

Have You Noticed These 14 Warning Signs of Spiritual Abuse?

I've spent years helping people recover from abusive situations. They range from abusive marriages, homes and even abusive church environments. Over the years, there has grown an awareness of how church and ministry environments can misuse their influence and authority in a way that damages the spiritual and emotional life of people. This has become known as spiritual abuse. The ramifications are more harmful than most people realize.

The Need for Better Answers

I find that the majority of Christians who have served God for a long enough time have, at some point, been a part of a spiritually toxic environment. Yet I rarely see people walking through any kind of process to heal from those harmful situations. The best that is offered is "the past is the past" or "get over it." Meanwhile, believers left and right are walking around with spiritual and emotional lacerations that they don't know how to heal.

Often it's because they have been in spiritually abusive environments for so long they don't know any better. In fact, I find that people in these kinds of settings lose their sense of judgment. It's like being with an alcoholic for so long that you begin to think that living with the ups and downs of addiction is normal.

Addressing Spiritual Abuse Patterns

Many churches are changing by making the health of their church family a high priority. Love, honor and a renewed lens on healthy authority are beginning to take shape. But we still

have a ways to go.

I have spent countless hours personally working with people who have come out of spiritual abuse. Some of the stories would make the hairs on your arm stand on end. Yet God has graciously worked in many of these people's lives to heal those wounds and renew their belief systems, allowing them to cultivate healthy connection and fellowship.

In the meantime, it's important to be aware of the warning signs. From my work with people and churches as well as extensive research, I have compiled some common signs that an abusive environment is in play.

Please understand that I do not throw the "abuse" word around loosely. This is a very serious issue, and I share this with great sobriety and through much prayer. Please note: You don't have to have all of these signs for abuse to take place.

If you did not listen to or watch our two-part episode on spiritual abuse, you can tune in here.

1. The standards of honor, respect and authority are distorted.

This is the biggest factor when spiritual abuse is taking place. Instead of a culture of honor and respect that is given from both leadership and followers, an authoritarianism exists. Over time, leaders lose their ability to be approachable. There can become a misuse of the verse "touch not God's anointed," and the body loses its ability to come and reason together.

There is little emphasis on working through issues, so people either quietly leave or sit in silent submission with no personal engagement. Instead of empowering the people, they become conditioned to just go with whatever is happening.

The concept of spiritual fathering can become distorted in

this. Leadership is driven to use force, intimidation or manipulation to make things happen.

2. Unsafe environments when it comes to dealing with problems.

A church is safe when it knows how to deal with problems effectively with love, grace and truth all in play. In a spiritually abusive environment, people are often demonized in embarrassing ways. Relationships are not protected and betrayal takes place.

In these kind of toxic settings, the leadership can become sucked into a “I am right, you are wrong” mentality. People lack the maturity to take a step back and see how to work through issues in a more healthy way. If we win an argument and lose a genuine opportunity to preserve a relationship, we lose.

One of the most unhealthy patterns that can envelop is a “don’t say anything negative” kind of environment, where there becomes a militant reaction to problems, pain and disappointment. People then don’t learn how to go through pain in an effective way.

I have also found that when a church does nothing about a problem it should address, that passivity can be incredibly damaging to the church culture.

3. Heavy religious performance-driven culture.

You cannot have an abusive environment without this because the abusive culture pushes people to give, serve, do and live in performance-based Christianity. As long as people are busy and doing things that serve the success agenda, things are okay. Any emphasis outside of that is frowned upon and given the cold shoulder.

In this setting, there is a heavy emphasis on how things look. It becomes more important that things look OK, rather than

authentically doing life as a body with effective vulnerability. We lose value for a healthy heart life.

People are becoming weary of the television perfection that Christianity portrays. We've not learned our lessons in all the big moral fallouts that take place. Meanwhile, our perfectionist values put an ungodly pressure on people that skews how they interact with God. They become subtly trained that their relationship with God is based on service and how perfectly things go.

It exhausts people and leaves them disillusioned. Unfortunately, in a high performance based environment, people become commodities in the goal of growth, success, status and achievement.

4. Fear and shame drive people into submission.

People are often punished in shameful and often public ways that crush them.

5. Emphasis on a charismatic leader who becomes the ultimate spokesperson on all spiritual issues.

I recall a ministry I interacted with years ago, where the answer to every biblical question I asked was, "(ministry leader's name) says this. " I remember thinking *What about what the Bible says?*

People lose the ability to get their own perspective. Reading non-approved books is frowned upon because the belief is that people cannot think for themselves. People are not encouraged to get with God's Word and search out answers for themselves. There becomes an unhealthy dependency on the leader.

I remember when a controversial subject came up years ago in a church, many of the members would address the subject by saying, "Pastor [Name] said this about it." No one did their own searching of the Scriptures or of the issue themselves.

6. The leader's sins and weaknesses are minimized while the people's sins and weaknesses are maximized.

Spiritual abuse can begin to shift when the church leadership is willing to admit mistakes and authentically share their own personal journey in redemptive ways.

It's a tragedy for a pastor to teach on subjects that have not been deeply processed in their own life. When was the last time you heard a pastor express repentance of certain areas to the congregation? It's often all about what the church needs to get right and very little about humbling yourself before God.

7. Over-spiritualizing of everything.

This is a major problem in general. It is very easy to throw in a "God told me" with whatever you want to say. We share our hearing from God as though we hear from God 100 percent correctly 100 percent of the time. This has led many in the body of Christ into deeper mental illness because we've not learned to process the realities of our life in balance. We've lost the power of learning to hear from God along with healthy counsel.

There becomes a spiritual answer for everything that manipulates situations and keeps leaders from saying, "We got it wrong. We thought we heard from God, and we're processing through what that means now. We're sorry, and we take full responsibility for it."

It's easy to cover up mistakes or insecurities with "God told me."

8. Hovering over personal decisions in a person's life.

It shocked me how much this happens, but it does in growing amounts. The thought of being this controlling sounds exhausting, but it is how many leaders attempt to feel safe.

They control people.

This can get into who people marry, what job to get and what decisions to make.

9. A culture of exclusive spirituality: “We have the monopoly on God.”

You can see this when there is little appreciation for other churches or ministries. There is a sense that “we have the revelation on this and no one else does. We are the ones who get this.”

10. Heavy financial manipulation.

This is a tough one, especially because the church still has a very poverty driven mentality on a lot of financial perspectives. Many still think its okay for people who are in ministry position and give full time hours to it, to live in lack and poverty circumstances.

But this shouldn't give us *carte blanche* to use offerings, giving projects and building campaigns in manipulative ways. In some churches, you cannot have a Sunday go by without a majority of talking time being spent on how people need to give more to the latest project.

When you have an achievement-minded church culture, then financial campaigns will always be in play. They will never end. You'll have to find a new way to get people to give each time.

11. Creating an internal bubble that isolates people from their families, other ministries and outside influences.

One of the problems with modern ministry is that people are easily burned out and disconnected from other parts of their lives. In fact, when I left formal pastoring, I was amazed at how much time I could invest in my relationship with my wife and children. It was astounding to me how church life can

isolate people from many important areas of their life and wholeness.

12. Unwillingness to act with compassion towards those who leave.

There is a time where dangerous and toxic people have to be dealt with. But many times, there are just honest disagreements or new paths opening up for people that churches need to recognize. Healthy churches know when its time for someone to move on and honor that transition.

Abusive church environments make it difficult to leave or move on. People are often shunned. Communication gets shut down. They get treated as outcasts. Leaving a church is very difficult to begin with, but abusive environments make it painfully worse.

13. Isolated accountability structure.

There is either no accountability structure, or the one that is in place is a small huddle where there is no collaboration or council on issues. There is little room for healthy debate and reasonable discussion over issues.

14. A strong legalistic and religious pressure.

Because the emphasis is often on how things look, there can be a legalistic pressure on sin, sanctification and holiness. People are taught in such a way that they always feel they have to do better, perform better or work to be good enough.

Question: Are there any you would add to this list? Please share in the comments below. {eoa}

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This article originally appeared at .