The Perfect Can Judge

Dan Matthews, Mike Davies 29 August 2022



If you are part of a church, you will often have heard a pastor or preacher encouraging us to serve God well and to follow Him with all our hearts. If we truly love Jesus, then it should certainly be our spirit's deep desire to do so, but how often have we seen people take offence or find something they just can't "agree with" and leave to find another church?

Perhaps it's even something we have done ourselves, where we just feel like we can't submit to the church's leadership. So we leave, maybe to drift for a while between other churches. In these cases, we often see that people's spiritual growth takes a knock. They can be doing so well, but suddenly it almost feels like they get derailed from God's plans. They can get back on track, by God's grace, but it takes time and can be painful.

The reality is this, though: it is rarely about a genuine point of theology. Very few things would actually drive enough of a wedge into the unity of the body to compel us to leave. In the church I attend, we all strive to follow Jesus without compromise, and there are (of course) some non-negotiables. However, that still leaves space for people with surprisingly differing viewpoints – even within the leadership.

The Struggle With Church Leadership

So why is it that we struggle so much to stay, serve and grow in a church? If there is space within the boundaries to find God's purpose in our individual way, why do we find ourselves at such odds with church leadership? Why do we kick back against what they say and what they ask of us?

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A Biblical Example

I believe the answer is found in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (actually, there were more – but only two are in the Bible). The church had issues, especially around unity and purity, and Paul had addressed them on it. It seems that they hadn't reacted well, so Paul addressed them again in this letter. He speaks a lot in the letter of his pride in the Corinthians and praises them for the things they do well. He says that the Corinthian church themselves are his letter of recommendation – and that is high praise indeed from Paul! In Chapter 6 verse 1, he starts with a challenge: "As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." (NIV) He exhorts the Corinthians that they are on this journey together, and spells out how the Apostles modelled the way workers should act (2 Corinthians 6: 4-10, NIV):

- by great endurance in persecution, purity, knowledge, patience and benevolence,
- through glory and dishonour, slander and praise,
- as sorrowful yet rejoicing, and as poor, but making many rich.
- by the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful teaching and the power of God.

The Corinthians were certainly not living out many of these well. And so now Paul has to challenge them to do so. He says: "We have spoken to you freely, Corinthians…" (2 Corinthians 6:11a, NIV).

The Role of Love

But then how does he continue? Does he list what they are doing wrong? Does he challenge their behaviour? Well, he certainly challenges things later in his letter, but first he does something else: "opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange — I speak as to my children — open wide your hearts also" (2 Corinthians 6:11b – 13, NIV).

Wow! What a sucker punch! Just pause for a moment and realise the weightiness of what Paul is saying. This is the church of which he boasts; the church which speaks of who Paul himself is; the church he LOVES. And yet they don't have the same love for him. How will they ever be able to hear the challenges and encouragements that God has for them if they don't open their hearts?

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And this, I fear, is what we do all too often. We may try to say the right things and do the right things. We may sincerely ask God for direction and conviction. But have we given our hearts to those whom God has appointed to lead us? If they are godly leaders – and I know in my church they are – then I know they love us passionately. They want the best for us. But are we restricted in our affections for them? If so, then it is only a matter of time before we find some point to disagree on, possibly even immaterial, and decide to leave the body to which God called us. And, in so doing, derail our spiritual walk.

A Challenge to Us All – Give Yourself

This is my challenge to myself and everyone reading: give your heart to the leaders God has placed over you. Think the best of them, want the best for them, pray for them and make it easy for them to lead you (Hebrews 13:17). They aren't perfect – none of us is – but don't let anyone else's imperfections derail your spiritual growth. It would break my heart for my leaders to tell me that they know I don't love them as much as they love me. Wouldn't that break yours too?