

When Religion Manipulates

Galatians 4:17–18

“They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you.”

Introduction: Not Every Church That Makes Much of You Is Necessarily Helping You

There is a difference between a church being interested **in you** and a church being interested in **what you can contribute to the institution**.

That difference is not always easy to recognize.

A salesman may be extremely interested in you right up until you say:

“I’m not buying anything.”

A politician may suddenly remember your neighborhood when an election approaches.

A distant relative may suddenly become unusually friendly when he discovers you own a beach house.

And churches can sometimes become very interested in people for reasons that have more to do with:

attendance,

loyalty,

money,

volunteers,

reputation,

institutional survival,

or influence

than with whether Christ is actually being formed in them.

Paul understood that danger.

In Galatians 4, false teachers had entered the churches of Galatia.

They were flattering the Galatians.

Courting them.

Making much of them.

Making them feel important.

But Paul says:

Be careful.

Their attention has an ulterior motive.

Verse 17 says:

“They make much of you, but for no good purpose.”

That is an extraordinary warning.

Not all religious enthusiasm is spiritual.

Not all attention is love.

Not everything that calls itself ministry is necessarily producing maturity.

Not everything done “for the church” is necessarily being done for Christ.

Sometimes the question we need to ask is:

What kind of people is this church trying to produce?

Are we trying to produce mature disciples of Jesus?

Or merely dependable supporters of the organization?

I. Unhealthy Motives Can Hide Beneath Spiritual Language

The Judaizers did not walk around saying:

“We would like to control you.”

They sounded spiritual.

They talked about:

Moses,

the law,

circumcision,

Abraham,

covenant,

obedience,

holiness,

tradition.

All of those subjects sounded religious.

But Paul looked beneath the vocabulary to what their teaching was actually producing.

That is one of the hardest kinds of discernment.

Unhealthy church cultures rarely introduce themselves by saying:

“Welcome. We would like to make you emotionally dependent upon us.”

No church sign says:

“Our goal is to make you afraid to disagree.”

Nobody puts on the website:

“We hope eventually you will confuse loyalty to this congregation with loyalty to Christ.”

Nobody advertises:

“Questions discouraged. Independent thought frowned upon.”

It is usually much more subtle.

Spiritual language can sometimes conceal very unspiritual dynamics.

Words such as:

unity,

submission,

faithfulness,

commitment,

loyalty,

sacrifice,

church family,

and spiritual authority

can all be beautiful biblical ideas.

But any biblical idea can be distorted.

“Unity” can become:

“Don’t disagree.”

“Faithfulness” can become:

“Never leave.”

“Submission” can become:

“Never question.”

“Sacrifice” can become:

“Give more than is healthy.”

“Church family” can become:

“Your relationships outside this group are less important.”

That is why discernment matters.

The issue is not merely:

What does the church say?

The issue is also:

What does the church produce?

II. Does the Church Point People Toward Christ or Toward Itself?

This may be one of the clearest tests.

Ask:

Where is this church pointing people?

Toward Christ?

Toward Scripture?

Toward spiritual maturity?

Toward dependence upon God?

Or increasingly toward the institution itself?

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1:

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

Notice the qualification.

Even Paul did not want loyalty to terminate with Paul.

Everything ultimately pointed beyond him to Christ.

That is how a healthy church should function.

The church is like a signpost.

Nobody drives to Virginia Beach, sees the highway sign, pulls the car over, spreads out the beach towels beside the sign and says:

“Honey, we made it!”

The sign is not the destination.

Its purpose is to point beyond itself.

In the same way:

The church is not the Savior.

The denomination is not the Savior.

The program is not the Savior.

The tradition is not the Savior.

The building is not the Savior.

The ministry brand is not the Savior.

Christ is.

A healthy church constantly points beyond itself.

Its message is:

“Know Christ.”

“Follow Christ.”

“Obey Christ.”

“Become like Christ.”

An unhealthy church gradually begins communicating:

“You need us in order to remain close to Christ.”

Those are very different messages.

III. Does the Church Want People to Grow or Remain Dependent?

This may be the central issue.

The Judaizers wanted dependence.

Paul wanted maturity.

Galatians 4:19 reveals Paul’s heart:

“My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”

That phrase tells us everything:

“Until Christ is formed in you.”

Paul did not say:

“Until you cannot function without us.”

He did not say:

“Until you agree with our group about everything.”

He did not say:

“Until you are loyal enough never to question us.”

He said:

“Until Christ is formed in you.”

That is the goal of the church.

Not merely attendance.

Not merely participation.

Not merely membership.

Not simply keeping programs alive.

The goal is:

Christ formed in people.

That means mature believers.

Believers who know Scripture.

Believers who pray.

Believers who discern.

Believers who serve.

Believers who can feed themselves spiritually.

Believers who can eventually help others grow.

A healthy church should not be afraid of spiritually mature people.

It should produce them.

The goal is not:

“They cannot function without this church program.”

The goal is:

“They know Christ, understand Scripture, walk in the Spirit, love the church, and can stand firm.”

V. Who Ultimately Benefits?

This is an extremely helpful question.

Who ultimately benefits from the life of this church?

Christ?

The people?

The community?

The needy?

The lost?

Future generations?

Or primarily the institution itself?

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:14:

“I seek not what is yours but you.”

That is a remarkable ministry philosophy.

Not:

“I want what you can give.”

But:

“I want you.”

Paul was concerned about what Christ was doing **in them**, not merely what they could do **for him**.

Churches must periodically ask the same question.

Do we value people primarily because they:

give?

volunteer?

teach?

sing?

serve on committees?

fill positions?

increase attendance?

strengthen the budget?

Or would we still value them if they could do none of those things?

That question exposes a great deal.

A healthy church says:

“You matter because you belong to Christ.”

An unhealthy church can gradually communicate:

“You matter because you are useful.”

There is an enormous difference.

VI. Does the Church Expand Your Freedom in Christ or Shrink It?

Spiritual manipulation frequently appears as greater spirituality.

More rules.

More restrictions.

More expectations.

More hoops.

More traditions presented as commandments.

More layers between the believer and God.

Paul says throughout Galatians:

Christ has set you free.

The Judaizers effectively responded:

Not so fast.

You still need our system.

You still need these requirements.

You still need our approval.

You still need these additional markers.

Religious control thrives whenever believers are taught that acceptance with God depends upon institutional approval.

The gospel says:

“There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

The healthy church helps people walk directly with Christ.

It teaches Scripture.

It encourages prayer.

It provides fellowship.

It offers accountability.

It strengthens faith.

But it never attempts to replace Christ.

A healthy church stands beside the believer and points toward Jesus.

An unhealthy church gradually begins standing between the believer and Jesus.

VII. A Healthy Church Produces Spiritual Self-Feeders

This is an important part of spiritual maturity.

At some point Christians must learn to feed themselves spiritually.

Hebrews says:

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles...”

There comes a time when believers must accept responsibility for their own spiritual growth.

No church can read your Bible for you.

No Sunday school class can pray in your place.

No worship service can obey Christ for you.

No Bible study can repent for you.

The church can:

equip,

teach,

encourage,
correct,
strengthen,
and support.

But eventually every believer must:

open Scripture,
pray,
obey,
worship,
serve,
and seek God personally.

A healthy church does not create permanent spiritual consumers.

It produces spiritual adults.

People who eventually stop saying:

“Somebody needs to feed me.”

And begin saying:

“Show me how to feed myself.”

And eventually:

“Let me help feed somebody else.”

That is maturity.

VIII. Does the Church Need to Be Impressive?

The Judaizers cared greatly about outward markers.

Paul repeatedly emphasized weakness.

That distinction still matters.

A church can become preoccupied with:

how large it is,

how impressive the facilities are,

how many programs it offers,

how many people attend,

how successful its events are,

how influential it is,

how polished the services are,

how well known its name is.

There is nothing inherently wrong with excellence.

There is nothing wrong with growth.

There is nothing sinful about having good facilities or successful ministries.

But there is something spiritually dangerous when institutional success becomes identity.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:5:

“What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.”

That is the center.

Not ourselves.

Not our church.

Not our reputation.

Not our achievements.

Christ.

A church may appear very successful while becoming spiritually unhealthy.

So perhaps the question should not merely be:

“How big is the church?”

But:

“What kind of Christians is the church producing?”

IX. What Happens When Programs Change?

Galatians 4:18 contains an important phrase:

“It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you.”

Paul wanted good things happening among the Galatians whether he was present or absent.

That is an important principle for the church.

Healthy churches produce people who remain faithful even when circumstances change.

A class ends.

A ministry changes.

A favorite program disappears.

A congregation moves buildings.

Styles change.

People come and go.

Yet mature believers continue following Christ.

Why?

Because their faith was never built primarily upon the program.

It was built upon Christ.

A parent raises a child hoping that eventually the child can function independently.

A teacher rejoices when a student learns to think and study without constant instruction.

A healthy church should experience the same joy.

It should say:

“Look at what God has produced in these people.”

Not:

“How can we keep these people dependent upon what we provide?”

X. Flattery Can Become a Tool of Institutional Manipulation

Verse 17 says:

“They make much of you.”

One translation captures the idea:

“They zealously court you.”

They were winning the Galatians emotionally.

Flattery is powerful.

Everybody likes to feel needed.

Everybody likes appreciation.

Everybody likes hearing:

“We couldn't do this without you.”

Sometimes that is genuine encouragement.

But sometimes it can become pressure.

There is a difference between:

“We appreciate your service.”

and:

“If you really loved this church, you would do this.”

There is a difference between:

“Your gifts are valuable.”

and:

“You are letting everyone down if you say no.”

There is a difference between encouragement and emotional leverage.

A healthy church appreciates people without possessing them.

A healthy church allows people to rest.

To say no.

To change ministries.

To establish boundaries.

To follow God's leading.

To mature beyond a particular role.

Nobody should have to fear that saying no to a church request means saying no to God.

XI. Be Careful When a Church Begins Thinking, “We Are the Only Faithful Ones”

Paul says:

“They want to shut you out.”

Spiritual manipulation often develops an insider mentality.

“We understand what others do not.”

“We are the truly faithful church.”

“Other churches are compromised.”

“Other Christians just don't understand.”

“We are different.”

“You are fortunate to be part of us.”

Before long, belonging to the congregation becomes part of a person's spiritual identity.

Then leaving the church feels almost like leaving God.

That is dangerous.

The body of Christ is larger than any:

congregation,

denomination,

movement,

tradition,

theological tribe,

or ministry.

Christ has one bride.

And none of us owns her.

A healthy church can possess strong convictions without believing it possesses Christ.

XII. How Do We Discern an Unhealthy Church Without Becoming Cynical?

This is extremely important.

Only God knows every heart.

Jeremiah says:

“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind.”

We cannot look into people's souls and announce:

“I know exactly why everyone here does what they do.”

That becomes judgmental.

So how do we discern?

We examine **patterns**.

Jesus said:

“You will recognize them by their fruits.”

—Matthew 7:16

We may not always know the hidden motives operating within a church.

But over time, motives produce fruit.

So look for patterns.

Does this church consistently point people toward Christ rather than toward itself?

Does this church welcome honest questions?

Does this church respond to criticism with humility rather than defensiveness?

Does this church share responsibility and encourage people to serve according to their gifts?

Does this church rejoice when other churches and ministries succeed?

Does this church acknowledge mistakes and make things right?

Does this church use fear to maintain loyalty?

Does this church manipulate people through guilt or shame?

Does this church treat people differently according to their money, influence, status, or usefulness?

Does this church cultivate dependence upon Christ—or dependence upon the institution?

Does this church encourage people to grow spiritually, think biblically, and become mature disciples?

Does this church feel threatened when people ask difficult questions, develop convictions, or grow beyond particular programs?

Does the character of the church during the week resemble the image it presents on Sunday morning?

Does this church create an atmosphere of grace, truth, humility, accountability, and service?

Does this church produce people who are increasingly loving, generous, forgiving, discerning, and Christlike?

Those questions do not make us cynical.

They make us discerning.

The issue is not whether a church is perfect.

No church is.

If you are looking for a perfect church, please don't join it.

You will ruin the whole thing.

The issue is not perfection.

The issue is direction.

What kind of fruit is growing here?

Do not judge a church merely by the fruit hanging on the platform.

Look at the fruit growing in the pews.

XIII. Five Questions a Church Should Ask About Itself

Rather than merely examining other churches, every congregation should be willing to examine itself.

1. Would we still do this if nobody outside the church knew about it?

That exposes our desire for recognition.

Are we serving because it honors Christ?

Or because we want a reputation for being a successful church?

2. Can we rejoice when another church succeeds?

That exposes competitiveness.

The kingdom of God is larger than our congregation.

When another church reaches people for Christ, heaven does not say:

“Wrong team.”

3. Are we disappointed when people no longer need one of our programs?

That exposes institutional dependence.

Sometimes the greatest evidence that a ministry succeeded is that people grew beyond it.

4. Are we more concerned with protecting our reputation or telling the truth?

That exposes pride.

Healthy churches can say:

“We were wrong.”

“We mishandled that.”

“We need to repent.”

“We need to make this right.”

5. Do we want people more attached to this church—or more attached to Christ?

That may be the most important question of all.

Conclusion: What Kind of Church Are We Becoming?

It is easy to preach a sermon like this about somebody else.

Some other church.

Some other denomination.

Some church we heard about on the news.

But Galatians should force us to examine ourselves.

What kind of church are we becoming?

Do people become more spiritually mature here?

Do people learn Scripture here?

Do people learn to pray here?

Do people become self-feeders here?

Do people become more gracious here?

Do people become more loving here?

Can people ask questions here?

Can people disagree without becoming enemies?

Can we admit when we are wrong?

Can we rejoice when another church succeeds?

Do we measure people by usefulness?

Do we allow people to grow?

Are we producing consumers?

Or disciples?

Are we building an institution?

Or forming people in Christ?

Those are not cynical questions.

They are healthy questions.

Because Jesus said:

“You will recognize them by their fruits.”

The question is not:

Are we a perfect church?

We are not.

The question is:

What kind of fruit is growing among us?

And perhaps that is the prayer every congregation should pray:

“Lord, keep us from becoming impressed with ourselves.”

“Keep us from using people.”

“Keep us from confusing our traditions with Your commands.”

“Keep us from cultivating dependence upon the institution.”

“Make us a church where people learn Scripture.”

“Make us a church where people pray.”

“Make us a church where questions are welcomed.”

“Make us a church where repentance is normal.”

“Make us a church where service is joyful rather than coerced.”

“Make us a church where believers grow into spiritual maturity.”

“Make us a church that points beyond itself.”

And above everything else:

Make much of Christ.

Because the healthy church never ultimately says:

“Make much of us.”

It says:

“Make much of Jesus.”