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# The Pastor has left ...

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All too often one hears of ministers leaving independent churches in unhappy circumstances. Occasionally they have been dismissed; more frequently they have felt compelled to resign because they have no longer had the support of their fellow leaders or other influential members of the congregation. Either way the men and their families are deeply hurt, if not rendered homeless and unemployed. Justice and compassion may seem sadly lacking.

In facing this issue those of us who are ourselves ministers all too readily focus entirely on the misdeeds and low spiritual state of congregations. We must remember however that we carry a heavy responsibility for the condition of the churches. We must also bear in mind that, as in most relationship problems, we often hear only one side of the story and that, only rarely, is the fault entirely on one side.

Of course, unhappy relationships between pastors and people are by no means restricted to independency! Whilst this article is concerned directly with that part of the evangelical constituency at least some of the perspectives and principles have wider application.

## **1. Getting Things In Perspective**

There is a danger of becoming paranoid about this particular problem, especially when we or our friends are embroiled in it. But we should remember that:

- a) Many independent ministers remain in one pastorate, more or less happily, for a very considerable period of time. This is probably much more the case than in most other kinds of churches. Moreover, enquiries to leaders of two church groupings have led to the response that, across the board, a situation which led to an impasse between church and minister is not that frequent.
- b) In a fallen world and in churches of half sanctified saints we should expect that both Christian ministry and human relationships will be difficult.
- c) There is nothing essentially new about this. The apostle Paul experienced rejection by Christian people and I shall refer later to his relationships with the Corinthian church. Or we could think of Jonathan Edwards, revered by us today but rejected by his own church after 23 years. Likewise his son, Jonathan Edwards junior was dismissed after 26 years in a pastorate!
- d) We must not assume that difficulties are never of the minister's making. I fear that some ministers' discussions sound like those of a professional association or even trade union!

## **2. Some Contributory Factors**

A number of factors contribute to the situation that I have outlined – and may help to explain why these situations now occur more frequently than in the past if that indeed is the case. I will divide these factors under two headings:–

## a) The characteristics of the times in which we live

- i. It seems to me that in the country at large we have a **leadership crisis**. That is not intended to be a political statement! What I mean is that, on the one hand, there is a reluctance by people to be led and, on the other hand, an unwillingness to take the lead and/or an inability to do so in a way that draws and maintains support. If this is a right diagnosis then it is inevitably reflected in our church life. So we have the extremes of heavy shepherding (not restricted to charismatic churches) and such *laissez faire* leadership that it is scarcely leadership at all. I wonder whether ministers and elders are given enough help, particularly at an early stage in their ministry or preparation for it, in understanding how to exercise a godly and Biblical leadership? Those of us in the “Reformed camp” have tended to shy away from teaching the “how to ...” in all kinds of areas in the Christian life (eg evangelism, Bible reading, parenting etc.). Maybe we need to do more of this, however, in relation to leadership. I wonder also whether evidence of proven gifts of leadership are given high enough priority in the appointment of ministers and elders.
- ii. A feature of our times is **mobility**. For example few of us have to be in a pastorate for very long before there is a majority of the congregation who had nothing to do with our appointment (although presumably they did take us into account when they chose to attend or become a member of our church!). Moreover this mobility does not encourage a sense of loyalty whether to the church as a whole, to other members or to the minister; nor does it encourage stable and deep relationships. It is also related to the next matter.
- iii. There is an enormous **diversity in evangelicalism** – far more I suspect than thirty years ago. This means that there is significantly more scope for disagreement amongst people who are avowedly evangelical. The disagreements may relate to doctrinal emphases, worship styles, congregational organisation etc. Because of the large degree of mobility most of us have people coming to our churches from an ethos very different from that of our own church. It may not be until they have been in the church for some time that they realise the depth of the difference, or its ramifications. Moreover, the fact that there is, in all likelihood, another evangelical church not too far away means that they can easily down tools and pull up sticks or, more to the point, threaten to do, so thereby exerting considerable pressure on the church leadership.
- iv. Most of us would probably feel that we live in a day of **small things**. We do not see large numbers of conversions nor feel that our churches are on fire for the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel. Such times engender dissatisfaction in Christians (in a sense quite rightly so) and all too often the minister becomes the scapegoat. If only he was different things would happen!

## b) Features of Independency

Apart from the fact that, by definition, independent churches can remove their ministers, it seems to me that there are a number of other factors in our kind of churches which may predispose towards a breakdown in the relationship between minister and people.

- i. **Independent churches tend to attract independent people – including some strongly independent people!** They have strong views and want to have their say, if not their way. Wilful sheep may be more difficult to handle than wayward sheep! They may of course also have more potential for being useful Christians if their strong mindedness can be channelled in the right directions and humbled to accept proper restraints.
- ii. **Congregational church government is often misunderstood as ecclesiastical democracy:** one man/woman one vote with everyone having equal say. This seems to me far removed from any concept in the New Testament and also from the outlook of the Congregational fathers.
- iii. **Conservative churches tend to attract conservative people.** I mean people who are not merely conservative in their doctrinal views but people who are temperamentally conservative. In almost every area of life they prefer the old to the new and are strongly resistant to change. But Biblical leadership can never be satisfied with merely maintaining the status quo. There are always going to be things in our churches, as well as in people, which need to be changed. There are new opportunities to be taken; new challenges to which we must respond. But there are people in our churches who will always feel threatened by changes, some by changes of even the most trivial kind.
- iv. **The way ministers are appointed within independency makes it fairly easy for inappropriate appointments to be made.** By this I mean both that a man with inadequate gifts and/or training can be called to a pastorate and also that an inappropriate match may be made between a particular man and a particular church. Once the honeymoon period is over some begin to regret the appointment and see it as a big mistake.
- v. **The increased emphasis on the plurality of eldership in independent churches over the last thirty years has in some places contributed to the kind of situations we are considering.** Personally, I am very committed to the principle of the plurality of elders and deeply thankful for my own experience of its outworking. However I can see that it can all too easily lead to difficulties. Elders who seldom preach and are not paid by the church share neither the high profile nor the vulnerability of the minister. Yet they may regard themselves as permanent fixtures and the true guardians of the church's well being. One or two may become resentful of the influence that the minister has. They may themselves have a significant "power base" in the congregation, including perhaps a number of relatives. For the most part they will have no training in Biblical leadership. If they are in positions of leadership in the world they may import ideas learnt there into the way they view their eldership role.

From some features of our current scene I want now to draw some lessons from an ancient one: The church of Corinth and its relationship with the apostle Paul.

### **3. Leadership in Conflict Situations: A Case Study**

There is not space here to plot, in any detail, the causes of the strained relationship between the Corinthians (or at least some of them) and the apostle; but that a strained relationship developed is beyond doubt. We get the first hint of it perhaps in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians where Paul describes the party spirit that had

developed in the church. Various groups were aligning themselves with various leaders, Paul among them, and the super-spirituals were professing allegiance only to Christ. Underlying this party spirit was pride, that root sin which continues to permeate so much of the thinking and behaviour even of Christians. 2 Cor. 2:5-11 & 7:12 speak of the wrong doing of one individual either against another church member at Corinth or perhaps against the apostle himself. If the former, it is an example of the way in which a private grievance can quickly engulf a whole church. This may in turn be linked to the arrival in Corinth of Christian leaders who either claimed to be, or were regarded by some of the Corinthians as, “super apostles”; Paul identifies them as pseudo apostles – men who appear to have superior and perhaps spectacular gifts. Compared with them and, especially at a distance, Paul appeared rather inferior.

Paul was no plastic person nor a disembodied head! It is clear from the Corinthian correspondence that he was deeply hurt by the whole situation. What lessons can we draw from his response to it? I suggest the following at least:

a) **Christian leadership must involve both forbearance and confrontation.** Paul is clearly very reticent about provoking a crisis and about confrontation. 2 Cor. 1:23, 2:4 explain that he has not returned to Corinth, as previously promised, in order to spare them and not cause them grief. In 2 Cor 10:1 he appeals to them “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” – a meekness and gentleness which had been mistaken by some of the Corinthians as timidity. Christian leaders should not be bruisers! We must be patient and peaceable. Such is a mark of the wisdom that comes from heaven (James 3:17,18). Our Lord Jesus himself of course provides us with the supreme example of meekness and gentleness; see Matt. 12:14f. He is the true pattern for every servant of the Lord.

There are, however, times when confrontation is essential. 2 Cor. 7:8-16 makes this clear. It refers to the so called “severe letter” that Paul had written. Paul says that after he had written and, presumably, sent it, he regretted doing so. He feared its impact would be negative. But in fact it had the desired effect and had led to godly sorrow and real repentance. This was vital for the healing of the relationship between him and the Corinthians.

Some of us perhaps create problems for ourselves and our churches by being too impatient and too quickly confrontational. Others of us store up trouble for later on by simply allowing a situation to steadily deteriorate and attitudes on both sides to harden rather than confronting wrong attitudes, words and actions with gentleness and firmness. Christian leaders must demonstrate both the weakness of Christ and the power of Christ (2 Cor. 13:1-4). On the one hand we must be willing to be misunderstood and misused and to bear it with meekness; on the other hand we must be willing to deal firmly with sin. We must also distinguish between matters that are trivial and to which we can turn a blind eye or a deaf ear and those which are major and cannot be overlooked. Spurgeon said that his deaf ear was often the more useful of the two!

b) **Leadership must be motivated by a deep love for God’s people and must express that love repeatedly.** No doubt 1 Cor. 13 was written to pinpoint a grave deficiency in the church at Corinth. Yet Paul addresses them as “my dear brothers” (1 Cor. 15:58) and closes his first letter by sending “my love to all of you in Christ

Jesus” (1 Cor. 16:24). In 2 Cor. 2:4 he can say “you know the depth of my love for you”. Further he can say in 2 Cor. 7:3: “you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you”. These expressions of deep love for the Corinthians were not hollow. He did not at the same time go around telling others what a terrible lot the Corinthians were and how badly they were behaving. Rather he boasted about them to his colleague Titus and no doubt to others (2 Cor. 7:14). And all this at the time when, humanly speaking, he must have felt utterly exasperated with them! I wonder whether our people are assured that we really do love them? Christian leaders are surely to be exemplary Christians rather than exceptional ones. Not least should we be examples of that Christian love which Jesus said is to be the distinctive badge of his disciples and which characteristically is directed towards those who do not deserve it.

- c) **Leadership must be characterised by humble and sacrificial service.** In the upper room Jesus said that “the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves”. This speaks both of our estimate of ourselves and our service to others. The supreme example is our Lord himself “who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many”. That example is mirrored by the apostle. He proclaimed himself a slave of the Christians to whom he ministered (2 Cor. 4:5). He made no pretension to be anything other than, in himself, weak. He gratefully recognised that the function of his “thorn in the flesh” was to remind him of that weakness. It is clear that he is reluctant in the extreme to bring to the fore either his elevated experiences of Christ or the depths of his sufferings for Christ. He has been willing to serve the Corinthians without financial reward from them (2 Cor. 11:7-10). Just as the Lord Jesus gave his life that we might live so the apostle says “death is at work in us but life is at work in you” (2 Cor. 4:12).
- d) **Leadership must model true and wholehearted forgiveness.** This is linked to the love for the believers at Corinth to which I have already referred. But note 2 Cor. 2:10: “if you forgive anyone I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake”. 2 Cor. 7 breathes the same spirit – Paul’s great joy that the relationship is repaired. We have to admit that it is just as easy for ministers as for others to hold grudges and to view people whom we feel have wronged us in the past with resentment and distrust. We must go out of the way to demonstrate that we really do forgive people and to win back those who, for whatever reason, have become alienated from us. In this world, if any relationships are going to survive, repeated forgiveness will be essential – as our Lord taught in Matthew 18. As Christian ministers we must model that in our own relationships. We must teach forgiveness by practising it.
- e) **Leadership must aim at Christ’s glory in the spiritual progress of his people.** In 2 Cor. 11:2 Paul says “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ”. Paul’s supreme concern was not his relationship with the Corinthians but theirs to Christ. It is easy to say that this is our concern too but, in reality, for it to be otherwise.

This last point has a bearing on the question of whether, when difficulties arise between a pastor and the congregation, he should leave or stay. Sometimes leaving may be the easiest way out for the pastor; but what will it do for the congregation? Will it leave deep spiritual problems unresolved? Will it leave part of Christ's flock without a leader? What about those Christians, perhaps newly converted or rather on the edge of things, who may be left confused and bewildered? On the other hand, sometimes to stay will only cause further deterioration in the situation. The church may divide, causing dishonour to the name of Christ in the locality and the long term weakening of the cause of the gospel in that place. The minister may feel he has a right to stay and that truth and justice are on his side. But the supreme consideration has to be the good of the church of Jesus Christ and his own honour and glory.

## **4. Some Final Reflections**

### **a) Appointment of Ministers**

I think this is a potential weakness within independency. It astonishes me that sometimes churches call a minister without seeking, or at any rate taking any notice of, the opinion of other Christian leaders who know him well or of his previous church. Surely this is unwise and even a little arrogant! I am not arguing for "accredited lists" (how could I when I do not appear on one myself?) for the mere appearance of the name on such lists may not tell us very much about the man. But I am urging that churches be discouraged from judging by initial appearances and that, where there are known to have been difficulties in the past, these should be discussed openly and thoroughly not only with the man himself but with the other parties. The same is true with regard to past difficulties in churches; prospective pastors would be wise to seek as much information as possible, without of course prejudging the issue.

It also seems to me that, at the time of appointment, there must be very thorough discussion between the candidate for the vacant pastorate and the existing leaders of the church. This should not only cover doctrinal matters and the church's stance on various issues such as the ecumenical movement etc. but also the way the church reaches decisions and the intended relationship between pastor and elders and/or deacons. There ought also to be a clear understanding, of which the whole church membership should be aware, as to how the appointment would be terminated. Surely the church should not be less stringent in these matters than the world. It should be clear from the start whether, in the event of difficulties, the minister for example will require a 75% majority in order to stay or whether the church will require a 75% majority to ask him to go!

### **b) Plurality of Eldership**

This can be an enormous strength. It has been so in my own experience. However the relationship between a minister and his fellow elders (and I may say their wives as well!) is clearly vital. We should work hard at developing a relationship of mutual confidence and deep spiritual fellowship in which differences of opinion can be openly discussed without threatening the relationship. The same applies of course to our relationship with deacons and other leaders within the church.

Ideally at least, we should aim at some variety within the eldership. The eldership should not be restricted to stereotypes of the minister! Of course we need whole hearted agreement on the things that matter most. But it ought to be evident that there are differences of personality and temperament within the eldership and even, within the parameters allowed by the church's position, some minor differences in outlook and emphases. It should be clearly agreed by every elder that they will never allow differences between them to be exploited. But the kind of variation which I am trying to describe will help the eldership to hold the confidence of the whole congregation and prevent a gulf opening up between the membership and the eldership which can be so detrimental. Let me quote Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "as Christians we must all do the same essential things but we do them in different ways". Then with regard to preachers in particular: "he can use one man to make the message appeal to a certain type, while another person could not be used in that respect. Different presentations appeal to different people and rightly so and God makes use of all" (Spiritual Depression p. 96). What the Doctor applies more narrowly to preachers has application surely to wider aspects of leadership. Particularly for those of us who have been in one pastorate for many years, to be able to share our ministry with other men, preferably full time assistants or associates can be enormously helpful. It will help to keep us fresh and alleviate some of the pressures which accumulate with the years. The congregation will also appreciate a little variety from the pulpit! All of us can get into a rut and pull the church into it as well! And we should note that some ministers do not survive, not because of opposition from their churches, but due to sheer exhaustion, mental, physical or spiritual.

### **c) Seeking help outside the church in times of difficulties**

Some have suggested that Presbyterianism has distinct advantages over independency, not least in relation to the particular matter we have been considering. Perhaps so. But the fact of the matter is that none of us can exercise a ministry amongst a congregation which has lost its confidence in us. One of the great strengths of independency is that it recognises the unique nature of the relationship between minister and congregation, a relationship which must be freely chosen and in no way imposed. By the same token it can only be maintained by the willing consent of both parties. This is not to say, however, that the seeking of advice from other Christian leaders (whether ministers of local evangelical churches or leaders of church groupings) should not be encouraged. Indeed it is highly desirable. Particularly if it is done at an early stage it may help either minister or congregation to get matters into a better perspective. At the very least it may help matters to be dealt with in a way that is seen to be just and loving. I would certainly want to argue against an over strict and doctrinaire view of independency which proudly refuses any advice from outside. That is manifestly unbiblical. But seeking advice and listening to it is very different from control by some outside body or individual.

In this connection it is worth noting a statement in the Savoy Declaration:

In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or in administrations, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church in their peace, union, and edification, or any member or members of any church are injured in, or by any proceeding in censures, not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet in a synod or council, to consider and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference to be reported to all the churches concerned. Howbeit, these synods so assembled are not entrusted with any church power, properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures, either over any churches or persons, or to impose their determinations on the churches or officers.

The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689 has a similar statement.

Perhaps it is appropriate to note one particular kind of outside interference which is not uncommon but which is normally unhelpful: that of a previous minister. It is understandable that members of a church, in a time of difficulty with their present pastor, might turn for advice to a previous one whom they loved and esteemed. It seems to me that, at the very least, he should not encourage this and be most careful in the way he responds. Certainly he should never take the initiative in commenting to church members on the shortcomings of their current minister and be extremely reticent about endorsing theirs.

We minister as very imperfect saints amongst equally imperfect saints. There may also be in our churches people who have risen to positions of considerable influence who may be unregenerate. So despite our best endeavours and all the wisdom that we can muster, not to mention our prayers, we may find ourselves sadly having to leave a church to which we believe God had called us. What then? We must surely beware of the pitfall of long term bitterness and an unforgiving spirit which may effectively destroy any future ministry we might otherwise have. And our great comfort should surely be this: our Lord Jesus himself was despised and rejected by men. We sometimes deserve that; he certainly did not. But he is our great high priest and is able to both sympathise with us and strengthen us in our time of deep trouble. Moreover we can rejoice that all things do indeed work together for good to those who love God and whom he has called to be his own. As part of the outworking of that we may expect that a sense of rejection by the Lord's people will lead us into closer fellowship with our Lord himself.

On trial before the Sanhedrin our Lord said "from now on the Son of man will be seated at the right hand of the almighty God" (Luke 22:69). These words reflect the confidence of our Lord Jesus that his Father would vindicate him. That is what enabled him to be largely silent before his tormentors. He committed himself, says Peter, to him that judges justly (1 Peter 2:23). So must we, remembering always that it is God's verdict on us in eternity that is important – rather than what others think of us in the here and now.

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