

APPENDIX 21: SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to harm. Spiritual abuse happens when someone with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit another, thus causing spiritual wounds. Spiritual abuse may be perpetrated by abusers who believe they have the best interests of the victim at heart.

Spiritual Abuse is not a separate category of abuse and there is no consensus on a definition of the term. It is important when discussing such cases with statutory agencies to be clear that spiritual abuse is a form of psychological and emotional abuse within a religious context. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour.

Spiritual abuse may occur on its own, or alongside other forms of abuse, such as physical, sexual or domestic abuse. The heinous nature of spiritual abuse is that it is often used to 'legitimise' or facilitate other forms of abuse by leveraging "divine authority".

Spiritual abuse shares some of the hallmarks of bullying and harassment, including intimidation, manipulation and inducing fear. However, what makes this distinct are the elements associated with religious belief including coercion through religious position, membership of the religious community, scripture, biblical discourse and spiritual threats.

Jesus spent more time challenging spiritual abuse than any other problem in the church of His day (see Matthew 23). The reality however, is that spiritual abusers do not become so when they walk through the church doors, they bring this destructive mindset from home. Spiritually abusive church leaders tend to be spiritually abusive husbands, wives and parents.

In the context of family life, parents stand in the place of God for their children. Spiritual abuse is so insidious because, "Children literally take the attributes of their parents and stamp them on the face of their higher power" (Lisa Miller, PhD, *The Spiritual Child*, p.91). Spiritually abusive parents distort the image of God in the minds of their children. Protestant reformer Martin Luther once stated, "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, VIIIa, 249).

The subtle power of spiritual abuse is that it presents a false view of God and a false way of serving Him. People are controlled through the misuse and abuse of religious scripture, divine position, spiritual threats and fear of spiritual consequences and the suggestion of God as complicit.

"There are profound consequences to someone who feels unable to comply with abusive behaviour . . . If you believe that to disagree or to fail to comply means that you are letting God down or even, in extreme cases, that you will not enter heaven, the pressure on you is immense"

Jesus was particularly concerned about this issue because of the enormous influence the Pharisees had over the people. While at face value, these leaders were morally upright, highly ethical, radical health reformers, sacrificial tithe returners and totally dedicated to church services, Jesus declared, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

Spiritually abusive people generally lack awareness of their dysfunctional mindset and how much harm they perpetrate. In most cases of spiritual abuse, the control of people is the central issue, and **legalism** is one of the greatest weapons in the arsenal of a spiritual abuser. However, our success in the home is not measured by our ability to control others, but how effectively we model the grace of Christ to our families. As Ken Blue observes that, "We cannot wash feet while standing on a pedestal" (*Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 84).

Spiritual abusers tend to use power, fear and intimidation to control; exhibit hypocrisy by observing the letter but not the spirit of the law; make unfair and unreasonable demands; major in minors; use knowledge and language to control and manipulate, are highly sensitive to, and intolerant of criticism and judge and shame those who 'step out of line.' Legalism has a form of godliness but denies the power of the gospel to transform lives.

C S Lewis commented, "Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst" (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 31-32). Religious 'bad men' tend to perpetrate harm fully justified in their own minds that they are doing right, often using Scripture reassure themselves. The fifth commandment has been used to justify wielding undue power over children; 'spare the rod, spoil the child' to justify physical abuse, Paul's comments on submission to justify spousal abuse, and many other examples can be cited.

In order to effectively resist abusive spirituality it is vital to understand and experience healthy spirituality. Paul counsels us, "Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5). Combatting spiritual abuse begins with self-awareness and self-reflection.

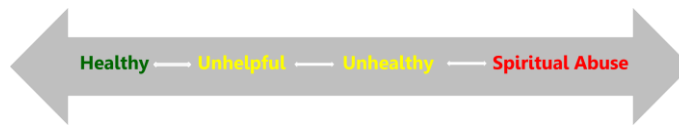
More often than not however, spiritual abusers do not cease to be so by themselves. According to Arterburn & Felton, "We must have the courage to follow Christ's example and overturn the system, be it a marriage or an organization, if that system is wrong" (Toxic Faith, 72).

Ken Blue summarizes that, "The only cure for the abuser, as well as the abused, is a sufficient dose of God's mercy and grace" (Healing Spiritual Abuse, 120). In this regard we must heed the counsel of the apostle, "let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

A SPECTRUM OF BEHAVIOUR

In their excellent book 'Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse', Dr Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys suggest that in identifying spiritual abuse, it is important to locate it the spectrum of behaviour we experience within Christian contexts.

These behaviours range from healthy behaviour one end of the spectrum and abusive behaviour on the other.



Healthy - Nurturing behaviour in which people flourish and grow.

Unhelpful behaviour - This is where someone's reaction/behaviour is not harmful but not helpful and we all behave in this way at times.

Unhealthy – we start to see a consistent pattern of behaviour that is negative, where we check ourselves before approaching that person; where they are not open to question etc. It can often be challenged and addressed at this stage.

Spiritual Abuse – The dynamic becomes a persistent pattern of coercive controlling behaviour that reflects the definition of psychological abuse within a religious context.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Misusing scripture to coerce behaviour - Biblical messages of submission, sacrifice, obedience and forgiveness can be used to manipulate, control and coerce. The Bible is weaponised to facilitate abuse.

Coercing through censorship – This may include pressuring people to secrecy and silence. People may feel unable to ask questions, disagree or raise issues in the name of "unity."

Requiring unquestioning obedience – This may include requiring obedience to the abuser, with an implicit or explicit suggestion that this equates to obedience to God. People may feel pressured into providing financial, emotional and psychological support, service or even sexual activity.

Enforced accountability – For example, being required to be accountable to another without consent, and without choice and control over boundary setting in the relationship. It should be noted that there are times when accountability is required (for example, where there is a safeguarding agreement).

Exclusion or isolation of individuals as a punishment for non-compliance – An individual may cut off from the sources of social and emotional support they have come to rely on.

Coercing behaviour through exploitation and manipulation – This may include extreme pressure to conform by a degree of commitment to the Church or the abuser that exceeds what is required of others in the Church.

Publicly shaming and humiliating individuals in order to control their behaviour - Individual/s may experience public shaming and humiliation because of a perceived lack of obedience or conformity.

Threats of spiritual consequences – This may include exercising control through threats of spiritual consequences for non-compliance with personal directives.

Inappropriate mentoring relationships. The misuse of the pastoral relationship in such a way that the mentor does not hold appropriate boundaries, and justifies this by theology, scripture or by claiming special spiritual insight or divine sanction.

THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

As with other forms of abuse, spiritual abuse can result in significant harm to a person. It can also seriously impact a person's faith. The impact may include:

Distrust and fear

Distrust is one of the main consequences of spiritual abuse. Coercion and control can leave individuals unsure of who and what they can trust. It can also lead to a distrust of any believed to be connected to the Christian faith.

Crisis of faith

Spiritual abuse can lead to damage to, or a loss of, faith. The role of faith and scripture in the experience of this abuse can lead individuals to questioning what, if anything, they believe.

Feelings of powerlessness

They may have felt compelled to be obedient to their abuser, and to defer to their decisions. They may struggle to regain control over their lives and may be frightened about doing this.

Feelings of anger - People often feel anger and rage about what has happened. The anger can be magnified by the knowledge that it happened in a Christian context and that scripture and teaching has been used to justify it.

Shame, self-blame and humiliation - They may ask questions like, "how did I let this happen to me?" "Why did I end up in this church?" "What's wrong with me?" "Why didn't I see this coming?" They may worry they have unknowingly been complicit in the spiritual abuse of others.

Loss of self and identity

For many, faith is central to a sense of self and identity. A loss of faith, or loss of a Church role and damaged relationships, can result in a direct challenge to this. It may take some time for an individual to build a new positive image of themselves and it should be recognised that not all individuals may be able to do this where trust has been severely damaged. This is another reason why effective response to abuse is so important.

Isolation

Individuals who leave spiritually abusive relationships or environments may find themselves isolated. Other relationships may have diminished due to the effects of the abusive relationship. This may leave the individual with a lack of social support. The distrust experienced can result in deep complexities associated with accessing support and intervention.

Health and/or psychological problems – The trauma of abuse can often compromise a person's mental health and also lead to physical symptoms of ill-health.

HEALING FROM SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Healing from spiritual abuse is often a long and painful journey, but survivors need to be assured that it is possible. Survivors of spiritual abuse need to appreciate that:

- **It's not their fault** – There is nothing a person can do to cause abuse. It is always the choice of the abuser. It is OK to be angry about the abuse and to experience all of the emotions that will come.
- **Abuse is never OK** - Abuse is never justified and must never be excused or the impact diminished.
- **They are not alone** – There are individuals, communities and organisations that can support the survivor's healing journey. Survivors need to proactively seek out supportive people whether inside or outside of the church.
- **They need to practice self-care** – It is vital to carve out time to nurture their emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing.
- **They have inherent value** – Survivors need an accurate portrayal of who God is and the value he has instilled in them through creation and redemption.

Recommended Reading on Abusive Relationships & Trauma

Allender, Dan	1990	The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse
Alsdurf, James, and Phyllis Alsdurf	1998	Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home.
Arterburn & Felton	2001	Toxic Faith: Experiencing Healing Over Painful Spiritual Abuse
Blue, Ken	1993	Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience

Clinton, T. & Straub, J	2010	God Attachment: Why You Believe, Act, and Feel the Way You Do About God
Crippen, Jeff	2015	Unholy Charade: Unmasking the Domestic Abuser in the Church
Henke, David	2021	Spiritual Abuse Recovery Workbook
Herman, Judith	1997	Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror
Johnson, J. & Van Vonderen, J	1991	The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church
Lansberg, Diane	2015	Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores
Nason-Clark, Nancy Kroeger, Catherine Fisher-Townsend, B.	2011	Responding to Abuse in Christian Homes: A Challenge to Churches and the Leaders
Oakley, L. & Humphreys, J.	2019	Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse
Scazzero, Peter	2017	Emotionally Healthy Spirituality
Thompson, Curt	2015	The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves
Tracey, Stephen R.	2005	Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse
Tucker, Ruth A.	2016	Black and White Bible, Black and Blue Wife: My Story of Finding Hope after Domestic Abuse