

# How To Spot a Manipulative Church Leader - by Donald Miller

I grew up in a small town in Texas and attended a small church. I loved my church. I loved the jovial pastor; all the men in suits who rubbed me on the head as I came in and out of the sanctuary; the kind ladies who always brought us muffins in Sunday school and especially the youth camps we'd go to over the summers. Church was my second home, and it almost feels like I spent more time there than in my own home.

One winter though, our pastor decided to retire. We threw an enormous party in his honor. I'll never forget person after person walking to the microphone to tell stories about the many years he'd shepherded our congregation. People cried, we sang, we brought gifts, we ate food, we laughed until late into the night. It took a full month for everybody to say their goodbyes.

I am eternally grateful the first minister I encountered was such a good man.

Because the second minister I encountered wasn't.

A committee was put in place to replace our pastor and the committee decided to hire a dynamic young man from Louisiana. The man had been a traveling preacher, moving from church to church to perform revivals and to tell people about Jesus. He was a tall man and loud. He flailed his arms as he spoke. He talked about God's power, about God's wrath, about God's love and to be honest, he was quite moving.

He was incredible at getting people to respond. He had a sharp sense of humor, would occasionally say shocking things to test our loyalty and see if

we would turn on him or go with him. He knew the Bible inside and out and knew how to play human emotions like a fiddle. On any given Sunday, we would experience a range of emotions from guilt and shame to fear and sometimes joy.

I even remember his first sermon. It was entitled "*Appoint those you trust and trust those you appoint.*" That should have been an obvious sign to everybody. He was saying, without question, if you hire me to be your pastor, I am the boss. You must never question my authority.

Soon, the entire congregation fell under his spell. We loved it when he delighted in us but feared screwing up. One Sunday, he snapped at the man working in the sound booth so sharply the man turned red from embarrassment. The pastor, realizing he'd gone too far, explained ferociously that God is a God of excellence and wouldn't stand for mistakes, even from volunteer sound guys. He then quoted a passage about how we were supposed to be perfect even as Christ is perfect.

Looking back, this was all manipulation. People who care about the truth understand they are capable of self-deception and surround themselves with accountability. This pastor got rid of the accountability. He drove off any elder who wouldn't submit, once again, quoting scripture and spinning the Bible so that those questioning his motives looked like infidels. He even said he felt justified using violence against them, simply because they refused to trust the leader God had appointed.

What made the situation so difficult is that the church in fact grew. His off-color sense of humor seemed relevant and even worldly while his knowledge of Scripture gave the congregation a sense of security. In fact, I'd say a sense of security is the main reason people were drawn to the church.

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Don Riso and Russ Hudson, perhaps the world's leading experts on the *enneagram*, talk about controlling, bully-type personalities as being secretly afraid. Many of them had been molested as children and subconsciously believe people are out to get them. Determined to never be molested again, they make themselves big; try to sound tough; try to intimidate people and will never allow themselves to be vulnerable.

They insist that anybody close to them be submissive and will lie and cheat to protect themselves and their empire, all the while posing as a righteous hero. While extremely unhealthy, controlling personalities are stressed and get great relief and a feeling of power by dominating others, even sexually. It is thought that many Priests who have molested young boys did not have a purely sexual motive, but took comfort in dominating young men to gain a sense of security and power, all the while acting as a shepherd in the church.

What happens under the spell of a master manipulator is people unknowingly submit their sense of security to somebody else. They relinquish the responsibility God has given them to govern their own lives to a powerful figure who says to them, "*look, just do what I say and you'll be fine.*"

What they don't realize is the extremely insecure manipulator is gaining security from controlling people, not from protecting them. Being wounded himself, he only wants to surround himself by those who are weak and who will not question him. He subconsciously considers this his layer of armor. The manipulated masses are his protection against outside intruders.

Many people came to know Christ under the manipulative pastor's regime. And anytime he was questioned, he used his knowledge of Scripture statistics about church growth and Christian conversions (though they were greatly exaggerated) to bolster his case and run off accusers. Most people were afraid to contend with him because they knew he would attack them ferociously.

The church then became a revolving door. More than half the people who visited smelled him out and went away, and the pastor didn't mind this at all. He only wanted the submissive; those who would allow him, using scripture, to guide and command every aspect of their lives. He even posted the names of tithing and non-tithing members in the lobby. Those who disagreed with him were written up as insubordinates to God in letters sent to the entire congregation, humiliating them and running them off for good.

He even went as far as to threaten lawsuits. And yet, as said previously, the church grew, filled with submissive people. The more intuitive walked away rolling their eyes.

The pastor, of course, grew more and more controlling. He told the congregation what they could and couldn't read, what they could and couldn't watch on television, what they could and couldn't see at the movies and even who they could and couldn't vote for.

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Things grew very dark however, one evening when the pastor found out one of the elders he wanted to get rid of had visited a bar on the edge of town.

The man and his wife had gone on a double date with some friends and went out to the bar to hear a band. Somebody informed the pastor and he had the elder paged and told him to meet him at his office.

What unfolded was nothing short of a scolding and a witch hunt. The pastor embarrassed the elder and belittled him and informed the church he'd asked for his resignation from the elder board. The elder hadn't so much as sipped a beer, but the pastor wanted to get rid of him anyway.

Within a few weeks, the elder took a gun from his gun cabinet, and took his life.

The pastor of course, felt no remorse, blaming the event on the elder's secret life in which he visited bars.

Ultimately, the power-mongering was too much and too many people began to leave. Manipulators however, do not care to restore anything and will gladly take the ship down with them. They need to feel their power, whether that is to raise somebody up or tear them down. This pastor needed to destroy the church before he left. He slowly fired every member of the staff; then resigned to start a non-profit that mobilized Christians to take up conservative political causes and fight the democrats.

Shortly after he left the church, the pastors own daughter committed suicide in the bathroom of their family home. He had one other child, a college-bound freshman. To this day, his son will not speak to him, and the pastor does not speak of his children. His wife is thought of as a kept woman.

The church, some twenty years later, has not recovered from the destruction. There will never be restoration or reconciliation because the manipulator will never repent.

Repentance is, after all, an act of vulnerability. Manipulators will not put themselves in a place of vulnerability for fear they will once again be abused. They instead demand trust from everybody around them. Those who do not submit are considered enemies.

The devastation from a manipulator goes beyond the loss of life. Too many to count walked away from their faiths because of his tactics. Manipulators are skillful movers of people, so we often see their many accomplishments, but they are even more skilled at hiding the devastation caused behind the scenes.

Christian leaders who are manipulators bring people to Christ at the expense of pushing many, many more people away.

Here's how to smell out a manipulator in a religious setting:

A Christian leader who is manipulative will:

- Never be truly vulnerable. They will never tell stories about their weaknesses. If they do, those stories will be about how they are too strong, too devout and too many other things that are more or less humble brags.
- Always have the true answer, and truth is truth because they said it. The truth in the Bible is complex, but a manipulator knows they can't get you to submit if they don't have ALL the answers. Certainly trained pastors have answers, but nobody has all the answers. Manipulators do. They want to tell you how to live.
- They make you jump through hoops. If you want to get married, you must go through hours of classes so they can approve. If you want to be a member, you must sign a contract or a statement of theological belief, (or vow to submit to the leadership and attend all of the services)

Now many wonderful churches do this sort of thing, but when there is a manipulative leader(s), you'll normally find an endless number of hurdles to jump over. They want to test you, over and over, to make sure you're being submissive.

- They will never let you off the hook. A manipulative leader can never, ever let you be fully free in Christ. There must always be something wrong with you or else you will no longer need them and will no longer have to submit.

If you're in a church with a manipulative leader creating this culture, I believe you should leave. The only way a manipulator stops manipulating is when the manipulation stops working, and by staying, you're saying to the manipulator that it's working. If you fight them, you'll lose.

**Donald Miller**

