



The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse

Pr Les Ackie

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse

What is spiritual abuse?

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Abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to hurt

What is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds

The words "SPIRITUAL" and "ABUSE" are stacked vertically in a white, serif font, enclosed within a red rectangular border. A red horizontal line extends from the left side of the box.

SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Spiritual abuse involves using the principles of the Devil in the name of Christ

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C S Lewis

“Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.”

Reflections on the Psalms, 31-32

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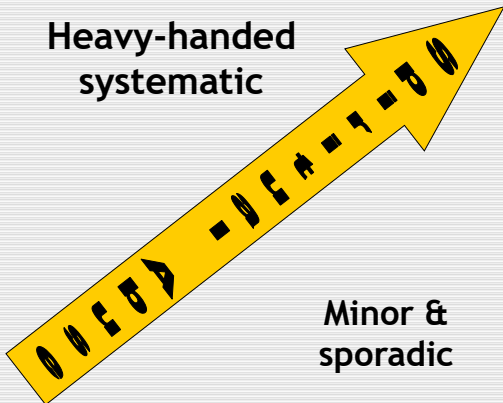
Spiritual abuse may differ from some other forms of abuse in that it may be perpetrated without intent to harm

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Spiritual abusers don't become so when they walk through the church doors

Heavy-handed
systematic



Minor &
sporadic

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Jesus spent more time challenging spiritual abuse than any other social problem of His day

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The Dangers of Spiritual Abuse

Matthew 23:13

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

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Spiritual abusers present a false view of God and a false way of serving him

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"Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who we are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God."

Juanita and Dale Ryan
Recovering from Spiritual Abuse, 9

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Martin Luther

"I have difficulty praying the Lord's Prayer because whenever I say 'Our Father', I think of my own father who was hard, unyielding and relentless. I cannot help but think of God in that way".
Gregorovius, Villa, 249

The Pharisees

- Morally upright
- Highly ethical
- Radical health reformers
- Sacrificial tithers
- Totally dedicated to serving God

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For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:20

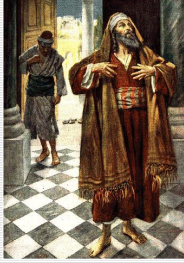
Jesus Warning



"Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

Matthew 16:6

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... nothing is more deceptive than the sin of goodness.

George Knight
The Pharisees Guide
to Perfect Holiness, 50

The Leaven of the Pharisees

“obey” “keep” “do”
Legalism
“law”
“commandments”

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Legalism is the great weapon of spiritual abuse

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In most cases of spiritual abuse, the control of people is the central issue

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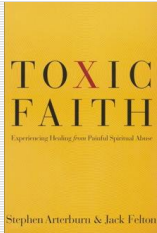
Matthew
23

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Dictators cannot function unless people first give away their power

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"We must have the courage to follow Christ's example and overturn the system, be it a marriage or an organization, if that system is wrong. Silent submission in the face of violence, dishonesty and abuse will only enable that abuse to be passed on to generations." (72)

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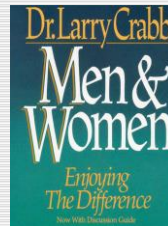
Spiritually abusive organizations and people use shame and guilt to manipulate vulnerable people

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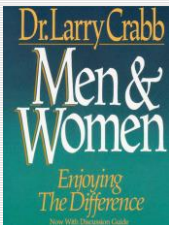
Once shame is transformed into an identity, it becomes toxic and dehumanizing

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... the problem of presenting Christian discipleship as discovering God's demands and working hard to fulfil them is that "our churches will eventually resemble first-century synagogues run by Pharisees ...

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... filled with either weary folks who know that their best efforts fall short, but are willing to try harder next week, or proud people who, like their teachers, so badly miss the point of God's law that they think they are keeping it."

Larry Crabb
Men and Women, 178

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And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts . . . Mark 3:5



Spiritual abusers use knowledge as a means to control

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Using religious language to guilt-trip people into doing what we want is spiritually abusive

Forms of Spiritual Abuse

Forcing a child into conformity with Scripture or spiritual principles

“The Bible says . . .”

“Ellen White says . . .”

Manipulating a child’s behaviour by invoking Divine displeasure

“Jesus doesn’t love disobedient children”

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Spiritual abusers crave recognition

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But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.

Matthew 23:5

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They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ²³greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'

Matthew 23:6-7

“Dr”

“Pastor”

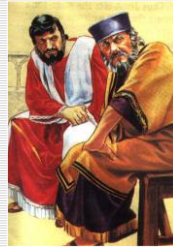
“Elder”

A leader's need for a title in order to enhance his or her authority is in direct proportion to the lack of true authority and personal insecurity

“Bishop”

“Reverend”

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"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.

Matthew 23:25

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Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Matthew 23:28

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But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them . . .

Mark 10:42

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Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.

Mark 10:43-44

The True Measure of Greatness

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who . . . ⁷made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men.

Philippians 2:5

Servant Leadership



Our success will be measured not by how many people we control but by how many we openly and honestly serve. We cannot wash feet while standing on a pedestal.

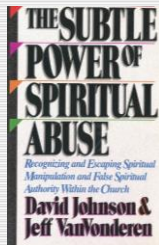
Ken Blue
Healing Spiritual Abuse

MAJORING ON THE MINORS

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”

Matthew 23:23

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“In a spiritually abusive system, the mundane becomes essential, the vital trivial and the real needs of people are neglected for the sake of agendas.”

Johnson & VanVonderen
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Playing God

Spiritual abusers subtly position themselves to take the place of the Holy Spirit in people's lives

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It's amazing how quickly a dysfunctional system can move to exclude a person who violates its norms

Characteristics of Spiritual Abusers

(see Matthew 23)

- use of power, fear and intimidation to control
 - exhibit hypocrisy by observing the letter but not the spirit of the law
 - make unfair and unreasonable demands
 - crave recognition and attention
 - preoccupied with position and titles
 - put obstacles to people's experience of salvation
 - love public display of piety
-

Characteristics of Spiritual Abusers (see Matthew 23)

- may work hard to make converts yet spiritually abuse them in the process
 - see material possessions as God's favour
 - major in minors
 - use knowledge and language to control and manipulate
 - highly sensitive to, and intolerant of criticism
 - ostracize and malign those who 'step out of line'
 - use Scripture out of context to control
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Some Christians use the fifth commandment to justify wielding undue power over their children

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Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.
Ephesians 5:22

How should we respond to spiritual abuse?

Galatians 5:1

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

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"The truth shall set you free"

John 8:32

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The real test of religion is,
does it make wings to lift a
man up or a dead weight
to drag him down?

William Barclay

Spiritual Abuse Checklist

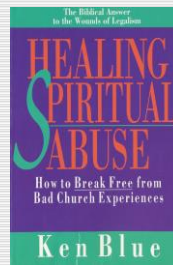
1. Am I growing spiritually as a result of my relationship with church/person?
2. Am I encouraged to think independently and empowered for personal growth emotionally, intellectually etc?
4. Am I allowed to have differences of belief and behaviour, on issues of secondary importance?
5. Am I encouraged to have high moral standards with both members and non members?
6. Am I free to enter dialogue, offer advice and critically evaluate the relationship?
7. Do I have ready access to information within the relationship or is the flow of information tightly controlled?

Spiritual Abuse Checklist

8. Does my relationship with the church/person allow for development in theological beliefs?
9. Am I encouraged to ask hard questions of any kind?
10. Am I encouraged to develop relationships outside of my immediate circle?
11. Is my relationship with the church/person characterised by honesty?
12. Is my relationship with the church/person characterised by unselfish giving or self-serving?

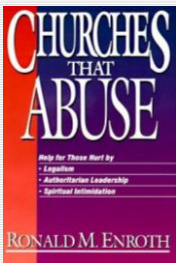
Adapted from Ronald Enroth
Recovering from Churches That Abuse

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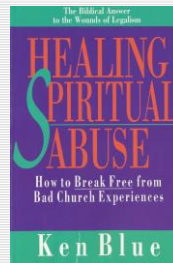
“You must now decide whether you should stay and fight for change or leave.” (134)

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“In our homes, in our churches, and in our programs of Christian education, we must strive to cultivate critical, discerning minds if we are to avoid the tragedy of churches that abuse.” (206)

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“The only cure for the abuser, as well as the abused, is a sufficient dose of God's mercy and grace.” (120)

Hebrews 4:16

. . . let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Rock of Ages

Could my tears forever flow
Could my zeal no languor know
Not the labour of my hands
Could fulfil Thy law's demands
All for sin can not atone --
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to Thy cross I cling

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Grace and peace be multiplied
to you in the knowledge of God
and of Jesus our Lord.

2 Peter:1-2
