase all agency, but it requires moral seriousness. Leaders who hold several dimensions of another person's life must increase safeguards, not exploit the dependence.

The New Testament model is the opposite. Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he coveted no one's silver, gold, or clothing and worked to support the weak ([Acts 20:33-35](#)). Ministerial support is lawful, but shepherds must never become predators whose appetite determines the flock's sacrifice.

Grooming in Sacred Space

Sexual exploitation by spiritual leaders is especially destructive because it can recruit theology into the violation. The body is harmed, but so are prayer, Scripture, trust, confession, church, and the person's image of God.

The subject must be handled without voyeurism and without premature verdicts. Not every allegation is true. Not every inappropriate interaction is identical in severity. Not every pastoral relationship involves grooming. Yet the church must abandon the fiction that adult status automatically removes power imbalance.

A pastor, counsellor, prophet, bishop, teacher, or ministry founder may possess spiritual, social, financial, vocational, and emotional authority over a congregant. The person may have disclosed trauma, marital pain, sexual history, guilt, illness, or fear. The leader may be believed to speak for God. Sexual contact within such a relationship cannot be evaluated as though two strangers met with equal power.

Recent research on adult clergy sexual exploitation identifies recurring patterns of grooming, compliance, entrapment, coercive control, institutional complicity, and spiritual injury (Simpson, 2025, 2026; Simpson & Death, 2026). A systematic scoping review likewise found that religious practices and position may be manipulated to enable grooming, abuse, and continuing control, with effects upon identity, prayer, trust, community, and the survivor's relationship with God (Durkin et al., 2025).

Grooming often begins with exceptional attention. The leader identifies spiritual potential, offers private access, communicates frequently, creates secrecy, and reframes boundaries as evidence of special trust. The person may be told that ordinary people will misunderstand the relationship. Gradual violations then appear as spiritual intimacy rather than danger.

Sexual misconduct may be disguised as counselling, deliverance, impartation, spiritual cleansing, prophetic instruction, fertility intervention, private discipleship, submission, or preparation for ministry. The religious explanation does not reduce the violation. It can increase it because resistance appears to resist God.

In some settings, physical touch is normal in prayer. Laying on of hands is biblical. Pastoral affection can be appropriate. The existence of legitimate touch makes boundaries more important, not less. Consent must be specific, freedom from pressure must be real, and vulnerable situations require heightened care. Private sessions, bedrooms, hotel rooms, late-night communication, undressing, touching intimate areas, secrecy, or ritualised sexual acts cannot be justified by claims of anointing.

The doctrine of impartation can become especially dangerous when believers are taught that power flows from a superior person through touch, proximity, or ritual. Sangwa (2025) rejects the idea that a minister distributes spiritual gifts at will and warns that the pursuit of transferred power can create dependence upon supposedly anointed personalities. Chapter 14 will examine occult imitation more fully. Here the point is relational: once a believer thinks the leader's body carries necessary power, ordinary boundaries can be spiritualised away.

Women and girls have often been targeted within male-dominated systems, but safeguarding must not assume only one pattern. Men and boys can be abused. Women leaders can abuse. Same-sex exploitation occurs. Persons with disabilities, migrants, students, employees, counselees, and those seeking healing may face particular vulnerability. The moral standard applies across gender, office, denomination, and tradition.

Church language frequently misnames the event as an “affair” or “moral failure.” These terms may conceal the power relation. Where a leader exploits pastoral authority, private disclosures, economic dependence, or spiritual fear, the wrongdoing is not adequately described as equal adultery. The church must examine whether apparent agreement was produced within a structure of coercion.

None of this permits conviction by allegation alone. It requires competent, independent, evidence-based investigation. But neither may the church use the complexity of evidence as permission for paralysis. Immediate safety, preservation of records, removal from access where risk warrants, and support for those reporting concerns can occur without declaring final guilt.

The false shepherd's deepest contradiction is revealed here. The person entrusted to protect vulnerability uses vulnerability as access. The staff becomes a chain, and the sanctuary becomes the place from which the wounded must later flee.

Public Humiliation and the Weaponisation of Confession

Confession belongs to the grammar of grace. The sinner comes into truth because Christ has borne judgment. Scripture commands believers to confess sins to one another and pray for one another ([James 5:16](#)). Church discipline may sometimes require public acknowledgment where sin is public and harm has spread. Yet confession becomes abusive when disclosure is compelled, staged, broadcast, or stored for later control.

Public humiliation may take the form of forcing a person to recount sexual sin, family conflict, addiction, doubt, or trauma before a congregation. It may occur through a sermon whose unnamed target is recognisable to the community. A leader may reveal pastoral confidences under the claim that God instructed him to expose darkness. The congregation becomes an audience to another person's vulnerability, and the leader demonstrates that no secret is safe outside his approval.

Such practices should be distinguished from truthful public discipline. Biblical discipline serves repentance, protection, restoration, and the integrity of the church. It requires evidence, proportionality, impartiality, and pastoral care. Humiliation serves domination. It maximises shame, displays power, and warns observers what may happen if they resist.

Asymmetry makes confession vulnerable to misuse. The counsellee reveals what the leader does not reveal. The leader interprets the disclosure, decides its significance, and may claim authority to prescribe restitution or punishment. Research on spiritual and sexual abuse has shown how religious confession and pastoral asymmetry can deepen dependency when access to forgiveness or divine approval appears concentrated in the minister (Werner, 2022).

Protestant traditions may reject sacramental absolution and still reproduce the danger. A prophet demands confession before deliverance. A mentor requires access to sexual thoughts. A discipleship group compels members to report every failure. A pastor insists that repentance is invalid until confessed to him. The leader becomes a functional priest whose approval is necessary for peace with God.

The gospel says otherwise. Christians confess to one another where responsibility and healing require it, but forgiveness rests in Christ. No leader owns the conscience. Pastoral confidentiality should be explained clearly, including its limits where a child, vulnerable adult, credible threat, or suspected crime requires reporting. Confidentiality is a trust for care, not a private vault controlled by the minister.

Weaponised confidentiality works in both directions. Leaders demand silence from complainants while disclosing selected information that protects the institution. Non-disclosure agreements may be used to conceal patterns. Private settlements may be conditioned upon silence. Staff are told that discussing concerns is gossip. Yet genuine confidentiality protects the vulnerable, preserves due process, and limits unnecessary exposure. Secrecy protects power.

Isolation, Exit Costs, and the Loss of a World

“Why did they stay?” is often asked as though departure were a door standing open in a neutral room. In high-control religious settings, leaving may mean losing an entire world.

The member may lose family, marriage, friends, housing, employment, school, immigration support, professional references, ministry credentials, business customers, and the only community that knows the person's history. Departure may be interpreted as apostasy. Children may be told that the parent has rebelled. Remaining friends may fear contact. The person may have been taught that outside churches are dead, compromised, demonised, or condemned.

Isolation develops gradually. External pastors are dismissed as jealous. Former members are described as bitter. Journalists are agents of persecution. Clinicians do not understand spiritual realities. Lawyers are worldly. Family members are controlling. The leader's community becomes both the source of belonging and the interpreter of every alternative.

Exit therefore carries spiritual terror. The person may believe that God will withdraw protection, that demons will return, that prophecy guarantees disaster, or that salvation depends upon remaining under the ministry. Even after physical departure, the leader's voice may continue inside the conscience.

Hirschman's (1970) categories of exit, voice, and loyalty are useful here. Institutions remain healthy when members can raise concerns and, where necessary, leave without illegitimate punishment. Tyrannical systems close both routes. Voice is labelled rebellion; exit is labelled betrayal. Loyalty becomes the only permitted response.

The costs are intensified by sunk investment. People may have given years, money, relationships, reputation, and vocation. To admit the system is harmful may feel like admitting that much of life was built upon error. Cognitive dissonance can lead people to reinterpret warning signs rather than surrender a cherished identity (Festinger, 1957). The stronger the sacrifice, the stronger the temptation to believe it must have been worthwhile.

This should produce compassion, not contempt. Intelligent people can become trapped because intelligence operates within relationships, incentives, fear, and meaning. Education does not make a person immune to trust. Spiritual longing is not stupidity. A person may remain because the leader once offered genuine help, because some teaching was sound, because community life contained real love, or because the facts remain uncertain.

The church must therefore stop blaming the wounded for not leaving sooner. It should ask what made departure dangerous, confusing, costly, or spiritually terrifying. At the same time, mature believers retain responsibility to test teaching, refuse known sin, and obey God above humanity. Compassion does not erase moral agency; it locates agency within reality.

Why Intelligent Believers Defend Abusive Leaders

Defence of an abusive leader is rarely explained by one motive. Several dynamics may converge.

First, sacred legitimisation changes the moral meaning of evidence. Conduct that would appear controlling in an employer is interpreted as spiritual formation in a pastor. Anger becomes prophetic zeal. Secrecy becomes wisdom. Luxury becomes favour. Harshness becomes apostolic authority. The sacred frame does not merely excuse conduct after the fact. It teaches followers how to perceive it.

Second, charismatic authority creates personal identification. The leader represents the community's story, success, persecution, and hope. Criticism of the leader is felt as criticism of the follower's faith and identity. The question "Did he do wrong?" becomes emotionally entangled with "Was my conversion false?", "Was my healing unreal?", or "Have I wasted my life?"

Third, selective testimony controls the evidentiary field. Successes are repeated. Failed prophecies disappear. Those who prosper after giving are given a microphone. Those who lost money are told to examine their faith. Loyal insiders receive information that portrays complainants as unstable, immoral, ambitious, or demonised. The follower may sincerely believe the official account because competing evidence has been withheld.

Fourth, group conformity raises the cost of independent judgment. When everyone stands, applauds, gives, or affirms, doubt feels morally suspicious. Individuals often rely upon community cues under uncertainty. A person may think, "So many mature believers cannot all be wrong." Yet crowds can magnify error as well as wisdom.

Fifth, fear of false accusation can be manipulated. Scripture rightly condemns false witness. Leaders may remind the church of this duty while refusing impartial examination. The congregation is asked to choose between immediate defence and participation in slander, as though patient inquiry were impossible.

Sixth, dependency shapes belief. A staff member whose salary depends upon the ministry faces different pressures from an external observer. A relative may fear family collapse. A donor may fear reputational exposure. A student may need credentials. A migrant may need sponsorship. Material interest does not automatically prove dishonesty, but it can bend judgment.

Seventh, gratitude can become captivity. The leader may have prayed during illness, paid school fees, offered employment, defended the follower, or taught truths that genuinely helped. The person struggles to hold two realities together: the leader did real good, and the leader may also have done grave harm. Mature judgment can affirm both. Tyrannical systems demand that earlier good erase later evidence.

Eighth, apocalyptic urgency can suspend ordinary caution. If the ministry believes it is carrying the final revival, confronting the Antichrist system, or preparing a nation for destiny, governance questions appear petty. Critics are said to attack God's last-hour work. The perceived emergency becomes permission to bypass accountability.

Ninth, congregations may desire the benefits of domination. A strong leader offers certainty, belonging, identity, and an enemy. Followers are relieved from slow discernment. The leader names who is righteous, dangerous, blessed, cursed, faithful, or rebellious. Some members participate in policing others and receive status from proximity to power.

Tenth, institutional reputation can be mistaken for gospel reputation. Leaders and members fear that exposure will cause unbelievers to mock Christ. They conceal sin to protect witness and thereby destroy witness more deeply. The gospel does not require falsehood to survive. Christ is not honoured when His name is used to prevent truth.

The spiritual dimension remains decisive. Scripture teaches that deception is real, the heart is capable of self-deceit, and Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. Yet spiritual warfare must not become an excuse for imprecision. The church should test doctrine, fruit, evidence, power, and treatment of the vulnerable. It should not declare every defender demonised or every accused leader satanic.

Institutional Betrayal: When the Gate Protects the Wolf

An abusive leader rarely remains powerful by personal charisma alone. Institutions provide records, salaries, buildings, communication systems, legal advice, security, platforms, and legitimacy. They can restrain wrongdoing or multiply it.

Institutional betrayal occurs when the body trusted to protect people preserves itself at their expense. Smith and Freyd (2014) developed the concept to describe institutional wrongdoing or unsupportive responses where individuals depend upon the institution. In churches, the betrayal can acquire spiritual depth because the organisation claims to embody Christ's care.

A board may exist on paper while being selected, paid, or removable by the founder. Elders may depend upon the leader for ordination, income, housing, or public influence. An investigation may be assigned to close friends. Lawyers may be asked primarily to minimise liability. Communications staff may issue statements before affected people are contacted. Family members may control records and succession. Donors may threaten withdrawal if the leader is disciplined.

Conflicts of interest are then spiritualised as loyalty. Those closest to the accused are said to know his character best, when their dependence may make impartiality least possible. Outsiders are rejected because they do not understand the ministry's anointing. The result is an inquiry structured to confirm innocence.

Institutional betrayal can follow predictable patterns: deny the report, attack the reporter, reinterpret the leader as victim, isolate witnesses, delay until attention fades, announce an internal review without independence, and restore the leader before findings are complete. The vocabulary of grace may then be used to pressure the congregation to "move on."

Research among adults reporting pastoral sexual exploitation in Australian evangelical and Pentecostal settings found that institutional responses could compound harm through shunning, disbelief, reputation protection, and post-abuse coercive tactics (Simpson, 2026). The specific sample cannot represent every church, but the mechanisms are recognisable across institutions.

Official inquiries into child sexual abuse in religious organisations have likewise documented barriers to reporting, inadequate records, failures to respond to allegations, deference to leaders, and concern for institutional reputation. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse emphasised that known figures likely understate the scale because abuse is under-reported and because institutional records may be incomplete (IICSA, 2021, 2022).

Institutional betrayal does not require every official to be malicious. Some are frightened, inexperienced, legally confused, or sincerely convinced that private handling is biblical. Others fear destroying a good work through one person's sin. Yet intention does not erase consequence. A system can harm through negligence, partiality, or incompetence as well as deliberate concealment.

The opposite is institutional courage. It means telling truth about risk, receiving complaints without retaliation, preserving records, appointing independent investigators, accepting external scrutiny, supporting affected people, correcting structures, and placing mission above reputation. Recent research outside church contexts suggests that accountable institutional responses can reduce the association between betrayal and trauma symptoms (Adams-Clark et al., 2026). The principle is morally transferable: institutions can either deepen the wound or participate in repair.

A church shows courage when it is willing to lose money, status, followers, property, invitations, or a founder's name rather than sacrifice truth. The institution exists to carry witness. It must never consume the witness to remain alive.

Digital Spiritual Control

Digital platforms have not created spiritual tyranny, but they have made it portable, continuous, measurable, and scalable.

A leader can now enter the follower's pocket every hour. Messaging groups distribute instructions, prophecies, giving appeals, attendance demands, and warnings against critics. Members may be expected to respond immediately, share content, report location, post proof of participation, or explain absence. A delayed reply can become evidence of spiritual coldness.

Private messages can facilitate grooming. The leader bypasses ordinary visibility, establishes emotional intimacy, requests photographs, schedules secret meetings, or frames late-night communication as pastoral emergency. Screens can create a false sense of safety while accelerating boundary violations.

Livestreams can turn discipline into spectacle. A member is rebuked before thousands. Clips remain searchable after repentance or exoneration. Coordinated followers may attack critics, flood comment sections, report accounts, contact employers, or circulate edited recordings. The institution can mobilise a digital congregation as a disciplinary crowd.

Databases create another form of asymmetry. Churches may record attendance, giving, counselling needs, family relationships, health concerns, prayer requests, and volunteer activity. Such data can improve care. Without governance, it can become surveillance. A leader may know who stopped giving, who visited another church, or which family is withdrawing before any conversation occurs.

Parasocial attachment intensifies the authority of distant leaders. Followers experience repeated mediated familiarity and may feel personally known by someone who cannot know them. A brief reply, prophetic livestream, or public mention can carry disproportionate emotional weight. The leader's platform then functions as community, teacher, counsellor, and spiritual authority without local accountability.

The answer is not digital retreat. Technology can distribute Scripture, connect dispersed believers, support safeguarding training, document evidence, and widen access to sound teaching. The issue is jurisdiction. Digital ministry must remain under the same standards of truth, consent, privacy, accountability, and pastoral limitation as embodied ministry. Chapter 20 will examine artificial intelligence, synthetic media, surveillance, and digital church more fully.

African Churches and a Global Temptation

Spiritual abuse occurs across continents and traditions. It is not an African essence, a Pentecostal essence, a Catholic essence, or an independent-church essence. It appears wherever sacred authority escapes accountability.

African Christian contexts nevertheless require particular attention because several strengths and vulnerabilities can interact. Respect for elders, communal identity, hospitality, prayer, reverence, mutual obligation, and confidence in spiritual reality can sustain extraordinary resilience and mission. These goods should not be caricatured as backwardness. African churches have often preserved biblical seriousness, sacrificial worship, communal care, and supernatural expectation in settings where Western churches became rationalistic or individualistic.

The same goods can be exploited. Respect for elders may be converted into immunity. Communal belonging may make departure devastating. Belief in spiritual causality may allow illness, infertility, unemployment, or family conflict to be interpreted through the leader's claims. Economic vulnerability may increase dependence upon a ministry that provides work, school fees, healing promises, or social networks. Shame may silence disclosure. Weak governance may leave founders accountable only to relatives or loyal associates.

Research on some African Neo-Pentecostal settings has documented concerns about misappropriated spiritual authority, human-rights violations, and governance failure, while stressing that the findings apply to particular movements rather than Pentecostalism as a whole (Orogun & Pillay, 2022; Tagwirei, 2023). Orogun and Pillay's survey across several African countries reported high respondent agreement that abuses occurred in the settings studied. Such evidence is significant, but it should not be inflated into a prevalence estimate for all African churches.

Independent prophetic ministries may face special structural risk when founders control doctrine, finances, appointments, discipline, property, media, and succession. Yet established denominations can conceal abuse through bureaucracy, clerical hierarchy, transfers, and institutional loyalty. Informality is not the only danger. A sophisticated institution can protect wrongdoing more efficiently than a small church.

Gendered power also matters. Women may carry much of congregational labour while remaining excluded from meaningful governance. A male leader may exercise authority over marriage, fertility, sexuality, and finances without female safeguarding voices or independent complaint channels. At the same time, women leaders can also exploit followers, and women relatives of powerful men can become active enablers. Safeguarding must not assume innocence by gender.

Migration and diaspora create further dependence. A ministry may provide language, housing, immigration guidance, employment, and community in a foreign country. The same network that protects the migrant can control the migrant. A person may fear that exposing a leader will divide an ethnic community or bring shame upon Christians before the host society.

Political access compounds authority. Leaders photographed with presidents, ministers, business elites, or security officials may appear beyond ordinary challenge. Members may believe complaints cannot succeed. Politicians may value crowds and spiritual endorsement, while ministries gain protection and legitimacy. The church then risks becoming a patronage network in sacred clothing.

Regulation is a difficult question. States have legitimate responsibility to restrain crime, protect children, enforce labour and financial law, and safeguard citizens. They may also misuse regulation to control doctrine, suppress unpopular religion, or reward compliant institutions. Kaunda (2021) shows the tensions surrounding state attempts to "clean up" African Neo-Pentecostalism. The answer is neither religious immunity nor state theological control. Churches must govern themselves faithfully while accepting lawful oversight in matters of public harm.

The author's work has warned against both anti-supernatural reduction and untested spiritual power. Sangwa (2024a) argues that prophetic healing and deliverance claims must remain under Scripture, gospel proclamation, order, accountability, and the sovereignty of God. Sangwa (2026b) further distinguishes verified networks and public claims from unsupported speculation, refusing to label every charismatic movement part of one secret system. That evidentiary restraint should govern African analysis as well. The watchman must neither flatter power nor invent guilt.

The Strongest Case for Strong Spiritual Leadership

A fair judgment must hear the strongest defence before reaching a verdict. Critics of spiritual abuse language raise several serious concerns.

They argue that Scripture commands obedience and submission, that churches cannot function if every member becomes a private court of appeal, and that modern therapeutic culture increasingly labels discomfort, correction, discipline, and doctrinal disagreement as harm. They warn that congregations shaped by expressive individualism may demand pastors who affirm every desire and call any refusal abusive.

They further argue that false accusations can destroy innocent leaders, families, and churches. Public allegations travel faster than investigation. Social media rewards outrage. Anonymous accounts can be impossible to test. A leader may be suspended for safety and then treated as convicted. Even acquittal may not restore reputation. First Timothy's requirement concerning accusations against elders therefore remains necessary.

Confidentiality also has legitimate purposes. It can protect children, complainants, families, witnesses, and due process. Public disclosure may expose sensitive information, contaminate testimony, prejudice legal proceedings, or create trial by congregation. Leaders sometimes cannot answer accusations fully without violating another person's privacy.

The defenders of strong leadership also note that spiritual fatherhood and intensive discipleship may produce maturity where fragmented modern life has left people without guidance. Young churches, mission movements, and crisis settings may require decisive founders. A pastor may need to remove a dangerous teacher, correct public sin, protect the flock from manipulative outsiders, or make urgent decisions before a committee can deliberate.

They point to biblical figures who sinned grievously and were still used by God. David committed adultery and murder yet remained in covenant history. Peter denied Christ and was restored. John Mark failed and later became useful. If the church treats every serious failure as permanent exclusion, it may deny grace and produce a culture of fear.

They also warn that secular safeguarding frameworks can carry assumptions hostile to biblical doctrine. A church may be accused of harm merely for teaching sexual holiness, male and female creation, church discipline, parental authority, or the exclusivity of Christ. Governments may use legitimate concern about abuse to regulate preaching or interfere with religious freedom.

These arguments contain substantial truth. The church does need authority. Not every painful experience is abuse. False accusations occur. Confidentiality matters. Social media can condemn unjustly. Secular institutions are not infallible. Firm doctrine is not violence. Founders may possess real gifts. Grace restores sinners. Any account that ignores these truths will create another injustice.

Yet none of them establishes unaccountable power.

Biblical obedience is never detached from the leader's duty to watch over souls and give account. The same New Testament that commands submission forbids elders to dominate, requires them to be above reproach, permits public rebuke, praises examination of teaching, and records apostolic confrontation. Authority and accountability are not rivals. Accountability is one of the forms authority takes under Christ.

The misuse of abuse language should lead to definition, evidence, and due process, not denial. A word can be misapplied and still name a real evil. "Heresy" has been abused; heresy exists. "Discipline" has been abused; discipline remains necessary. "Justice" has been politicised; justice remains holy.

Protection against false accusation should operate as a fair process, not prior disbelief. The accused deserves notice, opportunity to respond, impartial investigation, and protection from rumour. The complainant deserves safety, respectful reception, protection from retaliation, and an inquiry not controlled by the accused. These goods reinforce one another.

Confidentiality should protect people and evidence. It must not conceal patterns, obstruct authorities, or prevent those at risk from receiving warning. A church may be unable to disclose every detail, but it should be able to explain process, conflicts of interest, safeguarding action, and the basis of final decisions.

Decisive leadership may be necessary in crisis, but urgency does not erase character. A founder's gift does not create ownership. The more concentrated the authority, the stronger the safeguards required. A leader who truly serves the flock should welcome structures that protect the flock from his own blind spots.

Biblical restoration must also be distinguished carefully. David was forgiven, but consequences entered his house. Peter's denial was not pastoral sexual exploitation, financial fraud, or abuse of vulnerable persons. Different sins have different implications for office. Grace can restore a person to God without restoring every role. The qualifications of [1 Timothy 3:1-13](#) and [Titus 1:5-16](#) concern public character and trust, not merely private forgiveness.

Finally, the risk of state overreach does not justify ecclesial concealment. Churches should defend religious liberty and resist ideological regulation. They should also report suspected crimes, protect children, honour labour law, maintain honest accounts, and cooperate with lawful investigation. The state must not preach the gospel. The church must not become a private state.

Evidence, Allegations, and the Discipline of Due Process

Truth requires careful naming. A rumour is not a complaint. A complaint is not a corroborated allegation. An allegation is not a finding. A charge is not a conviction. An acquittal is not always the same as factual exoneration, because legal thresholds and available evidence may differ. An unresolved case remains unresolved.

These distinctions are not legalistic distractions. They protect the ninth commandment, the vulnerable, the accused, and the credibility of the church.

[Proverbs 18:17](#) observes that the first to state a case seems right until another comes and cross-examines. The verse rebukes premature certainty. It should not be weaponised to silence the first speaker. The first account deserves to be heard; it does not become final merely because it was first.

An anonymous report may contain valuable information, especially where retaliation is credible. It may justify risk assessment, record review, supervision, or independent inquiry. It does not by itself establish guilt. Investigators should seek dates, documents, witnesses, patterns, communications, financial records, and other corroboration while protecting identity where possible.

Immediate protective action is not identical to punishment. Temporarily removing a leader from counselling, financial control, contact with children, or public ministry may be necessary while facts are examined. Such action should be proportionate, documented, time-bound where possible, and communicated without declaring a verdict.

Investigations must be independent in substance, not merely in name. A close friend, relative, employee, donor, or lawyer whose primary duty is to defend the institution may be unable to conduct an impartial inquiry. Terms of reference should identify scope, access to records, reporting lines, conflicts, evidentiary standards, and whether findings will be shared.

The accused should receive the substance of allegations and a fair opportunity to respond, subject to safety and legal constraints. Witnesses should not be coached. Complainants should not be required to meet the accused privately. Records must be preserved. Retaliation, including spiritual threats, job loss, shunning, defamatory sermons, or coordinated online attacks, should itself be treated as serious misconduct.

Public communication should avoid both evasive vagueness and sensational exposure. A church can say that concerns have been received, protective steps taken, an independent process appointed, and civil authorities contacted where appropriate. Later communication should distinguish what was established, not established, admitted, unresolved, or outside the inquiry's competence.

Due process is not unbelief. It is disciplined love of truth.

Safeguarding, Reporting, and Justice

A church confronted with possible abuse should begin with protection, not public relations.

Where immediate danger exists, safety comes first. Children and vulnerable adults must be separated from credible risk. Medical care, emergency services, or secure accommodation may be required. Leaders should not demand a prayer meeting before permitting a person to leave danger.

Suspected crimes should be reported to competent civil authorities according to applicable law. Mandatory reporting duties differ across jurisdictions, and churches must obtain current local guidance. The absence of a specific legal mandate does not automatically settle the moral duty. Serious sexual assault, violence, child abuse, fraud, trafficking, and credible threats are not merely internal disciplinary matters.

Church leaders must preserve evidence. Messages, emails, recordings, financial records, attendance logs, counselling notes, security footage, and devices should not be altered or destroyed. Pastoral desire to “clean up” a situation must never become obstruction.

Reporting channels should not require complainants to approach the accused leader or his immediate associates. Churches need more than one route, including access to trained safeguarding personnel and, where possible, external professionals. Information should be available before crisis, not hidden in policy documents no member has seen.

Conflicted leaders must recuse themselves. A board member who depends financially upon the accused, a spouse protecting family reputation, or a long-term associate defending shared legacy cannot simply declare impartiality. Recusal is not betrayal. It is one way integrity honours relationship.

Support for those reporting harm should be independent of the accused leader. It may include medical care, qualified counselling, legal information, practical assistance, spiritual care from a safe person, and protection against economic retaliation. No one should be required to remain in the same congregation to receive support.

Trauma-informed care does not mean treating every account as already proved. It means recognising that distress, fragmented memory, delayed disclosure, ambivalence, and continued attachment can occur after abuse, while still testing facts carefully. Perry's (2024) review identifies recognition of abuse, telling one's story, and redefining spirituality as recurring themes in meaning-making and growth. Recovery cannot be forced into an institutional timetable.

Church discipline remains necessary. A leader may be removed for conduct that fails biblical qualification even where criminal prosecution is unavailable or does not proceed. The standards of pastoral office are not identical to the elements of a criminal offence. Conversely, excommunication cannot replace civil justice where crime is alleged.

Financial restitution may be appropriate where money, wages, property, or services were wrongfully taken. Counselling costs, medical expenses, unpaid labour, or lost income may require consideration. Restitution does not purchase silence or erase accountability.

Long-term care matters because harm outlives the news cycle. Survivors may struggle with worship, prayer, Scripture, trust, marriage, work, and community. Durkin et al. (2025) caution that spiritual harm is not adequately addressed when reduced to psychological symptoms alone. The church should not abandon spiritual care, but it must offer it without pressure, denial, or forced return to the institution associated with harm.

Safeguarding should become culture rather than paperwork. Policies need training, implementation, review, audit, and consequences. Leaders require supervision. Counselling needs boundaries. Work with children requires screening and visibility. Financial controls need separation of duties. Complaints need records. Digital communication needs rules. A policy signed by the founder but ignored by the founder is decoration.

Repentance, Forgiveness, and the Limits of Restoration

The gospel offers real forgiveness to real sinners. It does not offer a technique for escaping truth.

Genuine repentance names wrongdoing without euphemism. It does not say “mistakes were made” where a person manipulated, assaulted, stole, threatened, or lied. It does not centre the offender's pain at losing reputation. It asks what truth requires for those harmed.

Repentance ceases the conduct, submits to investigation, accepts consequences, makes restitution where possible, surrenders control, and demonstrates change over time. A leader who demands rapid restoration, selects his own counsellors, attacks witnesses, or invokes forgiveness to regain a platform has not shown the fruit appropriate to repentance.

Forgiveness is not the same as restoration to leadership. This sentence must not be softened.

God may forgive a repentant offender fully. The church may receive that person into fellowship where safe. Relationships may be reconciled where truth, repentance, willingness, and protection permit. Trust may grow slowly. None of these automatically restores public office.

Pastoral qualification includes being above reproach, self-controlled, not a bully, not greedy, faithful in household life, and respected by outsiders. Some conduct reveals a pattern or produces a breach of trust incompatible with future pastoral, counselling, financial, educational, or safeguarding authority. The church does not deny grace when it recognises consequence. Office is not a right purchased by repentance.

Restoration processes often fail because they centre the gifted leader rather than the wounded flock. The schedule is designed around the leader's return. A few months of counselling are announced. Friends testify that he is humble. The congregation is told to forgive. Those harmed are asked to attend a reconciliation service. The platform is restored before trust, evidence, or structural change has matured.

A biblical process reverses the centre. It asks whether affected people are safe, whether truth has been established, whether restitution has occurred, whether the leader has relinquished entitlement, whether governance has changed, and whether returning to office would expose others to risk or communicate that gifting outranks character.

Forgiveness must never be compelled as a public performance. Christians are commanded to forgive from the heart, relinquishing personal vengeance and entrusting judgment to God. Yet a wounded person may need time to understand what occurred. Forgiveness does not require denial, private meetings, restored access, silence, or the removal of legal consequences.

Reconciliation requires participation by more than one party. Trust requires evidence. Office requires qualification. These are related but distinct goods.

A Church Where the Staff Serves the Sheep

Exposure is incomplete unless it leads to reconstruction. The biblical alternative to spiritual tyranny is not a suspicious congregation in which no one can lead. It is a church where authority is strong enough to serve, humble enough to be corrected, and transparent enough to be trusted.

Christ alone must remain Head. This confession should shape constitutions, budgets, succession, preaching, counselling, and discipline. A church that says Christ is Head while one family controls property, appointments, doctrine, investigations, and succession has placed theology in the creed and monarchy in the machinery.

Plural leadership provides one safeguard. Plurality is not automatic righteousness; a group can conspire. Yet shared authority, independent voices, clear terms, and real capacity to remove leaders reduce the danger of personal sovereignty. Elders should not be selected merely for loyalty, wealth, family connection, or public status. Biblical qualification and demonstrable courage matter.

Boards must govern rather than decorate letterhead. They need access to finances, authority over compensation, independent minutes, conflict-of-interest rules, and the ability to commission external review. Members whose livelihood or family ties prevent impartiality should not dominate decisions concerning the leader.

Financial transparency should be proportionate and real. Accounts need independent review or audit according to size and law. Personal and ministry assets should be distinguished. Related-party transactions should be disclosed. Offerings for designated purposes should be used accordingly. No leader should be the sole authoriser, beneficiary, and reporter of expenditure.

Pastoral counselling needs boundaries. Churches should define settings, records, confidentiality, referral, physical contact, digital communication, and supervision. Leaders should recognise when a situation requires a licensed clinician, physician, lawyer, social worker, or specialised safeguarding professional. Spiritual authority is not universal competence.

Safeguarding must include adults as well as children. Any person can become situationally vulnerable through grief, illness, disability, migration, poverty, marital crisis, spiritual fear, employment, or dependence. Labelling only certain people "vulnerable" can conceal how power creates vulnerability (Fernández, 2022).

Complaint systems should be visible, multiple, and safe. Members need to know whom to contact outside the immediate leadership line. Whistleblowers should be protected from retaliation. Anonymous information should be assessed carefully. Patterns should be tracked across time.

Theological education must teach more than preaching technique. Candidates need formation in power, ethics, boundaries, finance, safeguarding, trauma, law, team leadership, and repentance. Institutions should stop conferring titles that enlarge authority without testing character.

Publishers, conference organisers, donors, and media platforms should conduct proportionate due diligence. A large audience is not a character reference. Repeated serious concerns should not be dismissed as jealousy merely because a speaker attracts crowds. Platforming is a moral act.

Congregations also require discipleship. Members should learn how to examine teaching, distinguish command from counsel, recognise grooming, preserve evidence, report concerns, and resist gossip. They should honour faithful leaders, pay them justly, pray for them, and protect them from malicious accusation. The purpose is not permanent suspicion. It is mature love.

Families of founders must remember that the church is not inheritance property. A child may be qualified to lead, but bloodline is not ordination. A spouse may serve faithfully, but marriage does not create investigative independence. The family should be protected from unfair hostility while refusing dynastic entitlement.

Digital ministries need privacy, moderation, communication, and safeguarding rules. Private messaging with minors or vulnerable counselees should be restricted. Giving data should not become spiritual surveillance. Livestreams should not broadcast discipline or private disclosures.

Most of all, the church must recover ordinary pastoral faithfulness. The healthy shepherd may never trend. He teaches Scripture, visits the sick, protects children, corrects gently, admits error, keeps confidences properly, refers beyond his competence, shares authority, accounts for money, honours marriage, resists flattery, and prepares people to follow Christ without him.

Such ministry may appear less powerful because it refuses to manufacture dependence. In heaven's accounting, it is stronger.

A Word to the Shepherds, the Flock, and the Wounded

To the predatory leader: the sheep are not yours. Their bodies are not yours. Their money is not yours. Their marriages, children, vocations, secrets, and consciences are not yours. The title that shields you now will testify against you if it was used to consume the flock. The Lord who exposed Israel's shepherds still sees. Repent before the staff is taken from your hand.

To the sincerely mistaken leader: authoritarian habits may have been inherited from mentors, culture, denomination, family, or fear. Good intention does not make them safe. Invite correction. Share authority. Learn boundaries. Apologise specifically. Change structures before crisis forces change. Humility is not weakness in a shepherd; it is one of the forms truth takes.

To boards, elders, and senior associates: you were not appointed to admire. Govern. Ask questions. Read accounts. Preserve records. Recuse where conflicted. Do not wait for the public to force the courage Scripture already requires.

To spouses and relatives of powerful leaders: family loyalty is good, but Christ's church does not belong to the family. Love does not conceal destructive sin. Protecting a surname at the cost of the flock transfers shame rather than removing it.

To congregations: stop asking human beings to become what Christ alone can be. Do not demand that a pastor guarantee your future, reveal every secret, make every decision, or carry your faith. Honour leaders without worshipping them. Test without becoming cynical. Grow up into the Head.

To donors, publishers, organisers, and political friends: money and access can keep a false shepherd standing after truth has spoken. Stop calling platform protection ministry. Withdraw support where responsible examination is refused.

To those who have been harmed: trusting a spiritual leader did not make you foolish. Remaining for a time does not prove consent to what was done. Seeking safety, documenting events, consulting professionals, reporting suspected crime, and finding another Christian community are not rebellion against God. Healing may be slow. Prayer may feel difficult. Scripture may carry the voice of the person who misused it. Christ is not identical to the leader who wounded you. The Good Shepherd does not despise the bruised reed.

To those accused: seriousness of subject does not erase your right to fair process. Do not answer rumour with rumour. Preserve evidence. Submit to impartial inquiry. Refrain from mobilising followers. If innocent, truth does not need intimidation. If guilty, grace does not need concealment.

To faithful pastors: this chapter is not written to make you ashamed of authority. Continue to preach, correct, protect, discipline, and lead. Do not surrender the flock to wolves because false shepherds have disgraced the staff. Serve under the Chief Shepherd, and let your accountability become part of your witness.

To repentant sinners: Christ's blood is sufficient. No sin is cleansed by retaining a platform. Lay down title, access, money, and reputation if truth requires it. Better to enter the kingdom without office than preserve ministry and meet the Lord as an unrepentant destroyer of sheep.

In the Last Second Before Midnight

The church is living near eternity. No one knows the day or hour of Christ's return ([Matthew 24:36](#)). The language of the last second before midnight is therefore not a secret date. It is a call to moral wakefulness.

At midnight, no follower will be saved by proximity to a celebrated prophet. No bishop can lend holiness to an unrepentant soul. No spiritual father can supply oil to another person's lamp. No board resolution can reverse the Chief Shepherd's judgment. No private archive will remain hidden from the One whose eyes are like flame.

This is not the hour to preserve a ministry that cannot survive truth. It is not the hour to call fear honour, silence unity, control discipleship, or exploitation sacrifice. The Bridegroom is not preparing a people who tremble before human personalities. He is preparing a holy people who know His voice.

Leaders must repent of domination. Boards must repent of passivity. Congregations must repent of idolatry. Families must repent of dynastic possession. Donors must repent of purchasing spiritual access. Institutions must repent of sacrificing the wounded to reputation. Critics must repent of false accusation and delight in scandal. Everyone must return beneath the Word.

The warning is severe because hope remains. The Lord promises in Ezekiel that He will search for His sheep, rescue them, gather them, feed them, bandage the injured, and strengthen the weak. The false shepherd does not receive the final word. The wound does not receive the final word. The institution does not receive the final word. Christ does.

He laid down His life for the sheep. He does not feed upon them. He knows them by name. He does not reduce them to donors, followers, bodies, labour, or evidence of His greatness. He carries the weak without making weakness a chain. He corrects without humiliation, leads without deceit, and rules without sin.

Yet spiritual tyranny often gains credibility through displays of hidden knowledge and power, making it necessary to distinguish biblical prophecy from divination and occult syncretism. A leader who claims to see secrets, identify curses, manipulate spiritual forces, or transmit power may bind followers through more than personality. The next chapter must therefore examine how divination, mediumship, magical technique, ancestral consultation, and occult practice can be renamed prophecy, discernment, anointing, deliverance, or Christian power.

The church must enter that examination without naturalistic unbelief and without superstitious surrender. Not every supernatural claim is false. Not every power is holy. The test remains Scripture, Christ, truth, fruit, and the gospel.

The final image of this chapter is not the chain. It is the Shepherd breaking it.

Jesus Christ knows His sheep. He laid down His life for them, rose bodily, intercedes for them, exposes the wolf, heals the wounded, gathers the scattered, judges corrupt shepherds, and will soon appear as the Chief Shepherd. Let every borrowed staff be placed beneath His hand.

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