

Breaking Free From the Spirit of Control

Here are six ways to identify an unhealthy leadership style in a church or ministry.

My world was shaken 20 years ago this week. On Nov. 10, 1989, one day after German protesters tore down the Berlin Wall, a Christian ministry I had been a part of for 11 years also fell apart.

Maranatha Campus Ministries was a vibrant outreach to college campuses. It was founded in Kentucky during the Jesus movement by a passionate charismatic couple, Bob and Rose Weiner, who eventually started churches on more than 50 American universities. In its heyday in the Reagan era, students from Maranatha took the gospel around the world.

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But with all our good intentions and youthful zeal for evangelism, the ministry did not survive. We had a flawed, authoritarian leadership model, which was made worse by a lack of mature advisers. When Maranatha's young pastors grew up and realized the ministry had an unhealthy and oppressive structure, they voted to disband. The churches either went independent, merged with other groups or closed.

Meanwhile, the many young people who had been disciplined in

Maranatha had to deal with their own unique form of post-traumatic stress disorder. They woke up and realized that Maranatha had been influenced by the Shepherding Movement, which taught that all Christians should be submitted to personal shepherds who dispense advice and approve all decisions.

The Shepherding movement, which had broad influence in many charismatic churches, collapsed around the same time. Because I lived through that era, I am hypersensitive to the way a spirit of control works in a church. And I can assure you that controlling attitudes will destroy a ministry. Here are six obvious signs that a spirit of control is at work:

1. Little or no accountability. There is safety in the multitude of counselors (see Prov. 11:14). There is much less safety—perhaps even danger—when a leader does not bother to seek counsel from a diverse group of his peers, as well as from gray-haired men and women who have the wisdom that comes with age. If a pastor or church leader isn't open to correction, he is headed for a train wreck.

2. Spiritual elitism. If there is a spirit of control in a church, people are usually told that their group is superior. Supposedly they have special spiritual privileges from God, along with “exclusive” revelation. If people choose to leave, they are shunned or branded as renegades. Sometimes, in extreme cases, people are even cursed if they leave. (Last week when I was in Hungary I learned of a charismatic church that publicly curses people when they quit the congregation.) This cultic behavior inflicts unimaginable emotional suffering and also divides families.

3. An oppressive atmosphere. Authoritarian leaders know how to control people through manipulation. In some cases, this control may simply take the form of subtle suggestions and persuasion. In the most abusive situations, it may come in the form of threats, legalistic demands, unreasonable requirements

or false doctrines. In some cases, especially in charismatic circles, it can come through misguided personal prophecies or mystical visions.

In such a church no one is allowed to ask questions. Spiritual heaviness lies like a thick cloud over the congregation, and few believers manifest genuine joy because they are overburdened by feelings of guilt and fear.

4. Angry domination. Tyrants are surprisingly similar. Because they want to control their surroundings, they often blow up when people do not conform to their demands. Yet the Apostle Paul taught that church leaders should not be “violent” or “quarrelsome” but “self-controlled” and “gentle” (see 1 Timothy 3:2-3). Later he instructed Timothy that the Lord’s servant “must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone” (2 Timothy 2:24). You will always find lots of anger wherever there is a controlling spirit.

5. Individual guidance is discouraged. The Bible teaches that every Christian has direct access to God through one mediator, Jesus Christ. Every believer can hear God’s voice personally and should expect to receive God’s guidance.

In authoritarian church situations, however, members are not encouraged to seek God’s guidance themselves. Rather, they are urged to conform to the preferences of the leader or the group. In some cases, leaders have actually taught their congregations to seek counsel and specific approval from a pastor before making major decisions. Thus church members develop an unhealthy dependence on a man in order to function spiritually, and their ability to trust God is diminished.

This kind of control is emotionally crippling. For many who submitted to the philosophy behind the Shepherding movement, it took years to recover from the loss of decision-making ability. They relinquished their wills and lost their identities because they viewed absolute obedience to their

spiritual leaders as a Christian virtue.

6. Women viewed as inferior. Some churches today permit the ordination of women, even as senior pastors or bishops, while others maintain that Scripture does not permit women to hold these positions. Apart from these differences of opinion on biblical interpretation, it should be noted that authoritarian churches usually discourage women from pursuing *any* genuine role in ministry. Women are viewed as useful only in their functions as wives and mothers, and they are not encouraged to step beyond these confines to pursue ministry opportunities.

Such a low view of women leads men to treat them as God-ordained sex objects or drones equipped to perform only menial tasks. Women who have leadership gifts are branded rebels or “Jezebels.”

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, similar walls of communist control fell in rapid succession until the entire Soviet Union broke apart. Yet walls of spiritual bondage still exist today in so many parts of the church—and the ghosts of the Shepherding movement still haunt us. We are called to be emancipators, not enslavers. As we seek to build healthy churches, let’s remember these words from Galatians 5:1: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (NASB).

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