

## The abuse of Pastoral Authority in some churches in Nigeria today

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**Abstract.** This paper is a study of the role that spiritual leaders are to play in the lives of believers and the extent to which Christian religious leaders have abused authority invested into their hands over the years. Authority which is a vital subject for churches today has also become controversial among Bible believers and churches have been torn apart. This old time deception has dogged the footsteps of the old time religion. The major findings were that: Religion or belief that should help man to deal with problems of human life that are significant, persistent, and intolerable has now become the sole problem man is having. Instead of finding fulfillment in the household of the faith, members become bound by fear, frustration, indoctrination, and manipulative mind control that have made their pursuit of God an endless drudgery punctuated by a driven and legalistic lifestyle. *Churches should be sanctuaries not prisons. Faith should be the ultimate freedom not the ultimate trap.* Throughout this paper, researcher discussed abuse of pastoral authority largely in the biblical context. Therefore, the abusive practices and principles we traced were limited to Christianity.

**Keywords:** authority, abuse, church, pastoral authority, effect of abuse.

### 1. Introduction

In our modern times and age, it is becoming more and more evident that we face some very trying times. The pressures of life, family, and the inner weaknesses that all of us grapple with

certainly have become greater and greater, and our society has simultaneously become colder and more impersonal. Many among us turn to religious and spiritual avenues in an effort to address these concerns and in so doing, find fulfillment, understanding, and satisfaction in our lives.

However, many others, no less zealously and sincerely concerned with their well being and that of their children, have found just the opposite in their own religious journeys. Instead of finding fulfillment, they have become bound by fear, frustration, indoctrination, and manipulative mind control that have made their pursuit of God an endless drudgery punctuated by a driven and legalistic lifestyle. This phenomenon is not restricted to a particular church in Nigeria, either. For example, the researcher discovered that it is common to some of the Christian ministers, it was in Ilorin, Kwara state where a minister told young Christian women who were seeking spiritual fellowship with them, that to please God they must confess in detail all of their sexual sins to a "discipler." In Kaduna, a sick child died from a curable illness because of his parents' refusal to seek medical help for "religious convictions" instilled by their church's teachings. Also in Kaduna a young lady who was a fashion designer was asked to fast if she wanted to hear and speak English language. The same fasted until she lost her consciousness. There is a pastor in Ilorin who has the habit of criticizing married couples publicly from the pulpit during Sunday morning worship service for having

missed a midweek prayer service and the pastor often command them to fast and pray to demonstrate repentance for this sinful failure. And in another local case, a pastor who had made himself a paternal grandfather to his flock threatens via prophetic utterance, all who waver at coming forward for a mass public baptism will die by auto accident at the hands of a "death angel", and subsequent eternal damnation if they do not repent. Nouwen (2001) calls these bizarre incidents, an old time deception that has dogged the footsteps of the old time religion; the deceptive snare of abuse of pastoral authority which is inflicted by aberrant Christian churches. Several such groups are currently operating in Ilorin, and many hundreds more exist across the nation. All of them, however, have one thing in common: they regularly inflict religious abuse upon their members in the name of God and Christianity and have committed untold spiritual violence upon them, (Cline 2012). This paper examines the role of the pastor as a light bearer to those who are spiritually blind and in darkness, an instructor to the unlearned (Onwuka 2002, 3). As Onwuka (2002, 4) observes the pastor is an angel of the church set apart to bring the message of hope and salvation to men (cf.Rev.2:1,8;12:3). He is a soul winner who knows the price of a soul and its precious worth (Garry 1994, 204). He is a spiritual physician who knows how to diagnose men's case and to rightly apply the medication of the word of God to their spiritual needs (Robert 1981,20) and he is a spiritual parent who begets souls in Christ Jesus through the preaching of the gospel among others (Onwuka, 8). The pertinent questions which the paper seeks to investigate include: Why do pastors abuse the God-given authority in the church? What is the perceived effect of abuse of pastoral authority in the church? Thus, the aim of the study is to re-examine the prevalence of abuse of pastoral authority, and the havoc it has generated for the church in the contemporary times with a view to exploring and expressing the biblical views on the right usage of pastoral authority.

## 2. The New Testament on Pastoral Authority

In New Testament usage the terms "pastor," "elder," "overseer," "bishop" and "shepherd" apparently referring to the same office (Tit.1:5-7). The term "elder" (πρεσβύτερος) Occurs in the New Testament sixty-five times and has three main and several secondary meanings, e.g., members of the lay nobility, as opposed to the high-priestly nobility among the members of the Sanhedrin, elders in the Jewish synagogue communities, Christian congregational elders, including members of the leadership council of the original community, leaders of Pauline Gentile mission congregations, the twenty-four heavenly elders in Revelation, and simply those who are older. Overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) appears five times in the NT. It refers to Christ in 1Peter 2:25 and elsewhere to individuals who have a function or an office in the Christian community (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7). "Shepherd"/ pastor (ποιμήν) occurs 18 times, most often in the Gospels. Outside the Gospels it occurs only in Ephesians 4:11; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25. The verb, on the other hand, appears only 3 times in the Gospels of a total of 11 NT occurrences (Matt 2:6; Luke 17:7; John 21:16) and 4 times in Revelation (Verbrugge 2000, 488, 480, 198).

Often times, these terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament (Tit. 1:5-7). In 1 Peter 5, the same church leader who is called "elder" (πρεσβύτερος) in verse 1, is also called pastor or shepherd (ποιμήν) in verse 2, and even bishops or overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) in verse 2. Therefore, the hierarchical form of church government which places bishops over elders in modern times is not necessarily biblical. (O'Donovan 1996, 171) is therefore, correct when he says that a pastor-elder is a bishop, and a bishop is an elder. Since they continue the juridical role of synagogue, when one honours and submits to them, one is not submitting merely to a man; but submitting to the Lord and Chief Shepherd of the church who has placed them in the church. This view is also supported in Romans 13:1 which says "Obey the rulers who have authority over you. Only God can give authority to anyone, and he puts these rulers in their places of power" (CEV). Grudem (2000,912) then opines that as a pastor does all of the work of the ministry-every Christian must

be busy in the work of Christ; but the pastor trains the people for their individual ministries and supervises the work of the ministry.

Thus the authority of a pastor is for the purpose of building up and protecting God's people and work. It is a humble authority--the authority of a steward (Mk. 10:42-45; 1 Cor. 3:9; 4:1; 12:7; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10; 5:3-5). It is a loving authority--the authority of a father (1 Thess. 2:7-11). The pastor is to have a godly, loving, tender, sacrificial consideration for the welfare of the people. His rule is not to be an overbearing, self-serving type of rule. He rejoices when his children mature and stand on their own feet before Christ. His goal is not to make the people dependent on him; his goal is to teach the members so that they can interpret the Bible properly for themselves and find direction for their lives directly from Christ through the indwelling Spirit. It is a liberating authority--the authority to build up not hold down. "For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed" (2 Cor. 10:8). A godly pastor is not in the church to hinder the Spirit's working through the body of believers by exercising an oppressive type of "pastoring" that cripples individual vision and initiative. His role in the church is rather to build up the body so that it prospers spiritually and all of the various gifts are functioning and Christ can be Lord throughout the entire body to freely accomplish His work. Godly pastors have the goal of maturing the flock so that they can participate in the work of the Lord to the fullest extent possible. They do not want to tie the saints down but to liberate them to their greatest potential in Christ (2Cor.13:10; cf Douglas, 2007,693). These, and other passages, show that pastoral authority should be exercised for the benefit of those under authority and never for the benefit of the person exhibiting the authority.

### **3. The Practices in some churches: Abuse of Pastoral Authority**

Having established the pastoral authority in the New Testament, writer shall now discuss the practices in some churches and how pastoral

authority is being abused. Religious abuse is the crushing psychological, spiritual and emotional damage suffered by members of authoritarian communities of faith whenever its spiritual authority is twisted by spiritual leaders to achieve a desired goal through unethical, cruel and damaging means. Sometimes these may be physical or sexual in nature, but much more often, it is more clearly seen in the many various forms of mental and spiritual trauma that are inflicted upon church members, often through the practice of abusive leaders using personal influence upon a community of faith to turn people on one another to exercise and magnify their power and position in the name of "church order." (Essien, 2010, 642). This sort of "discipline" often deeply crushes the mind and spirit of every church member who is unfortunate enough to become subject to it. Individual initiative, critical thinking and personal choices of action are strongly discouraged and condemned by aberrant church leaders as sinful pride. It is made quite clear to the group by the pastor or leaders that the only really important goals in life are those that they dictate to the group. These practices - harsh and bizarre as they often become - are viewed by the group leaders as genuine acts of devotion that all true believers will gladly submit to so as to obtain divine favour and spiritual growth. Obiora (1998, 21) calls it "Divine Deceit: Business in religion. Still, others just call it religious 419 being that it defrauds weak-minded people in the society (Fakoya, 2008). Consequently, Ferguson (2005, 11) sharing the Australian experience, label them "God's Millionaires" who act as chief executives using aggressive business tactics to build their congregation with little or no reference to God and rather than being Christocentric they are overtly materialistic in outlook.

Such an aberrant church can be and is any church group, Catholic, Pentecostal, or Evangelical that inflicts upon its members various forms of abuse through deliberate acts of church-sanctioned deception, manipulation and intimidation, at both public and private levels. It does not stop there, however; the aberrant church presents itself as the only true church to have exclusive possession of the way of

salvation which no other church can possibly have. Aberrant religious groups always seem, at first glance, quite normal. They are usually led by a pastor or small core of leaders who seem to be dynamic defenders of Christianity, men and women of faith and power who tirelessly watch their flocks. They often appear to be humble, dedicated figures whose positions of leadership often bring with them leading roles in the larger community outside the four walls of the church, but they freely utilized their influence for their own temporal gain, at the expense of their followers. However, the watchful rule of such leaders are profoundly control-oriented, and they achieve and maintain a shocking degree of power over their members, who willingly submit to it under the impression that they are pleasing God. Jeffrey (2001, 67) says, there are churches where public condemnation and criticism of people in morning worship is the expected norm, and where members actually appear to expect and approve of it as *vital* to "staying in church.". What is even more tragic, however, is that many spiritually abusive leaders of aberrant churches sincerely believe that the degree of unbiblical submission they are demanding of their followers is necessary for their good.

When all else fails, abusive pastors and their defenders may fall back on the conversations between David and Saul in 1 Samuel 24 and 26 where David refuses to take Saul's life because he is "not allowed to touch God's anointed one." Abusive leaders then say "because pastors are the representative of God, no one should stand against them under any circumstance." It clears that these passages are taken out of context and grossly misapplied to fit their desires and their defenders. These leaders rationalize and defend such behaviour under the guise of love and shepherding. Another scripture commonly used to justify abusive control and authoritarianism by the leaders of some churches is Hebrews 13:17, which says, "Obey those who rule over you..." Young (2012) says, "These leaders think that this means they have blanket authority over the flock entrusted to them and that they can proceed to take control over the personal lives and personal faith of believers". According to him, the word "**obey**" in this passage literally means "to be persuaded by" in the original text.

Nothing in this verse gives church leadership unrestrained control over the lives of others. Instead, it teaches believers to consider the example set by truly loving, God-fearing, servant-leaders that lead us to Christ.

In short, those that wish to act as dictators are not fulfilling a calling of God but are instead elevating themselves into a position to serve their own self-interests and ambitions. They step outside of biblical teachings for the purpose of fulfilling their desires to control the lives of others. Some of the greatest leaders in the Bible – Paul, Peter, John and even Jesus himself – explicitly taught against those that wish to "lord" over believers. Ironically, those that claim "authority" themselves reject genuine authority – that of the scriptures and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Charles Swindoll, (quoted by Openshaw 2012) once shared on the subject of "Christian Guru's", those leaders in the church or an organization who either elevate themselves, or are elevated by their followers to become their "guru". The leader's followers venerate him and subject themselves to him. He is the source of their revelation, doctrine and truth. They give him their undivided loyalty, and unconsciously uphold him as their object of "pedestal worship". There comes with this devotion, a total reluctance or refusal to act without the "guru's" directions or edicts that come from his "headquarters temple". As a result of this he holds great power over them. On the other extreme, "dictator" seeks to control his church by the strong hand of his authority, his personal strengths, or his powerful charisma. The dictator can diabolically control others through the intimidation of his presence, through fear, or by the manifestations of power which he can exercise.

Pastoral authority is not a matter of controlling, manipulating, coercing or ordering people around. Pastoral authority is about protecting the sheep that God has entrusted to one's care. In cases of pastoral abuse, these types of defenses are clear misinterpretation of pastoral authority at best and a perversion of God's Word at worst. Additionally, it shows a lack of concern and care for those who experience abuse. It is important to note that blind, unquestioning loyalty to

pastoral leadership is one of the marks of a cult. Any pastor who insists on it is probably an hireling and not a true shepherd.

**Martinez (2012) while talking on this same issue, views it in terms of** seven bars of religiously abusive prisons, which he lists as: absolute obedience to the elite - submission to all dictates of leaders at any price; extreme group conformity - undue compulsion to adopting a community code of conduct; suspension of critical thinking - group rejection of independent thought as sinful, demonic; twisting of Scripture - misinterpretation of biblical passages/teachings to magnify authority; phobic manipulation - using fear of punishment to intentionally control and dominate another; coerced confession of faults - forced pressure on the self and others to confess to "sins"; abusive excommunication - brutal expulsion of members and harsh treatment afterwards. This is usually achieved through the usage of mind control. This is, by definition, an effective control of both thought and behaviour of another through involuntary means that are deliberately set up for the unsuspecting to be lured into. The devices used to construct individual snares for prospective converts and church members are many and diabolically sophisticated (Wright, 2001,25). They usually revolve around the leaders' usage of every means at their disposal to influence group member behaviour, which include, but are not limited to family ties, scripture twisted out of context, emotional and social bonds with the group, personal weaknesses, heavy handed authority figures claiming to be the voice of God, and individual heartfelt desires simply to "do the right thing." These techniques of control are used in conjunction with one another - either simultaneously or together - to achieve the desired degree of control, reinforcing each other in the abusive culture, which can and usually is found anywhere people gather to live.

We concede that this widespread, yet well-hidden, spiritual scourge seems too unbelievable to be true. However, Itent ((2009), a Christian sociologist who has interviewed many former members of abusive churches in his book,

*Churches That Abuse* says about the seeming "peculiarity" of it all:

You may even feel that the abusive practices described appear to be far removed from the world of conventional churchgoers, and, it is hoped, they are. Yet, I am convinced that tendencies toward abusive styles of leadership are far more prevalent than most Christians realize. **If we are honest with ourselves, we might admit that at least the potential for authoritarianism may exist in some of our own backyards.**

Therefore, Watts (2012) orates that when the authority lays an intentional claim that its leadership role has been divinely-bestowed, and is even exclusive of all others, the potential for abusive control sharply rises. Legitimate Christian authority is rooted in the nature of God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ as clearly defined by the Christian scriptures, but illegitimate "Christian" authority is based upon the purely human tendency to obey authority that appears to be divinely bestowed only to an elite group who have regained the "real meaning" of the scriptures. Like a cancerous affliction, such abusive authority is a wild growth in the Body of Christ that can survive only through the aggressive subjugation of living cells and tissues. And there have been hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people throughout the history of Christianity who have fallen prey to this horrendous abuse of power and enslavement of soul.

One aspect of abusive authority occurs between senior and junior pastors. Dysfunctional senior pastors often abuse and emotionally damage their junior. On one occasion a senior pastor mistakenly thought the junior pastor had disrespected him. The senior pastor slapped the junior pastor off his chair. Some other junior pastors also have similar experiences. A recent occurrence was a 'You Tube' showing the General Overseer of the Living Faith Church also known as the Winner's Chapel, David Oyedepo, in which he smacked an unyielding female church member during deliverance service. This has sparked social media outrage in Nigeria and around the world. The video

immediately became an internet sensation and after it was posted on You Tube, it drew a widespread condemnation of the pastor's action, which many see as gender abuse. It was about the pastor, affectionately called "Papa" by members of his church, slapping a lady kneeling before him. Apparently, the lady refused to admit she was a witch. After several prods by the pastor, the lady rather insisted she was a "witch for Jesus" a claim that apparently angered the pastor. Bishop Oyedepo then slapped her on the left cheek, yelling, "Do you know who you are talking to?" The congregation cheered but the courageous lady insisted she was not a witch. The disappointed pastor dismissed the lady; saying she had no place in heaven. Many Nigerians who had seen the video took on their social media communities to condemn the pastor's action while hailing the lady for maintaining her stance in the face of such brutality. The condemnation, commentators say, is not just for the pastor's spiritual tactics but also a denunciation of violence against women. Human rights activists have labeled the pastor's action as "religious bullying", "violence against woman" and "child abuse." (<http://www.jehovahs-witness.net>)

Others give in to egoism and develop wounding habits. A pastor of a small church in a rural area wanted his church to buy an empty school and turn it into a Bible college. His staff was skeptical because the cost seemed prohibitive. The same pastor publicly rebuked his staff for their lack of faith and mandated they should follow him as he follows God. Ego-driven senior pastors believe they have the right to discipline associates who get in their way most especially in the area of posting and transferring. A pastor who is a victim is often transferred to a remote station or a new preaching station where there are few or no member at all. This is what leads to schism even in Ilorin. Because of leadership training, other senior pastors believe that appropriating a ministry vision is their first priority. They feel constrained to promote that vision above all else. Senior pastors become wounding agents when they place their goals and visions over the well-being of their associates. Senior pastors sometimes act out in destructive ways when they are overburdened by

stress, burnout, or a conflicted sense of self. A senior pastor's depression may also contribute to his tendency to mistreat others. Wounding agents rarely see themselves as needing change; they believe others must change. If wounding agents do not get their way, they may act out in harmful ways and may be completely unaware of the trauma they are causing. This is often seen in some of the prophets and prophetesses who have been confronted physically and yet without a change. Another example is seen in the toxic Churches. A toxic church often mistreats staff associates. A toxic church exists when doing becomes more important than being. People in a toxic church believe their service to God is keeping church systems functioning. They believe God's blessing results in bigger budgets for bigger buildings to accommodate more people. Looking successful replaces love as the key ingredient.

#### **4. The Effect of Abuse of Pastoral Authority**

The immediate effect of abuse of pastoral authority reflects on the members who are at the receiving end. Many sincere and well-intentioned believers are led astray into extra and unbiblical teachings. The ultimate outcome is a distorted view of Christ and the gospel, which causes many to ultimately walk away from God altogether. For those that manage to function within an authoritarian church, usually feelings of guilt, condemnation and worthlessness hang like a dark cloud over their Christian walk. Obviously, this is not what God intended for his children. Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt.11:31). Sometimes, people thus abused are consumed with anger, bitterness, shame, and disillusionment. They are prone to depression and acting-out behavior, including over eating, over spending alcoholism, drug addiction, pornography, promiscuity, and family dysfunction. For example, a young pastor once told the researcher that when he was a driver to one senior pastor, he often drove him to different hotels for sexual act in the name of going to the mountain top for prayers. The senior pastor would do all kinds of immoral behaviour which

later affected the young man when he became a pastor.

Too many pastors abuse their authority so much that they hinder and cripple the work of God by turning the ministry of the Lord into a “one man show,” and the people rise only to the level of their servants and never mature to the true liberty in Christ that is anticipated in Eph. 4:13 “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”(NIV). Christianity from its inception has been a religion of service to humanity. This was first seen in the founder of the religion himself, Jesus Christ, who did a lot of humanitarian services such as healing the sick, educating people about salvation and the kingdom of God, calling people to repentance, so as to have eternal life and providing for those who were in need physically, materially and spiritually; abuse of pastoral authority will rather prevent all of that from being achieved.

Another effect of abuse of pastoral authority is a lack of practical links between the educated classes and the masses of the church. This situation has continued to increase the already impoverished socio-economic conditions of the citizens of Nigeria. Nepotism, despotism and tribalism have eaten deep into the conscience of every Nigerian leader including pastor “the spiritual father of the nation”. A known senior pastor, who is also a Professor, would visit and give serious attention to the educated class while he pays little or no attention to the masses. Some of our senior pastors who are also state holders in the society, instead of serving the people and making any positive impact in maintaining a virile, dynamic and integrated nation, abuse their God-giving authority and rather represent their personal interest. This in a way contribute to Nigerian’s lack of politically, economic and spiritual growth.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the pastoral authority that exists in the New Testament and also highlighted the abuse of pastoral authority in some churches in Nigeria. This abuse is a traumatic process of unethical manipulation and

domination, intentionally inflicted by some church leaders upon their followers. This control is achieved through various manipulative forms of actual mind control. Some pastors give in to egoistic thinking and develop wounding habits. Ego-driven senior pastors believe they have the right to discipline associates who get in their way most especially in the area of posting and transfer. This is contrary to the concept of liberating authority that is taught in the New Testament. Abuse of pastoral authority turns the church from a sanctuary into a prison; the faith which should lead to ultimate freedom becomes an ultimate trap. However, this conclusion does not negate the fact that God has given authority to the pastor and that the Bible demands that members submit to God-called pastors who are leading according to God’s word. That some pastors abuse their authority is not a license for church members to become rebellious toward genuine God-given authority.

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