

Spiritual Abuse, Christian Cults and Controlling Ministries

It's irresponsible to loosely toss around emotionally charged accusations like "spiritual abuse," "Christian cults" and "controlling ministries." I wouldn't want to stand before Jesus and give account for misspoken words that carry the potential to tear down what He is building.

On the other hand, it's also irresponsible to turn a blind eye to spiritual abuse, Christian cults and controlling ministries. I wouldn't want to stand before Jesus and give account for supporting ministries that are tearing down what He is building.

When spiritual leaders are caught in sex abuse scandals, the secular and Christian media alike pen stories that offer the detestable details and dogged denials. But spiritual abuse, cultish churches and controlling ministries are less often exposed than pastors who coerce teenaged boys and unsuspecting church secretaries to have sexual relations.

Victims of abusive church authority structures may not even realize what they are enduring until they escape its grip. Spiritual abuse is often subtle. Christian cult leaders don't always operate like Jim Jones. Controlling ministries tend to hide behind the guise of spiritual coverings. And far too many outsiders are not willing to even question the messages and practices of such churches. It takes lovers of truth with spiritual discernment to recognize the sometimes-subtle signs of abusive churches. And it takes courage to confront it.

What exactly is spiritual abuse? Jeff VanVonderen, co-author of the classic book *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, explains it this way: "Spiritual abuse occurs when someone in

a position of spiritual authority ... misuses that authority placing themselves over God's people to control, coerce or manipulate them for seemingly godly purposes which are really their own."

Spiritual abuse is hardly a new phenomenon. You can find instances in the Bible of spiritual leaders exploiting people to build their kingdoms. In Jeremiah 8, the Lord called out the abuse of prophets and priests, saying, "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious" (v. 11 NIV).

The root problems of people in the "church" were treated superficially. In other words, the pastor put a Band-Aid on the problem so things looked good from the outside but the wound was festering on the inside. The pastor's prominence was more important than the legitimate needs of the congregation.

Today, this manifests as spiritual leaders recruiting volunteers to build their ministries while neglecting to minister to the real needs of hurting people. In such cases, churches become like businesses. The pastor is more like a CEO than a spiritual leader. Staff meetings center on marketing initiatives that will bring more people—who will bring more tithes and offerings—into the sanctuary. Church services becomes about external appearances, but the white washed tombs are full of dead men's bones.

Jesus addressed spiritual abuse in His day. Beyond His warnings about the Pharisees, Jesus also pointed out ravenous wolves. These ravenous wolves look much like anointed prophets, but their motives are dastardly. Today, the spiritually abusive Pharisaical pastor has a long list of rules and demands and little grace for those who don't rise to the occasion.

Entire books have been written on spiritual abuse. Those books will help you see spiritual abuse for what it is, how you got sucked into the cycle, how to break free from spiritual abuse,

and how to recover from spiritual abuse once you've escaped its clutches. But for now, I want to leave you with some nuggets from Dave Johnson and VanVonderen's book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*.

Power-posturing is a telltale sign of spiritual abuse. Power-posturing leaders spend a lot of time focused on their own authority and reminding others of it. Johnson and VanVonderen say this is necessary because their spiritual authority isn't real—based on genuine godly character—it is postured.

In practical terms, this might manifest as a leader who likes to remind the congregation that he can excommunicate people or that any anointing you are flowing in comes from the head (him). This leader can never be questioned, and is usually not accountable to anyone. Those around him are usually mere “yes men” who do his bidding in exchange for delegated authority to lord over others.

Performance preoccupation is a sign of spiritual abuse. Johnson and VanVonderen note that obedience and submission are two important words often used in abusive church structures.

Don't get me wrong. Obedience and submission are important. But spiritual abuse often shames or scares people into obedience and submission. True obedience is a matter of the heart. Spiritual abusers apply undue pressure that is not from God. That pressure is usually applied to get you to do the leader's will, not God's will.

Unspoken rules are common in instances of spiritual abuse. In abusive spiritual systems, Johnson and VanVonderen offer, people's lives are controlled from the outside in by rules, spoken and unspoken.

“Unspoken rules are those that govern unhealthy churches of families but are not said out loud. Because they are not said out loud, you don't find out that they're there until you break them,” Johnson and VanVonderen write. It often seems

these “rules” hold more power than scripture.

The “Can’t Talk” rule is seen where spiritual abuse is present. Johnson and VanVonderen explain that the “can’t talk” rule blames the person who talks, and the ensuing punishments pressure questioners into silence.

If you voice a problem you become the problem. If you question why the church no longer picks up the poor kids in the ministry van but has shifted its focus to more affluent neighborhoods, you are removed from your role as a volunteer driver. Others see your fate and decide they’d better not rock the boat. It’s a form of intimidation.

Lack of balance and extremism is often present where spiritual abuse lives. This manifests as an unbalanced approach to living out the truth of the Christian life. Johnson and VanVonderen explain that in these systems it is more important to act according to the word of a leader who has “a word” for you than to act according to what you know to be true from Scripture, or simply from your spiritual-growth history.

The truth is prophetic words don’t carry the same weight as Scripture, and you can hear from God for yourself. When you rely on other people to tell you what God is saying, you open the door to control and manipulation.

It’s not possible to fully expose the inner workings of spiritual abuse, Christian cults and controlling churches in a single article. My goal is to raise awareness of a troubling issue and get you thinking—not to send you on a witch hunt for spiritual abusers.

If you think you are part of a spiritually abusive cult-like or controlling church, ask the Lord to break any deception off your mind and show you the truth. The truth could be that you are in a healthy church and you just need to die to self. But it could be that you are in an abusive system and you need to break free. If your heart is purely seeking the truth, the

Holy Spirit will surely guide you there (John 16:13).

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