

Telltale Marks of an Abusive Church Leader

In all settings, both secular and religious, charismatic and non-charismatic, leaders can be abusive, taking advantage of their people and using them for all kinds of fleshly purposes, from financial gain to sex to control. But we charismatics can be especially prone to abusive leadership. After all, we do believe in “the anointing,” and we don’t want to “touch God’s anointed,” to sin against the man of God who is backed by the Spirit of God. And so abusive leaders can more easily take advantage of us.

In Psalm 105:15, God says, “Do not touch not My anointed ones, and do no harm to My prophets.” Have you ever heard a pastor quote this verse, threatening you with divine judgment if you dared to differ with his authority? Has a self-proclaimed prophet warned you of the dire consequences of rejecting his words, using this very text? In reality, the verse has little (or nothing) to do with church leadership.

Now, I can’t verify this story, but I heard it firsthand from a well-known American pastor. He said that he and his wife were new believers when they attended a gospel rally in California. According to their account, when the preacher got up to speak, he said to the crowd, “You don’t need your Bibles. You have a prophet of God in your midst.” The moment this couple heard this, even though they were new in the Lord, they left immediately.

Years later, they found out what happened to this man. His name was Jim Jones, and he became the leader of the Peoples Temple, which became the Jonestown cult, ending with the mass suicide of more than nine hundred of his followers in Guyana. As a manipulative leader, he was able to get all those families to leave the United States and relocate to an

entirely new part of the world, where he lived like a king among them.

Of course, he ended up a heretic, but he was originally ordained as a Disciples of Christ pastor. I'm not putting him in the category of a misguided charismatic leader since he was a complete apostate and a cult leader. But he shared one of the key characteristics of abusive leaders: He drew disciples after himself rather than pointing people to Jesus and creating a sense of allegiance to God and His Word. As Paul warned the elders of Ephesus,

"For I know that after my departure, dreadful wolves will enter among you, not sparing the flock. Even from among you men will arise speaking perverse things, to draw the disciples away after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

These people are wolves rather than shepherds, feeding off the sheep rather than feeding the sheep, fleecing them rather than nurturing them, plundering them rather than ministering to them. That is something abusive leaders have forgotten or ignored: these are the Lord's sheep, not their own. The church is God's possession, not the pastor's, and at the end of the day, these leaders will be accountable to the Great Shepherd Himself for how they treated His flock. As a leader myself, this is a sobering thought.

But how do you test pastors and leaders? How do you recognize and run from abusive leadership without falling into rebellion and unhealthy judgmentalism?

Abusive leaders aren't motivated by love or by what is best for the flock. They're motivated by what's best for them, by what fills a need in their lives, by how you can advance their cause, using you as their tool rather than serving you for your good. True apostles are not abusive. The higher in the Lord you go, the less you will take advantage of others and the less you will need to announce how powerful you are.

A final word to my fellow leaders: If you find your security in the Lord and walk intimately with Him, He will announce to others, “This is My beloved son [or daughter], in whom I am pleased. Listen to what he [or she] has to say!” (See Matthew 3:17.) As you diligently follow Him, others will gladly follow you. The Lord Himself will be your biggest backer. {eoa}

This passage is an excerpt from Playing With Holy Fire (Charisma House, 2018) written by Michael L. Brown, Ph.D., who is the founder and president of AskDrBrown Ministries. Dr. Brown served as a leader in the Brownsville Revival from 1996–2000, and out of this significant spiritual movement he and his leadership team birthed the FIRE School of Ministry, which Dr. Brown serves as president and faculty member. He is host of the nationally syndicated, daily talk radio show, the Line of Fire With Dr. Michael Brown—“your voice of moral, cultural, and spiritual revolution”—as well as the host of shows on GOD TV, NRB TV, and INI TV. His syndicated columns appear on many leading websites, and his work has been featured in the Washington Post, the Baltimore Sun, the Charlotte Observer, the Charlotte Magazine, Citizen magazine, and other publications.