

Part One: Servant Shepherd

Avoiding Spiritual Abuse as a Pastor

Introduction

It is simple to dismiss the subject of spiritual abuse.

It is rationalized away as follows: 'Therapy culture dominates modern life. Much of our behaviour and attitudes have become shaped by society's emphasis on the fact that you must never hurt anyone's feelings. People have become over-sensitive and they over-react when church leaders are a little brusque in their challenges or direct in their sermons. These days it is too easy to play the victim.'

But whereas our cultural environment has affected churches, and not every claim to have been mistreated by those in positions of leadership is true, nevertheless the Bible itself warns against church leaders misusing their power.

Never darken the doors of a church again

Shockingly and sadly, physical and sexual abuse within the church is a reality. This book is not meant to address those cruel, complex and criminal actions which hit the headlines. It is about more ordinary matters. There are lesser degrees of misbehaviour and bullying on the part of leaders, which can leave people deeply hurt emotionally. Sometimes it causes their faith in Christ to fall to pieces – perhaps wrecked irreparably. Some who have been enthusiastic Christians vow never to darken the doors of a church again.

When this happens, God is angry. Listen to his words against those leaders who should care for his people, but actually injure or neglect them:

'Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! ... You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally ... I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock' (Ezek. 34:2-10).

In a parable, the Lord Jesus warned those who are put in charge of the servants in his house that if they are wicked and begin to beat the other servants, they can expect severe punishment at his Second Coming (Mt. 24:45-51). The apostles frequently warn church leaders against 'lording it' over God's flock which has been entrusted to their care (2 Cor. 1:24; 1 Pet. 5:3; 2 Cor. 11:20).

We are fallible and sinful

The subject of spiritual abuse needs to be taken seriously by pastors. We believe all people are sinful, including church leaders and elders like us. We are all quite capable of ill-treating people, either inadvertently or knowingly. We all have a tendency to cover up our failings. We need to look at ourselves.

This part will help us begin to think through this hugely important matter, that we might be faithful, wise and balanced in our pastoral care. The Lord is able to make us good shepherds of his sheep for his glory and the benefit of his flock.