

Spiritual Abuse

Instead, speaking the truth in love we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament grows and build itself in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15-16)

The controversy of spiritual abuse is an issue that we, as Christians, cannot ignore. Sadly for some people church is not a safe place. Unfortunately there are people within the church who consciously or unconsciously set out to de-empower and overstep boundaries. Spiritual abuse does not just exist in the domain of cult groups, there is potential for spiritual abuse in every church group.

This paper sets out to:

- Define Spiritual abuse
- Explain the roles that people play out in a spiritually abusive situation
- Explain some of the characteristics of spiritually abusive churches and groups
- Provide some examples of spiritual abuse

What is Spiritual Abuse?

When discussing the issue of spiritual abuse it is necessary to provide a clear definition.

According to Johnson and Van Vonderen:

spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment.

Gibson defines spiritual abuse as:

Just as emotional abuse affects one emotionally, while physical abuse inflicts pain and bodily injury on its victim, spiritual abuse afflicts one spiritually. It is the result of a spiritual leader or system that tries to control, manipulate or dominate a person. This control is often in the form of fear (<http://www.spiritualabuse.org/introduction.html>)

Peter Watson writes in the foreword to "Power and Trust In Church" that:

Abuse of power and breach of trust occur when one person disregards, ignores or deliberately overbears the interests, wishes and feelings of another. Abuse and bullying result from one person treating another human being, a knowing, feeling subject, as an object. Such an act denies that the other person is a knowing feeling subject and pretends that the person is an object to be used (2003).

In "Churches that Abuse" Ronald Enroth states:

...spiritual abuse can take place in the context of doctrinally sound, Bible-preaching, fundamentalist, conservative Christianity. All that is needed for abuse is a pastor accountable to no-one and therefore beyond confrontation (pg 189)

Spiritual Abuse:

- Is a legitimate form of abuse
- Involves one person (or group of people) disempowering some-one who is dependent on their help and support
- Can take place within any church group
- Can result in some-one leaving the church and their faith altogether

Roles played within an abusive situation

According to Arterburn there are five roles normally played in an abusive situation:

- The Perpetrator
- The Co-conspirator
- The Enabler
- The Victim
- The Outcast

To highlight each of these roles I would like to share with you a case that comes from the religious group that I grew up in: the attempt to ban the use of radios, televisions and computers amongst it's members. For many people reading this paper this issue will seem extremely trivial- even laughable, however the resultant end for two victims and their family is devastating. It involves myself, and my family indirectly – we play minor roles, however the impact this case had on our family was huge and ultimately is the reason why we have all since left the group.

When I was three months old my parents joined a group, which consisted of a seemingly, informal, arrangement of small home based church groups. Unpaid ministers were assigned to guide members and provide a means of outreach to the community. What my parents were looking for was simple fellowship without the church politics that they had found in mainstream Christianity.

I know that my parents when they joined this home-based church group they didn't realise that they were joining a spiritually abusive group, which had over at least 75 years deliberately covered up the group's origins and claimed that they were the last remaining remnant of the true church found in the New Testament. Over the next 18 years as my family's involvement within the group grew (my father became an elder and was responsible for the home church we were in) so to did the number of rules and restrictions placed on us: our lives were very much governed by a need to maintain an image of perfection.

The Persecutor

The first and dominant role in an [abusive] situation is that of persecutor.

Persecutors usually:

- Are “unhealthy” people usually with backgrounds of abuse

- Compensate dysfunctional background by victimising others
- Feel forced to play role, forced to abuse others

These individuals need to defend against their own sense of brokenness and fallibility, and they often do so through outrageous behaviour. They end up hurting many, especially those who possess a true faith and sincerely seek God's will for their lives (Arterburn:2001:172).

The persecutor in this case was an elderly man – the head of the group for Victoria and Tasmania. He also wielded considerable influence on the overseers of other states as well. Nearly every year at the annual Convention (of usually about 500 people or so) he would stand and give his lecture on the evils of radio and tape players and television. He would repeatedly state: “God’s true children would not even contemplate having such evil in their households”. During his time as head of the group this man forced people to leave the group because they were open about having radio and television within their homes.

The Co-Conspirator

There are also other roles that enable abuse to occur. Arterburn recognises that: “For every persecutor there exists at least one co-conspirator who manipulates, plots and plans to keep the persecutor in power and position. The persecutor and the co-conspirator work as a unit; they operate as one (2001: 183).

- Sometimes more than one co-conspirator exists (such as within large organisations)
- Co-conspirators will do anything to defend and protect the persecutor
- Loyal
- Protector of persecutor's image

There were a number of co-conspirators to assist this persecutor. Of most importance was a minister who was hoping to take over the persecutor's job when he died. He was usually the person responsible for informing people that they were no longer welcome within the group. He was also usually responsible for sorting out problems and issues (when they arose) between people within the group. I had never really taken too much notice of this person until it was our turn as a family to be singled out for attention.

When I was fifteen my parents took issue with how a female minister had decided to treat our family – they informed her that she was not welcome to visit our house any more and, in the subsequent talks that followed indicated that they were thinking of leaving (the implications of an elder and his family leaving the group of their own volition were tremendous). The main co-conspirator and a colleague were called in to sort out the mess.

Later that year at the annual Convention, and in mid sermon the co-conspirator, staring right at our family, started the lecture: “ I was very disappointed recently when I made a visit that I really wasn't looking forward to – it was to a family

struggling in the faith. When I arrived I found the front door open, the radio blaring and the children wrapping Christmas presents. I knocked, but the radio was so loud that no-one came to the front door. Isn't this a true indication that the family was struggling?" and every-one nodded their agreement trying to work out which family he was talking about. For my family, given the fact that we caused waves, it was the beginning of the end.

The Enabler

Taking a lesser role, however still enabling abuse is the role of the Enabler. According to Arterburn: "Enablers are the primary caretakers of the persecutor... They are religious addicts, addicted to the persecutor, the toxic system and their role. They are addicted to the feelings of worth they obtain when they are called on to fix problems or to cover up the wrongs of the persecutor (2001:190)

Enablers:

- Carry out the unpleasant duties of the persecutor and co-conspirator(s)
- Have strong feeling of resentment, but rarely complain
- Have low feelings of self-worth
- Are dependent on the persecutor and the system
- Will believe any lie or rationalisation to maintain peace

There were a significant number of people within the group who played the role of the enabler. They were the people (myself included) who nodded in agreement, and pretended to be shocked and disappointed whenever the radio/television issue was raised. In secret, we owned stereo systems (walkmans were a welcome invention too), some of us justified monitors and video players and today many have embraced the internet as a media source. We knew that the issue was a power play, it was, in fact, a non-issue, and in our own personal lives we were prepared to ignore it, however we were not prepared to stand up and directly challenge the persecutor and the co-conspirators.

The Victim

"The most unfortunate of all roles within [spiritual abuse] is that of the victim. Victims don't know what they are doing when they blindly support a toxic faith system and its persecuting leader or parent. They do everything out of a desire to know God and worship God, but their actions are misguided" (Arterburn:2001:196).

Victims:

- Sacrifice time, money and faith to support the system
- Are manipulated in order to keep family or group together and persecutor in power
- Fear rejection and abandonment
- Are compliant and trusting people who believe everything that they told
- Want to be part of the system
- Feel betrayed if and when the abuse is exposed

The victims within this case are many, however they can be divided into two main groups:

- *People who took the issue so seriously they lived pretty much cut off from the world around them. They, and their children, struggled (and still struggle) to fit into mainstream society because of their lack of cultural knowledge.*
- *Also, children from “divided families” (where one parent was in the group and the other not and where radio and television were often found in their homes) can also be considered victims. They were frequently shunned or bullied by other children within the group because they were considered different (even inferior).*

Sadly this issue does have a tragic end for two of its victims. Three months after I left the group I awoke to hear the news on the radio – two children, who came from a divided family had committed suicide rather than attend the group’s annual Convention.

The Outcast

In most [spiritually abusive] systems, someone can usually see the problems and confront it. Unwilling to play the games of the persecutors and the co-conspirators, the person becomes an outcast (Arterburn:2001:201).

The Outcast:

- Will stand up for what is right/challenge the system
- Risk losing jobs, family and church
- Will be identified as troublemakers and pushed out of the system

Within the group I grew up in there were people prepared to take on the role of the outcast – very few and they didn’t last long within the group. As soon as they challenged authority and became a problem these people were asked to leave. From more prominent families it was extremely common to find that all traces of that person was removed – no photos of them appeared on the walls with other family photos and their names were never mentioned again. Rumours invariably circulated defaming the person. People who questioned their departure were threatened with the same fate. Many of the people within the outcast role in this case operate from outside of the group.

At the time the two children committed suicide despite a high level of media interest there was only one ex-member of the group prepared to make a police statement regarding the practises of the group. Later, at the time of the Coroner’s Inquest only the father of the children objected to the Coroner’s findings that it was the children’s musical preferences that had lead to their suicide.

For me, I can identify very strongly with the role of the victim/enabler roles until I left. I grew up in a so-called perfect church thinking that one day I would officially join. I couldn’t see myself leaving. It wasn’t until I started studying characteristics of

cult groups at the age of 16 at school, and made the connection between those characteristics and the group I was in that I realised that I would ultimately leave. By this stage, trying to cope with the pressure from family and other members of the group to join I went into survival mode – and leapt straight into the enabler role. I worked out pretty quickly that if I became the “perfect” girl (who followed all the rules without actually joining) a lot of the pressure would be eased. It is a time in my life that I’m not particularly proud of. It wasn’t until 4 years after I left that I began researching the group and joined an ever-increasing number of people prepared to speak out and share their experiences.

Characteristics of Spiritually Abusive Churches and Groups

The following five characteristics are fairly general of most spiritually abusive churches and groups. Usually spiritually abusive groups will exhibit a number of these characteristics if not all. Unfortunately examples of these characteristics can be found within mainstream church groups as well. To illustrate this some of the examples I have given to highlight each characteristic come from mainstream Christian churches (in each case however, it would be rare to find other characteristics present).

Authoritarian Leadership

Leaders within an abusive church/organisation usually set themselves up as the ultimate authority. They are the special people who hear and truly understand God’s voice within the group. Because of their “unique” ability members of the group or organisation are not encouraged to question leadership decisions – to do so would be opposing God’s wishes and desires. Members of the group who try to oppose the leader are shamed into silence because they “have a wrong spirit” or (if asked to leave) made examples of to ensure the silence of other members. As a result the decision making process within the group is limited to the leader (or a small committee who will not oppose the leader).

In the experience I shared above about the religious group I grew up in there is a clear pattern of authoritarian leadership. However, it’s important to realise that authoritarian leadership can extend beyond the more extreme examples of cults and sects and into the mainstream church. Let me share an example:

A local mainstream church group were undertaking preliminary discussions about the future directions of their church. They were already attracting some youth support and they wanted to continue building their youth program. The parish council met and discussions took place regarding the suitability of the existing church space (which was traditional and not really suited to the type of services they wanted to run). A building program was discussed and the parish council went back to consult with the congregation. It was during this discussion that problems arose. A small group of the congregation were unhappy with the plans, they had been part of the congregation for a long time and their families had been part of the congregation. They (and their families) had made donations and for them, rebuilding the church would mean losing their connection with tradition. A vote was taken, and a further meeting ensued to try and reach a level of agreement. During this meeting the discussion became rather heated as people struggled to come to some form of agreement. Matters took an

unfortunate turn for the worse when a parish council member made this statement: “the people who are opposing this [building plan] are opposing God’s will”.

It may have been a well intentioned comment from an extremely frustrated council member who is probably very committed to promoting youth initiatives with the church, however to attempt to shame people into agreement by implying that they were opposing God is a breach of power and an example of spiritual abuse.

Averse to Criticism:

Generally people within spiritually abusive groups will never admit that there is a problem with the group’s structure and teachings. The strong belief of exclusiveness that is often taught within spiritually abusive groups encourages members to ignore wrongdoings or even justify it: “the way is perfect but the people are not”. Consequently when a breach of power (such as abuse – physical, sexual, emotional and/or psychological) the offence is ignored (or even justified – the pressures of work) or the offender is quietly removed and the offence covered up. To implement policies and strategies to deal with situations of abuse is to admit that there is a problem. Unfortunately in such groups the victim is also ignored or made to feel as though they are also part of the problem.

To illustrate this idea a little further I would like to share with you a Cowwarr experience. Having attended several Cowwarrs (both age groups) it seems inevitable that the question of sex before marriage invariably arises during “The Panel” sessions. Each time I have quietly observed people’s reactions to the response to this question. In both instances the response was the same “the church does not condone sexual relations outside of marriage” – very black and white and very clear and a fair and reasonable response. However, both times with such a response I have seen heads lowered and shoulders drop.

To understand why this teaching could be a platform for spiritual abuse it is necessary to share a few statistics. 27.6% girls under the age of 16 in a survey conducted by Ronald and Juliette Goldman (1988) reported that they have been recipients of inappropriate and unwanted sexual attention (by peers and older). 9% of boys in a similar survey also conducted by Ronald and Juliette Goldman indicated that they had been recipients of inappropriate and unwanted sexual attention. Unfortunately church groups are not immune from this statistic.

The response during “The Panel” sessions although presenting a correct teaching ignores these statistics and invariably for some victims of abuse “The Church” becomes part of the problem – perhaps even taking an enabling role within the abuse setting. Perhaps a far more compassionate response should have at least included a clarifying statement on abuse to ensure that any victims of abuse are not made to feel guilty or ashamed of something that is not their fault.

Perfectionistic:

In an abusive spiritual situation there is often a preoccupation with performance and appearance. Usually these groups are extremely legalistic with unreasonable conditions placed upon the lifestyle choices of members. Group members who are

unable to live up to the high standards imposed are made to feel guilty. Leaders often publicly shame errant members and other group members are actively encouraged to shun those who do not live up the standards imposed.

Sadly, just based on my appearance alone, (short dyed hair, modest amounts of jewellery, rare use of make-up, and usual attire of jeans and shirt) I know that I would not be permitted to participate in any type of fellowship with other members of the group.

Unbalanced:

In order to claim their “uniqueness” spiritually abusive groups usually try to distinguish themselves from other groups by putting excessive emphasis on a minor point of theology. This leads to a distorted version of the Christian message where often the essential elements of the Gospel message are ignored to place greater emphasis on the group’s own message.

Examples of this include:

- **Exclusiveness**

1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”.

- **Appearance (in particular women’s appearance)**

Deuteronomy 22:5 A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing for the Lord your God detests any-one who does this.

1 Corinthians 11:14-16 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If any-one wants to be contentious about this – we have no other practice- nor do the churches of God.

- **Ministry**

Christian Convention Church – also known as: The 2x2s, The Truth (and associated with the Cooneyites) uses the following verses (with omissions) to justify their ministry .

Matthew 10:57, 9-10 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: “The kingdom of heaven is near”...Freely as you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey or extra tunic or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

Mark 6:7 Calling the Twelve together he sent them out two by two....

Luke 9:1-6 When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority... and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God...He told them "Take nothing for the journey – no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them.

- **Place of Worship**

Christian Convention Church – also known as: The 2x2s, The Truth (and associated with the Cooneyites) uses the following verses to justify their place of worship;

Acts 7:48 - However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men

Acts 17:24 – The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.

- **Jehovah's Witnesses Blood Rule**

Genesis: 9:4 But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.

Leviticus 17:10-11 Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood – I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of the creature is in the blood and I have given to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

Acts 15: 19-21 It is my judgement, therefore that we not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood....

Paranoid:

Within a spiritually abusive group there often exists a feeling of "us versus them". Usually this is a feeling encouraged by leaders as a controlling tactic for group members. Non-members are portrayed as "un-Godly" or "of the world" and members are encouraged to break links with non-members including family. The extreme examples of this include both the Jonestown and Waco massacres. There are also other groups, which actively shun "the world" such as Exclusive Brethren, Christadelphians, Christian Convention Church and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Conclusion.

We are called by God to praise Him in community. Jesus said: "For where two or three came together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Unfortunately we are all human, and, in being in community we are all capable of overstepping each other's personal boundaries. People operating in each of the roles

of abuse: persecutor, co-conspirator, enabler, victim and outcast can be found in every church group (usually unaware that they are operating in such roles- we are all capable of operating in each role). To minimise the potential for spiritual abuse occurring within our spiritual communities it is essential that the problem is owned by every-one. We all need to know how it is possible for each to infringe on other's boundaries, and when it happens deal with it with compassion and love.

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