

Spiritual abuse—which is the manipulation and exploitation of others by the misuse of spiritual privilege and power—is a well-documented problem in the mind controlling cults and sects of Australia. Unfortunately, as many battered Christians have discovered, its negative effects may also be found in ‘normal’, mainstream churches.

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# The Insidious Harm of Spiritual Abuse

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At my first encounter with spiritual abuse, I equated the term with the well-documented mind-numbing cults such as the Jehovah Witnesses and insidious sects such as the Sydney Church of Christ\* and the Shepherding Movement. I soon became aware, however, that this same abusive system had infiltrated some of the more respected evangelical churches.

Most people understand the terms “child abuse”, “sexual abuse” and “emotional abuse” but find it harder to grasp the idea of “spiritual” abuse. The task is easier when the definition identifies the common feature of all abuse—the misuse of power and privilege.

Spiritual abuse is just that: the manipulation and exploitation of others by the misuse of spiritual privilege and power. By definition, the majority of those who perpetrate such abuse are office-holders in Australia’s churches and religious institutions.

Instances of spiritual abuse can range from a one-off event innocently committed by a single, well-meaning church leader to an intentionally scripted abusive system involving the leadership en masse. The act can be as obvious as a public breach of pastoral confidentiality or as private as subtle pressure to give financially beyond your means. Because the issue covers too vast a scope to be addressed adequately in one article, one of the sidebars accompanying this article lists sources for further information.

## Four rules

Spiritual abuse shares many common features with other abusive systems. The most identifiable are the unspoken rules: Don’t trust, don’t talk, don’t think and don’t question.

**Don’t trust.** The power wielded by abusive leadership is generated from the double premise that they alone are God’s “anointed” and that their biblical interpretations alone are to be trusted. Any interpretation or information that does not receive their endorsement is untrustworthy. The “don’t trust” rule squashes the individual’s confidence in their own judgment and their ability to make decisions for themselves. Any personal experience that contradicts the leadership’s teachings is also deemed untrustworthy and an indicator of spiritual immaturity.

**Don’t think.** Leaders of closed systems do not tolerate the study and consideration of alternative interpretations of Scripture. Their viewpoints are considered unquestionable truth. This closed mindset often extends to edicts on personal life; clothing, occupation, ministry location and even marital choices may be prescribed. Independent thinking, particularly any close analysis of the group’s belief system, is considered a sign of dissent and disloyalty.

**Don’t talk.** In abusive systems any discussion of group issues with non-members is discouraged. The leadership will not tolerate outside consultation since it could expose the membership to alternative solutions and undermine the leadership’s authority. Often current members are forbidden to talk to or about former members, unless it is to report on their subsequent shame and demise. Former members with relatives still involved in the church may be reluctant to talk about their experiences for fear of reprisal. In some churches, members are commanded to sever communication with non-member relatives and to adopt the group as their new family.

**Don’t question.** Abusive leadership will not tolerate challenges to its authority. “Don’t question” is a powerful rule. The member who questions the decisions or standards of the leadership is usually ostracised, humiliated or excluded from ministry opportunity. I have met with many individuals and couples who have experienced such treatment when they questioned the leadership in their churches.

## Case Study: Jan and Phillip

Jan and Phillip were talented musicians. They had been active members in their church for eight years, but they were alarmed, two years ago, when their pastor and elders told them God wanted them to leave in three months to assist in a new ministry interstate.

Jan and Phillip replied that they doubted this was God's will since Jan's mother was very sick and relied on them daily. In response, they were told that to disobey God by staying would bring dire consequences.

This was not an isolated case in the church. Jan and Phillip has witnessed several others leave under pressured circumstances. They now felt that same pressure.

Jan and Phillip did leave, almost immediately, for another church. Sitting in my counselling room, they struggled with deep hurts and concerns. They wondered whether they had overreacted or misread God's will. Phillip's parents and most of their friends were still in the church, and, though their new church was biblically sound, it lacked the vitality of the old. As yet, no avenues for ministry had opened.

Over the next few months I listened as Jan and Phillip detailed their good and bad experiences with the old church. They appreciated many fine qualities in the ministry and its people but also saw the control wielded by the leadership. Part of their healing involved processing the conflicting emotions of relief and sadness.

During this time, Phillip renewed acquaintances with Christian friends from university, and he and Jan began reviving their musical ministry in their new church's Sunday school. They maintained intermittent contact with friends from their old church, meeting in neutral venues whenever possible.

Phillip's parents continued to be bewildered. They defended the pastors on occasion but accepted that Phillip and Jan were not returning.

The pastor of their new church, recognising Phillip and Jan's need to connect in a closer way, welcomed them into his home group. Their grief lingered for a year or so, but they rebuilt their lives with the help of their new home group, social acquaintances and a determination to live by growing in truth.

## Case Study: Pastor Don

I met Pastor Don in Dallas. At the time, he was the on-air announcer for the Minirth-Meier clinic. He had his own story of misguided power and its tragic consequences.

Don was the pastor of a prominent Texan church when a member's teenage son committed suicide. In his passion to present Jesus as the sustainer of his people through all trouble, he strongly advised them against any public or private grieving.

Traumatised, the family struggled through the funeral. They spent the next 12 months trying to suppress their grief until another teenage son, in a deep depression, also chose to end his life.

This second tragedy prompted Pastor Don to examine both his theology of emotions and the appropriateness of the advice he had given. He realised that, by advising against their grieving, he had contributed to the family's ongoing trauma and possibly, in some way, to the second son's death. He repented of his abusive ignorance and sought forgiveness from God and the family. Pastor Don has since dedicated himself to training and a ministry of counselling and care.

## Characteristics of the abuser

The leaders of abusive systems share a common profile:

- A need to control
- An authoritative style
- A commanding personality
- An inability to tolerate criticism or dissension
- A tendency to surround themselves with a small, exclusive clique.

Often the leader is a self-styled Bible expert whose subjective interpretations appeal to the members and reinforce the leader's "anointed" position. Rarely do these interpretations survive close scrutiny, but, even so, such criticism of their teaching is perceived as persecution. Besides, given the choice, the membership invariably remains with the besieged leader, lest they risk having to face the reality that they were duped.

Abusive leaders are also quite secretive. Rarely are their financial affairs and family life subjected to the same scrutiny as those of their membership. The demands made on others are not made on self. Spiritually abusive leadership seems to flourish in environments with the following characteristics:

- Earnest seekers of truth
- A biblically diluted established church
- A society that seems to have lost its spiritual way.

In such cases, the resulting spiritual vacuum is filled by leadership that offers a sense of authority and a security not found elsewhere. That strong sense of "belonging" makes the abuse tolerable. To lose that is to return to insecurity.

## The path through spiritual abuse

Survivors of spiritual abuse recount how they were left with deep personal issues, particularly an inability to trust. Because critical thinking was discouraged, they had no confidence in their own ability to discern truth from error. This led to a distorted perception of God and how a person has a relationship with him.

Survivors also struggle with the concept of unconditional acceptance. Most spiritually abusive systems are very performance oriented. God's pleasure depends on submission to the church's edicts and the total acceptance of the leadership's authority. This leaves many survivors with a relationship with God based on fear and performance. Grace and unconditional acceptance are ideas that were spoken about but never experienced.

This lack of trust and confidence also impairs the member's marital, family and social relationships. It is difficult to share closely with a relative when issues of group loyalty are at stake or to accept another as a brother or sister when they have been labelled, with no uncertainty, as an untrustworthy non-believer. A lack of self-confidence will impair most attempts to achieve or to take a risk in life, and a diet of performance-based acceptance will make most people vulnerable to emotional and physical burnout as they strive to gain approval.

For the survivor of abuse, recovery is often long and arduous. Spiritual abuse is no exception. The survivor, having exited the system, needs to begin trusting, talking, thinking, questioning.

Healing often begins with confronting and dismantling the rules that governed the group. This needs to be done in a safe and confidential setting, and the survivor has to find someone they can trust. Sometimes a neutral Christian therapist is a good place to start.

By talking about their experiences and expressing the strong emotions they feel, the survivor will discover that the hold the leadership had on them will weaken. Processing the fears and guilt associated with their exit will require sound counsel and caring, accepting friends or a transparent and accountable support group. Once the grief over exiting has been resolved, the survivor needs to immerse themselves in new patterns of relating and living based on the grace of God.

## The need for vigilance

Christians, even in mainstream churches, need to be alert to the signs of spiritual abuse.

- Are their leaders open and accountable?
- Do they encourage critical thinking?
- Will they willingly consider new ideas and initiatives?
- Can they tolerate a diversity of opinion and interpretation?

Any hint of spiritual abuse needs to be addressed through all appropriate channels. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus outlines the process for dealing with those who have wronged us. This involves confronting the abuser in increasingly more public arenas until, as a last resort, the relationship is terminated.

If the local church leadership is part of the problem, most denominations have a grievance procedure that should be followed. But if the leadership is not accountable to a higher authority, then the members need to question the rules and talk out and challenge as often as they can. If you feel there is no acceptable response, move away. Find a group that is healthy and focus on your own healing.

Abusive leadership maintains its power and privilege by breeding fear and guilt and rewarding loyalty. Dissension and exposure are what they fear most.

## Delving Deeper

### Books

The following is a selective list of resources dealing with spiritual abuse.

Churches That Abuse, by Ronald Enroth. Zondervan, 1992. ISBN: 0310532922

Healing Spiritual Abuse, by Ken Blue. InterVarsity Press, 1993. ISBN: 0830816607

More Jesus Less Religion, by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton. Waterbrook Press, 2000. ISBN: 1578562503

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse, by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen. Bethany House, 1991. ISBN: 1556611609

Twisted Scriptures, by Mary Chrnalogar. Zondervan, 1997. ISBN: 0310234085

### Website

[www.spiritualabuse.com](http://www.spiritualabuse.com)