

From Shepherds to Sovereigns: How Pastors Mistake Ministry for Monarchy - *Brendon Naicker*

Abstract

This paper explores the modern cultural influences shaping church leadership and governance, focusing on the tension between biblical principles and the adoption of secular values. It challenges the pervasive misconception that ministry is a personal kingdom to be ruled, inherited, or controlled for self-interest. The discussion critiques the tendency to value status, wealth, or influence over spiritual maturity in leadership selection, reflecting the wider cultural preoccupation with materialism, individualism, and consumerism. The paper urges pastors to resist cultural pressures, focus on God's call, and prioritise spiritual servanthood over ambition or popularity.

Introduction

Modern culture often infiltrates the church, bringing with it values and practices that distort the biblical framework for ministry. Today's society is marked by consumerism, individualism, and a desire for power and recognition, all of which threaten to compromise the role of a pastor or leader. This paper critiques these cultural influences, emphasising the importance of servant leadership and spiritual accountability. It challenges the adoption of worldly models of governance, calling for a return to the biblical ideal of ministry as stewardship under God, not as a vehicle for personal ambition or legacy-building.

Ministry as Stewardship, Not Ownership

One of the most troubling cultural influences on ministry today is the perception of church leadership as an opportunity for personal control or familial inheritance. In an era where legacy and individual branding are celebrated, some church leaders have treated ministry as if it were a private enterprise. This mindset mirrors the corporate world rather than the Kingdom of God.

Os Guinness critiques this cultural drift, warning that "the church has succumbed to the seduction of success, power, and recognition, losing sight of its sacred calling."¹ This has resulted in leadership that prioritises personal gain over servanthood. The biblical model, however, is clear: leadership in the Kingdom of God is defined by humility and self-sacrifice. Jesus Himself declared, "*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*" (Matthew 20:26–28).² Leadership is not a platform for self-promotion or familial advantage but a responsibility to serve the body of Christ faithfully.

¹ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), 89.

² Matthew 20:26–28, New International Version.

Regulatory Accountability

Modern legal frameworks, such as the *Charities Act 2011* in the UK, further reinforce the need for impartiality in church governance. These regulations reject the notion of ministry as private property, ensuring that churches operate for the benefit of their communities rather than for the personal gain of individuals or families.³

However, these frameworks also reflect the cultural distrust of institutions, including the church. While they are necessary to prevent abuse, they expose the church's failure to uphold its own biblical standards of accountability. Jonathan Leeman argues that "*church governance must reflect Christ's authority, not the ambitions of individuals.*"⁴

The Impact of Consumerism on Leadership

Consumer culture has deeply influenced how church leadership is perceived and practiced. Many churches have adopted metrics of success based on attendance, revenue, and popularity, often at the expense of spiritual depth. This mirrors the broader cultural obsession with measurable outcomes and visible success. Tim Keller critiques this trend, stating, "*Success can easily become an idol that corrodes the soul of a leader, as it focuses attention on the visible fruits of ministry rather than the invisible work of God in the hearts of people.*"⁵

This emphasis on outward success risks reducing the church to a business model, prioritising growth and efficiency over spiritual transformation. True leadership calls for a return to biblical principles, where faithfulness to God's mission takes precedence over numerical achievements.

The Danger of Leadership as Performance

Modern culture elevates charisma, status, and wealth over spiritual maturity and faithfulness. Consequently, some churches select leaders based on worldly qualifications rather than spiritual discernment. Paul's warning to Timothy remains as relevant today as ever: "*Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others*" (1 Timothy 5:22).⁶ Eugene Peterson critiques this trend, stating, "*The pastoral vocation is not a career or a performance but a call to live among people with transparency and integrity.*"⁷ Yet today, pastors are often pressured to act as CEOs, entertainers, or influencers, prioritising public image over genuine spiritual leadership.

³ Charity Commission, UK. *Charities Act 2011*.

⁴ Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregational Authority* (London: Christian Focus, 2016), 47.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), 101.

⁶ 1 Timothy 5:22, New International Version.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), 198.

The Flaws of Democratic Governance in the Church

While democracy is celebrated in secular society, it often fails to serve the unique needs of the church. Decision-making driven by congregational voting can prioritise personal preferences over spiritual convictions. In churches where spiritual maturity is lacking, democracy can lead to division, compromise, and the adoption of worldly values. John Stott warns against this approach, stating, *“The church is not a democracy where every member has an equal say irrespective of spiritual maturity. Rather, it is a body where Christ reigns, and leadership must reflect His wisdom and guidance.”*⁸

This underscores the importance of spiritual discernment in church governance, ensuring that decisions align with biblical principles rather than catering to popular opinion. Mature, Spirit-led leadership is essential to preserving the integrity and mission of the church.

Spiritual Leadership vs. Popularity

Biblical leadership is not a popularity contest. Paul’s bold declaration reflects this truth: *“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ”* (Galatians 1:10).⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer critiques the elevation of majority rule in the church, writing, *“The church is not a democracy but a community under the Word of God.”*¹⁰ This highlights the need for leaders to prioritise God’s will over human preferences, even when it challenges cultural norms.

Building a Legacy of Servanthood

Contemporary culture often celebrates leaders who leave behind personal legacies of wealth, influence, or recognition. However, the true legacy of a pastor is not measured by worldly standards but by faithfulness to God and the impact of their service on others. As Henri Nouwen writes, *“The leader of the future will be one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there.”*¹¹

This perspective challenges the cultural obsession with success and recognises that a pastor’s true legacy is found in their commitment to servanthood and discipleship. Leaders who focus on advancing God’s Kingdom rather than their own reputation leave a legacy that endures eternally.

⁸ John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 45.

⁹ Galatians 1:10, New International Version.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 33.

¹¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), 22.

The Kingdom Perspective

The cultural obsession with legacy-building has infiltrated many churches, leading leaders to prioritise personal achievements over spiritual impact. Charles Spurgeon warned against this mindset: “Ministers are not to build their own empire but to advance the Kingdom of God, even if it costs them everything.”¹² Pastors must resist the cultural pressure to conform to worldly standards of success, focusing instead on making disciples and equipping others for ministry. A.W. Tozer lamented the church’s loss of spiritual focus, writing, “The church that marries the spirit of the age will find itself a widow in the next.”¹³ This sobering reminder calls pastors to align their leadership with eternal priorities rather than transient cultural trends.

Conclusion

Modern culture poses significant challenges to church leadership, from consumerism and individualism to the adoption of secular governance models. Pastors must resist these influences, remaining faithful to their God-given calling. The role of a pastor is not to build a personal kingdom but to serve God and His people with humility and faithfulness. By prioritising spiritual maturity, accountability, and servanthood, churches can resist the cultural pressures that threaten to undermine their mission. Ultimately, the true measure of a pastor’s legacy lies not in their personal achievements but in their faithfulness to Christ and their impact on the Kingdom of God.

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¹² Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1954), 56.

¹³ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (London: Christian Publications, 1948), 76.