

How I Overcame Spiritual Abuse

It was my hunger for God that opened the door to spiritual abuse in my life.

As strange as that may sound, it's the truth. From the time I was a small child, I sought God and hungered for an intimate relationship with Him. I wanted desperately to please Him.

I did not realize then that my desire to do His will was born out of my need for His acceptance and approval—two things I thought I would never have. But it led me, as a young woman, to dedicate my life to “full-time Christian service” and started me on a pilgrimage through various churches, denominations and religious institutions in pursuit of His perfect will.

I willingly submitted to the human authorities placed over me in these various organizations, based on the scriptural admonition that we should submit to those who rule over us (Heb. 13:17). I was taught that to “rebel” against these authorities was to rebel against God.

Fortunately for me, some of these authority figures were men and women of honor, integrity and wisdom. They cared for their flocks and sought to obey God according to the revelation they had. I grew and learned much under their care.

Others, however, misused the authority that had been given to them. They exercised control over me spiritually and personally. They used the name of God to back up their own soulish desires, questioning my love and devotion to God if I didn't do what they desired. They tried to fit me into a mold of their own making rather than allowing me to be who God created me to be.

The “mold” required drastic changes in my personality, career and call. By nature I was an outgoing, fun-loving extrovert, but I had to become a “woman of quiet spirit”—one who didn’t speak. By gifting I was an administrator and teacher, but I had to give up any opportunities to use my gifts in the broader Christian community because I was told that I must stay home and take care of my husband, children and household. If I didn’t, I would be responsible for my husband’s spiritual condition—and he might “run away to join a cult.”

Even worse, I was told that God would not be pleased with me unless I behaved, or performed, the way my leaders felt I should.

One organization in which my husband, Art, and I worked would not even allow us to buy a Sunday newspaper. This same organization hired us to work six days a week but paid only my husband; I was to work for free. The salary was so meager we could not live on it, but we did it because we loved Jesus and wanted to please Him. It was a miserable, gut-wrenching time, with little personal freedom.

At one church my pastors were lovely people, but their hearts had been wounded through years of misunderstanding and pain. Some of their pain came from the neglect, as well as the physical and verbal abuse, they had experienced in their own childhoods. It was also the result of hurts they had received from the members of the body of Christ to whom they had ministered for years.

People they had birthed into the kingdom, taught and nurtured abandoned them for greener pastures. People they had supported financially and for whom they had travailed in prayer left them when they needed them most. These unhealed wounds greatly affected their ministry. It became a mixture of the prophetic word of the Lord filtered through their own pain and emotional needs.

Because of their dysfunctional backgrounds, these pastors doubted God's love for them. They could not receive it and could not give it to others. But rather than acknowledging their weakness, they masked it—along with their insecurity, fear, frustration, despair, grief and dying—behind a veil of “authority.” They took the position that *they* were the pastors (prophets, apostles) of the house, and if we didn't listen to them, we were not only in rebellion, but also in danger.

Turning Point

In all of this, I tried to be obedient to what I thought was the truth and please God in the process. But the oppression I was under eventually took its toll. My personality was shattered. I didn't know who I was or who I was supposed to be.

One night in desperation I cried out to God, and the Holy Spirit took the veil from my eyes. He showed me that I had been receiving seeds of error, not truth—and that these seeds were producing death rather than life; fear rather than faith; despair rather than hope; frustration rather than peace; and grief rather than joy.

The seeds were stifling spiritual growth, cloaking my vision and destroying me. They had been sown through the vehicle of words—words spoken from the pulpit as well as in fellowship groups—that I had received into my open spirit as truth. In a vision, the Holy Spirit showed me those words and took them out of me. He gently taught me in each situation I had been in what was Him and what was not.

Over time, as He began to rebuild me, He also taught me several truths that now help me to recognize the warning signs of spiritual abuse:

* Anyone who tries to come between God and me is not from God. “For there Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”

(1 Tim. 2:5, NKJV). No one has the right to come between my Savior and me. My total allegiance belongs to Him.

* I am accepted in the Beloved just as I am (see Eph. 1:6). I do not have to earn His love; He loves me simply because I am His child and He is love (see John 1:12; Rom. 5:8; 8:15-16; Eph. 2:4-9; 1 John 3:1; 4:8-10).

* Jesus is the one true shepherd (see John 10:11,14; Ezek. 34:11-12). Submitting myself fully to Him brings freedom and joy.

* It is not the Spirit of Christ, but a religious spirit, that is abusive. This spirit teaches that you are unacceptable unless you reach a certain standard, and uses fear and intimidation to maintain control. Where the Spirit of Christ is, on the other hand, there is liberty (see 2 Cor. 3:17).

* I can identify false prophets (and abusive spiritual leaders) by their fruit (see Matt. 7:15-20). "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit" (v. 18). If the harvest of their ministry is depression, negativity and guilt rather than love, joy and peace, I know there is a problem.

* Ultimately, I am responsible for hearing God and for obeying what He shows me by His Spirit and through His Word. Wisdom dictates that I seek counsel and confirmation for the things He shows me, but to allow someone else to hear God *for* me and base my life decisions solely on what that person says is *heresy*.

These truths set me free from the bondage of spiritual abuse. They also set me free to serve God, not in order to win His love, but in order to express my love to Him. As I began to walk in them, I learned to better recognize the characteristics of a godly spiritual leader. He or she is:

1. One who is called to be an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher (see Eph. 4:11)—part of the fivefold

ministry Jesus established

2. One who has totally surrendered to the lordship of Christ and yielded every part of his being to Him, without hidden agendas or worldly motives

3. One who represents Christ as He is and whose motive is to exalt only Him

4. One who understands that submission is in the heart and who himself submits to others in love as he submits to Christ

5. One who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit—love, first and foremost—followed by joy, peace and the rest (see Gal. 5:22).

A spiritual leader who has these qualities will build up, not tear down, the body of Christ and will help to establish God's kingdom on the earth. He will guide and protect, rather than manipulate and control, his sheep, encouraging them to become all God intended them to be and preparing them for the works of service that God planned ahead of time for them to do (see Eph. 2:10; 4:12).

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