

# Westboro Baptist: When Spiritual Abuse Brainwashes the Saints

When I read about the two Westboro Baptist daughters' decision to leave the hate-mongering congregation last week, I rejoiced! Their bravery is likely to embolden others to escape this radical **cult**. I expect to hear other reports of people leaving Westboro Baptist—and denouncing their vile practices—in the days ahead.

Yes, I rejoiced when I heard that the **Holy Spirit** broke in with light and set Megan Phelps-Roper and her younger sister, Grace, free. But soon that joy turned to **intercession**.

I understand all too well the hateful rhetoric that will harass these women for weeks, months or even years to come. No, not from those Westboro has persecuted in the past. Indeed, the sisters have received a warm embrace from many Christians in the wake of their high-profile departure. Rather, these brave women are facing a barrage of backlash from those who claimed to love them, yes, from the ones who yell anti-gay or anti-Jewish slogans at funerals of servicemen.

Although Westboro is an extreme example, verbal **persecution** is common when folks escape churches where **spiritual abuse** reigns. I've endured this type of persecution first-hand—and I've heard from many others who have also experienced the cursing and judgment that often chases those who escape the clutches of spiritual abuse, Christian cults and controlling ministries. (Check out my past articles on spiritual abuse and how to recognize cults.)

**Extreme Spiritual Abuse**

Why do I keep writing about **spiritual abuse**? Because it still exists in religious organizations, and too few want to even acknowledge it—much less talk about it and reach out to those who need the love of Christ to restore their damaged souls. Again, although Westboro Baptist church is an extreme example of spiritual abuse—most churches aren't so obviously hate-inspired—the church's response to the Phelps's granddaughters parallels what people typically face when they exit a controlling church.

For example, the Phelps granddaughters say their family “now considers us betrayers, and we are cut off from their lives.” This is the outcome when you leave a spiritually abusive church. If anyone asks what happened to you, they are told not to contact you—just to pray. Not-so-subtle insinuations suggest you've backslidden or even turned your back on Christ altogether. People who were once your spiritual family mark you as a traitor. And you lose your once-beloved Christian community in the twinkle of an eye.

Shirley Phelps-Roper responded publicly the day after the news of her daughters' departure made headlines, saying, “The New Testament is full of people that start right, but then fall away.” Can you imagine a mother—a mother!—so quickly dismissing her children? There was no mention in her statement about praying for her daughters. She seemingly wrote them off, quoting 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

Such is the power of a spiritually abusive system. It brainwashes its members to the degree that they will often turn against their own family before they will consider any possible wrongdoing within the organization. Shirley Phelps-Roper's indictment must have cut the girls at the core. What a painful statement to hear from your own mothers' mouth!

## Judgment and Curses

Next, Westboro Baptist Church spokesman Steve Drain told *The Kansas City Star*, “Those two girls were kind of straddling the idea that they wanted to be of the world but that they would also miss their family, the only thing they ever knew. If they continue with the position that they have, those two girls, yeah, they’re going to hell.”

What? So now Drain is playing God, judging their eternal salvation? This is part of the cult mentality that believes it is the only one that has truth or eternal security. And this is the type of backlash people who leave spiritually abusive systems endure—whether they ever read it in the newspaper or not. As I said, I’ve known spiritually abusive pastors to judge someone’s salvation after they departed a controlling church—or declare that they will lose their anointing, miss their destiny and walk in circles for the rest of their lives.

Where **spiritual abuse** rules, you don’t have to leave to meet with **persecution**. There’s plenty on the inside. Case in point: Lauren Drain, author of a memoir entitled, *Banished: Surviving My Years In The Westboro Baptist Church*, was excommunicated from the church in 2007. Drain in a 2010 interview, “I saw some hypocrisy, and I mentioned it to them and they hated it. You’re not supposed to question anything.”

Spiritually abusive churches want you to join the yes-man club. You are not allowed to question the pastor (in a right, sincere spirit) about anything. If you do, you are labeled a troublemaker and shunned, stripped of any authority you may carry, or sometimes forced to leave.

## Signs of Spiritual Abuse

These are just a few of the insights we now have into how Westboro Baptist Church operates internally. But I know this from my research and my personal experience: Where you find cults and spiritual abuse, you’ll also find unspoken

expectations, “can’t talk” rules, power-posturing, isolation tactics, an inappropriate demand for loyalty, and all types of Scripture violations.

Westboro Baptist Church may be one of the most visible cults in our time, but I am convinced based on the hundreds who reach out to me about this topic that **spiritual abuse** remains a major problem—sometimes even in what appear to be friendly, **charismatic** churches. That’s part of the problem with spiritual abuse. You typically don’t see it manifest until you are sucked so far into the system that it’s hard to escape.

So, will you join with me in praying for the Phelps’ granddaughters and others who are trapped in Christian cults, controlling ministries and spiritually abusive systems? Will you intercede for the captives that need to be set free? It was for freedom that Christ set us free (Gal. 5:1). Amen.

**Jennifer LeClaire** is news editor at Charisma. She is also the author of several books, including *Did the Spirit of God Say That?* You can email Jennifer at [jleclaire@charisma.com](mailto:jleclaire@charisma.com) or visit her website [here](http://www.jenniferleclaire.com). You can also join Jennifer on Facebook or follow her on Twitter.