

Spiritual Abuse

by David Henke

Founding Date: Spiritual abuse is as old as false religion itself. While the practice is old, the term “spiritual abuse” may have been coined first by Jeff VanVonderen.

Organizational Structure: Can occur under virtually any organizational structure, but “top down” hierarchical structures are especially well suited to systemic spiritual abuse.

Definition: Spiritual abuse is the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help. Sometimes abuse arises out of a doctrinal position. At other times it occurs because of legitimate personal needs of a leader that are being met by illegitimate means. Spiritually abusive religious systems are sometimes described as legalistic, mind controlling, religiously addictive, and authoritarian.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

#1. Authoritarian: The most distinctive characteristic of a spiritually abusive religious system, or leader, is the over-emphasis on authority. Because a group claims to have been established by God Himself the leaders in this system claim the right to command their followers.

This authority supposedly comes from the position they occupy. In Matthew 23:1-2 Jesus said the Scribes and Pharisees “sit in Moses’ seat,” a position of spiritual authority. Many names are used but in the abusive system this is a position of power, not moral authority. The assumption is that God operates among His people through a hierarchy, or “chain of command.” In this abusive system unconditional submission is often called a “covering,” or “umbrella of protection” which will provide some spiritual blessing to those who fully submit. Followers may be told that God will bless their submission even if the leadership is wrong. It is not their place to judge or correct the leadership – God will see to that.

#2. Image Conscious: The abusive religious system is scrupulous to maintain an image of righteousness. The organization’s history is often misrepresented in the effort to demonstrate the organization’s special relationship to God. The mistaken judgements and character flaws of its leaders are denied or covered up in order to validate their authority. Impossibly high legalistic standards of thought and behavior may be imposed on the members. Their failure to live up to these standards is a constant reminder of the follower’s inferiority to his leaders, and the necessity of submission to them. Abusive religion is, at heart, legalism.

Abusive religion is also paranoid. Because the truth about the abusive religious system would be quickly rejected if recognized, outsiders are shown only a positive image of the group. This is rationalized by assuming that the religion would not be understood by “worldly” people; therefore they have no right to know. This attitude

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leads to members being secretive about some doctrines and the inner policies and procedures of the group. Leaders, especially, will keep secrets from their members. This secrecy is rooted in a basic distrust of others because the belief system is false and can not stand scrutiny.

#3. Suppresses Criticism: Because the religious system is not based on the truth it cannot allow questions, dissent, or open discussions about issues. The person who dissents becomes the problem rather than the issue he raised. The truth about any issue is settled and handed down from the top of the hierarchy. Questioning anything is considered a challenge to authority. Thinking for oneself is suppressed by pointing out that it leads to doubts. This is portrayed as unbelief in God and His anointed leaders. Thus the follower controls his own thoughts by fear of doubting God.

#4. Perfectionistic: A most natural assumption is that a person does not get something for nothing. Apart from the express declarations of salvation by grace through faith God has given in the scriptures, it would be natural to think that one must earn salvation, or at least work to keep it. Thus, in abusive religions all blessings come through performance of spiritual requirements. Failure is strongly condemned so there is only one alternative, perfection. So long as he thinks he is succeeding in his observation of the rules, the follower typically exhibits pride, elitism, and arrogance. However, when reality and failure eventually set in, the result is the person experiences spiritual burnout, or even shipwreck of his faith. Those who fail in their efforts are labeled as apostates, weak, or some other such term so that they can be discarded by the system.

#5. Unbalanced: Abusive religions must distinguish themselves from all other religions so they can claim to be distinctive and therefore special to God. This is usually done by majoring on minor issues such as prophecy, carrying biblical law to extremes, or using strange methods of biblical interpretation. The imbalanced spiritual hobby-horse thus produced represents unique knowledge or practices which seem to validate the group's claim to special status with God.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Examples of spiritual abuse are found throughout the Bible. God describes (and condemns) the "shepherds of Israel" who feed themselves rather than the flock, who do not heal those who are hurting, or seek to bring back those who were driven away but rather discard them, ruling with force and cruelty (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Jesus reacted with anger against the thievery of the money changers in the Temple as they misused God's people for selfish reasons (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-47; John 2:13-16). He was angry at those more concerned with rules and regulations than with human suffering (Mark 3:1-5).

In Matthew 23, Jesus describes the abusive spiritual leader in great detail. In John 9 the Pharisees "cast out" the man born blind simply because the truth he told about his healing exposed their own corruption. In Acts 7:51-56, Stephen called the Jewish leaders to account over their spiritual abuse. His testimony of Christ vindicated Jesus, whom they had abused, and condemned them. The legalistic Jews were so angry they stoned Stephen to death. In Galatians Paul addressed a performance based Christianity which leads to the abuse of legalism. There are many more such examples.

As God in human flesh, Jesus had legitimate spiritual authority. But He did not exercise it to gain power for Himself, or to abuse and control others with rules and

regulations. He said, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The Greek word for “heavy laden” is *phortizo* which means here “to *overburden* with ceremony (or spiritual anxiety)” (*Strong’s Concordance* #5412). Jesus gave a balanced perspective on positional authority when he said, “But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren” (Matthew 23:8). He gave another key to discernment when He taught, “He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory...” (John 7:18a).

Jesus was not “image conscious.” He was willing to associate with wine drinkers, cheating tax collectors and even prostitutes. He accused the legalistic Pharisees of “teaching for doctrine the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9) and likened their showy, hypocritical outward righteousness to “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27).

Neither was He paranoid. His ministry was conspicuously open to the public. When He was on trial (John 18) He was asked about His teachings and His reply was, “Why askest thou me?” Jesus pointed out that He always taught in public, and never in secret, so why not ask His disciples. He had nothing to hide.

Jesus did not fear to criticize the religious leaders or their faulty doctrines (e.g. Matthew 15:1-9; 23:1-39, etc.). And when confronted with criticism or with treacherous questions designed to discredit Him, His response was never to simply demand silence or only positive recognition from His accusers. Rather, He gave answers – scriptural and reasonable answers – to their objections (e.g. Luke 7:36-47; Matthew 19:3-9).

Jesus upheld the high standard of the Law, yet He clearly placed the legitimate needs of people before any rules or regulations (Matthew 12:1-13; Mark 2:23-3:5). The scriptures make it clear that no one will cease to sin in this life (Ecclesiastes 7:20; 1 John 1:8). Jesus made it plain, however, that one can know in this life that they have eternal life (John 5:24; 6:37-40), a theme developed by Paul throughout his epistles, and by John (1 John 5:10-13).

The Pharisees, quintessential spiritually abusive leaders, were quite unbalanced in their perception of what mattered most to God. Jesus said they, “...pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, — judgment, mercy, and faith...” (Matthew 23:23).

EFFECTS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Spiritual abuse has a devastating effect on people. A very high level of trust is often placed in spiritual leaders. It is, and ought to be, expected that the trust will be honored and guarded. When such trust is violated the wound is very deep. Sometimes the wound is so deep that the wounded person cannot trust even a legitimate spiritual authority again.

An analogous situation exists with the victims of incest. The emotional and psychological symptoms exhibited by victims of incest parallel those of spiritual abuse to a remarkable degree. The main symptom is the inability to relate normally to people who represent the source of their emotional injury.

Besides an unhealthy fear of, and disillusionment with, spiritual authorities, the spiritually abused person may find it difficult to trust even God. “How could (or why did) He let this happen to me?” Anger is also deeply felt. Anger itself is not always

wrong – God Himself expresses anger at such spiritual abuse (see Biblical Response, above). However, even legitimate anger, if not properly channeled and dealt with, can degenerate into bitterness and cynicism toward everything spiritual.

RECOVERY FROM SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Healthy recovery from spiritual abuse must begin with understanding what has happened and how. A victim usually thinks he is the only one experiencing these problems. Just being able to give a name to the problem is important. There are many books on the subject (see recommended reading below) that will be helpful in learning about spiritual abuse and recovery.

Afterward the abused person must learn the true nature of God's grace, love and forgiveness. This is the foundation for being able to eventually forgive the abuser. Being able to share the experience and what has been learned so as to minister to someone else's need is also very important. This could be done in a support group made up of people with a similar experience who can share the healing love of Christ.

Finally, a lot of time must be allowed for full recovery.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, Bethany House Publishers. Dynamite! Excellent help for recognizing and escaping spiritual manipulation and false spiritual authority within the Church. 235 pages.

Faith That Hurts, Faith That Heals, by Stephen Arterburn, and Jack Felton, Thomas Nelson Publishers. Very thorough treatment, analyzes beliefs that make harmful faith, religious addiction, etc. as well as treatment and recovery, and the characteristics of healthy faith. 320 pages.

Breaking Free, by David R. Miller, Baker Book House. Speaking first-hand from the experiences of his own family, Miller penetrates virtually every nuance of legalism and its insidious effects on individual and family life. 176 pages.

Wisdom Hunter, by Randall Arthur, Multnomah Press. Taut, fast-paced thriller presents a powerful message about the damage caused by Christian legalism. 323 pages.

Churches That Abuse, by Ronald Enroth, Zondervan. Providing real-life examples throughout, Enroth probes every corner of the abusive church. He also provides help to find the way out, and back to God's healing. 253 pages, endnotes.



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