

The Enemy Within: The Dangers of Spiritual Abuse

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Abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to hurt. Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit another, thus causing spiritual wounds. Spiritual abuse differs from most other forms of abuse in that it may be perpetrated with no intent to harm.

This form of abuse is essentially using the principles of the Enemy in the name of Christ. Its seriousness is indicated by the fact that 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, it is a daunting thought that parents stand in the place of God for their children and these children tend to get their image of God from their most dominant parent or carer. Parents' task is somewhat akin the role of John the Baptist - to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. By modelling God's love, grace and truth to their children, spiritual parents make it easier for them children to accept Jesus when He makes a direct appeal to their hearts, because they would have already encountered Him through them. In her book *Child Guidance*, Ellen White states, "You may be evangelists in the home, ministers of grace to your children" (p.478). Unfortunately, too many parents are ministers of religion more than 'ministers of grace.'

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. 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).

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (2 Peter 1:2).