

SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN THE CHURCH: A GUIDE  
TO RECOGNITION AND RECOVERY

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## **DEDICATION**

This project is affectionately dedicated to my dear wife Sharon, and to my three daughters, Bryn, Rachel, and Grace.

I am also profoundly grateful for the examples of courage provided by the survivors of spiritual abuse who I am honored to call friends, and to the subtle but life-changing words and actions of kindness and understanding by my family, friends, and the law-enforcement personnel and District Attorney's Office of Multnomah County, Oregon.

Above all, I bow my knee in adoration and gratitude to the Friend of Sinners and Finder of Lost Sheep—the Great Shepherd Jesus Christ, who still seeks and saves the lost and hurting to this day.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

C-PTSD	Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome
ICC	International Christian Church
ICOC	International Churches of Christ
ICSA	International Cultic Studies Association <sup>1</sup>
NPR	Narcissistic Personality Disorder
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome
SGA	Second Generation Survivor

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<sup>1</sup> “About Us - International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA).” Accessed January 3, 2017. <http://www.icsahome.com/aboutus>. “Founded in 1979, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) is a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic or high-demand groups, alternative movements, and other environments. ICSA is tax-exempt, supports civil liberties, and is not affiliated with any religious or commercial organizations.”

## **ABSTRACT**

The theme of this project is spiritual abuse. For this project, spiritual abuse is defined as the use of deception, manipulation, and undue influence by a pastor or leader over a member of a church or Christian organization in order to appropriate the member's material, physical, or emotional resources. The purpose of this study is to introduce the reader to the existence, characteristics, and leaders of spiritually abusive churches. Select biblical examples of spiritual abuse, Christian and secular academic sources, and a description of the basic personality types of spiritually abusive pastors, their churches, and their victims are presented. A description of both healthy churches and healthy pastors is provided, along with suggestions for how churches and pastors can prepare themselves to effectively care for survivors of spiritual abuse. The appendix includes an exegetical sermon on spiritual abuse from the book of Jude. An extended bibliographical list is provided for further reading on the subject of spiritual abuse, thought reform, and the development of a healthy pastoral theology relating to the care of spiritual abuse survivors.

## **PROLOGUE: A HOUSE OF MIRRORS**

With the demise of old-fashioned amusement parks, we are seeing the disappearance of Houses of Mirrors. These houses were comprised of maze-like passageways where the customer walked, becoming increasingly disoriented and set off-balance by the mirrors that surrounded them, as the mirrors functioned as the actual obstacles in the maze. Distorted images made it nearly impossible to be sure that what was seen was . . . real, and not a mere image.

The mirrors were of all shapes and sizes. However, what they all had in common was that they all lacked a flat surface, as found in any normal household mirror. Instead, they were convex, concave, bloated out, and punched in, so that they did not yield a true reflection of their subject. Instead, the image they produced was distorted.

Walking through a House of Mirrors, people saw distorted images of themselves. The reflections ranged from comical to grotesque. One mirror might portray its beholder, instead of his true, 6 ft. height, as being only 4 feet tall—and three feet wide! Another one might present the body's frame as resembling an upside-down bowling-pin. Another might take a 210 lb. man and slim him down to what appeared to be a solid, lithe 175 lbs.

To add to the experience, a person often saw his companions' images in the distortion of the misshapen mirrors. Nothing, and no one, was actually, what they appeared to be in the House of Mirrors.

Once a person finally completed the journey through the House of Mirrors, stepping into the daylight of the *real* world seemed a bit disorienting. Were buildings truly flat and solid? Was the ground moving? It often took a couple of minutes to gain one's bearings and return to the world of trustworthy, solid images.

Many experiences in life leave us feeling that we have spent time in a House of Mirrors. The military, college, a cross-cultural experience where close relationships are formed in the forge of challenge, or perhaps danger—experiences like these can be dizzying, and even difficult to describe years later, when we have moved on with our lives.

As a former paramedic I am intimately familiar with the experience of sharing the challenges and danger of a complex call with my partner and fellow rescuers. The world tends to flee from view during such intense, seemingly unreal minutes, leaving only the immediate threats to address and tasks to accomplish. It was often difficult to re-adjust to *normal* life after those calls.

People stumble out into the brightness of daylight out of other, darker, mirrored mazes. Abusive marriages and relationships, drug and alcohol addiction, sexual degradation, and other intense, often dangerous conditions of life, leave us disoriented, dazed, and vulnerable—even when we leave them.

Likewise, people who belong to abusive religious systems are living in houses of mirrors. Reality is distorted, twisted into a confusing, off-balancing existence that, sadly, becomes *normal* for members. In this spiritual maze of mirrors, leaders appear to possess more power and authority than the rest of the

world would ever accord them. They become giants, towering over those they control. In every direction one turns in the spiritual House of Mirrors, pastors and leaders are ever looming, ever providing their own, personal explanations of truth, and demands of loyalty and behavior. They appear in every mirror, whichever way one turns—large, intimidating, and ever watchful. There seems to be no escape.

In contrast, in every mirror the member sees herself as small, distorted, frail, weak, and needy—every mirror, without exception, for the leaders are themselves the architects of these spiritual houses of mirrors. Moreover, just as a house of mirrors is designed and constructed to make escape mildly difficult, these spiritual houses of mirrors are *not* constructed for the member to find it easy or comfortable to leave. Rather, a person must stumble out of them, sometimes knocking over a few mirrors on the way out, simply resolving that you will . . . keep . . . following . . . that sliver of brightness that has invaded the soul's darkness. All of one's hopes are pinned on the belief that there is a true Light beckoning. But the artificial light of the House of Mirrors must be abandoned to live in that Light.

Abused members are not as bold as their leaders' think they are, when it comes to leaving the spiritual House of Mirrors. They often feel as dead as stones. They wonder if there is truly another world that even exists out there, and if that world will allow, welcome, or embrace them back into its light. They are, finally, people with nothing left to lose, and many are eventually willing to take risks to escape the House of Mirrors.

As one who has survived an abusive church, I have found that when people do finally leave they often remain in a state of disorientation and confusion regarding their faith, the church, the Bible, Jesus, God, prayer, marriage, children, careers, food, and traditions. The list is long and it grows as more people who escape abusive religious groups share their stories. Like the guests of a house of mirrors who have stumbled out its back door, blinking in the sunlight and unsteady on their feet—those who leave the dark churches often remain in a state of spiritual funk, and dizziness, and uncertainty for a long time.

They wonder if they have just wasted months, if not years of their lives. *By the grace of God, they haven't.* They wonder if they can ever trust any church, or leader, again. *By the grace of God, they can.* They wonder if their marriages and families can ever, possibly, recover from the assault and trauma endured. *By the grace of God, they can heal.* They wonder if their lives will ever seem put together again, functional and healthy. *By the grace of God, life will come back together.* They wonder if *up* will every truly seem like *up*, and *down* truly seem like *down*, and if they can ever trust their ability to judge truth again. Parents wonder if they will ever be able to effectively lead and protect their families again. Children wonder if they can trust their parents and if they will forever bear the stigma of belonging to a troubled church, not of their own choosing, but of their parents' choice! *Again, by the grace of God, by the grace of God, by the grace of God. . .*

If you are in an abusive church or religious system today, ask God to rescue you, and look for a small crack of Light from the back of the room, where

an unseen Friend has left the door ajar for those who will to leave. I still squint at the magnificent, healing Son in my own eyes.

## INTRODUCTION

Abusive churches, past and present, are primarily characterized by strong, control-oriented leadership. These leaders use guilt, fear, and intimidation to manipulate members and keep them in line. Followers are led to think that there is no other church quite like theirs and that God has singled them out for special purposes. Other, more traditional evangelical churches are put down. Subjective experience is emphasized and dissent is discouraged. Many areas of members' lives are subject to scrutiny. Rules and legalism abound. People who do not follow the rules or who threaten exposure are often dealt with harshly. Excommunication is common. For those who leave, the road back to normalcy is difficult, with seemingly few who understand the phenomena of spiritual abuse.

Ronald Enroth, sociologist and prominent author in the Christian countercult movement, writes:

I believe many Christians today lack awareness and understanding regarding the spiritually abusive churches that exist in their neighborhoods and cities. Most churches do their best to be spiritual communities of good-hearted, humble members who seek spiritual growth, the wise application of the Bible to life, recovery from hang-ups, bad habits, and genuine, authentic community with other likeminded Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of abusive churches has been reported over the past several decades in excellent books by Ronald Enroth, Paul Martin, Ken Blue,

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald M. Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*, English Language edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 31.

David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, among others. There is a solid core of works published in the secular realm that deal more generally with the issues of cults, cult recovery, Narcissistic Personality Disorder in leaders, and of the principles and applications of thought reform. But the day-to-day functioning of such groups, including abusive churches—their behaviors, strategies, and organization, etc.—is a moving target, constantly evolving and adapting so as to best serve the desires of their leader. Thus, there is a need to present and spread the message of education, recovery, and hope to those who have been involved in abusive churches. There is also a need to provide effective assistance to both the victims and the potential recruits of these malignant groups.

### **Research Methodology**

The methodological approach of this project is qualitative, with an overlapping of phenomenology, biblical hermeneutics, and grounded theory.<sup>2</sup> The perspectives and accounts of spiritual abuse from twenty-six survivors of eight churches/Christian ministries were obtained through personal interview and email exchanges. The range of age of the interview subjects was from early twenties to mid-sixties, nineteen were female, and all subjects joined their respective abusive groups as late-teens or as adults. (None were raised in the

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<sup>2</sup> While written to satisfy the standards of a theological doctoral dissertation, I hope to publish this work in a form that utilizes popular language, and is more accessible for a broader readership.

abusive groups that they left.) All names of research interviewees have been changed to protect their identity and confidentiality. When not demanded by context or in use regarding persons of deity, the use of the male pronoun expressly intends to include both genders. Relevant biblical passages have been exegeted and applied to the current study, and both historic and current publications related to spiritual abuse (as a type of thought reform) were consulted. Equal attention has been given to both religious and secular-based works in the field.

### **Overview of the Project**

This book is separated into chapters that present a biblical and secular survey of spiritual abuse, spiritually abusive leaders, and the abusive churches they lead. The marks of spiritually healthy churches and leaders are also presented, along with some suggestions for how such healthy churches and pastors can effectively care for the survivors of spiritual abuse who may seek to worship in a healthy church. In support of my arguments, I provide extensive interview data from spiritual abuse survivors and intersperse narrative accounts of my own experience of membership in an abusive church.

This project is presented in nine chapters. Chapter one introduces the phenomena of cults and aberrant religious groups in contemporary America and suggests a solution to the tension of referring to an otherwise orthodox, evangelical church as a cult.

Chapter two places the project in its theological context, surveying selected examples of spiritual abuse within the spiritual communities of the Old and New Testaments and noting the ethical/spiritual deficiencies of the spiritual abusers described in the text.

Chapter three describes the common, narcissistic disorder found in spiritual abusers, and suggests that such leaders are invariably, ultimately recognized by the content of their words, as considered over time.

Chapter four presents the concept of religious totalism, the mindset commonly found in those who join and remain in abusive churches. This chapter discusses the tensions encountered when a prospective member is challenged to make greater commitments to the church despite his private misgivings of doing so, and the crisis of faith that such challenges create. I will also explore the particular draw of a church or group with a totalist ideology to well-meaning, motivated Christians who simply wish to grow deeper in their faith experience.

Chapter five presents the primary indicators of a spiritually abusive church in eight areas, loosely correspondent with the eight criteria of thought reform developed by Robert Lifton.<sup>3</sup> Through the narrative accounts of survivors of spiritually abusive churches, I will develop each indicator in a manner that will be readily understood by the reader.

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<sup>3</sup> Lifton, Robert Jay. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

Chapter six presents four conditions that have been found to be a consistent part of the decision that the member of an abusive church makes to finally leave the church—all in answer to the question, “Why do people leave abusive churches?”

Chapter seven describes the various emotional-spiritual wounds that the survivors of abusive churches often carry with them when they visit healthy churches. The areas of personal, marital, family, and professional loss, along with spiritual woundedness, are listed and described with a view to informing members and pastors of healthy churches of the condition of the survivors who may visit them.

Chapter eight describes the core motivations and character qualities of the safe pastor—one who acts as a tenderhearted servant, and not as the abusive over-lording pastor of the abusive church. The marks of a safe church are described, juxtaposed with the eight indicators of the abusive church.

Chapter nine presents my summary of the importance of identifying abusive churches, and of purposefully caring for the survivors of such churches. In this chapter, I pull together the overall content of the project to provide solid application points for both the pastor and the church member who desires to be effective in the restoration of abuse survivors to spiritual health.

In the Appendix, I provide a sample sermon from the book of Jude that deals with the issue of abusive leaders in the Christian church.

## Definitions

The following words and phrases are found throughout the project.

**Abusive Church** – A distinct group that subscribes to the general, core-beliefs of the Christian faith in its doctrines, but exists in an atmosphere in which the policies, practices, traditions, decisions, and demands of the church's leader(s) have created a socially unhealthy, traumatizing environment in the congregation.

**Abusive Pastor** – A person who is recognized as the primary leader of the church or group, and who methodically uses deception, manipulation, and undue influence in order to appropriate the member's material, physical, or emotional resources.

**Cult** – While most of the terms and ideas that I introduce are simple and easy to grasp, it is apparent in the project that I struggle greatly with the term *cult* in describing a Christian church. I will better explain and seek resolution to the struggle in subsequent chapters. But for a basic, consistent definition of the word, *cult* denotes a *small, religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous*. While ideology and doctrine always have a role in the health or dysfunction of any religious group, increasingly a group's status as a *cult* is derived solely from its actual treatment of its members, and not from its creeds, beliefs, and theology.

**Second Generation Adult** – An adult who was born or raised in a cult or a spiritually abusive church or group.

**Spiritual Abuse** – The application of undue influence and coercion over a person's thoughts and actions, resulting in various forms of trauma to the individual, and particularly related to the spiritual/ecclesial milieu (in this work, a Christian church).

**Thought Reform** – The deliberate, systematic alteration of an individual's thinking processes, including attitudinal, volitional, and belief. Thought reform is practiced in the world of commerce, religion, entertainment, etc., and reached its most developed broad application in the Chinese Communist government of Chairman Mao in the early 1950's.

**Totalism** – an ideological or philosophical group environment in which members are led to make increasing, unlimited, undifferentiated commitments of loyalty in thought, word, and action, to the group and its leadership. Totalism is the demanded response of the member by the totalitarian regime to which the member belongs.

**Brainwashing** – the use of coercion and manipulation, etc., to make somebody adopt a specific, altered, point of view, usually without their knowledge of any overt strategy of doing so. Brainwash is a more popular expression of what was formally known as the thought reforming process.

**Narcissism** -- a fixation with oneself that arises from a disordered self-love, and expressed in grandiose, self-serving, self-absorbed attitudes and behaviors. Narcissists routinely lack the ability to care for their own emotional needs, and so develop strategies in their interpersonal relationships that

manipulate and coerce others to devote their lives to meeting the needs and desires of the narcissist.

### **Assumptions**

First, I assume that historic Christianity is the proper lens through which to view abusive churches. Abusive churches do, after all, make a consistent and singular claim to being the possessors of a pure, *true* form of the Christian faith, particularly in regards to the doctrine of ecclesiology. Any endeavor to understand and comment on such churches should begin with a reliance on the general, historically orthodox understanding of what proper, normative Christianity should look like, especially when viewing its existence in a Christian church. Therefore, this project is unambiguously Christian in its orientation.

The first assumption naturally leads to the second. The Bible is rightly to be considered the plumb line in the measurement of healthy churches and unhealthy or abusive churches. This project assumes the Bible to be a uniquely inspired book, similar to many other works of its genre and historical period, and yet bearing unique features of both human and divine authorship. When studying the Bible it is to be approached not only with confidence in its trustworthiness, but also with due respect for its obligatory nature. Therefore, this project is biblical in orientation.

Third, I assume that all who read this book share a sense of revulsion at the idea that any leader or religious organization would knowingly manipulate followers for the sake of both material and non-material gain. Any form of

tyranny, deceit, or assault on human freedom and choice is repugnant, and is an affront to the best standards of practice of both Christianity and all other legitimate, healthy religious traditions. (Assuming this shared conviction regarding the unethical nature of such behavior in the setting of religion, I will not develop any arguments for *why* thought reform, cultic manipulation, spiritual abuse, etc. are inherently evil. While I assume that my readers will not all agree on the first two assumptions, I do assume that all agree on the third, regardless of their particular religious or metaphysical beliefs.) Therefore, this project is humanitarian in its orientation.

### **Limitations**

This presentation of the recognition of, and recovery from, spiritual abuse is not exhaustive. It does not present an ongoing, systematic plan of therapy for the survivor's successful recovery. I have limited the scope of this project to an exploration of biblical data regarding spiritual abuse and a listing of common conditions found in contemporary, spiritually-abusive Christian churches. I have augmented the discussion with a brief (select) survey of academic and psychoanalytic thinking regarding the issue of thought reform, cults, and issues of recovery from high-demand, cultic groups.

This book does not include extended discussion regarding abusive groups from other (non-Christian) religions, business cults, self-improvement cults, marketing cults, martial arts cults, and political cults, etc.

### **Importance of the Project**

This work is critical to several groups of people, and will provide a tool in addressing the persistent, corrosive effects that abusive pastors and the abusive churches they create have on the reputation of the Christian faith, and on the personal faith-experience of Christians. For survivors of abusive churches who are asking, "What happened?" I hope to provide solid answers and some initial direction regarding the process of recovery from such experiences. For the family and friends who suspect their loved one's church is abusive, I hope to provide answers to the question, "What is happening to our son . . . our daughter . . . our friend . . . our mom . . . our dad?" For pastors and members of healthy churches who desire to relate to the survivors of abusive churches with kindness and understanding, I hope to provide a reasonable set of character-based goals for the pastor and congregation in order to be a place of acceptance and healing for survivors. Finally, for those readers who do not share my Christian faith, but are interested in the phenomena of abusive churches, I hope to provide a reasonable explanation of how spiritual abuse happens within a church. I hope to draw clear distinctions between the reasonable, biblical commandments and instructions addressed to all Christians and the unscrupulous, malicious misuse of those commandments and instructions to gain control over the lives of members.

### **Summary**

This project is an attempt to define and identify spiritual abuse as it occurs in Christian churches. Through the survey of selected biblical examples of

spiritual abuse, current academic and religious works regarding abuse, interviews (both in person and via email) with survivors of spiritual abuse and personal reflections of my experience in an abusive church, a basic understanding of the nature of spiritual abuse, including the behavior and thought-processes of spiritual abusers, is presented. Common indicators of spiritually abusive churches are proposed, along with the reasons and difficulties encountered by those who leave spiritually abusive churches. The latter chapters of the project present the attributes of healthy churches and pastors that serve to provide understanding, a place of healing, and the restoration of faith to spiritual abuse survivors. This project begins with a presentation of cults and abusive churches, as they exist in America today.

## Chapter 1

### CULTS AND CHURCHES . . .

What is a cult? What is an abusive church? Are they the same, or are there distinctions between the two that are important to bear in mind as the reader interacts with the issue of spiritual abuse in churches today? To introduce the word *cult* into a discussion regarding abusive, Christian churches often ends any meaningful discussion with survivors of such churches, as many Christians feel that the words *cult* and *Christian* are mutually exclusive. More than one survivor of a spiritually abusive church has told me, "I know I was not in a cult, because my church believed in the Bible, and the full deity of Jesus Christ." Through the years, I have come to wonder why it is that survivors of spiritual abuse in Christian churches draw solace from the notion that their church could not have been a cult, as if that assignation makes the abuse they suffered in their (allegedly *non-cultic*) church in some way less worse than what they actually suffered there.

#### Cults in America

Researchers estimate that at least 2,500,000 Americans have joined cultic groups during the past fifty to sixty years. Some who joined groups during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have raised children in cults and other highly

controlling cultic environments.<sup>1</sup> In a free society such as the United States, cults not only exist, they must be allowed to exist as an expression of America's value of religious freedom.

The word *cult* describes a distinct religious group, a religious group that is "regarded as unorthodox or spurious," or [in a non-religious sense] a "great devotion to a person, idea, objects, movement, or work (as a film or book); especially: such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad."<sup>2</sup> Historically, the word *cult* did not carry its present connotations of unhealthy, aberrant, or totalitarian religion, but merely denoted a particular religious group, such as the cult of Dionysus or Bacchus or of emperor worship, or the mystery cults of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Such groups were known more for their secrecy and exclusivity of initiation than for being destructive, bizarre, or mistrusted by the surrounding culture.<sup>3</sup>

The United States has a strange relationship to cults. A person's religion can be seen as strange, abnormal, mysterious, or even downright creepy, but as long as that religion does not hurt anyone or break any laws, it is not just tolerated, but protected under law. Even groups that are widely known as *cults*

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<sup>1</sup> See website of the ICSA, "FAQs - International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)." <<http://www.icsahome.com/elibrary/faqs>> (January 3, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> "Definition of CULT." <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cult>> (January 3, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Colette Hemingway and Seán Hemingway, "Greek Gods and Religious Practices," In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000) <[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grlg/hd\\_grlg.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grlg/hd_grlg.htm)> (October, 2003)

are granted a right to exist and to practice their faith according to the dictates of the consciences of their members. Such religious groups and movements, while often poorly understood, are generally tolerated by Americans, who value both individuality and independence, as long as those conditions do not impinge on the welfare and freedom of others. In the United States, cults and abusive churches present a challenge to the delicate balance between respect of individual rights regarding religious practice, and the obligation of the government to protect its citizens from undue coercion and psychological abuse in its religious institutions and groups.<sup>4</sup>

Increasingly, Americans have witnessed their cultural leaders joining new, non-traditional groups, movements, and religions, espousing their beliefs, and even becoming effective recruiters for them. The idea of new and novel religious and ideologically based movements finding a home in the American cultural landscape has become increasingly common and tolerable. The Beatles had a guru, folk musician John Denver attended and enthusiastically promoted EST courses,<sup>5</sup> Madonna observes Cabalism, and Tina Turner, a self-described *Buddhist Baptist*, practiced chanting.<sup>6</sup> Hare Krishna adherents solicited

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<sup>4</sup> See Herbert L. Rosedale, Esq., "Reflecting on Cultural Diversity in Response to Cultic Activity - International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)." <http://www.icsahome.com/articles/reflecting-on-cultural-diversity-in-response-to-cultic-activity> (January 3, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Erhard Seminars Training (1971-84), an organization founded by Werner H. Erhard, offering a 60 hour course promising personal transformation and empowerment to overcome the various hang-ups and hassles of life that led people to attend such a course.

donations in airports, chanted, and danced on downtown corners. Actors, politicians, poets and musicians became Scientologists, espousing the religious creation of science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, seeking personal improvement and happiness through the exploration and study of the immortal, eternal spirit called a *Thetan* that presumably resides in the human mind and body.<sup>7</sup>

These new religious groups and metaphysical-based pursuits actively recruit. When I was thirteen, my friends and I happened upon a Hare Krishna concert in a neighborhood park. I was enthusiastically welcomed by a friendly young man with a shaved head who wore what looked like a pastel colored bedsheet. He invited me and my friends to a meeting held at a nearby house where we would hear a talk about Krishna and enjoy all the sweet rice we could eat. “You’ll like it, really!” he assured us.

I passed on the offer. At that age, it took more than sweet rice to catch my interest. By the age of eighteen I had been approached on the streets of my SE Portland neighborhood by three, historic, well-known cults. While the Krishnas had offered me sweet rice, an enchanting, attractive young woman invited me to a free personality test given by her friends, the Scientologists. Another woman approached me in a parking lot of a grocery store and handed me a tract produced by her church, the Children of God. (It was not until I had gotten home

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<sup>6</sup> “*Nam Myoho Renge Kyo | Tina Turner Blog*,” n.d. <<https://tinaturnerblog.com/tag/nam-myoho-renge-kyo/>> (January 3, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> “*THE THETAN*” <<http://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/basic-principles-of-scientology/the-thetan.html#slide7>>

and saw the sexually explicit drawing on the cover of the tract that I suspected what she well might have been offering me, along with her religion!)

Although Americans have long held a benign tolerance for such avant-garde movements and groups, it was not long after their introduction into the religious scene of the nation that disturbing stories arose regarding their inner workings, including accounts of deception, manipulation, and abuse of members. Groups like the Children of God, the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, the Church Universal and Triumphant, Twelve Tribes, Heaven's Gate, The People's Temple, etc., some of which were founded by men and women from Christian homes, experienced various (and v public) scandals and scrutiny. Some of them went on to become bywords of tragedy and death. Today, the mere mention of The People's Temple of Jonestown, Guyana (formerly of San Francisco), the Branch Davidians of Waco, and Heaven's Gate of San Diego evokes memories of death, murder, and horror. Such memories are now permanently attached to the word *cult* in the American vocabulary. Currently, the word is routinely used to describe "an ideological organization held together by charismatic relations and demanding total commitment."<sup>8</sup> Researchers, academicians, and practitioners have studied the effects of cultic involvement as they have interviewed and cared for the survivors of cults. The processes that lead to the purposeful, drastic change of the thinking processes of

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<sup>8</sup> Russell Bradshaw, "*What Is a Cult Definitional Preface - International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*". <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/what-is-a-cult-definitional-preface>> (January 3, 2017).

members are referred to as *thought reform*, *coercive persuasion*, *extraordinary influence*, *thought struggle*, *brainwashing*, *mind control*, *exploitive persuasion*, etc. These terms refer to processes of gaining undue and unhealthy control and influence over the thinking of a member of a group.<sup>9</sup> In the non-Christian world of research and study of thought reform and abusive, aberrant groups, there is ongoing struggle in arriving at an accurate, helpful understanding and appropriate use of the word cult. In the article “Traumatic Abuse in Cults,” psychotherapist Daniel Shaw defines a *cult* as “a group that is led by a traumatizing narcissist, in which members are subjugated by the leader in various ways, mainly through the destruction of their subjectivity—their objectification.”<sup>10</sup> Shaw argues that a cult may be recognized by the relationship between the leaders and its members—that of the removal of healthy independence and replacement with unhealthy dependence on the leader, along with the leader’s malicious treatment of his followers.

Clinical psychologist Margaret Singer addresses the changes of the thinking and attitudes that happen in cultic groups through deception (here referred to as *thought reform*):

A certain type of psychological con game is exactly what goes on in a thought-reform environment. A complex set of interlocking factors

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<sup>9</sup> See Margaret Thaler Singer and Robert Jay Lifton. *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight Against Their Hidden Menace*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 53.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Shaw, C.S.W., “Traumatic Abuse in Cults,” <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/traumatic-abuse-in-cults-shaw>> (January 7, 2016)

is put into place, and these factors, either quickly or slowly depending on the situation and the subject; bring about deep changes in the mindset and attitudes of the targeted individual. Though the manipulation of psychological *and* social factors, people's attitudes can indeed be changed, and their thinking and behavior radically altered.<sup>11</sup>

People who are recruited into cultic groups are invariably led to subject their decisions to the beliefs and goals of the group. Ordinary choices in life, such as what clothing to wear, what social activities to participate in, what car to drive, what classes to enroll in, etc., are made in accordance with the values and desires of the cult. In time, the more vital, critical decisions of life—whether to continue in school, what career to pursue, whom to marry, where to live, etc.—are submitted to the same values, with one overriding goal: continued acceptance from the group. When friends and family note the alarming change in their once self-directed, independent, motivated friend or family member, they are puzzled, and become concerned. They might find themselves wondering, “Is our son (or, daughter, uncle, nephew, friend, etc.) in a cult?”

In the world of cult-recovery and cultic studies, a nuanced, multi-faceted understanding of the term *cult* is preferred. Michael Langone, Executive Director of *International Cultic Studies Association*, describes the phenomena of behaviors, teachings, and conditions that routinely earn a group the name *cult* as a sort of *conceptual family*. “The members of the family are distinct, and it is inappropriate to give all of them the same name (e.g. *cult*). Yet they do have a family resemblance that rests on the inquirer's perception that the group exhibits

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<sup>11</sup> Singer, 54.

one or more of these characteristics.”<sup>12</sup> Langone lists three indicators of a cult-like family “resemblance,” including the manipulation-deception of members, the justification and rationalization of immoral/unethical behaviors (done in service to the cult), and some degree of harm experienced by members.

### **What Shall We Call a Church That Hurts People?**

Many Christians, and their pastors, struggle in using the term *cult* to characterize a Christian church or ministry. When considered solely on its doctrinal positions (invariably claimed by *all* churches to be historical and orthodox) it is problematic to label it a *cult*. Singer wrote, “To understand cults we must examine structure and practice, not beliefs.”<sup>13</sup>

That is not what I was taught as a new Christian. A cult, I was told, was easy to recognize. I was told that its commitment to orthodox Christological doctrine was *the* primary means of knowing that a Christian group was *not* a cult, despite whatever aberrant or destructive behaviors might be observed in that church. Any group that held a defective belief about Jesus Christ was most certainly a cult. I was instructed that these groups corresponded to the aberrant, heretical church led by the antichrists described by the Apostle John, when he warned his readers to beware of those leaders who had entered into teaching ministries that denied the divine nature of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Langone, “The Definitional Ambiguity of Cult” *International Cultic Studies Association Magazine (ICSA)* Vol 6, (No. 3, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Singer, 15.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.<sup>14</sup>

The late Walter Martin is considered a father of Christian anti-cult studies.

In his classic polemic against cultic groups, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Martin defines cultism (the practices and qualities of a cult) as primarily those of doctrinal error:

By cultism, we mean the adherence to doctrines which are pointedly contradictory to orthodox Christianity and which yet claim the distinction of either tracing their origin to orthodox sources or of being in essential harmony with those sources. Cultism, in short, is any major deviation from orthodox Christianity relative to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Dave Breese defines a cult as a perversion of belief and practice.

A cult is a religious perversion. It is a belief and practice in the world of religion which calls for devotion to a religious view or leader centered in false doctrine. It is an organized heresy. A cult may take many forms but it is basically a religious movement that distorts or warps orthodox faith to the point where truth becomes perverted into a lie. A cult is impossible to define except against the absolute standard of the teaching of Holy Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 1 John 4:1-3. Unless otherwise noted all following Bible references are from the *New American Standard Bible* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1955), 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Dave Breese, *Know the Marks of Cults: A Guide to Enable You to Quickly Detect the Basic Errors of False Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1975), 14.

Religious perversion . . . devotion to a religious view . . . false doctrine . . . organized heresy . . . a religious movement that distorts or warps orthodox faith. Clearly, in Breese's view, a cult is primarily recognized by its heretical doctrine, and not by its behavior towards its own members and the surrounding culture.

This view is problematic from at least two standpoints. To a member who is willing to contemplate the deficiencies (and perhaps, dangers) of the group to which he belongs, the group's mere subscription to general, historic, Christian beliefs can thwart an honest appraisal of the group by that member. "I *know* I'm not in a cult," I used to tell myself. "Our doctrine is solid." I routinely referred to the doctrinal positions of major seminaries and large, successful ministries, and prominent preachers, and found that indeed, the doctrines of the church that I belonged to truly matched that of those historic, successful, and widely respected institutions and individuals. Our church's doctrinal statement could have been photocopied directly from those esteemed churches and institutions. What was happening—really, literally, physically happening had nothing to do with our supposed orthodox beliefs.

Consider the following excerpt of a court transcript in which the witness (testifying in defense of her pastor, who was on trial for the sexual abuse of a child) appeals to the argument that a church cannot be considered a cult if its doctrines can be deemed orthodox.

Defense Lawyer: We've heard this word sort of sprinkled through the trial: *cult*. Would you—do you feel like you were living in a cult?

Witness: In a *cult*, no, I don't. There—you know, there's actually a technical definition of a cult. *And for one thing, a*

*cult does not have orthodox beliefs in Christianity, and we have orthodox beliefs. And a big--*

Defense Lawyer: What does that mean, "orthodox beliefs"?

Witness: That would be your basic that Jesus is God, He came and He died on the cross for our sins. You know, we can have eternal life through believing in what He did for you and allowing God to forgive you for your sins. That's the basic gospel. You know, so that's orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup>

Another member later shared the same conviction as to why this church could not be considered a cult:

Defense: There's this word that's sprinkled throughout, *cult*, do you feel like you grew up in a cult, sir?

Witness: Not at all.

Defense: Why do you say that?

Witness: Because what we believe, is orthodox Christianity. What has been Christian for the last 2,000 years is what we believe. My understanding of a cult as something more unorthodox is [the] typical view of a cult.<sup>18</sup>

I recall my Christian friends and family visiting the small, cult-like church to which I belonged. They invariably evaluated our doctrine, as being sound, our level of commitment to live as followers of Jesus as admirable, and our evangelistic strategy for reaching our city with the gospel of Jesus ambitious and impressive. However, though they were experienced, mature Christians, none of them considered joining the church. None of them ever recommended our church

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<sup>17</sup> *State of Oregon vs. Michael George Sperou*, Multnomah County Circuit Court, No. 14CR10194, CA A159562, Volume XVIII of XXIII, p18-19 (2015), (Emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> *State of Oregon vs. Michael George Sperou*, 57, (Emphasis added).

to their friends or to other family members. Many eventually shared their unease with the church's excessive demands on the time and resources of its members. They noted the changes the church seemed responsible for in its members, seeming to turn them into intolerant, moralistic prigs, and as the years passed, to self-indulgent, depressed, dissipated wrecks. Nevertheless, no one openly used the word *cult* in description of the church that continued, year after year, to suck the joy and life out of his loved ones.

I believe this reticence to call a Christian church a cult continues, and that rather than a continued campaign of education to lead Christians to readily use the word, a new term should be used, one that is based on the behavior of churches, not their doctrine. Singer writes, "Our concern must focus on conduct, not beliefs."<sup>19</sup> They are spiritually abusive churches.

The word *abuse* indicates the improper use or treatment of something or the improper treatment of another person or persons. From its earliest recorded usage, centuries ago, it was often used to refer to sexual situations.<sup>20</sup> To *abuse* a person is more than to treat them badly or to disrespect them. It is to mistreat them or harm them in the context of a relationship or circumstance in which they have every reasonable right to expect they will be treated with respect, kindness, acceptance, and even honor. Instead of finding these conditions, members find

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<sup>19</sup> Singer, 102.

<sup>20</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*,  
<[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=abuse](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=abuse)>  
(August 30, 2016).

themselves increasingly mistreated, and their initial, reasonable expectation dashed. When people hear good things about God, Jesus, and the Bible, they naturally expect to find more of those good things in the churches that claim to represent the same God, Jesus, and the Bible. The abusive church takes full advantage of this reasonable optimism, using it to draw people into what will become an increasingly dependent, costly, and personally damaging church experience. It promises to meet the deepest desires of its members for meaning and purpose in life, for spiritual growth, for healthy marriages and families, and for a positive presence in the neighborhood. Instead, it steadily lays a deadening weight of betrayed hope, and demands for obedience, isolation from the surrounding culture, protection of the church's secrets, and unqualified submission to church leaders. Abusive churches inflict emotional, spiritual wounds on members, and those wounds leave deep scars. Whereas healthy churches help people and reciprocate loyalty and participation with service and genuine, need-meeting community, spiritually abusive churches hurt their members, rob them of emotional and material resources, and leave their members worse off for having had anything to do with them.

## Chapter 2

### SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN THE BIBLE

The Bible does not ignore or gloss over the difficulties and problems that people encounter as they seek to live out a life of faith. Its pages are replete with accounts of betrayal, swindling, lying, violence, political intrigue, marriage troubles, and moral compromise. There are numerous accounts of the abuse of power in the political, family, and community realms, and so it is not surprising to find instances of spiritual abuse recounted throughout its pages when abusive, unscrupulous leaders sought to take advantage of their followers in the area of their religious faith.

#### Examples of Spiritual Abuse from the Old Testament

##### Spiritual Abuse in the Beginning (Genesis 3)

The first instance in the Bible of the deception and manipulation of God's people by a spiritual abuser is found in its opening pages. In the third chapter of the book of Genesis, a creature, simply called *the serpent*, deceived the woman, Eve, into believing that God had short-changed her. God, the serpent declared, was holding out on Eve, unwilling to help her receive the wisdom and the power that she rightfully deserved. But there was a way to work around God's unreasonableness. If she would simply eat some of the fruit of the tree that would

grant her these attributes, she would immediately become “like God,” possessing the same attributes of divine wisdom, power, and immortality. Further, by simply stretching out her hand and taking a piece of the fruit, she would gain eternal life itself. Ironically, she would have lived forever had she simply obeyed God in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

The first human sin, marked by moral weakness, pride, vanity, and delusion, also contains the first example in the Bible of malevolent spiritual leadership. Satan, in the form of a creature described as a serpent, abused the trust of the woman by deceiving her into believing that by following his plan for life she would find the satisfaction and success that she desired. Believing the lie of the serpent, Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and then recruited her husband to join her in the new direction of life she had chosen. Their decision did not lead to life, power, and success. Instead, it resulted in shame, vulnerability, and the attempt to flee and hide from God. So it began, and so it continues to this day.

#### Spiritual Abuse in the Tabernacle (1 Samuel)

The book of First Samuel begins with an unflattering portrait of the tribes of Israel. Their society was lawless and violent, and spiritually bankrupt. The period has been called the dark ages of the nation of Israel. The religious decline of the nation during that period was exemplified in abuses committed by two brothers, sons of the high-priest Eli, against their fellow Jews. Hophni and

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:1-8.

Phineas had followed after their father, serving as priests in the town of Bethel, which was the center of Jewish worship during that era. Samuel calls them “worthless fellows” who not only forcibly took the choicest cuts of meat that worshippers intended to be offered for burnt sacrifice (not for the tables of the priests!), but also routinely slept with the women who were engaged in serving in the tabernacle ministry at Shiloh.<sup>2</sup> The benefits of growing up in a religious, well-known family did not result in integrity and faithful service for Eli’s sons. The brothers both succumbed to the temptation to use their religious calling for material enrichment and sexual gratification. Though Hophni and Phineas enjoyed great status and privilege in Israel, their unchecked theft of others’ possessions and of sexual conquest led them to abuse the people they were called to serve. Hence, they are examples of those spiritual leaders today who use their own pedigree, power, and position in the church to satisfy their personal desires at the expense of the members of the church. However, not all spiritual abusers in Scripture are priests, or men. Some are queens.

#### Spiritual Abuse in the Palace (1 and 2 Kings)

Jezebel was from Sidon (modern day Lebanon), and married into the royal family of the nation of northern Israel. (This was a time in Israel’s history when the northern tribes separated from the southern tribes, and formed an independent government). As the wife of King Ahab, and queen of the nation,

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22.

she wielded great political power, which she used to introduce the religion of her homeland to the people of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Jezebel viciously persecuted those Israelites who practiced their Jewish faith and hounded the Jewish prophets who criticized her and refused to abandon their historic beliefs. Her main motivation for attacking these historic, traditional leaders of the Jewish faith was her desire to export the Sidonian religion (the worship of the god Baal, with ecstatic, sensual temple services), through its priests and worship, into the life of Israel. It is likely that such a move to create a more religiously syncretistic culture, along with the abandonment of the Jewish faith, would have raised the stature of Israel in the eyes of the surrounding, polytheistic nations, and would have paved the way for lucrative political, military, and trade alliances. Thus, Jezebel serves as an example of the abusive spiritual leader who opposes the legitimate, godly leaders of faith, and strategically introduces corrupting influences into the spiritual life of the community, all in the pursuit of power and control over the faith community.

#### Spiritual Abuse in the Leadership of Israel (Ezekiel 34)

The prophet Ezekiel recorded God's intense anger at the political, cultural, and religious leaders of Israel, likening them to evil shepherds who used the flock for personal enrichment.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 16:31ff; 18:4.

Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock."'"<sup>4</sup>

It was common in ancient Near Eastern cultures to identify rulers and kings as shepherds over the people they led. The abusive spiritual *shepherds* had stolen the resources of God's flock—their fellow Jews. They were like dishonest, thieving shepherds—drinking the milk of the flock, stealing its wool, and butchering its choice animals to provide rich meals for themselves as the flock itself starved and withered.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock . . ."<sup>5</sup>

The lazy, self-indulgent shepherds were unwilling to leave the comfortable, protected confines of the flock to search out and rescue those sheep that had been scattered and were isolated from the main flock. In the same way, the corrupt, self-centered leaders of Israel had no compassion or concern for the isolated, alienated status of those Jews who'd become marginalized from their religion and community.

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<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 34:1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 34:7-8.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them, "Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and with shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns until you have scattered them abroad, therefore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey; and I will judge between one sheep and another."<sup>6</sup>

In Ezekiel's prophetic indictment, the worthless shepherds allow healthy, robust animals to bully and mistreat the weaker ones, just as Israel's abusive spiritual leaders looked the other way when bullies in the community took advantage of their poor, weak, and marginalized fellow citizens. The self-serving, often aggressive speech of abusive religious leaders can have the same effect, empowering their fellow abusers and scattering those who fear getting in their way. Is it any wonder that the victims of spiritual abuse today find Ezekiel 34 to be one of the most concise and accurate portrayals of the trauma inflicted by their abusers?

These four, brief accounts of spiritual predators amongst the people of God are merely a sampling of spiritual abusers found in the pages of the Old Testament. As the Bible unfolds, from the life of Jesus of Nazareth to the birth and expansion of the early Christian church, the attacks of abusive spiritual leaders on the community of faith continue.

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<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 34:20-22.

## Examples of Spiritual Abuse from the New Testament

### Spiritual Abuse in the Gospels

The Gospels comprise the four written accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, each by a different writer. Each gospel contains numerous accounts of both Jesus' teaching about abusive religious leaders (called false teachers or false prophets),<sup>7</sup> and his interactions with them. In the earliest days of his ministry, the Jewish leaders found Jesus intriguing and were quite curious about his teaching and the amazing miracles of healing He performed.<sup>8</sup> Investigative delegations were dispatched from Jerusalem, the religious and cultural capital of Judaism, to determine the legitimacy of this new, young Nazarene rabbi who was causing such a stir and attracting large crowds.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between Jesus and the Jewish leaders steadily worsened as they perceived his utter disregard for their authority, his criticism of their teaching in both style and substance, and his open warnings to his followers to beware of the teachings of their religious leaders.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> There were three main parties of Jewish religious leaders that Jesus interacted with: the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were primarily a religious-political party. Their theology was generally conservative, and rule-based. The scribes were a type of Jewish lawyer and copyist whose area of expertise was in the interpretation of the Mosaic (religious) law of the Jews. The Sadducees were a ruling class of priests who oversaw the entire system of worship and administration of the temple in Jerusalem. The teachings and activities of each of the three groups had a significant effect on the religious life of the common Israelite during time of Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 1:21-27.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 7:1; Luke 5:17.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:11-12; Luke 12:1.

These leaders watched him closely with growing concern over his growing popularity and influence.<sup>11</sup> They certainly had every reason to be concerned.

In the longest recorded sermon he preached, Jesus startled his listeners in the early moments of the sermon by assuring them that “. . . unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>12</sup> He concluded the sermon with the sobering warning to “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”<sup>13</sup> Even if a scribe or Pharisee did not see himself as one of those false prophets, the authoritative stance of Jesus, presuming to speak as the judge of Israel's religious leaders, would have been grating to their professional pride.

In what are the most aggressive, even caustically indicting words recorded from him, Jesus upbraided the Pharisees and scribes for their abusive, self-gratifying behavior:

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.”<sup>14</sup>

The scribes and Pharisees held positions of great power and influence, reading and interpreting Mosaic Law in the worship services of their synagogues.

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<sup>11</sup> John 12:19.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:20.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 7:15.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 23:1-3.

Archeologists have uncovered carved stone seats from ancient synagogues in Israel. The seats were reserved for the scribes and Pharisees, who sat facing the congregation, and rose from their seats of authority to read and interpret the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup> They held positions of great trust and responsibility which made their naked ambition and mistreatment of their followers all the more reprehensible. Rather than approach their unique and honored position with fear and humility, the seat of Moses had become to them what one writer has termed an “authority prop” from which they wielded their control over the people.<sup>16</sup>

Matthew 24 records the barrage of indictments that Jesus laid down against the spiritual abusers of Israel. They concocted burdensome religious demands for their followers, but would not lift a finger to help them bear those burdens (v 4). They loved being noticed as religious leaders, honored in public, and granted powerful titles (vv 5-12). They spoke as authoritative gatekeepers of the kingdom of heaven, though they themselves would not enter it (v 13). They took financial advantage of the poor and marginalized of their day, all the while reveling in pretentious, long, very-public prayers (v 14). They went to over-the-top extremes to recruit followers, whom they then trained to be as profane and hypercritical as themselves (v 15). They valued the material resources gained

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<sup>15</sup> Noel S. Rabbinwitz, "Matthew 23:2–4: Does Jesus Recognize the Authority of the Pharisees and Does He Endorse Their Halakhah?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46.3 (Sep 2003): 423-30.

<sup>16</sup> Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience*. Fifth Printing ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), 27.

through their religious programs more than the spiritual truths responsible for those resources (vv 16-22). They gave meticulous attention to the observance of the minutest aspects of their religion, but ignored its deeper, “weightier” provisions, such as the practices of “justice and mercy and faithfulness” (vv 23-24). They maintained an obvious, external appearance of morality and righteousness, but inwardly were filthy and corrupt, full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (vv 25-28). They made a great show of honoring and decorating the memorials and gravesites of the nation’s historic prophets, as if they would have been ardent supporters of them in their day, but it was actually their own order of ecclesial religious leaders who had murdered those very prophets (vv 29-39)!

It is no wonder that as Jesus’ public ministry progressed, their antipathy towards him only increased, leading them to expel his followers from their synagogues and to devise plots against him that ultimately led to his arrest and death.<sup>17</sup> They simply hated him. They hated the way he treated his followers, dispensing grace, forgiveness, and restoration where the Pharisees had only heaped scorn and judgment. They hated to see prostitutes weeping with love at his feet, forgiven for their sins, and receiving true, life-changing love. They hated tax-gatherers being hailed down from trees by Jesus, so that he might join them for lunch.<sup>18</sup> They hated him for the casual, self-accepting freedom he built into His disciples, and the freedom from legalistic observation of Jewish law that he

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<sup>17</sup> John 9:22; 12:42; Matthew 7:13-20; 9:11, 34; 23:1-39; Mark 7:5-13; Luke 6:7-11; John 11:46-53.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 7:36-50; 19:1-10.

granted them.<sup>19</sup> They hated the freedom and joy experienced by those who followed Jesus, hanging on his every word.<sup>20</sup> They hated the way Jesus spoke of them, accusing them of the harsh, unloving, impossible religion that they foisted on the already weakened, demoralized Jews of that day.<sup>21</sup> They hated that he refused to bow to them, to recognize their self-claimed authority, and that he freely cited their ostentatious religious behavior, as examples of hypocrisy to avoid, not emulate.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, they hated him for the relationship he boldly claimed to have to God—that of the unique, eternal Son of God.<sup>23</sup> Such claims were considered blasphemy to the Jewish scribes, priests, and Pharisees, and so they began to malign him despite the wonderful things he did for people. They questioned his parentage and religious legitimacy,<sup>24</sup> persecuted his followers,<sup>25</sup> picked up stones to kill him,<sup>26</sup> and in the end, betrayed him to their Roman enemies to be executed.<sup>27</sup>

### Spiritual Abuse in Acts

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 6: 1-5; Mark 7:1ff.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 7:28-29.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 13:10-17.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 23:4.

<sup>23</sup> John 5:16-18; 10:27-33.

<sup>24</sup> John 8:39-41.

<sup>25</sup> John 9:22; 12:42.

<sup>26</sup> John 8:59; 10:31.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 27:1-2; Luke 20:20; John 11:47ff.

As the New Testament unfolds, its writers give extensive treatment to the issue of abusive leaders in the churches of the ancient Near Eastern-Mediterranean world. The book of Acts describes that, from its earliest days, the church was threatened by unscrupulous, spiritually abusive leaders. Luke records a particular instance in which the Apostle Paul gathered the leaders of the Ephesian church to the port city of Miletus, along the coast of present-day Turkey.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."<sup>28</sup>

Paul reminded his friends of the manner of his ministry while he was in Ephesus. He had been humble, vulnerable, and tenacious in his commitment to share with them the good news of how they could find forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, the sincerity and willingness to suffer in ministry was not

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<sup>28</sup> Acts 20:17-27.

limited to his time in Ephesus. His life of ministry included much more suffering, all in the service of his Lord, who had called him to serve as a witness to the gospel of the grace of God. Paul then told them the reason he had called them to travel the 50-mile journey from there to Miletus—he expected that the Ephesian churches would soon be infiltrated and attacked by abusive, predatory leaders.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.<sup>29</sup>

Like shepherds constantly watching out for predators, the elders were to remain on the alert, always guarding their churches against attacks from spiritual predators. Paul's words were not spoken as mere contingency. The apostle was certain that after he had departed, their churches would face an onslaught of abusive, predatory leaders seeking to gain followers. The abusers would behave according to their nature by attacking the church as *savage wolves* attack a shepherd's beloved flock of sheep or goats. *Savage*, in the Greek, combines the ideas of both violent hostility and heavy burdensomeness.<sup>30</sup>

### Spiritual Abuse in the Letters of Paul

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<sup>29</sup> Acts 20:28-30.

<sup>30</sup> "Savage" (βαρύς). Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), BibleWorks, v.8.

Paul's letters to churches and to his fellow leaders are rich with accounts of the unfolding of his ominous prophecy, a prophecy that continues to this day as unscrupulous, power-hungry leaders dominate the members of what become abusive churches. He was vigilant to the threat of abusive leaders in the churches that he established across the ancient Mediterranean world. He confronted members of the church of Corinth regarding the abusive, false leaders who had assumed positions of authority in that church, marveling at the willingness of the Corinthians to submit themselves to severe spiritual abuse.<sup>31</sup> He unleashed some of his most forceful, accusatory invective against Jewish teachers who had entered the churches of Galatia and sought to impose the traditions and religious laws of Judaism on the Gentile Christians in that region.<sup>32</sup>

In the letters Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus (pastors whom he had trained), there is a treasure trove of information about abusive leaders who had gained positions of power and influence and were troubling the members in the churches they led. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul named two leaders who had already fallen away from the Christian faith and the maintenance of a "good conscience," Hymenaeus and Alexander, and had thus "suffered shipwreck in

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<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:13, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Galatians 1:8-9; 3:1; 4:17; 6:12-13. From its earliest days, as it arose out of the Judaism, the Christian church had engaged in discussion and debate with Jewish teachers, who sought to understand and test the claims of the Christian faith (i.e. Acts 17:10-11; 18:19; 24-26; 28:17ff). Sadly, in the context of this legitimate, necessary theological interchange there arose unscrupulous Jewish teachers who sought to manipulate and control Gentile Christian converts, and to be enriched at their expense. It is against the damage inflicted by these malicious quasi-Jewish teachers that Paul warns his readers.

regard to their faith.”<sup>33</sup> Paul reminded Timothy that the rise of abusive leaders, “liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,” was a matter of prophetic certainty, and that these men would impose ascetic demands on their followers.<sup>34</sup> Paul’s second letter to Timothy also includes direct reference to the threat of abusive leaders to the church. Two leaders, Hymenaeus and Philetus, were teaching their followers that the resurrection of the dead had already taken place, and were thus upsetting the faith of those they taught.<sup>35</sup> It is likely that by suggesting that the resurrection of the dead had already occurred, these teachers were creating much anguish and uncertainty in their followers, who doubtlessly wondered if they had been forgotten in that resurrection, or if perhaps God had found them to be unworthy of resurrection. This attack on the faith and confidence of Christians left them vulnerable to deception and abuse at the hands of the two corrupted teachers. Paul wrote of the inevitable degradation of Christian faith that would happen as history unfolded. People would abandon their love for God and wholeheartedly give themselves over to the love of themselves as they followed after leaders who themselves would hold to a “form of godliness” all the while denying its power.<sup>36</sup> From these leaders there would be some who would set their desires on the seduction of their female followers by

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Timothy 1:19-20.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Timothy 4:1-3.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Timothy 2:17.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-9.

taking advantage of their unresolved desires and issues of shame and guilt.<sup>37</sup>

Such imposters, Paul wrote, will only go from being bad to being worse.<sup>38</sup>

Paul's letter to his fellow pastor Titus bears the same concern for the damage done to church members by abusive leaders. Paul had directed Titus to remain on the island of Crete in order to create better organization of the churches.<sup>39</sup> After laying out the requirements Titus was to apply in the selection and ordination of church leaders, Paul explained the importance and immediacy of Titus' task, and again, identified characteristics common to abusive leaders: rebelliousness, lack of substance in speech, deceitfulness, and the tendency of upsetting families through errant, greed-driven instruction.

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.<sup>40</sup>

### Spiritual Abuse in Peter's Second Letter

In his second letter, the Apostle Peter addressed the threat of abusive leaders to churches as his primary subject. He warned of false teachers that would arise to mislead the church, in correspondence to the false prophets, who had plagued the nation of Israel. He warned of their doctrinal errors, moral corruption, and deceptive strategies:

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<sup>37</sup> 2 Timothy 3:6-7.

<sup>38</sup> 2 Timothy 3:13.

<sup>39</sup> Titus 1:5.

<sup>40</sup> Titus 1:10-11.

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.<sup>41</sup>

### Spiritual Abuse in John's Letters

The Apostle John wrote of the many spiritual abusers who had left orthodox, apostolic churches to establish their own ministries distinct from, and in opposition to, his authority and leadership.<sup>42</sup> He listed the errors they promoted, such as questioning and rejecting the testimony of the apostles regarding the divine identity of Jesus Christ,<sup>43</sup> lacking in love for the fellow Christians,<sup>44</sup> and demanding that followers obey them over the apostles. In his third letter, John identified one these leaders, Diotrophes:

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<sup>41</sup> 2 Peter 2:1-3.

<sup>42</sup> 1 John 4:1f.

<sup>43</sup> 1 John 2:3-6.

<sup>44</sup> 1 John 2:7-21.

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrophes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.<sup>45</sup>

Diotrophes stands as one of the archetypal abusive Christian leaders. He clawed his way to the highest position of leadership in his church. He refused input that exposed his own shortcomings and errors, rejected those who dared to disagree with him, maligned those who challenged him, and expelled from the church those who agreed with his opponents and did not follow his commands. Though Diotrophes lived and died almost two-thousand years ago, his disciples continue his ministry today in every church led by a spiritual abuser.

### Spiritual Abuse in the Letter of Jude

Finally, the short book of Jude provides what is perhaps the most powerful, distilled description of the motivations, personalities, behaviors, and traumas inflicted by the abusive leader. While Jude's original intent in writing to his readers was to discuss matters of the general salvation enjoyed by all believers, Jude was compelled to change his purpose in order to address the immediate threat of abusive leaders who had stealthily entered the Christian churches.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> 3 John 9-10.

<sup>46</sup> For further expansion on the book of Jude see appendices, "Jude: Facing the False Teachers."

## Insights

While the preceding examples of both Old and New Testament texts dealing with the threat, presence, and damage of spiritually abusive leaders is not exhaustive, it does provide some clear truths regarding spiritual abuse in the churches. The following is a short summary of insights derived from a consideration of the selected texts of scripture regarding spiritual abuse and spiritually abusive leaders.

First, the phenomenon of spiritual abuse in the church is biblically historical. From the earliest pages of the Old Testament, shared by both Jews and Christians as the inspired account of the history of the people of God, there have existed individuals who followed an established pattern of deception, manipulation, and control over members of the spiritual communities they led. The accounts of spiritual abuse presented in Scripture provide the reader an extensive historical record contained in an inspired source, the Bible.

Second, the presence of abusive leaders in the church is both perennial and inevitable. The Bible nowhere suggests that a perfect church exists, i.e., one that is invulnerable to the threat of abusive leaders, false teachers, and false prophets. Instead, it assures the reader that there will always be a demonically fueled effort to infiltrate Christian churches with leaders who are self-centered, greedy, and abusive to those they recruit.

Third, it is critical to recognize, understand, and effectively address spiritual abuse in churches. In the New Testament epistles, the greatest threat to the church was not persecution from external foes to the faith, such as

governments, hostile groups, or rival religions and belief systems. It was not a lack of funds or resources. It was not even the absence of effective, state-of-the-art communication systems to broadcast the gospel to the world. It was not the church's need to explain its beliefs in light of new scientific discovery. It was not the church's lack of political or cultural influence. It was not in the church's lack of great preaching, grand buildings, great crowds, or extensive programs. The greatest threat to the church of Jesus Christ was simply that of abusive leaders who corrupted the magnificent, grace-infused message of the gospel.

In summary, the Bible is replete with examples of spiritual abuse through the narrative of the actions and words of abusive spiritual leaders and the instruction by the authors of scripture regarding the recognition and response to such leaders. Throughout the following chapters of this project it will become sadly apparent that the biblical account of spiritual abuse and abusers is relevant and discernable in churches today. It is not unreasonable to speculate that that such abusers appear to have used the Bible as a type of template to follow in their abusive ministries. In the next chapter I will explore the basic, self-centered orientation of the abusive leader, and the nature of his most powerful tool—his speech.

### Chapter 3

#### THE PSYCHE AND SPEECH OF THE ABUSIVE LEADER

Many victims of spiritual abuse have come through the doors of my church through the years. They come from a variety of churches and Christian organizations, and show up at our doors a bit hesitant, a lot standoffish, and in no great hurry to make any commitments to the church. They also watch me very closely. Having belonged to an abusive church, and survived a long, often torturous, process of recovery, I like to think that God himself might send people to my church just because they need to go somewhere where people will not think they are overreacting and embellishing what is simply an unfortunate experience with the church. Without exception, the horrific experiences of the victims that I speak to begin and end with the abusive pastor. For example, the following are some comments I have heard:

“He told my wife to divorce me—that our marriage was never God’s will anyway—and she did. He told my kids not to talk to me or read my letters—and they don’t.”

“He called the young men who were his interns his ‘special, mighty men.’ He was molesting them all.”

“He kept asking for more and more money so he would not lose his property—we gave and gave, but we lost our home.”

“He kept demanding more money, but also more time. I did not have time for overtime shifts, and gave away many of my regular shifts, to be at church functions. In the end, I was broke and my credit was shot. I declared bankruptcy.”

“He told me that I was such an unloving, uncaring husband, I shouldn’t be surprised if my wife was attracted to other men with more Christian character.”

“He asked me what was in my pocket, and I said, ‘A silver dollar my dad gave me.’ And he made me give it to him, right then and there. I was a kid. I was ashamed to tell my dad.”

“He recorded our conversations, and then played them back to the elder team.”

“I ran into the pastor at a bookstore, after I left the church. He started hassling me—and actually ordered me to leave the bookstore. Amazing!”

“He sued me when I wrote something online about the church that offended him.”

“He told me I could leave the church if I wanted to—but my wife would stay, and the entire church would fight to keep the kids with her, not me.”

“He told my husband that I was an unsubmitive wife, and our marriage probably would not last.”

These examples point out that the way that abusive pastors think and how they speak is important to understand. We often focus on the behavior of those we suspect as being spiritual phonies. In doing so, we look for secret sins and vices, ostentatious lifestyles, hidden bank accounts, etc. However, not every spiritual abuser misbehaves, or indulges in overtly fleshly sins. Some lead very disciplined, outwardly moral lives, while ruling over those who follow them with an iron fist. In the next two sections I will explore the significance of an abusive leader’s thought processes and his speech (in its entirety, not simply that of sermons and teachings).

### **The Psyche of the Abusive Pastor**

Spiritual abusers are motivated by unmet desires, often deeply hidden, never acknowledged, and only discovered through the examination of verbal and behavioral evidence. They may be driven by the desire for influence, affirmation, and community power (and all of the control and use of resources entailed in such power). They may be driven by the naked love of wealth and material possessions. They may be driven by the desire to out-perform perceived ideological enemies and supposed competitors. They may be driven by the desire for the sexual conquest of their followers. They may simply be driven by the desire to escape their own personal sense of inadequacy and unworthiness. These desires all spring from the empty spaces and flattened contours of the inner soul of the abusive leader. The void can be named: pathological self-centeredness, or a diseased self-love, or a damaged self-image, or (what the psychotherapeutic sciences have named it) narcissism.

The ancient Greek poet Ovid wrote of Narcissus, a young man who was a skillful hunter, and was known for his physical beauty. He was a proud, unapproachable youth, and looked down on those who tried to get close to him. One day Narcissus was hunting in the forest. He sensed he was being watched by someone—and he was.

Echo was a fairy who lived in the forest. One day she saw the handsome young man, and overcome by his beauty; she fell in love with him, and began to follow him through the trees.

“Is anyone here?” called Narcissus.

“Here” replied Echo.

“Come to me,” demanded Narcissus, and he heard the same words in reply. He looked around him in the woods, and saw no one.

“Why do you run from me,” he asked. Again, he received only the same word back in reply.

Provoked and intrigued, he suggested, “Come, let us meet together.” Echo responded joyfully, “Together.”

And so she came to him and stood before him, and professed her love for him. But, when she reached out to embrace him, Narcissus pushed her away, breaking Echo’s heart. He ran from her, crying “Away with these encircling hands! May I die before what’s mine is yours!”

“What’s mine is yours!” she answered. Then she departed to a life of wandering alone in the woods and wasted away to nothing but a fading voice that only could repeat in diminished tones what it had heard.

The goddess Nemesis watched the whole affair, and was angered at the young man’s rejection of the fairy. Nemesis then devised a punishment for such cruelty. She drew Narcissus through the trees of the forest to a clear, still pool of water. As he passed by it, Narcissus noticed the pool, and was drawn to the remarkably beautiful person he saw in it—his own image. Falling in love with his own reflection, he became frustrated every time that he reached out to touch it. The lovely face disappeared in the rings of disturbed water. He was fixated with it—and became despondent that it was unable to return his love. Unwilling to

leave his reflection, disappointed and alone, Narcissus died there, gazing at himself, at the same time both desiring himself and feeling himself desired.<sup>1</sup>

The tragic myth of Narcissus is the origin of the term *narcissism*, a fixation with oneself that can be described as a sort of disordered, excessive self-love. Narcissistic people have an underlying mental soundtrack playing in their heads. Those who know them and observe them do not need to hear the music to recognize the predictable dance steps of the narcissist. Their drive is to be recognized, admired, and accounted as powerful, competent, great, noteworthy, talented, charismatic, or impressive. Their tendency is to view others as mere need-meeters and tools in the effort to achieve the notice, recognition, and influence they crave.

Narcissism can be measured on a continuum of severity. Judging by the vast amount of websites, blogs, and books that exist regarding their damaging effects on those around them, narcissists are alive and kicking in our culture, and are drawing increasing notice to the trauma they inflict on others.<sup>2</sup> A casual survey of internet blogsites dealing with narcissism reveals the front-burner nature of the disorder in the contemporary world, with sites named “Narcissism—

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<sup>1</sup> “*Metamorphoses (Kline) 3, the Ovid Collection*, Univ. of Virginia E-Text Center.” <<http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm#476975712>> (January 4, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> As of January 4, 2017, Google internet search engine returned 8,990,000 results to the query, *narcissism*, 566,000 to *narcissistic personality disorder*, and 629,000 results to *narcissism blogs*. Amazon.com lists 186 titles in response to the query, *narcissism, narcissistic personality disorder*.

a Serious Epidemic,” “Narcissistic Abuse,” “The Pain of Narcissism,” “The Diary of a Narcissist,” and “The Narcissist’s Child.”

As it progresses in severity, narcissism becomes increasingly dark and sinister—and much more destructive to victims. Its extreme form is a recognized personality disorder, the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPR).<sup>3</sup> The Mayo Clinic lists the following symptoms of narcissism:

- Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance
- Expecting to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it
- Exaggerating achievements and talents
- Being preoccupied with fantasies about success, power, brilliance, beauty, or the perfect mate
- Believing that they are superior and can only be understood by or associate with equally special people
- Requiring constant admiration
- Having a sense of entitlement
- Expecting special favors and unquestioning compliance with expectations
- Taking advantage of others to get what you want
- Having an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others
- Being envious of others and believing others envy you
- Behaving in an arrogant or haughty manner<sup>4</sup>

When it takes a malicious turn, where the narcissist assaults others (emotionally, and sometimes physically/sexually), NPR has been described by

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<sup>3</sup> *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 645, 669–72.

<sup>4</sup> Mayo Clinic Website, <<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/narcissistic-personality-disorder/basics/symptoms/con-20025568>> (September 5, 2016).

practitioners as *Traumatizing Narcissism*,<sup>5</sup> or *Malignant Narcissism*,<sup>6</sup> or *Malignant Self-Love*.<sup>7</sup>

Pastors who are narcissistic make hard demands on their members, knowingly inflict economic and family hardship on them, bring stress and tensions to their marriages, and have an overall approach that enlists people in activities and commitments that serve the pastor's desires, dreams, and goals. The mindset of the abusive pastor is set on one purpose, that of meeting his own desires for significance, security, and satisfaction. The church's members, programs, ministries, reputation in the community, and material wealth, etc., are all simply the tools that the abusive pastor uses to serve that one, exclusive purpose.

Unlike the mythical hunter, Narcissus, these leaders are not necessarily enamored by their own physical appearance (although that is certainly a possibility!). Instead, they are dedicated to the promotion and care of themselves through the subjugation of their followers, and theft of their material and immaterial resources. These resources are consumed by the narcissist, and thrown into the bottomless pit of his own unfilled, unfillable soul.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Shaw, *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Mahwah, N.J: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Christine Louis de Canonville, *The Three Faces of Evil*. 1st ed. (Stouffville, ON: Black Card Books, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Sam Vaknin, *Malignant Self-Love: Narcissism Revisited*. Edited by Lidija Rangelovska, Revised ed. (Skopje, Czech Republic: Narcissus Publications, 2015).

## **The Speech of the Abusive Pastor**

Jesus taught that a person's speech ultimately betrays what they really believe, and reveals who they truly are. Likewise, the speech of the abusive pastor, not just his sermons or teaching, or public comments, but *all* their speech, is what reveals his core identity. It is in their offices, cars, hallways at church, and at home, that abusive leaders will ultimately betray their true nature. They will simply be unable to maintain the veneer of integrity while their narcissistic souls demand satisfaction and expression.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus brought the application to his sermon home with great power and effect. There are three powerful points of application to the sermon: One, his listeners were to enter through the narrow gate, embracing the narrow, exclusive means of salvation that he and he alone provided them (vv 13-14). Two, they were to beware of the false prophets, those pseudo-religious leaders who sought influence and control over them (vv 15-23). Finally, they were to base their decision-making and manner of life on his teaching alone. To obey the words and teaching of Jesus was to show the same kind of wisdom as the wise man who built his house upon a rock, as opposed to another, slipshod builder who simply threw up a house on the unstable sand (vv 24-27).

It is in his second application point of the sermon that Jesus established the importance of listening to the speech of religious leaders as the means of determining legitimacy, as opposed to simply examining actions. Actions can appear to be very good, very religious, and yet be performed in complete

alienation from Jesus himself. The *words* of the religious leader, and not merely his works, are the evidence of his legitimacy before God and man. A closer look at Matthew 7:15-20 reveals that Jesus identifies false prophets primarily by their “fruits,” which, in the case of a religious teacher, are his words.

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Jesus taught that false prophets approach a religious community as if they are friendly toward it, and are its legitimate leaders. The *sheep's clothing* does not denote the woolen hide of a sheep, but the wool cloak that was worn by shepherds of that day.<sup>8</sup> These abusive shepherds would have an external appearance that argued for their legitimacy, i.e., *they showed up in uniform*. However, their appearance concealed their agenda of taking advantage of the flock, as a wolf would hungrily look over a flock of sheep. Therefore, through externally presenting themselves as legitimate leaders of the spiritual community, false prophets would not be externally recognizable as enemies, but would appear as legitimate leaders.

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<sup>8</sup> ἐν ἐνδύμασιν προβάτων: Literally, *wear sheep's clothing*, i.e. *only pretend to be harmless*, of the ways of a false teacher, disguising destructive intentions” (Friberg) “From ancient times to modern days it has often been customary for pastoral people to make for themselves coats out of the skins of the sheep with wool still adhering to the skins.” “*Shepherds: - Resources for Ancient Biblical Studies.*”

In light of this understanding, how can the inner nature, the core identity of a spiritual leader be discerned? According to Jesus, they can be recognized by their *fruits*. Fruit is consistent with the bush or tree from which it comes. No one picks cherries from apple trees, or finds oranges growing on pear trees. Likewise, sick, dying trees do not produce blue-ribbon fruit. A rotten apple tree produces tiny, gnarly, wormy apples. The quality of the fruit is consistent with the quality of the tree, and vice versa. “So then,” Jesus said, “you will know them by their fruits.”<sup>9</sup> That is all well and good, and makes sense, but there is a question to answer; What exactly is the *fruit* of a teacher? If fruit is the result of the reproductive process, the product of normative life cycling, then what is the *fruit* of a teacher? Do differing vocations have differing fruits? Obviously, they do. The fruit of a painter is something that is painted. The fruit of an angler is a creel full of fish. The fruit of a software engineer is software programs. The fruit of an architect is a set of blueprints for houses and buildings. The fruit of a prophet, according to Jesus, is his words. Whether preached, taught, written, whispered, or yelled, the words of a religious leader betray his inner life and nature.

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 7:20.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:21-23.

In the Bible, prophesying, casting out demons, and performing miracles are all primarily acts of speech. They are the result of spoken words, units of speech strung together in such a way that ideas are expressed to and received by listeners and readers. Words are the fruit of the teacher, and nothing more. Good words come from good teachers. Evil words come from evil teachers.

Every Christian leader, every pastor, eventually reveals his exact nature and core values to those around him, as they know him, observe him, and especially as they hear what he says. The distant pastor, perhaps preaching to a large church group every week, can hide his core identity for years because so few people get close enough to hear him at any other time than when he preaches. But most pastors lead small churches, and over the years, their church members get to know them very well, and through more circumstances than the sermon. They know the voice of the pastor, for they hear him when he is angry, saddened, hurt, joyful, surprised, disappointed, casual, relaxed, in the pulpit, out of the pulpit, on the street in front of the church, in his backyard, or over a cup of coffee. Over time, the pastor becomes known to his church, for better or for worse. Over time, the false prophet, today's abusive pastor, reveals exactly who is underneath that shepherd's coat, and he does it mostly by the words that leave his lips.

Jesus did not leave his church with a vague suggestion that false prophets would be recognizable by the bad things they would do, although corrupt religious leaders certainly do many bad things! Instead, he laid out very explicit criteria by which his followers could recognize false prophets, and so avoid being

seduced into entering through the wide gate and travelling on the broad road they offered, a gate and road that lead to destruction.<sup>11</sup> The chief criterion was the evaluation of the words that come out of the mouths of church leaders, all their words, all the time.

To summarize, abusive pastors hurt the people they lead, and they have a hard time not talking about themselves, which reveals their self-absorbed mindset. They often manifest varying degrees of narcissistic behavior, in which they place their own desires, needs, opinions, concerns, and image above those of the members of their church. The self-promoting, self-caring predisposition of the abusive pastor results in the formation of a congregation in which loyalty and submission to the pastor is assumed to correspond to loyalty and submission to Christ. In its most severe forms the narcissistic pastor exhibits a pathological demand for all of the attention, praise, resources, and care of the congregation. He will even move to punish, reject, and inflict various types of social traumatization on those whom he believes have failed him. The narcissist pastor, while an expert at *appearing* to love people, actually does not possess the ability to do so. Despite great effort in controlling his speech from the pulpit (in public), so as to camouflage his narcissistic nature and lust for power over the lives of his followers, the abusive pastor inevitably betrays his true nature as he interacts with others in both public and private settings. In a sense, almost everything the abusive pastor says ends up leading back to themselves, as statements, words,

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 7:13.

and expressions that inevitably serve his desires and image. As stated by the Lord Jesus, “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.”<sup>12</sup>

So then, why would anyone become a member of an abusive church? Why would anyone submit himself to such an abusive, narcissistic pastor? It is to these questions I turn in chapter four.

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 12:34.

## Chapter 4

### THE MEMBERS OF THE SPIRITUALLY ABUSIVE CHURCH

#### *Who Would Ever Join An Abusive Church?!*

Who would ever join a church led by a mentally unhealthy, narcissistic, and abusive pastor? Who would knowingly become a member of a church that demands increasing amounts of time, money, and emotional investment, while failing to provide any substantive return on such investments? What single person, hoping to find a marriage partner, would join a church that controls and determines the selection of a mate, and even presumes to give them permission to marry in the first place? Who would join a church that demands parents raise children in strict accordance with the pastor's wishes and beliefs? Would anyone join a church that discouraged them from pursuing a better education, career, or the pursuit of legitimate, healthy, lifelong goals and dreams? Who would join a church knowing that their marriage would be devalued? Who would join a church knowing that their relationship with their family and their lifelong friends would suffer, if not be completely severed?

According to the experts—no one. In the world of cultic studies, there is consensus that people simply do not, knowingly, join cults. They are recruited into them. People join groups that they feel are legitimate and conducive to their life-goals and values.

Philip Zimbardo, professor emeritus at Stanford University, rejects the notion that anyone would knowingly join such controlling, unhealthy groups. “No one ever joins a cult. People join interesting groups that promise to fulfill their pressing needs. They become cults when they are seen as deceptive, defective, dangerous, or as opposing basic values of their society.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul Martin, founder of Wellspring Cult Recovery Center, writes, “No one has ever shopped around to join a cult. No one has ever deliberately sought out an organization where they could be manipulated economically, physically, and emotionally.”<sup>2</sup>

People do not join abusive churches, they join churches that appear to possess the ability to deliver to them a better life, an experience of the spiritual life that corresponds to the life that they feel they need or have badly wanted. Abusive churches do not market themselves as abusive churches, but as churches that provide community, spiritual growth, fresh purpose, and assistance with life issues and family, that all people rightly desire in some measure. Martin writes, “The three main reasons why people join cults are: (1) healing for emotional hurts, (2) establishing friendships and relationships, and (3) spiritual growth.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip G. Zimbardo, “American Psychological Association Monitor” (May 1997): 14

<sup>2</sup> Paul R. Martin, *Cult Proofing Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1993), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, *Cult Proofing Your Kids*, 41.

These were precisely the reasons my wife and I joined our abusive church. We saw the church as the perfect place (and only place we knew of) in which the problems of our marriage might be addressed, where we would find the genuine, friendship we longed for, in the context of a distinct, purposeful, spiritual community. It was an appeal we were almost powerless to say no to.

As spiritual abuse survivor Wendy Duncan writes in *I Can't Hear God Anymore—Life in a Dallas Cult*:

Imagine a place where you are accepted and loved, where there is complete honesty and transparency, where you can totally be yourself and no longer have to strive to be someone else. Envision a safe haven where you could live in perfect peace and have everything you needed and wanted. That was the dream—and hope—that Trinity Foundation offered and that we naively believed. We longed for a shelter from the fast-paced lifestyle that surrounded us; we yearned for a harbor of refuge from the stressful concerns of life. We had a vision of living in a community of people who aspired to be like Jesus and to live like the first-century Christians. For those of us who became a part of the group, there was also an intense hunger for spiritual guidance and religious truth, a hunger that was easily exploited. For a brief time in our lives, we believed that we had found true community.<sup>4</sup>

### **Me, the Totalist**

There was something about *me* that made the little house church that met in a little house in a rundown part of town and boasted of its singular commitment to making disciples, so attractive and compelling: I was pathologically attracted to the total commitment, the all-or-nothing approach to faith. Join me as I reflect on

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Duncan, *I Can't Hear God Anymore: Life in a Dallas Cult*, Edited by Sandra Holcombe and Michael Brennen (Garland, TX: VM Life Resources, 2015), 35.

what that something was that made me vulnerable to recruitment into what turned out to be an abusive church.

It was 1985, and I was on the campus of a large university where I was attending a missions' conference with a group of fellow members of the new church I had just started attending. I was twenty-five years old. I had a deep desire for spiritual impact, and a longing to be in vocational ministry that can best be described as consuming, gnawing, and sincere. I do not recall anything I heard that day about missions. As with most conferences, there were plenary sessions in a large hall where presenters spoke of the current state of affairs in the world of missions' ministries, and of the crying need for young people to train as missionaries so they could bring the Christian message to the ends of the earth. There were slick advertising booths set up in another large room where various missions' organizations and parachurch ministries provided information on their work, gave out free pens, and distributed notepads and keychains with their organization's logo on them. For someone who desired a career in Christian ministry, each booth was magical, provocative, and stimulating. My desire to *do something*, preferably something *very big*, for Jesus, was encouraged. The larger meetings were punctuated by smaller breakout sessions. In these sessions speakers introduced their mission organization and talked about what it was doing and hoped to do to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

My friends and I attended a session that presented a large, multi-national parachurch<sup>5</sup> ministry that focused on an area of Christian ministry that we were excited about: *discipleship*. In obedience to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20), the organization was active in discipling college students, young professionals, and especially members of the armed forces.<sup>6</sup>

Well, this was perfect! Disciple-making was just what our little Bible church was all about! Actually, we felt that disciple-making was pretty much the *only* thing *any* church should be about, really.

The presenter lived in a good-sized city and represented his organization at a large university in a large disciple-making ministry with the students. He made a very compelling argument for the value and challenge of his ministry of training disciples. He presented his process of training college students so they experienced growth in their spiritual lives. He shared his method, which included Bible study and memorization, many one-on-one meetings for accountability, evangelistic training, and spiritual mentoring. A significant goal of the ministry was that its members would progress to the point where they themselves would become *disciple-makers*, helping another (spiritually younger) student grow in the

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<sup>5</sup> A parachurch ministry is one that functions alongside the formal church, assisting churches in their mission and ministries.

<sup>6</sup> It might help to think of disciple-making in the same way we think of mentoring today; a relationship in which a more experienced, accomplished member of an organization assists in the development and growth of a less-experienced, newer, member of that organization.

faith, who would then go on to make disciples of their own. Now, you are no doubt thinking to yourself, “That sounds like some sort of spiritual pyramid scheme,” and you are right. And, like all pyramid schemes, it never actually succeeds in reality.

Overall, the ministry organization appeared challenging and effective. The presenter was a sharp person. He was intense, articulate, comfortable speaking in front of a crowd, and fully convinced of the importance, effectiveness, and biblical legitimacy of his ministry model, which he described as being a *de facto* continuation of the very ministry model Jesus used in the training of his twelve disciples for ministry. Of all the speakers we heard that weekend, at all the workshops and plenary sessions, I found him the most compelling. I imagined myself one day being that sort of man, speaking in that sort of powerful, convincing way to people like me—who wanted to be like him!

Beyond these dreams, the specific thing that made the workshop memorable occurred at the end of the session, when the speaker answered various questions about discipleship from the audience. A young man, about my age, raised his hand and commented,

“I live in a small town, and there’s no one doing disciple-making in my town.”

“How do you know that?” asked the disciple-maker.

“Uh, I have asked around, and talked to my pastor, and checked at the community college there. It’s not going on. What should I do? I mean, if there is no one to disciple me into a person who can make disciples myself, how can I ever actually *do* discipleship?”

He was earnest in his desire to find help and training in his spiritual life. The speaker had presented a strong, compelling argument for the absolute necessity of making disciples just like the Lord and the Apostle Paul—one at a time, though through one-on-one, mentoring relationships. There truly seemed no other legitimate, biblical way to experience spiritual growth. The young man was in search of a disciple-maker.

“You are sure about that?” pressed the speaker.

The young man nodded in answer. “Yes, I am.”

“Well, then move to my town, and I’ll disciple you,” he shot back. The room fell silent.

“Uh, that’s over a hundred miles from me. That’s...quite a distance,” the would-be (and now, faltering) disciple said.

“Well . . .” The presenter paused. I felt the tension of a challenge laid down, almost as if a dare. I leaned forward in my chair. “I guess it all comes down to how badly you want to be disciplined.”

Reminiscent of *the rich young ruler* of the gospel story, the young man did not reply, and after another awkward moment, the Question and Answer session moved on to the next raised hand. No one else asked that kind of question again.

When reflecting on that breakout session, I believe that my response to the awkward interchange reveals why I chose to join a church that abused its members. You see, I *liked* the approach of the disciple-maker. His answer to the young man’s question became a challenge of the man’s sincerity—his true desire to be a disciple. Having recently transitioned out of the military, and still struggling to get my civilian legs, I was drawn to the clear, black and white, no nonsense nature of the disciple-maker’s challenge. It made sense to me. It had

the same ideological dialect of the language of challenge that I had been speaking, as a paratrooper in the Army, and then a dust-off medic, flying search and rescue missions along the coast of central California. No ifs, ands, buts, or maybes. Just, “How badly do you want to be a disciple?” Black or white, yes or no; Are you in or are you out?

The disciple-maker was inviting the young man to drop his nets (whatever those might have been), and move to the disciple-maker’s town, all so that he could meet with the speaker for one-on-one discipleship. I condemned the young man for his hesitancy and failure to accept the challenge, right there, on the spot. He was reticent to jump at such an *opportunity* for growth and impact for the kingdom of God. *I would have done it. I would have moved. I would have quit my job, moved my family, and severed all relational ties that held me to a normal life of shallow faith. I would have jumped at the opportunity.*

But I did not need to . . . because I already had. I was in the initial months of membership in the church that routinely issued the same nature and depth of challenges to its members—total commitment, without reservation.

The church met in a living room, and its twenty-five members sat on folding chairs in three rows. The service followed a traditional, Baptist church format: a welcome to the congregation, a prayer, a couple of hymns, an offering collection, and then, the sermon. I clearly recall the sermon that the pastor preached on my first visit to the church. He had titled the sermon, “A Furlough of Futility.” The sermon was part of a preaching series on the life of King David, and specifically covered a period (before he was king) when David lived as a

mercenary among the enemies of Israel, the Philistines. He hired himself and his soldiers out to the Philistine king to do battle for them, and then lied about his activities.<sup>7</sup> The focus of the sermon was on the frustration, and ultimate failure, of leaving God's plan for life. To abandon one's commitment to God would inevitably lead to hypocrisy, frustration, and a life of lying and secrets. Packed with historical, cultural insights, observations derived from the Hebrew text itself and illustrations that were perfectly appropriate and relative to my own experiences, the topic was of great interest to me. The pastor himself preached with fervor, conviction, and charisma. He was young, unpolished, direct to the point of being confrontational, and deadly serious about what he was doing. I glanced around. Each member of the church was taking notes, furiously trying to keep up with the preacher. No daydreaming, thumbing through hymnals, or drafting shopping lists here. These people were deadly serious, too. I felt right at home.

After the service on my first Sunday visiting the church, a couple of the deacons talked to me. When one of them asked if I planned to return the following week, I replied that I did not know, and that I would have to talk it over with my wife, who was across the room, talking with their wives. I sensed that my response did not please them, and probably seemed weak. "And then, I do have to work every third Sunday, since I'm on a one day on, two day off schedule," I explained. One of them was a paramedic himself, a veteran with many years in

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 27.

the field. He answered, "Well, you can get trades, or use vacation time, or even give away the hours. God will work it out for you to make it to a place where you can really grow, Ken. He really cares that much about you and your growth as a disciple. It's a matter of what you value most in life. Do not you think this is an opportunity that God has presented to you to really grow in His calling on your life to follow Him?"

"Uh, well," I stammered, "as a rookie, I kind of don't want to make waves by taking time off work right away. I have only been on the job for a couple of months."

The other deacon answered solemnly. "Right, Ken. Well, we would not ask anything of you that Jesus did not ask of his own disciples." I was hooked.

Although I did not become aware of the term for many years, when I read about it for the first time there was not the slightest doubt that it described me at that time of my life with absolute perfection. I was a religious totalist.

*Totalism* describes the ideological mindset behind its political (and probably more familiar) application, totalitarianism. A totalitarian regime or government is one that controls and demands the complete subjection, loyalty, and obedience of every citizen that belongs to it. It achieves that subjection by forcing every expression of its culture to bow to its authority. No facet of culture is allowed to exist independent of the demands, requirements, and oversight of the regime: the political system, arts and entertainment industries, athletic organizations, educational system from pre-school through university, military and police system, healthcare, prisons, transportation, and agricultural and

industrial systems. All and everything is under the control of the totalitarian state. The underlying philosophy does not just stop with armies, theater, and industry. It demands that the citizen adopt the belief-system of the State, submitting his thoughts to the beliefs and values of the government.<sup>8</sup> It is total domination, all the way to the soul of the victim. I was a religious totalist in that I truly believed that every aspect of my life (behavior, personality, habits, tastes, etc.) should be forcibly subjected to what I believed to be the demands of my new discipline—the Christian faith. Although I could not see it at the time, I was simply waiting for a totalist leader to come along who would start the process of dominating every aspect of my life, and pointing out all of the areas that I had been holding out on God.

The Bible itself seemed to argue that there was always more that I should have been doing to grow in my faith, or to express a deeper commitment to Jesus. Note how the following passages seem to demand of the believer an all-out, total commitment:

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<sup>8</sup>See Robert, Lifton, Robert, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* (Chapel Hill, NC: Martino Fine Books, 2014), and Stephen Martin, *The Heresy of Mind Control Recognizing Con Artists, Tyrants, and Spiritual Abusers in Leadership* (Nashville, TN: ACW Press, 2009), and the abstract by Robert J. Lifton, “Cult Formation - International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/cult-formation-lifton-csj-8-1-1991>> (January 4, 2017).

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.<sup>9</sup>

I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.<sup>10</sup>

And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."<sup>11</sup>

It seemed clear to me that if my life of following Jesus was not painful and costly, I was probably not really following Jesus. The late charismatic, popular Christian musician Keith Green had made a deep impression on me, with his exhortations to fans that they follow Jesus more closely, and consider becoming missionaries. "Jesus Commands Us to GO" was one of his more popular, well-received songs. At the conclusion of a concert in Vancouver, Washington, in the summer of 1980, he admonished his audience, "When you leave here tonight, don't go to McDonalds. Go home and shut yourself in your closet, and talk to God—ask Him what *He* wants you to DO. Then, DO IT!" I did not go to McDonalds that night.

Christian devotional classics tapped into unresolved, unsettled areas of my faith like drill sergeants remaking me into a Christian fighting machine.

*Absolute Surrender* by Andrew Murray, *The Pursuit of God*, by A.W. Tozer, *Why*

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<sup>9</sup> Philippians 3:7-8.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 9:23.

*Revival Tarries*, by Leonard Ravenhill, and *The Power of Prayer* by E.M.

Bounds promised relief from my unanswered questions. There were also the issues of nagging uncertainties, constant moral struggles and failures, and overwhelming temptations. I would fully surrender every corner of my youthful soul to the faith. I wanted to go deeper in that faith and believed God Himself certainly wanted me to go deeper. There could simply be no area untouched by belief and ruthless obedience. Any area of life that did not represent or somehow express my faith was seen as a vestige of the old, self-centered, pre-faith man, and must be, as Tozer wrote in *The Pursuit of God*, “extracted in agony and blood like a tooth from the jaw.”<sup>12</sup> In the deadly serious, disciplined, demanding little Bible church in Southeast Portland, with its charismatic, forceful pastor, I had finally found a place that promised to assist me in my own pursuit of God, as agonizing as the pursuit might prove to be. While no one joins an abusive church, they do join churches that they believe will further their personal goals, and will provide them with the structure, the relationships, the teaching, and the training that they believe will help them grow deeper in their Christian faith. Some people (like me), are easily recruited because of a nagging certainty that the joy and peace promised to the Christian can only be gained through relentless, exhaustive, excruciating labor, as well as the loss of self. When they sing the hymn, *All to Jesus, I surrender, All to Him I freely give*, they go straight to work surrendering and giving, with a passion.

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<sup>12</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst For the Divine* (Hannibal, MO: WingSpread Publishers, 2007), 20.

A basic fact of Christian theology is that God is perfect, and that each manifestation of his attributes exists in perfection and each of his attributes is the perfect measurement of that attribute. He is perfectly loving, perfectly knowing, perfectly righteous, perfectly powerful, etc. I was taught those things about God, and that a perfect God would not be quite so perfect if he tolerated imperfection, particularly the imperfections of mistakes, failures, and sin in the life of the believer. I knew that God loved me, but I suspected he did not quite love all the parts of me equally. I harbored a deeply held assumption that God would love me and fulfil my dreams to be in ministry if only I would work hard to give more of me to the self-improvement schemes and spiritual growth programs of my church. I believed then what I find many people believe today, that the love and blessing of God is a *quid pro quo* arrangement based on the believer's attempt at achieving total commitment to the Christian life. And so we become religious totalists, serving a God whom we suspect is perfectly totalist himself, and vulnerable to the manipulation and deceit of self-centered, abusive leaders and those who do their recruiting. This chapter has revealed the qualities of a person who is a religious totalist. "What does a totalistic, abusive church look like?" It is to that question I now turn.

## Chapter 5

### EIGHT INDICATORS OF CHURCHES THAT ABUSE

Spiritual abuse occurs when deception, manipulation, and undue influence is used by a pastor or church leader over a member to take the member's material, physical, or emotional resources. If you are a survivor of spiritual abuse, you might explain your losses in much more graphic, anguished terms. What, however, are the indicators that a church might be abusive?

Part of the answer to this question is found in Robert J. Lifton's *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*.<sup>1</sup> It is a fascinating study of the application of thought-reform (also known as brainwashing) as inflicted by the Chinese Communist Party on POW's in its prisons and on its own citizens. Shortly after the release of the book, Lifton observed that the application of thought reform was not limited to totalitarian cultures and governments, but that a person's thought processes and self-identity could be (at least temporarily) changed by the application of the same methodologies used by the Chinese government. People could readily be controlled in free societies, such as that of the United States of America, without

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* Chapel Hill, NC: Martino Fine Books, 2014).

coercion, incarceration, or physical controls. Lifton's "Eight Criteria of Thought Reform" apply to any group that seeks to gain complete control and unchallenged influence over its members.<sup>2</sup>

### **Deception: What Is Received Is Not What Was Promised**

*Members of abusive churches do not receive what they were promised when they were encouraged to join.*

Cult expert Margaret Singer, notes in this regard:

I have also had people say to me, "No one could argue me into one of those weird groups!" to which I usually respond, "That's right. Arguing is not very seductive. Charm and flattery are." Then I ask, "Did someone ever induce you to go to something, to do something, to believe something that you later found out was a 'line?'" Most people have had such an experience and when they think of the recruitment process that way they can understand it a little better.<sup>3</sup>

Abusive churches use deception to attract and recruit members in the same way that the Communist Party of China used deception in its effort to reform the thought processes of its Western POWs and its own university students in the 1950's. The abusive church carefully introduces its own dogma and assertions as truth and as the standard by which to ascertain truth. In the abusive church, membership itself carries the implicit agreement of the member to judge truth by what the church tells him is true. Once the recruit believes that

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<sup>2</sup> Soon after leaving an abusive church I began to read many Christian books dealing with the phenomenon of abusive churches, but my hesitancy to evaluate my former church as in fact behaving as a cult kept me from even exploring the insightful works of major authors in cultic studies.

<sup>3</sup> Singer, *Cults in Our Midst*, 109-10.

what the church (through its leaders and members) tells him is true, he begins to base his decision-making on what he is told by the abusive church. Soon, he is under the control of the abusive church.

The control is gained as the abusive church wins the trust of the person; gaining knowledge his cherished plans, dreams, or desires. Once this happens, church leaders then begin feeding the member implicit and explicit promises regarding how the church will bring those dreams, goals, and desires to pass. Consider the experience of Lyle, a college student who desired to grow in his faith, and so began attending the mid-week Bible studies held on campus by a church known for its heavy-handed control of members. He rose to become a study leader in the college ministry. I asked him if he felt the church used deception in its ministry.

I wanted to be that Green Beret Bible warrior, and I thought that they would be able to get me there; I saw them as a sort of golden ticket for me in my next step with God. In their Bible studies, there was always a level of deception—they wanted more out of you than they were telling you at the time. The studies are never open-ended—they always have a goal and a schedule to follow. The person who is in the study doesn't have much power or control. The fact is it's more a series of required lectures designed to lead you to join the church. I remember being asked to go to this Bible study. I was expecting a large group of people all talking about the Bible, maybe a specific verse that we read together. I showed up to find just one other person, the lead pastor (called the Evangelist), and it was just the two of us in this study, and it was more him teaching me things and asking me questions to gauge whether or not I was going to take the bait and pursue the studies. You are not told how many studies there are, what their titles are, or what verses will be in the study—none of that is told to you. You aren't told that you will be required to be baptized, and to give your life to the church. You will be expected to prioritize your church friends over your family and non-church friends. And if you don't comply with the church, your decisions made in past studies will be held over your head. They use those studies to break you and weigh you down. They deceive people in the name of God, believing that what they were doing is for the advancement of the true kingdom, and evangelism is God's highest calling in their mind.<sup>4</sup>

Expecting biblical training, intellectual challenge, and spiritual growth, Lyle was instead subjected to a recruitment process. He was never told what the expectations of the church were for its members, or what would be required of them to stay in the good graces of the church. The deceit practiced by an abusive church is found in its overt or inherent promise made to the prospective recruit that he will gain a better, more desirable life experience when he becomes a member, but he will ever experience the better life that is promised. People are most vulnerable to

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<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence with Lyle, March 9, 2016.

being tricked in the areas of life that they hold most dear, i.e., the areas that they often care so deeply about that their judgment can easily become clouded. Indeed, abusive churches do not stay in business by recruiting spiritual slackers and ambivalent Christians. They focus on attracting highly motivated, committed Christians who are dissatisfied with their faith and with their churches. They prey upon individuals who want, expect, and demand more from their churches and their faith, and often, more from themselves.

The late Paul Martin, a survivor of spiritual abuse and founder of an in-patient counseling center for former cultists, writes of the abusive group he once belonged to:

A few of the cultic practices I began to see exercised by [Great Commission International] in 1977 were the use of deceit, the claim that our group had discovered the only correct way to evangelize the world (a practice that was lost after the first Christian generation and then was rediscovered by the founder of our movement), and the suppression of any sort of questioning or confrontation of the leadership. Nothing I had read prepared me to see the warning signs when I joined.<sup>5</sup>

Another survivor, Don, likened his experience to a type of bait and switch scheme. He recalled a deep desire to serve others by guiding and coaching them in their spiritual development, and helping them become increasingly faithful followers of Jesus Christ. He wanted to carry out these spiritual aspirations in a healthy, spiritual community. Instead, within a few short years, he found himself

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<sup>5</sup> Paul R. Martin, *Cult Proofing Your Kids*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan , 1993), 9.

simply fighting for his own spiritual survival in what became a decidedly unhealthy, dissipated, abusive church. Don recalls:

The bait was the promise of thorough training in disciple-making so that we could multiply spiritually, plant churches, experience authentic community, and anticipate great joy and reward in Heaven. This switched over time into an ingrown, tightly controlled cluster of families and singles in which the pastor led the group into substance use, sexual immorality, gambling, and generally a hypocritical way of life that retained a shell of religious practice.<sup>6</sup>

Prospective members are deceived when they are told that the spiritual benefits they will receive as they participate in the life of the church will be commensurate with the degree of commitment they make to the church. In its initial stages, the new member may hear extravagant claims and assertions regarding the competency and charisma of the leader of the group. I was deceived by being assured that the abusive church I joined possessed the structure and academic opportunities to better prepare me for vocational ministry than a formal seminary. I clearly recall a summer day in 1984 when I was challenged to abandon my hopes of attending seminary by the associate pastor who had been assigned to help me in the area of spiritual growth. As I recall, he said something like the following:

Ken, we can provide you with much better training for ministry, and much more than mere academic training. We can give you the character training that you need, that all seminary graduates lack, so you'll be genuinely successful in ministry. We [he spoke of himself and the senior pastor] have talked about it, and we do not feel you should go to seminary, Ken. It might ruin you, to tell the truth.

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<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence with Don, February 20, 2016.

This bold claim was one of the reasons I decided to join the church. I believed I had discovered a quick way to acquire the kind of maturity, education, and skills that I knew I needed for a career in the pastorate. I believed him, so I was deceived into giving up my goal of attending seminary (a goal I later fulfilled). I buckled under the pressure, did not gain a seminary quality education, and found myself twelve years later driving away from the church with my wife, children, guitar, and some clothing, with little hope of ever serving as a pastor. Using my desire for spiritual growth and my (obvious) ambition to be in vocational ministry as bait, I was caught. I did not come remotely close to experiencing what I had been promised when I joined the church. I had been deceived.

In 1984, the United States Marine Corps produced a very powerful recruitment video, making an appeal to young men and women to join the Marines, and so act on the inherent desires they had to belong to a superior branch of the military, the Marines. Panning in to a chunk of metal being heated to white-hot and shaped on an anvil into a beautiful sword, the narrator intones, “You begin with raw steel, shape it with fire, muscle, and sweat, and polish it to razor-sharp perfection. What you end up with—is a Marine.” At this point, the impressive, gleaming sword is grasped by the white gloved hand of a young Marine in his dress-blue uniform. The somber narrator continues, “Maybe you can be one of us; the few, the proud, the Marines.”

The ad corresponds to precisely what some Christians want—a very challenging, costly, even excruciating experience of spiritual formation that will

result in them achieving a type of elite status. “Maybe you have what it takes—maybe you can be one of us” is an intoxicating challenge to some.

Many people are also deceived into joining abusive churches when they are promised close friendships and healthy community. They soon learn that the kindness and acceptance they seek is conditioned upon their continued devotion to the church.

Most people want to be valued, respected, and viewed with affection and warmth by friends and family alike. Sherry recalls that she joined an abusive church because she believed that she would be loved and valued simply for who she was, according to the biblical values of genuine, Christian community. Instead, she found that she would only be accepted and treated with kindness as she met the expectations of the leaders of the church, and observed its unwritten rules. “For me I guess that it boils down to a promise that I was and would always be unconditionally loved. The truth was that it was the most conditional love that is humanly possible.”<sup>7</sup>

Lyle realized the abusive church that had recruited him on campus had concealed its true, conditional acceptance underneath the veneer of the hope of acceptance. Shortly after leaving, he still longed for the relational intimacy that he (at times) experienced in the abusive church. He recalled:

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Sherry, February 20, 2016.

There was an expectation that everyone was family. The confessions of sins only accelerated the feeling of closeness. It made the group feel more alive than other Christian groups, as though they had some sort of magic spark. What is further deceptive is their idea of community. When I saw the closeness of the members, I was led to believe that joining the church was required to be part of that close-knit and loving community, but it all depends on being an obedient member of the church. Baptism is a great, emotional event for everyone. The person being baptized really believes that the people in the room are his *family*, and would die for him. Within days of leaving, I was never spoken to again by many of them.<sup>8</sup>

The particular claims and promises made to the new member are varied and tailored to his desires and hopes. Often, these expectations are shared with the new member by other, more tenured members who themselves are still living in the hope of experiencing what *they* had been promised. In the end, the member of the abusive church simply does not experience what was promised.

People do not join abusive churches. They are recruited into churches that make wonderful, personally tailored promises to them of a blessed, healthy, satisfying social and spiritual life. Therein is the deceit, for in the abusive church what is promised will simply never be received.

### **Loss: The Abusive Church Demands More, of Everything**

*The member's personal resources (e.g., time, money, skills, energy, etc.) will increasingly be expected and taken FROM the member INTO the abusive church.*

Abusive churches do not exist to enrich the lives of their members. Rather, they exist to enhance, continue, and staff the personal vision of their leaders.

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<sup>8</sup> Email communication with Lyle, March 9, 2016.

Abusive leaders require the unfailing loyalty and obedience of the members of their churches. They are driven to use people and their resources.

The most obvious resource that comes to mind is money. Abusive churches often pressure their members to contribute amounts that are excessive and damaging to their financial well-being. They routinely require extra financial support for what its leaders present as *special* needs, gifts, and opportunities that relate to the mission of the church. One Dallas, Texas abusive church, in addition to its required tithe of 10% of its member's incomes, instituted an "asset tithe," in which 10% of the value of each member's net worth (stocks, bonds, real estate, cars, bank accounts, and belongings) were given to the church.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, a "First Fruits" tithe policy was instituted, in which each member submitted a personal budget to the pastor, who then determined the amount of money to be given over to the church.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The word *tithe* ("a tenth") describes a demand in the Mosaic law in which Jewish people would pay a tenth of their produce to their priests for the upkeep of the tabernacle or temple, the payment of priests, and for support of the poor, etc. (i.e., Leviticus 27:32; Numbers 18:20-24) The Old Testament requirement of the tithe is not repeated as a Christian obligation in the New Testament, but Christians are generally expected, though not commanded, to give financial support to those who lead their churches and to the poor in their churches and communities (i.e., 1 Corinthians 9:9-14; 1 Timothy 5:17-18; Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:5-9; Ephesians 4:28). My understanding of the issue is that Christians are not commanded to tithe, per se, but that the members of any local church do take responsibility to contribute to the financial needs of their church, including the payment of its employees, and support of its local and global mission.

<sup>10</sup> Glenna Whitley, "The Cult of Ole," *Dallas Observer*, <<http://www.dallasobserver.com/news/the-cult-of-ole-6406297>> (September 17, 2016).

Natalia recounts the slide into financial crisis that she and her family faced as they were pressured to give increasing amounts of money in support of their abusive church:

There was a very clear, overt demand to give. As the main breadwinner in my household and one of the "larger salaries" in the church, I was expected to support my mother-in-law [a fellow member of the church] financially as well as provide a large tithe each month. The support of my mother-in-law was so that she would not be a "financial burden" to the church community. My husband was not working and we were often behind in rent and utilities. Nevertheless, that didn't matter as long as the pastor was supported. I was discouraged from contributing to my company's 401k plan, that would take money away, and we were encouraged to expand exemptions on taxes so that more money came in. I had an opportunity to take on a part-time job in my previous career of journalism. This was met with hostility and mistrust and I was informed that it was God's will that I stay in my current job. I left the church with all of our belongings able to fit in the back of a small pickup truck. It took seven years of patient care and paying off debt before I could consider buying a home at 47. Much of that debt was tax debt.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar story, Marie recalls the constant pressure she was under to give more money to her church than she could afford:

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<sup>11</sup> Email correspondence with Natalia, 18 July 2016.

There was always emotional pressure to give more than a reasonable amount, or an amount I was comfortable giving. The pastor was always interested in finding out how much I was making, or if I had other sources of income. People cashed out their retirement funds and handed them over to the leaders, who had promised them special training and education opportunities in the church. Those opportunities never actually happened, though. Many of us maxed out our credit cards for the "benefit" of the group or the leaders, and some people sold their houses.<sup>12</sup>

While abusive churches inevitably get around to taking the financial resources of a member, they do so only after they have established powerful influence over each member's most precious, irreplaceable treasure—his time. Presented with what is often an exhausting, dizzying array of activities, new members are asked to make increasing investments of their time through regular participation in the ministries and activities offered at the church. They are *invited* (but actually expected) to attend mid-week services and studies, early morning prayer meetings, classes for training in evangelism, or other faith-related activities. There may also be specialized ministries, outreach programs, conferences, and unique training or service-oriented events. It is stipulated both implicitly and explicitly to the new member that consistent attendance at most (or all) of these events is expected. As the member invests more of his time, more of his life becomes deeply, personally invested in the abusive church. Friendships and family relationships, along with hobbies, activities, and interests that the member formerly invested in, have fallen by the wayside, diminished in importance (if not outright discouraged) by the abusive church.

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<sup>12</sup> Email correspondence with Maria, 12 Oct 2016.

The continued drain on the resources of a member is measured not solely by what the member gives *over* to the church, but also through the opportunities for personal, material, and vocational gain that the member gives *up* for the church. Janet recounts the greatest losses to her abusive church were the lost opportunities for private, quality time with her family and with friends who were not members of the church:

[My church] kept me too busy to enjoy my family, people outside my church, and life. All spare time was spent at church activities, so there wasn't really a down time even though some of these were labeled social events. It also brought strain on family relationships. We were too busy with church to nurture our family.<sup>13</sup>

Abusive churches often rob young marriages and parents of the simple investment of family time. Researcher Dale Enroth notes that abusive churches often target younger, less established families for recruitment:

Such (abusive) churches often target young couples during the crucial childbearing years. As a result, the energy needed by these young couples for legitimate family interaction is siphoned off into a high intensity cause. Family obligations are sacrificed, and children's developmental needs are neglected.<sup>14</sup>

Abusive churches also take members' resources through discouraging members from pursuing professional and personal goals—particularly when pursuing those goals deflects resources (and possibly a member's attendance) away from the church. The International Church of Christ (ICC) is infamous for its aggressive college campus recruitment of students, and subsequent counseling

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<sup>13</sup> Email communication with Janet, March 3, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald M. Enroth, "Dysfunctional Churches", *Cult Observer*, Volume 9, No. 4 (1992).

of those students to either diminish their class load or drop out of college altogether. The reason? So that they are more available to serve and participate in the activities of the church. In an article on the ICC, former member Chad Reyes recalls college student members “who [would] drop everything to be a fry cook until they can be a disciple,” if church leaders counseled them to do so.<sup>15</sup>

One of the reasons abusive pastors discourage advancement is their own insecurity. The narcissistic pastor is very insecure. He is suspicious of the professional or academic advancement of church members, especially if the advancement results in the member gaining a more advanced education and more lucrative income. He cannot abide the confidence, autonomy, and opportunities that often accompany such successes in a member’s life.

Don left a successful medical practice to be more available to his church. When asked if his time spent in the church caused material, economic, or vocational loss, he replied: “Definitely. It led to abandoning my previous career for a career as a vocational disciple-maker. Because the vision I bought into was sold to me by a fraud, I found myself starting at square one in my mid-forties.”<sup>16</sup>

I deeply regret inviting a young friend to my abusive church. He was a professional helicopter pilot and former officer in the US Army. Once he became a member of the church, he was pressured by its leaders to give up his aviation

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<sup>15</sup> Jeff Wright, “Eugene Register Guard, Internet,” 1/26/04, from “International Church of Christ,” *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <http://www.icsahome.com/groups/internationalchurchofchrist> (September 13, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Email correspondence with Don, March 12, 2016.

career in order to remain in the area, all to be more available for ministry. He was then cajoled into taking a job as a field-laborer at a local tree farm, at a severe reduction of his pay, all the while being told by our church leaders that he was making a grand choice by remaining in a place where he could really grow in his faith. (Wherever he is today—I hope he is well, and flying!)

Peter recalled the financial loss his family suffered when his wife took on duties as a pastoral assistant, paid on the *quid pro quo* basis of the reduction of their monthly rent (paid to the pastor of the church). In describing his personal losses to the abusive church, he wrote:

Perhaps the biggest loss was that of my wife's time. She became the "full-time assistant" to the leader, giving up the possibility of part or full time nursing wages, for a rent reduction benefit of \$600/month, which was of course far less than minimum wage. I was expected to be grateful for all the supposed benefits flowing to us from this arrangement. This made it impossible to deal with debts, took priority over family life, and contributed significantly to the failure of the marriage.<sup>17</sup>

### **Isolation: The Abusive Church Separates Members from Family and Friends**

*Abusive churches discourage their members from forming or maintaining healthy relationships with non-members, unless there is a chance they themselves will become members.*

Abusive churches divide families and friends, and pull members into social, if not physical, isolation. Sadly, the people who present such a threat are the member's closest, most long-term relationships. Through the policies,

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<sup>17</sup> Email correspondence with Peter, 1 Sept 2016.

lifestyle, and teachings of the church the member enters a process of increasing isolation from the relationships and culture from which he came to the church. This process is not as simple as a mere external rule being made regarding friendships and contact with those deemed *outsiders* by the abusive church. The abusive church actively seeks to change the member's ideas and conclusions regarding his friends and family. He is led to believe that his former friends, his family, and his co-workers are, at the very least, unworthy of his time, and at worst, are antagonists, standing in the way of his continued spiritual growth.

I was offended when my parents questioned the wisdom of my extreme commitment. We had sold our first house and purchased one of lesser quality and value to live closer to the church community, and to be available for its ministries and activities. A couple of years later we sold that home when we were offered the *opportunity* (I am using a bit of our *groupspeak here*) of moving into a large home shared by the senior pastor and several other church members for more intense, daily discipleship training. We decided to move into his expansive, rented house, with our two preschool-aged daughters, renting two bedrooms for our family of four, and sharing the rest of the house with the pastor and his wife, two other families, and several single adults.

My father was not impressed by our zeal. When we put our home on the market (we ended up selling it at a loss), he stopped by one day in order to confront my rash behavior and to try to talk sense into me. He expressed his heartfelt concern for the type of home and lifestyle that our choices would most likely create for his granddaughters, and questioned the wisdom of our decision

to abandon the ownership of our own home to become renters, not even of our own house, but of rooms in a rented house. “What about the kids, Kenny? What about their lives? What about the home they’ll grow up in? What about your marriage? What about your future, your reputation, Kenny? Have you really thought about this, son?”

I was incensed. “Good grief, Dad! I’m *doing* something here, not just living like everyone else, trying to get ahead, get rich, save my pennies! I want to *count* for something more than just owning my own home. I want this chance to grow deeper in my faith, to be discipled! I’m training to be a pastor. This is how I’m doing it, and it’s none of your business to come to MY house and criticize me! You should be proud of me, that I’m making a choice here to follow Jesus more closely. Instead, you come here to criticize me. I cannot believe it! And you say you are a Christian!”

I could not relate closely to my father about the most important things in my life. Those important things were the decisions, convictions, and goals that were all being formed according to the teaching and programs of my church. I believed I was very, very different from my extended family, and we could no longer be very close. I had a completely new set of friends who *could* understand and relate to my life—my fellow church members! Therefore, I naturally began to pull away from my family and (life-long) friends.

We moved into the large, rented house atop a mountain, overlooking the city of Portland. I cannot recall a single time when I felt the desire or the freedom

to invite anyone from my family over for a visit, though they lived only a couple of miles away.

Activities and celebrations that are the bedrocks of family life: birthdays, anniversaries, holiday traditions, family reunions, and recreational activities, such as camping trips, vacations, golfing, or attending sporting events that had been important family gathering times are not attended by the abusive church member. He no longer has time, and in time, loses the inclination that he had in years past to attend. He is no longer *physically* present with his family, or his friends. In time, both friends and family members get the point, and may simply stop inviting the member to events and gatherings. The withdrawal indicates the member's loyalties have been transferred from his traditional, family ties to the abusive church. It becomes very clear that the member self-identifies as a member of the church, and not (primarily) as a member of the family, or of the old group of friends.

If the member does attend family events, it is noticed that they have changed and have become overly serious and emotionally flat. The family is at first confused, then hurt, and then annoyed: "He used to be the life of the party," they report. "He was fun to be around, and seemed to enjoy himself so much. Now, he seems repressed, stilted, boring, and sad. The only time he really lights up around family is when the conversation has been steered (by him, usually) to religion. He could go on and on and on (and he does!) about it—and even more so, about our religion. He obviously thinks we are not "saved," or, at least, not as "serious about Jesus" as he is, and he does not hide his condescending attitude

very well. We actually stopped wanting him around at many of our family events, because he has become so judgmental and arrogant. Who is this religious zombie that has inhabited our son's body, and what have they done with our boy?!" *Their boy* is no longer *their boy*.

The initial experiences of disappointment eventually subside to a new reality for family and friends. In time, they accept his membership in the group. Over the years, babies are born, engagements announced, anniversaries and graduations celebrated, illnesses faced and deaths grieved, all with the understanding that the beloved member of the abusive church will not be there—or, will not be *all* there.

Most narcissistic pastors demand constant attention and complete loyalty. They are jealous of their members' relationships with family and old friends. Sherry believes that jealousy was behind her pastor's discouragement of his members having healthy relationships with those outside his church. She commented:

Looking back, I realize that the underlying dynamic was that our pastor was insanely jealous. He was envious of any connection that his followers felt with anyone else—even others within the church. He demanded complete loyalty, but was never persuaded that he had it. For his part, he would make significant efforts to be the most important person in the lives of church members and offer the most need-meeting relationship to each person in his sphere.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Email correspondence with Sherry, March 19, 2016.

Tragically, it is only over the course of time that members of abusive churches learn that their leaders have no interest in the members' gain, but only in their own gain of the resources of the members.

### **Elitism: The Prevailing Notion of Superiority**

*Abusive churches are elitist, and view other churches and pastors with disdain.*

Churches that abuse live in a thick fog of elitism. Enroth writes, "Followers are led to believe there is no other church quite like theirs and that God has singled them out for special purposes."<sup>19</sup> Fostering elitism in the congregation of an abusive church is critical in the process of gaining loyalty from members. Having recruited a person into the church with the assurance that it is the most faithful, most effective, and most *serious* church in the neighborhood, that claim must be continually nurtured and fed. Psychologist Michael Langone describes the process as it plays out on cults and other thought-reforming groups, such as abusive churches:

Through testimonies of group members, the denigration of the group's "competitors" (e.g., other religious groups, other therapists), the tactful accentuation of the recruit's shameful memories and other weaknesses, and the gradual indoctrination of the recruit into a closed, nonfalsifiable belief system, the group's superiority is affirmed as a fundamental assumption.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Enroth, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Langone, "Deception, Dependency, and Dread" - *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/deception--dependency--and-dread-langone>> (September 21, 2016).

Members are taught that their church's doctrines, down to the minutest conclusions, are the only *biblically correct* conclusions. As their church is considered by them to be superior to other churches in their area, members of elitist churches often seek to draw members away from other churches and into their church. In the 1980s, amidst great controversy, the International Church of Christ (ICC) aggressively established churches in cities across the world, often in open conflict with churches of its parent denomination, the Church of Christ (COC). In warning the established COC fellowships regarding the encroachment of the new (ICC) churches, researcher Flavel Yeakley warned, "Do not think you can persuade the leaders of the discipling movement to stay away just because you ask them to stay away. They honestly believe that your congregation is unfaithful, spiritually dead, and lost."<sup>21</sup>

Janet recalls how her pastor led his church members to share in his disdain for other churches in the community:

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<sup>21</sup> Flavel R. Yeakley, Jr, ed., *Discipling Dilemma: A Study of the Discipling Movement Among Churches of Christ*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1988), 83.

Chip never did anything with another church, because they were all “less-than,” and had something wrong doctrinally. He had us all convinced that there was no safe church to go to that believed the whole word of God and didn't water down the doctrinal truths. In turn, people also spent time disrespecting other churches if they heard of something that seemed “off.” The whole church became hypercritical of any church, any leader, because Chip was the one who gave the true info, almost like he had the direct line with God. It all played into the facade of him being the perfect pastor; perfect teaching, perfect discernment, pastoring a church with perfect believers who would never be swayed by anything “those other people” believed. It was almost as if he would even question people’s salvation even on minor issues if they were not in alignment with his beliefs.<sup>22</sup>

The elitism of the abusive church is identified in the way its members speak of themselves, their pastor, and the way they speak of other churches and pastors. It is expressed in criticism, or simply a noting of the perceived shortcomings of other churches and pastors, along with inflated claims regarding the superiority of their church over all others. For example, comments may be offered like:

“Well, they are not really committed to the Great Commission like we are.”

“They preach a “feel-good” gospel, not the real gospel, like our pastor does.”

“They are not committed to disciple making, like we are.”

“They do not care about evangelism, like we do.”

“I do not know if they are really saved or not—there’s no evidence that I can see in their lives.”

“They don’t really DO Christianity—they just play the game.”

“They aren’t baptized by the Holy Spirit.”

“They are not a praying church, like we are.”

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<sup>22</sup> Email correspondence with Janet, 9 March 2016.

“They are lukewarm, not sold-out for Jesus, like we are.”

“They are not involved in social justice, like we are.”

“They are involved in social justice, and not evangelism, like we are.”

Lyle recalled both the underlying elitism of the abusive church he was a member of, and the complex motivations that drove the behavior of the church members:

They see themselves as the doctors and everyone else as the sick. They believe they are warriors, who are fighting against the whole world to try to bring the true kingdom into the world, because they don't want everyone to go to hell. Full world evangelism is one of their most important motivators and beliefs. It has to be, because as soon as you join, now you believe that all of your friends and family are going to hell.<sup>23</sup>

The pastor of my former (abusive) church wrote to the members of his church, “We must steel ourselves for persecution, if we are to have any part in reintroducing Christ to the American Church!”<sup>24</sup> With the zeal and confidence of a prophet, he diagnosed the deficiencies of the American church today:

The problem with the contemporary church in America is that it believes that God in Christ is seeking admirers rather than imitators—imitators of His earthy life, with all the suffering and persecution that goes along with it. They honor Him with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him.<sup>25</sup>

Strong words. His letters read like biblical epistles, and regularly arrive to his church from the Oregon State Penitentiary, where he is incarcerated for child

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<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence with Lyle, 19 September 2016.

<sup>24</sup> M. Sperou, “Letters from Mike”, c. Oct 5, 2015, <<http://bcresources.net/app/letters-20151005-mike/>>. (September 16, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> M. Sperou.

molestation. The elitism that surrounds life in an abusive church has no correspondence to reality.

### **Group-Speak: The Unique Language of Each Abusive Church**

*Abusive churches develop a distinct vocabulary that corrupts the member's communication with outsiders, within the church itself, and within his own thought processes.*

Abusive church members often speak in strangely similar ways, using the same euphemisms, figures of speech, and even sentence structures in their conversation. The group-speak is a natural result of the unique, exclusive values and worldview held by the members of the church, and serves to reinforce those values while at the same time solidifying the bonding of the members to one another. The bedrock of the control of an abusive church and its pastor over the lives of members is the control of all aspects of communication: how they speak, what they hear, what they read, and from whom (or from what sources) they receive information. To bring about the change of thinking sought in members by abusive church leaders, the communication of members must be controlled and altered. Lifton writes:

The most basic feature of the thought reform environment, the psychological current upon which all else depends, is the control of human communications. Through this milieu control the totalist environment seeks to establish domain over not only the individual's communication with the outside [all that he sees and hears, reads and writes, experiences, and expresses], but also—in its penetration of his inner life—over what we may speak of as his communication with himself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 420.

Words are the building blocks from which ideas are constructed and communicated. Even our own thoughts are expressed to ourselves in words. To change the ideas and thought processes of members, abusive churches often use a new vocabulary, mostly comprised of familiar words now laden with new meanings. Abusive leaders tend to simplify language into bite-sized, polarized meanings that stop members from deeper contemplation and enquiry, leading them to adopt ideas and beliefs without critical thought. Lifton describes this language twisting as *loading the language*:

The term "loading the language" refers to literalism and a tendency to deify words or images. A simplified, cliché-ridden language can exert enormous psychological force, reducing every issue in a complicated life to a single set of slogans that are said to embody the truth as a totality.<sup>27</sup>

There are at least three effects of the loaded language of abusive churches and cults. The new vocabulary gradually erodes the member's ability to communicate clearly with (outside) family and friends. In a sense, he now speaks a different language and must *translate* what he hears and what he says to people he may have been speaking to his entire life. In addition, the corrupted language of the church forces him to communicate within the group in a way that is insulated, tending to increase the groups' social isolation and unhealthy group cohesion. Langone writes:

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<sup>27</sup> Lifton, "Cultic Formation."

This kind of shift in meaning of basic terms is a common manipulative ploy in cultic groups. Members who have come to be indoctrinated in the group hear one meaning for a particular term, while nonmembers hear another meaning. Such definitional shifts enable groups to "hide in orthodoxy." They may seem orthodox to individuals using the normal meanings of key terms, but the strategic meaning shifts of these terms among members permit the leader to act in unorthodox ways while seeming to be pure as snow. I have referred to this phenomenon as "ideological fraud."<sup>28</sup>

My fellow survivors and I often use our old church's *coded language* as a means of bringing a smile to our faces—and as a touchstone memory of our common experience in the abusive church. Here are a few examples of the distorted vocabulary that is found in many churches:

*Agenda*: An ordering of activities created to give guidance to a plan, meeting, goal, etc. In the abusive church, *agenda* is used to describe a personal, clandestine plan that a member devises as his own strategy for getting through life without trusting God and living openly before the community. "You are just hiding a private *agenda* to hang on to your life," to a member who had joined a 401K retirement plan at her work.

*Defect*: To leave the church (which is understood as *de facto* abandoning one's relationship with God). When my wife and I left the abusive church, we were spoken of as defectors who had in actuality left God when we left the church.

*Removed*: This chilling use of the word describes the idea of God killing a person who has defected (see above) from his place of usefulness and training

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Langone, "Advice for Church Authorities." *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <<http://www.icsahome.com/home>> (September 20, 2016).

for God's kingdom—as a member of the abusive church, of course. “Go ahead! Do your own thing, leave God out of your life. But remember, God may certainly *remove* you if you persist in bringing dishonor to His name.”

*Teachable*: Whereas the word normally means to maintain an attitude of openness and critical thinking, to increase one's knowledge of an issue, or skill, it is used by abusive churches to describe something much narrower. To be *teachable* is to accept everything taught by the pastor. A believer who is truly *teachable* (according to the abusive church) immediately agrees with any pastor or person in a higher position of leadership in the church. A teachable disciple never questions or challenges those in authority. For instance, when I questioned the way the pastor spoke of another member of the church (who was not present) as being ungracious and insulting, the assistant pastor quickly stepped into the conversation. “Ken, you are being very unteachable right now, you know.”

*Backslidden Baptist*: A term to describe a fictitious church that represented a church of low commitment among its members. “Well, if you are unwilling to pay the price to *really* follow Christ, I'm sure there's a place for you down the street, at *Backslidden Baptist*.”

*Vulnerable*: To *open up*, and share one's deepest feeling, failures, and desires with whomever requests the information. Vulnerability is requisite to building intimacy between members, and is closely tied to the open, public confession of sin. To be deemed *invulnerable* is considered a serious offense against the church community and generally cited as evidence of hidden sin.

One survivor of an abusive church has written of her former church's policy of shunning, in which the pastor communicated the shunned member's status by including the member's name on a *Mark and Avoid* list. Ironically, the pastor has taken a cue from a verse in the Bible in which Paul warns his readers to avoid false teachers, members are to have nothing to do with their fellow members who are listed as those to *mark and avoid*.<sup>29</sup> My friend learned that her entire family had been put on the *Mark and Avoid* list.

Perhaps the most damage of the corrupted vocabulary of abusive churches is inflicted on the innermost thoughts of the members themselves. By distorting a member's vocabulary, deceiving the member into believing the new definitions and meanings of words, he loses the ability to have a meaningful, independent conversation with himself. Let's imagine the case of a young husband and father, working hard at his new job, and just able to make ends meet. His abusive pastor has hammered it into his head that God wants it all, everything that the young man is, or could be, or could produce because God asks nothing less than a total commitment of every aspect of life, including the young man's money. The pastor begins to pressure the young man to give more money to the church. He teaches the man that dissatisfaction, greed, and a lack of faith are the marks of a worldly attitude towards money. The young man might have once said to himself, "It bugs me that I'm being pressured to give money that I just don't have." Now, however, the abusive ideology of the church, taught

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<sup>29</sup> Romans 16:17 (King James Version).

to him in words that have had their meanings twisted, leads him to reason, "I am sinful for being angry, doubtlessly greedy, covetous, and ungrateful for all that God has given me. I am also lacking in faith, or I would give more money in the confidence that God will take care of all my needs." Then, because he certainly does not want to displease God, he pulls out his wallet and gives more than he really should to his church. By changing the way the young man *talked* about money, the abusive church changed how he *thought* about money. In doing so, the church manipulated what he *did* with his money.

### **Fear: Dread of Failing to Please the Abusive Leaders**

*Members of abusive churches often have an inordinate fear of displeasing their leaders.*

It may be an anthropological trait that makes people look for strong, confident leaders to follow. From infancy, we look for our needs to be met by our mothers. In a sense, we look to our mothers for direction and resources. Then, as we grow, we include fathers, family members, teachers, coaches, and others. We learn that the resources we need for growth and well-being are received as we remain in a good, obedient relationship with these need-meeters and partners. We respect and follow the direction of judges, airline pilots, teachers, police officers, neighborhood association committees, our bosses, our coaches, and just about every other person who holds an accepted, legitimate position of leadership in an area in which we are involved.

We also learn that when we do not respect the rules, and the people who make them, there are consequences. Disobey a police officer, and you might end

up in jail. Defy a judge, and you might be thrown out of the courtroom. Disappoint your boss, and you might lose your job. Although no one would suggest that it is healthy for a person to go through life in fear of authority figures, there is a type of legitimate *fear* of failing to keep the rules by which we have tacitly agreed to live.

Although fear is antithetical to Christian faith,<sup>30</sup> abusive churches are often seedbeds of a fear-based faith. They nurture an environment of stress and fear as a mechanism of control. Members of abusive churches are not motivated by a desire to please their abusive pastors, but by the fear of *displeasing* them. They become convinced, as Langone has written, that their “future well-being depends upon adherence to the group's belief system.”<sup>31</sup>

I was motivated by fear of the consequences of displeasing my abusive pastor, *not* the desire to please him. As time passed, and my wife and I became more deeply imbedded into the abusive church community, I grew increasingly vulnerable to his control, and found that he had gained power in the most important relationships and areas of my life. My fear was not as much of the pastor himself, it was more related to what the pastor could do to me through his influence on those closest to me. He could turn my closest friends in the church against me, belittle me before the congregation, and discourage people from

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<sup>30</sup> See Mark 4:40; 2 Timothy 1:7.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Langone, “Deception, Dependency, and Dread,” *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/deception--dependency--and-dread-langone>> (September 21, 2016).

spending time with me. He could convince my children that I was a weak Christian and father, and my wife that I did not seem to love her as much as she loved me. He could remove me from valued positions of responsibility in the church and betray private issues of sin and confession that I had shared with him. He could tear apart my self-esteem and sense of worth. How did I know he could inflict that kind of punishment on me?

Simply because he did, in each of those areas. The punishment and control was not physical (in the free societies of the West, it rarely is), but psychological. One survivor recalls, "I experienced a lot of fear of displeasing the pastor, and I said things to friends, and even my own kids, that I didn't believe or agree with in order to be OK with the pastor." She recalls receiving the ire of her pastors when she innocently included them on a list of household duties during a church retreat: "Once we were on a church retreat at the beach & I was in charge of details like washing dishes, clean-up, etc. I put the pastor and his associate pastor on the schedule assuming that everyone would serve the others in this way. BIG MISTAKE! I was publically criticized and told that this was a bad use of their time, because they were too important & their time too valuable."<sup>32</sup> Langone declares:

Punishment may sometimes be physical. Usually, however, the punishment is psychological, sometimes even metaphysical. Certain fringe Christian groups, for example, can at the command of the leadership immediately begin shunning someone singled out

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<sup>32</sup> Email correspondence from Betty, June 20, 2016.

as being "factious" or possessed of a "rebellious spirit." Many groups also threaten wavering converts with punishments in the hereafter, for example, being "doomed to hell." It should be remembered that these threats and punishments occur within a context of induced dependency and psychological alienation from the person's former support network. This fact makes them much more potent than the garden-variety admonitions of traditional religions, such as "you will go to hell if you die with mortal sin. The result of this process, when carried to its consummation, is a person who proclaims great happiness but hides great suffering.<sup>33</sup>

In abusive churches, the fear of displeasing pastors and leaders is always hanging in the air, creating members who mask great anxiety and fear under the appearance of having great happiness.

### **Disclosure: Confession as a Church Requirement**

*In the abusive church, confession of sin, failure, and even thought is often coerced, indiscriminate, and intrusive.*

If there was an earthly court to prosecute spiritual abuse, I believe the most common crime tried in that court would have to do with the tendency of abusive churches to pervert and abuse the Christian practice of confession. It is in this delicate, precious area of the Christian life that abusive pastors and churches do some of their most harmful, and near permanent, emotional damage to members.

In the abusive church this precious and mostly God-directed spiritual practice of confession is twisted, abused, and used as a tool in service of the wicked designs of the abusive pastor and church. By establishing a church

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<sup>33</sup> Langone, *Deception*.

practice of public or group confession in which the members of the church divulge their innermost thoughts, desires, moral failures and sins, abusive churches formalize a policy of the psycho-spiritual violation. Coerced confession strengthens the abusive pastor's control over the church while weakening the autonomy and confidence of its members. The over-focus, if not actual requirement, of the confession of sin and sharing of the inner-thoughts of members has at least three significant results in the life of the church. It empowers the abusive pastor, damages the member, and weakens relationships with fellow members of the congregation.

#### How Coerced Confession Empowers the Abusive Pastor

The first result of the perversion of confession in a church is that it strengthens the idea that the abusive pastor possesses a deeper knowledge of people. Abusive pastors do often seem to have a mystical perception of the inner thoughts and secrets of the members of the church. Without identifying the specific sin of the member, the abusive pastor can strengthen the illusion of his clairvoyance and spiritual power simply by insisting that there is *something* there to confess. In *I Can't Hear God Anymore*, Wendy J. Duncan recounts with graphic, unsettling horror the implementation of what was called the *hot seat* in the Dallas cult to which she belonged. A hot seat session involved an individual member undergoing what might be hours of interrogation by Ole Anthony, pastor and founder of the Trinity Foundation. The subjects of the hot seat were emotionally broken through the incessant questioning by Anthony, supported by

the group, and the almost invariable rejection of every defense. Many confessed to sins that they had never even committed. One woman broke in her hot seat session, agreeing with Anthony that she was, indeed, a witch. In a second, more ruthless session, Anthony corrected his first assessment of her, having discerned that actually her secret, “high place” identity of rebellion was that of a failed high priestess.<sup>34</sup> Many of the former members interviewed by Duncan were unable, years later, to speak of the abuse they had experienced in the hot seat sessions.

In the abusive church that I left, our pastor routinely confronted his members in smaller group settings with the accusation of them clinging to a *secret agenda* for their lives, some plan or intention that involved them leaving his church, or saving up money that he did not know about. He also kept members on his own version of the hot seat by haranguing them for hours with his suspicion that they harbored hidden resentment or jealousy towards him. In one horrific period, he routinely kept small groups up all night questioning them, cross-examining their answers to his questions, which were all designed to uncover the seditious thoughts he suspected they harbored. It soon became apparent that there was never a *right answer* when being interrogated by the pastor, for the goal of the session was not to arrive at any exposure of a particular truth. The goal was simply to satisfy the pastor’s desire to break the member’s will, and to break down any sense of self-respect and composure. Once broken, the *repentant*, apologetic member was graciously forgiven by the

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<sup>34</sup> Duncan, *I Can’t Hear God Anymore*, 104-5.

pastor. The group quickly followed his lead and affirmed its affection for the humbled, broken member. The sessions ended in exhaustion, tears, and hugging, an experience Lifton called “an orgiastic sense of oneness.”<sup>35</sup>

The abusive pastor had much to gain through such sessions. He was perceived by members as possessing mystical wisdom and knowledge. He was confirmed in his position of power and control over members of the group, even to the point of disrupting and manipulating their inner thoughts. He was reassured that members feared him for his power and willingness to inflict emotional pain. He was assured of the members’ willingness to obey him, even to the point of denigrating their fellow members. Finally, he was perceived as the immediate source of the grace and forgiveness so desperately desired by the members.

#### How Coerced Confession Hurts the Christian

Coerced, manipulated confession empowers abusive leaders, but its damage to the mental and spiritual health of the confessing member is horrific and debilitating. Its scars are deep and lasting. What Lifton calls a *cult of confession*<sup>36</sup> may seem agreeable and even beneficial to the new member of an abusive church. Through confession, a member may find the opportunity to pursue personal purification from sin, or powerful identification with the church

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<sup>35</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 426.

<sup>36</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 426.

membership. He may experience acceptance and the perception of forgiveness of his sins. He may even find temporary relief from a free-floating sense of guilt and shame that many experience.

Relational intimacy is built through self-disclosure, but the inauthenticity and coercive nature of confession in an abusive church quickly reveals the transitory, even counterfeit, nature of those seemingly positive gains found through self-disclosure. Having allowed his soul to be exposed by force, as it were, the member is left vulnerable, unprotected, and with the lasting wounds of violation that have been referred to as a type of spiritual rape.

Despite the seeming success of coerced confession, it actually produces the exact opposite of its intended goal. Lifton writes, “the cult of confession has effects quite the reverse of its ideal of total exposure: rather than eliminating personal secrets, it increases and intensifies them.”<sup>37</sup> As confession in the abusive church becomes increasingly a macabre, dramatic performance to the member, he loses sight of what he confesses out of genuine remorse and honesty. Disclosure becomes an offering to appease the abusive leader and the church congregation. The member becomes the very thing that his confession of sin was supposed to insure he would *not* be, a hypocrite. In addition, as he routinely shares his innermost secrets along with fabricated sins and wrongs, he loses clarity on who he really is, what he has really done, thought, or said. He loses the ability to form and maintain genuinely close relationships. His secrets,

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<sup>37</sup> Lifton, *Thought Reform*, 426.

normally shared only with great care and circumspection with his closest, most intimate friends, become common fare in the church.

### How Coerced Confession Hurts the Congregation

The third result of coerced confession is a violation of the trust, courtesy, and acceptance that should mark a healthy congregation. When members tolerate confession used as a tool against their fellow members, they act as unwitting assistants to the abusive leader. They also become desensitized to the mistreatment of their fellow members. Sherry recalls her pastor's malicious use of coerced confession and its damage on her relationships with fellow members:

Our narcissistic pastor had no conscience whatsoever. He enjoyed the process of traumatizing people. It was easy to see the gratification he derived from making people grovel. There was incredible pressure to join him in the torment. It sometimes felt as though we were picking up stones to throw at our friends. The difference was that we did have consciences. We felt sick inside. We were anxious for the conflict to be resolved so we could reassure our friends. Unfortunately, as time went on, our consciences became impaired, and we rarely gave reassurance or support to fellow members, no matter how badly they were treated.<sup>38</sup>

When confession is coerced, a false, *non*-community is created, where the unconditional acceptance and love inherently promised to members upon joining is ripped away and replaced with a quite conditional type of love—one that depends on the member suffering emotional humiliation to gain the acceptance he desires. Instead of building a sense of trust between members of the church, it results in distrust, self-

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<sup>38</sup> Email correspondence with Sherry, November 10, 2016.

protectiveness, and fear. Confession of sin, whether real, imagined, or concocted, becomes the entrance fee and membership dues of the community. It is the way members communicate their commitment to the group, and their right to remain members. When confession is perverted in this way, and admissions of sin, failure, and unworthiness is emphasized more than forgiveness, grace, and the genuine joy of being accepted by God, then a church may have become a cult of confession.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus told a story about a boy who took a lot of money out of his father's estate and ran away to a distant land where he was quite the life of the party until his money ran out and his friends left him. Impoverished, and near starvation, he thought of going home. He recalled the kind and generous nature of his father, and set out on the road home. As he shuffled along, he composed the confession he would make to his father. He would recount his foolishness, confess his sins, and conclude by suggesting that as he was no longer worthy to be the father's son; he would be content to be treated simply as one of his employees. But his father, seeing him at a great distance, ran to meet the wretched boy on the road. Falling on his neck, the father began kissing him and made a big fuss over him. The boy began to deliver the confession speech he had prepared,

And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this

son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” And they began to celebrate.<sup>39</sup>

Jesus told this story to illustrate how much God loved sinners—people who make mistakes, do wrong, act badly—and often *know* they are doing wrong and acting badly. He wanted to be sure that people who find themselves in a far land would know the Father was waiting for them, and the rapturous joy that would be experienced when they finally made it home. I think Jesus knew that a growling stomach and a guilty soul can come pretty close to drowning out the memory of a gracious God.

In abusive churches there is no celebration in confession, only a passing, phony sense of relief, soon replaced by the dread of the next time when confession will be demanded of the member.

### **Trauma: Leaving is Painful and Costly**

*Abusive churches purposefully make it excruciatingly difficult and unpleasant for members to leave, or even to contemplate, leaving the church.*

When a member begins to contemplate leaving the abusive church, the trap-like nature of the church becomes painfully evident. There are two primary aspects of every trap. First, it is relatively easy or natural to get into the trap. Second, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get out of it. Since people do not join abusive churches and cults, but rather recruited into them through deception; it is only when they recognize the deceit used to recruit them that they begin

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<sup>39</sup> Luke 15:21-24.

contemplating leaving the church. The contemplation of leaving is often the point where emotional pain, the trauma of leaving, begins. Enroth writes:

Leaving a restricted and abusive community involves what sociologists call the *desocialization* process whereby the individual loses identification with the past group and moves towards *resocialization*, or reintegration into the mainstream culture. There are a number of emotions and needs that emerge during this transition process. How one deals with these feelings and affective experiences has a significant impact on the overall healing that is required.<sup>40</sup>

I interview many people who have been hurt by abusive churches. Sometimes they struggle with admitting that they were in fact in a church that abused them and could rightly be called a *cult*, by every understanding of the word. While some of them can readily identify the ways they were abused in the church, and even feel a sense of guilt over their experience of abuse, others struggle with the memories.

It took a couple of years after leaving my abusive church to admit that I suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The term describes the experience of so many of our veterans of war—men and women who faced the rigors of combat, experiencing a constant state of alertness and hypersensitivity to their dangerous surroundings, along with the emotional and physical wear and tear that those conditions inflicted on them. I hesitated to claim the condition for myself because it seemed an exclusive, tragic birthright of the veteran. The experience of having been

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<sup>40</sup> Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*.

spiritually abused in a church by a narcissistic pastor did not seem to merit the term.

However, I was wrong. Many, if not all, survivors of spiritual abuse have some form of PTSD from which they are in the process of healing. Recent studies have identified a sub-set of PTSD, Complex-PTSD (C-PTSD)<sup>41</sup> resulting from prolonged periods of stress, abuse, and powerlessness, such as those experienced in an abusive church or cult. Whereas the standard causes of PTSD are usually related to particular, sudden, acute experiences of violence, injury, or stress (like combat), C-PTSD results from longer-term exposure to the stress agent(s). In the abstract “Cults: A Natural Disaster— Looking at Cult Involvement Through a Trauma Lens,” Shelly Rosen writes:

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<sup>41</sup> “Complex PTSD,” *National Center for PTSD*. General Information. <<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/complex-ptsd.asp>> (September 24, 2016).

In cultic groups, this social pressure is constant. The verbal abuse, physical abuse, and neglect can be severe in high-demand groups. There is often limited or no ability for one to physically leave the stifling other(s). And once a person is indoctrinated, it's often impossible to leave the demands that have become part of one's own way of thinking. This is not stress that can be worked out at the end of the day.<sup>42</sup>

When the trauma experienced by those who survive membership in abusive churches is considered through the lens of C-PTSD, it becomes clear why they have trouble settling into a new church, trusting the new pastor, finding comfort in church activities and events, praying, or studying their Bibles. They are injured, having been wounded in the abusive church. Moreover, Rosen's abstract cites studies that reveal an ominous finding regarding the prevalence of PTSD in cult survivors. Whereas the prevalence of PTSD in post-deployment military personnel falls between 10%-25%, in cult survivors (which I understand to be analogous to abusive churches), it is found in up to 61% of male survivors and 71% of females.<sup>43</sup>

The trauma of the exit process from an abusive church or cult can be understood as occurring in two stages: while the member is still in the abusive church, and in the days and hours that follow the member's actual departure from it. The first stage of pain upon departure from the abusive church is the threat of rejection and derision the member will experience. Members of abusive churches

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<sup>42</sup> Shelly Rosen, "Cults: A Natural Disaster— Looking at Cult Involvement Through a Trauma Lens." *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 5 (December 29, 2014). <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/cults-a-natural-disaster>> (September 23, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Rosen, "Cults: A Natural Disaster."

routinely hear warnings about the foolishness and certainty of catastrophe, should they ever leave the church. They are told that if they leave they will face the probability of divine judgment for their abandonment of the community. The ways that God might judge the member are limitless, and cruel. They are regularly told,

“Your marriage won’t last.”

“Your kids might get sick, or worse.”

“Your opportunity to be in ministry will be forever lost.”

“You’ll never have friends.”

“You’ll never count for much in God’s kingdom.”

“Your kids won’t respect you.”

And the list of threats goes on.

Abusive church leaders routinely mock and deride members who have left the church, demeaning their decisions and confidently speculating about the member’s present life experience. One man left an abusive church, telling the pastor that he wanted to return home to his home state, California. He hoped to get into the landscaping business there. After his departure, in the group’s eyes, he became the model of the disciple who fell away from God—who chose to pursue his own, “selfish agenda” for his life rather than remain in the church and count for Christ. He was the example of failure in the Christian life, and when warning his members against leaving the church, the pastor would cynically chide, “You could always go to California and become a landscaper for Jesus!” The man later recalled that his actual reason for leaving the church was his

growing concern over the many personal, hidden sins of the pastor that he had discovered.<sup>44</sup>

Mothers who had left the church, voicing their disappointment and frustration with the church's teaching regarding child raising, were laughed at, and remembered as being over-protective, indulgent parents: "Heidi left Jesus to over-focus on her family." Other warnings were couched in the mean-spirited criticism of those who had left the church:

"Drake wants the American Dream more than Jesus, so he left Jesus."

"Robert would rather make money than make disciples."

"Karl wants to spend more time fishing, alone—so he walked out on his friends."

"Jim struggled with the pastor's authority, and decided to go it alone."

The warnings to the church are clear when former members are spoken of in such disparaging and disrespectful ways: "If you leave you will certainly be spoken and thought of in the same way as these ones who have left before you." This keeps many abused people in their churches for years.

The second stage of trauma is at the particular moment that the member walks away, or when it becomes known that he is leaving the church, and the days that follow. My wife and I walked out of the semi-communal home that we shared with several other church members to the harsh, berating yells of the associate pastor. Others in our church, having displeased the pastor through

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<sup>44</sup> Personal experience of the author, and subsequent interview with the subject, January, 2015.

some supposed offense, were immediately evicted from the *ministry* home where they lived, as fellow members actually packed their personal possessions in boxes, which they carried to the front porch! One survivor was told, as she walked out the door of her abusive church, "You will die alone in a nursing home," and, "You probably are not saved."<sup>45</sup> Again, these insulting, disrespectful behaviors on the part of the leaders and members of the abusive church made the point clear to the remaining members of what would happen to them, should they decide to leave their *living situation*, (as we called it). The depth of emotional-psychological pain inflicted in such treatment makes recovery from the abusive church much more difficult and extended. Some survivors carry the painful memory of seeing their parents choose to remain loyal to the abusive church rather than support them. Some experience their spouses choosing to remain in the abusive church rather than remain married. Almost all who leave the abusive church are abandoned and betrayed by fellow members whom they hoped would remain loyal and committed in friendship.

In clear contrast, Jesus did not punish people for leaving him. One poignant account of his reaction to people leaving his ministry is found in the sixth chapter of the gospel of John. Many people were following him in this period of his public ministry that has been referred to as its High Water Mark. They hung on his every word, their stomachs full of the bread and fish that he miraculously multiplied. They wanted him to be king. he wanted them to understand the nature

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<sup>45</sup> Email correspondence with Marie, Oct. 12, 2016.

of following him, that it was not a life of free food and large, exciting public gatherings, but one of dependence on him alone for spiritual sustenance and meaning. This was not the life they expected when they joined the *Jesus Party*. They were offended at his diagnosis that their real needs were spiritual, not physical. They were disappointed that he was not interested in simply being another one of their messianic figures leading a charge against the Romans. And so, John records, “As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.”<sup>46</sup> It is fascinating to note what He *did not* do at this point. An abusive leader would find a way of striking out at such an insult, by slandering those who left, warning his remaining congregants that to follow the lead of such defectors was to set out on a road of ruin and loss. They might yell at them as they walked away, making life hard for them, or, as some pastors and leaders do, notifying fellow members and neighboring churches of the backslider’s exit, or putting them under some form of church discipline.

Not Jesus. No, the Chief Pastor and founder of the Christian faith, who had the power to do anything at all that he wanted, and to make any person do what he wanted them to do, respected the choice of those who left him. There is not a shred of evidence or suggestion that he attacked, criticized, maligned anyone, or chased after those who left. He simply related to the ones who did want to stay with him. He asked them what they wanted to do, and was told by

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<sup>46</sup> John 6:66.

Simon Peter that he, and those who remained with him, were doing so out of a personal conviction:

So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."<sup>47</sup>

When abusive pastors and their churches persecute and attack those members who leave them they are acting in a way that Jesus does not condone, and certainly never practiced in his own ministry on earth.

These eight indicators point to a church that might be abusive, or at least leaning that way. Of course, there might be more indicators, and not all eight need be present in each abusive church. However, they provide a reasonable list of indicators that are easy to observe or to discover through casual interaction with church members or direct observation of a church's activities and worship services. Often a member of an abusive church, who is in a state of adherence to the church's authority and beliefs will not admit to any of the eight indicators. However, his family and friends will readily agree that the indicators are present in his church. It is difficult to observe a loved one come under the sway and abusive authority of an unhealthy, narcissistic pastor and his church. I am often asked by concerned family members and friends, "What would ever make them leave the church? They seem fanatically committed to it, and seem to have purposefully burned all their bridges to the past." There is hope, however. Not all bridges are flammable; new bridges can be built, and almost everyone leaves

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<sup>47</sup> John 6:67-69.

their abusive church. The following chapters will explain how that happens, what it's like for the survivors, and how concerned friends, family members, and pastors can be a part of the healing process.

## Chapter 6

### WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE ABUSIVE CHURCHES?

It is difficult to pin down why it is that people leave abusive churches and cults. Sociologist Stuart A. Wright notes, “Leaving a cult is a matter that has received little attention and is probably the least understood question related to the phenomenon.”<sup>1</sup> One fact, however, that is surprising, if not certain, is that almost all members do end up leaving cults, and I suspect the same is true of abusive churches.

Langone agrees:

Obviously, the control cult leaders [and spiritual abusers] achieve is not absolute because ultimately most people leave cultic groups (Barker, 1984), although a sizeable number remain for many years. . . . That members felt considerable pressure to remain in the group is further supported by Wright’s finding that 42% of cult defectors left covertly (e.g., by sneaking out in the middle of the night), while 47% made an overt withdrawal “without fanfare or public ‘announcements’ to the group” (Wright, 1983a, p. 186), although only 11% make “an open announcement or declaration to the group that one is leaving” (Wright 1983a, p. 187).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S.A. Wright, as cited in “Reasons for Leaving” - *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/reasons-for-leaving-almendros>> (January 5, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Langone, *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 9.

Research also suggests three primary means of departure from cults and abusive groups. Victims who leave their cultic groups and abusive churches sneak out in secret (42%), quietly walk out (47%), and a small percentage (11%) leave clearly communicating their dissatisfaction or disappointment with the group and its leaders.<sup>3</sup> A fourth reason for the departure from an abusive church is that of a minor who is removed from the group by his (exiting) parents.<sup>4</sup> Wright's study also identified four primary conditions that motivate members to leave abusive groups or cults. Looking back on my own experience, each of the four was present in my departure from an abusive church in 1996.

### **Time Away from the Church**

Through their dizzying array of activities and ministries, abusive churches eat up the hours and days of their members' lives. They create exhausted members who truly need a break—a vacation! Unfortunately, many abusive

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<sup>3</sup> Langone, *Recovery from Cults*.

<sup>4</sup> In this work I will not address the phenomena of children and members who are born into cults and abusive churches, known as Second Generation Adults (SGA). The issue is vast, only recently identified, and merits a much more in-depth treatment than I am able to give it. For an introduction to the experiences and needs of SGAs, see the topic collection at the International Cultic Studies Association website: "Second Generation Adults - *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*." <<http://www.icsahome.com/elibrary/topics/second-generation-adults>> (September 27, 2016). Also, see Helen Gao, "A Scar on the Chinese Soul." *The New York Times* (January 18, 2017). <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/opinion/a-scar-on-the-chinese-soul.html>> (January 23, 2017) for introductory discussion to the emerging research regarding the transgenerational transmission of trauma, as presently studied in the survivors of the Chinese government's thought reform programs and policies of the 1950's and 1960's.

leaders play a role in their members' travel plans, giving them permission regarding when and where to take vacations, if at all. My wife and I both love travel, but rarely were able to do so, as recreational travel was frowned on by our church leaders, unless it was with other group members. Leaders were uneasy when members travelled. Long trips and nice vacations suggested to the leaders that the members were holding out on them financially. The deeper reason, of course, had to do with the loss of control and influence when members were not physically and emotionally present with the group. When our family did travel, we experienced a strong emotional reaction that we both vividly recall to this day, over twenty years later. As we drew closer to Portland, and our semi-communal, shared home, we both experienced anxiety, apprehension, and gloom. As we drove down the highway, we stopped laughing, stopped telling stories, and stopped listening to each another. Though unacknowledged at the time, we shared the same reactions. A knot grew in our stomachs. Our hearts began to beat faster. We drove more slowly. Each passing mile was dreaded. We were experiencing acute stress and grief over having to return to the abusive church.

One instance of the powerful effect of simple time away from the group on the member, and the group, remains vivid. I was given an award in recognition for an essay I wrote regarding a philosophy of care in the pre-hospital setting. My employer flew my wife and me to Washington, DC for National Emergency Medical Services Week, reserved us a suite at the National Hilton Hotel, and scheduled meetings with our state's lawmakers, including both Oregon senators. We met the politicians, hobnobbed with other EMS providers from around the

country, saw the monuments and museums, ate at Washington's finest restaurants, and even attended a rooftop cocktail reception that looked out over downtown DC. It was heady stuff for both of us!

When we returned to Portland, however, we were not so much as asked how our trip had gone, what we had seen, or whom we had met. It was almost as if our fellow church members, including those we lived with, had not even noticed we had been gone. I mentioned to our pastor that I had had a great time away, and had met our state's senators and congressional representatives. His response was a lazy shrug. He had not read my winning essay—the stuff of travel, essays, and US senators evidently being of little importance to a man in his position! In going on the trip, Sharon and I had done something viewed by the abusive church with suspicion. Our adventure was ignored and soon forgotten. But not by us.

What had really happened was that Sharon and I experienced temporary freedom from our cultic lifestyle. We had breathed dangerous air. We had found respect, and worth, and affirmation in the world *out there*. As the hours passed during our time away, we began to enjoy each other, and to enjoy being away from the church. We began to relax, too, all in the context of viewing ourselves as a married couple, and not simply members of the church. I felt that I had the pre-church Sharon back, and, I hoped, she felt that she had the pre-church Ken back. Neither of us admitted it to each other at the time, but it was a sheer joy to be away. Just, *away*.

The all-encompassing control of the member's thoughts and feelings steadily erodes with the passing of miles and minutes away from the group, a fact of which the leaders of abusive churches are well aware. That is why it is common for them to prohibit group members from even going to the store unaccompanied by another member. They know that the member has a deeper self, a *true, pre-church* self that will open the soul's prison gate in an instant, given the opportunity afforded by time and distance away from the church.

### **Unsanctioned Friendships**

Abusive churches know that genuine friendship between members and non-members present a threat to the church's control over its members, so such friendships are discouraged. Friendship with *outsiders* presents the possibility of second opinions, other voices, and input that has not been filtered by the dogma of the abusive church.

Like many members of abusive churches and cults, I drove off most of my friends in the earliest days of my membership. If they were not Christians, I dogged them like a bloodhound, inexorably turning each conversation into a platform from which to seek their conversion. If they were Christian, I forcefully challenged their faith commitment, which would only be accepted by me as genuine and sincere if they quit going to their own churches (some of which they had been members of since infancy), and joined my church.

After severing the ties with family and old friends, any new acquaintances that came into my life were nothing more than evangelistic opportunities. Once

they made it clear that they would neither convert to Christianity nor attend my church, I was uninterested in investing in relationships with them. After a few years in the abusive church, as my infatuation with its promises and leaders began to wane, I began to look forward to the long paramedic shifts away from the church. I began to value the friendships that developed with my fellow-paramedics—my partners. During the long hours in the cab of the ambulance, we talked of family, of feelings, of histories, and experiences. We shared what we had done during our days off, and what we were planning to do on our next days off. We looked out for each other, not only on calls but also between calls. If your partner was having a crummy day, you looked out for him and he would do the same for you. On the scene, you made sure you and your partner were safe. You learned of your partner's struggles at home, in the marriage, with the kids, etc. You depended on each other, looked out for each other, and if you were fortunate, between clocking in and clocking out, you started to become friends.

I was fortunate. Having friends who are not members of the abusive church, and even dislike it, *but who genuinely care about you*—is compelling. I had a few, precious, fellow medics who knew me and accepted me. They knew that my church was strange, mean, pushy, demanding, and ruining my life and my marriage. They would not have been caught dead walking through the doors of my church, but they liked me. They were men, women, Christians, atheists, married, single, gay, and straight. In giving me their friendship, they provided me a community to step *into* when I stepped *out of* the church. I suppose it is more accurate to say they embraced me, knowing that my strange, disordered,

fanatical world had exploded, and I was in many ways starting a new life. They were candles left in the window, giving hope that there might be a place to escape the darkness, where I might be welcomed with kindness. They saved me from the loneliness that so often accompanies a departure from an abusive church. They taught me that sometimes the exit door of an abusive church is held open by the gracious hands of friends who have nothing to do with church, or even with Christianity, but who simply would never turn their back on a friend.

### **Discovery of Ideological Shortcomings**

A group's ideology is the unique system of beliefs to which it holds. Subsequent practices, doctrines, attitudes, traditions, and formal and informal teachings all grow out of its underlying ideology. The Bible argues that the way a person thinks ends up determining his core identity: "As [a person] thinks within himself, so he is."<sup>5</sup> By way of application, I believe the same is true of churches. What a church believes within itself, so it is.

Wright's research into the reasons for people leaving cults led him to the conclusion that people leave cults and abusive groups/churches when they become disillusioned with poor achievements or repeated "errors in prediction."<sup>6</sup> When the pastor predicts the end of the world on such and such a day, and that

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<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 23:7 [brackets mine].

<sup>6</sup> Langone, *Recovery from Cults*, 9.

day comes and goes without the apocalypse occurring, members start to doubt. Many of them leave the church or movement at that point.

There were never eschatological predictions made in my abusive church, but there was a type of ideological *prediction* that attracted my wife and me to the church. Our little church's ideological boast was primarily of its superior training of its members for ministry. We boasted that in the future, those men (we did not believe that females should be pastors) who were trained in our church would plant churches up and down the I-5 freeway. We were training pastors for the churches we would start in Seattle, Salem, Medford, Sacramento, Los Angeles, etc. However, ten years after joining, it became clear to me that the pastor had no intention of starting any new churches. He would simply never give up the control of his members and access to their material resources. The church-planting ideology that was so attractive to me was simply not true. At its best, it had simply been bait to attract me to the church.

The disillusionment that brought the most heartache to my life, however, was the broken promises regarding the help my wife and I hoped to receive in our marriage. Rather than assist us in our marriage relationship, the abusive church killed our marriage. Sharon and I joined the church in 1984, just two young adults, newly married, but already aware of fissures and cracks in our young, fragile marriage. We joined the church hoping to receive assistance. We were promised we would receive it in the church. Ten years later, those fissures and cracks had steadily widened into chasms in our relationship, with each on a separate side. We had become distant, and our marriage was worse than we had

ever imagined it could be. While we bore responsibility for how we had neglected our marriage relationship, we had done so while our pastor stood idly by, even contributing to our increasing estrangement. The realization that our marriage was in such trouble, and that our pastors were simply in no position to help us, played a big role in our decision to leave the church.

### **Disillusionment with Leaders**

Wright concludes, “Lastly, members may depart in disillusionment when they learn about the hypocrisy or immoral behavior of the cult’s leaders.”<sup>7</sup> Wright touches on a significant factor in a member’s decision to leave an abusive church or cult: the failure of leaders to behave in a way that corresponds to the *stated* values and beliefs of the group.

This fourth reason for exiting an abusive group certainly played into my decision to leave. However, my disillusionment was not only found in the pastor’s commission of sins, but in his refusal to admit and reject those sins, or to seek restoration with the members whom he had hurt through his behavior. It was only after time away from the confused, miasmatic atmosphere of the church that I realized the deepest reason for his unwillingness to repent of his sin. For him to genuinely disclose his sins, admit to his guilt, and pursue repentance, restoration, and the making of amends, he would have risked the exposure of his secrets, some of which were actually felony crimes. He knew that such disclosure might

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<sup>7</sup> Langone, *Recovery from Cults*, 9.

well have led him to where he now sits—in a prison cell for the sexual abuse of a minor.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, as I observed our pastor's failure to live up to the (alleged) beliefs of the church he had established, I was certain that I would not progress in my Christian life as long as I remained under his influence. I would not find peace of mind. My wife and I would simply never have a close, intimate marriage. My children would not grow into confident, competent adults, but they would certainly be pressured to center their lives around the church, exactly as all members were pressured. I worried that they would leave the church, and in doing so would leave us! I would not be encouraged to pursue ministry, nor would I even be encouraged to progress professionally in the paramedic field. It was clear to me that, to our pastor, there was simply no acceptable level of commitment to our church other than each member subjecting every scrap of all that they were, all that they had, and all that they ever hoped to be, to him alone.

It was not one immoral act or a revelation of hypocrisy that that precipitated my departure from the abusive church. I left after a process of considering what had become of my church, of my own lifestyle, and the increasing immorality and indifference of my abusive, dissipated pastor. My exit process was not unique. In a fascinating study of the *deconversion* (the loss of faith and subsequent departure of a member from a religious group, and return to

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<sup>8</sup> Rick Bella, "Happy Valley Pastor Mike Sperou Convicted of Child Sex Abuse, Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison." *The Oregonian*.  
<[http://www.oregonlive.com/clackamascounty/index.ssf/2015/04/happy\\_valley\\_p\\_astor\\_mike\\_spero\\_1.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/clackamascounty/index.ssf/2015/04/happy_valley_p_astor_mike_spero_1.html)> (January 5, 2017).

a former state of belief) of former members of high-control religious groups (including churches), Janet Jacobs concluded that deconversion does not happen all at once. In *Deconversion From Religious Movements*, Jacobs reveals that the exit takes place over time, and in a two-phase process: There is social detachment from the group, and second, an emotional detachment from the leader. Jacobs explains, “Deconversion is an evolutionary process that proceeds in stages of disillusionment from social to emotional defection. As such, the emotional ties to the religious leader are severed last and therefore form the binding relationship within religious commitment.”<sup>9</sup>

Over the course of a couple of years, I had become socially detached from the abusive church of which I was a member, keeping my feelings and intentions secret, even from my wife and friends. I also grew to disdain the pastor of the church, certain that his consuming self-love, greed, immorality, and malice were core qualities of his nature that would not change. Therefore, I did what experts say all members of high-demand, cult-like groups eventually do—I left.

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<sup>9</sup> Janet Jacobs, “Deconversion From Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (3) (1987): 294.

### What Happened?!

I have dreams every night (and it seems like all night) about being back there. The dreams all have the same elements: I'm back there, with Sharon and the children. I know it's bad, but I'm afraid Sharon thinks things are normal. Life is going on, but only I know that things are bad, wrong, sick, and hurtful. I'm not sure Sharon will listen to me, and there's no one else to trust. In my dream, I can see the leaders know that I have turned, and am not on board with them anymore. I have to find a way to trick Sharon into leaving, with me. I have to find a way out for us that won't hurt her or the children, or make them think I have deserted God. I did not desert God—God deserted me, I think. No, He did not. He wouldn't. But maybe I deserted Him...

All of us who left keep having these kinds of dreams. We can fill in the blanks and finish the sentences when we describe our dreams to each other. We're always back there, always knowing, always trying to convince somebody to leave with us. (We acted like there were armed guards at the door—we could have just walked out, anytime.)

Then, there're the other problems.

I'm paranoid, enraged, depressed, cannot sleep more than a couple of hours at a time, have terrible back spasms, drink too much, too often, and chain smoke. I constantly struggle with temptation. I'm afraid. I look out the windows in the middle of the night, to see if there is anyone out there watching the house. Should I buy a gun? I worry that I'm going to die. They'll say I deserved it and that if I had only repented . . .

I can't make decisions anymore. Don't know if I should buy 2% or 3.25% milk, white or brown eggs, and struggle when I go shopping because of not being able to decide. I keep losing things! I spent a full hour and a half in the Levis section at Meier and Frank, trying to decide between pre-washed or regular jeans. I walked out of the store with neither. Spent an hour looking at cell phones and plans, and then found that I don't have the credit rating to get a cellphone, anyway. Empty. Can't make anything work. Should I take overtime shifts at work?

What happened, God?<sup>10</sup>

I wrote those words on New Year's Eve, 1997, the first entry in a journal. I

decided to create the journal because of a few things of which I was certain.

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Garrett, "Personal Journal, December 31, 1997."

First, we had been through something truly devastating, harrowing, life altering, and worthy of remembering, at least as a family. Perhaps journaling my experiences of recovery from an abusive church might help me to better understand what exactly happened, and (someday) help to explain it all to the kids, when they were older, and (again, perhaps) interested. Second, I was beginning to suspect that the strategy I had employed to bring about healing to my family was not going to work. Upon leaving the abusive church, Sharon and I immediately began re-engaging with an array of activities that we hoped would usher us back to the normal life we sought and would create a healthy home for our three daughters. With the help of a generous property owner, who waived his policy of first and last month's rent and credit checks, we moved into a charming old house in the neighborhood in which I had been raised. We went to work restoring our credit rating, took a couple of vacations with the kids, faithfully attended parent-teacher conferences, joined a healthy church in our neighborhood, and began to re-establish the relationships with family and old friends that had suffered during our years of membership in the abusive church. I was a veteran paramedic, and began to pursue professional advancement, moving into the position of Field Training Officer. I had even begun to take seminary classes, intent on continuing to pursue my dream of being a pastor one day. The best plan of recovery we could come up with was to hit the ground running by engaging in a wide variety of social, professional, and academic pursuits that we felt we had been cheated out of during our time in the abusive church. We would find a church that was healthy, not sick. We would move into a

healthy, satisfying future, leaving our past membership in the abusive church a shrinking object in the rearview mirror of our lives. That plan did not work out so well. So, what is a better approach to recovery from an abusive church experience? The following chapters present a suggested strategy for families, friends, churches, and pastors to be a helpful part of the recovery process for those who have left abusive churches. But first, it is helpful to consider the challenges faced in recovery by the survivors.

## Chapter 7

### WHEN THE WALKING WOUNDED WALK INTO OUR CHURCHES

It does not surprise me that the members of healthy churches might have a tough time understanding the concept of an abusive, *Christian* church—a church that holds to correct, orthodox theology, and yet functions like a cult. And with the difficulty of understanding the nature and number of such churches, it makes sense to me that most Christians have a difficult time understanding the struggles carried through the doors of their churches by the survivors of abusive churches. Survivors work hard to get their lives on track, and simply going back to a *normal* church is a big step. They also work hard to cover-over, ignore, and rise above the wounds they carry from their time in the abusive church. For me, however, one of the first places my wounds started to show was not in a church, but in a seminary classroom, just over a year after our escape.

One of my seminary assignments was to read *Life Together*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. Bonhoeffer died in a Nazi prison, just months before the end of the war. He also founded an underground (non-government sanctioned) seminary where he trained young Germans for the pastorate. My reading report and review of *Life Together* was highly critical, not so much of Bonhoeffer (a modern saint and Christian martyr), but of his high-estimation of the experience of living in Christian community. I

truly felt that I had the full *Living Together* experience! In my report, I pointed out what I perceived Bonhoeffer's naivety regarding such close-in living conditions, and the certain failure of communal living to survive and accomplish its goals of spiritual maturity and growth. I questioned the wisdom and legitimacy (from a Christian perspective) of such contrived living situations, in which *disciples* subjected their day-to-day lives to the scrutiny of a *discipler* or pastor. I suggested that all such living conditions were destined to failure, mostly because of the leader's inability to sustain power, or the likelihood of him abusing the power he had been granted by the members. Strong stuff, it was, but considering the fact that Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* was required reading for members of the church I had left, it is unlikely that any of his ideas would have received a fair and unbiased reading from me. My professor's response to my report was hand-written, and almost as long as my report itself. "Ken," he wrote, "I have been awake until three in the morning, trying to understand your comments regarding this book." He went on to defend the book itself and gently suggest that perhaps I had missed or misunderstood its main premise. It was a gracious and patient response to my diatribe, which seemed so strange to him.

Who writes such a scathing review of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for goodness' sake? Someone in recovery from spiritual abuse, who had been (erroneously) taught that Bonhoeffer's discussion of *cheap grace* versus *costly grace* meant that genuine, saving faith should hurt. I was unable to appreciate the practical education and spiritual growth, in community, that Bonhoeffer wrote of and achieved (until his seminary was shut down by the Nazis). I could only consider

his arguments regarding *discipleship* and *community* through the lens of my experience of spiritual exhaustion, marital discord, family instability, economic ruin, and (as I had come to learn just a few months after our exit) sexual abuse. My wounds from the abusive church/cult were deep, open, raw, and barely beginning to heal, and it was from that place of trauma that I wrote my report on *Life Together*.

The reason my professor was perplexed by my report (I think I actually got a passing grade!) was that he did not know my background, and likely the severe emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical wounds inflicted by abusive churches and cults on their members. He did not know me—no fault there—but in not knowing me, he simply had no idea of the context out of which I expressed such criticism of a genuine Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He saw that I bore significant spiritual wounds, but had not a clue regarding the cause of those wounds. I doubt he would have considered the possibility that those wounds were inflicted by a Bible believing, gospel preaching Christian church, particularly one whose pastors had attended his seminary! He may not have seen the cause of the wounds I carried, but he certainly saw some of the wounds themselves.

The wounds of those who exit spiritually abusive groups are well documented and shared by many survivors. Exit counselor Carol Giambalvo lists the challenges faced by those in recovery from spiritually abusive churches and cults. They experience a sense of purposelessness, depression, guilt, and anger. They suffer from feelings of isolation, distrust, and fear regarding their state of mental health. They struggle with black and white thinking, over-spiritualizing (in

the absence of logical thinking), and an inability to make decisions. They are embarrassed for having been in a cult. They have nightmares, cognitive inabilities and deficits, sexual issues, and employment/career problems.<sup>1</sup>

### Re-entry Wounds

I have asked a number of the survivors of spiritually abusive churches to describe their experiences of re-entry into healthy churches. Via conversations and email exchanges, they tell of loneliness, insecurity, and the prevailing sense of being spiritually damaged that they bear as they seek to worship in healthy churches. My friend Lyle wrote, "Being a part of a loving community is one of the root desires that a human seeks, and they took advantage of that. It was honestly intoxicating and addictive. I miss it."<sup>2</sup> Survivors of spiritual abuse *do* seek new, healthy spiritual communities in which to worship and live out their Christian faith. They also struggle with feeling compelled to find a *good* church as an issue of obedience to God. Giambalvo reports survivors who "Fear that they need to find another "right" church that is "on fire for the Lord."<sup>3</sup> Yet, as the following

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Giambalvo, "Post-Cult Problems: An Exit Counselor's Perspective." In *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 148-54.

<sup>2</sup> Email correspondence with Lyle, March 9, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Giambalvo, "International Churches of Christ Introduction," *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*.

<<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/international-churches-of-christ-introduction>> (October 11, 2016).

statements of abuse survivors demonstrate, the journey from membership in an abusive church to membership in a healthy church is never smooth:

Sangmu: I immediately began attending a good church and was glad it was large, so I could be anonymous. I wanted no expectations put on me and wanted to be in control of any relationships I might have. Eventually, the mega-church did not meet my needs for relationships . . . I wanted a smaller place to be known and gain some friends.<sup>4</sup>

Miriam: I did not immediately attend a church when I left. I didn't attend any church for about 5 years. I was just very guarded and watchful for ANY signs of dictatorship-type leadership. I was distrustful of all church leadership whether they deserved it or not. I was extremely hesitant to trust anything preached from the pulpit and evaluated every aspect of the church body as a whole with eagle eyes. I was not afraid to question everything.<sup>5</sup>

Karla: I liked familiar music, which reminded me of the comfort I received in my youth and earlier adulthood. Eventually, I chose a church only because I knew it had biblical beliefs and because good friends attended there.<sup>6</sup>

Sherry: I struggled to be understood and quickly realized that the recovery process would be less painful if I could give up that desire as a lost cause. I still longed for a close feeling of community, but felt certain that was a lost cause.<sup>7</sup>

Survivors also struggle with how much of their story to tell to their new, normal churches, if at all. As they struggle to reach an understanding of what exactly happened to them in their abusive church, they often find it difficult to put it into words, and to risk sharing their story with others:

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<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence from Sangmu, October 6, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Email correspondence from Miriam, October 5, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence from Karla, October 5, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Email correspondence from Sherry, October 5, 2016.

Betty: I didn't talk about the abusive church much, even with my friends at work, because I knew they wouldn't understand and could not help, but would think, "How could she have been so stupid?" Also, I had always been so positive about my church in the past, and so all of a sudden now I was talking about how horrible it was? I do think I was somewhat accurate in anticipating what people would think. Over the years, I have talked about it more freely, mainly with people at my new church, and I don't care as much about what others think of me.<sup>8</sup>

Karla: I avoided telling church acquaintances/friends about the cult for several years, knowing that there was no way they could possibly understand. I felt sure that, inside at least, they would think, "How could you be so weak and deluded?" When I began to tell a few people, I did get this reaction from most people, though I appreciated their attempt to be kind about it. It was really too painful to tell hardly anyone. That is one of the values of having friends (war buddies) who went through the experiences too!<sup>9</sup>

Miriam: When I told people of my experiences in the abusive church, the general feeling I got from them was disbelief and/or an overall hesitancy to accept the extremity of what I was telling them. It seemed like they thought I was overdramatizing my experience or elaborating on the truth, when in actuality, the experience was worse than the words that I could come up with to describe it. They did not come right out and say it, but I knew there was no way they could fully understand my words--no matter how hard they tried, even with the best intentions. After all, most people have no context in their own lives to relate to my abusive-church situation. Generally, knowing that people could not relate and/or didn't have any capacity to understand, I would limit my discussions of this subject to just a few summary sentences without going into much detail, unless someone asked to know more. I would tell what they wanted to know, but not waste my breath without a request for more information.<sup>10</sup>

For others, sharing the abusive church experience with others comes easily, and some survivors seem to wear their wounds on their sleeves, seeking

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<sup>8</sup> Email correspondence from Betty, October 5, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Email correspondence from Karla, October 5, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Email correspondence from Miriam, October 5, 2016.

to share, and to be understood, regarding their experiences. They often struggle with a tendency to view many, if not all, issues, teachings, and interactions in their new church through the lens of the spiritually abusive church they left. It is critical that pastors of healthy churches understand this tendency, described by Paul Martin:

Ex-cult members returning to evangelical churches: Although many ex-cult members of the extremist Christian groups do return to evangelical churches, they often continue to suffer. These members typically will seek a church that is very similar to the one they left. Such people leave their former group because they are incapable of submitting to its demands, but they still believe many of its tenets. Sometimes they involve themselves in a local church only in the hopes of replacing what they lost by leaving the cult. These people need help.<sup>11</sup>

Other survivors carry their wounds in circumspect quietness, rarely opening up about the past abuse, and then only with great caution. It is difficult to integrate into a church community, for pain that is left concealed cannot receive the loving, accepting balm of a healthy, caring, grace-filled spiritual community.

### **Psychological Wounds**

Survivors of abusive churches bear a tremendous burden of emotional, cognitive, and often behavioral woundedness because of their recovery. Abusive churches invariably (if unwittingly) demand that the member create a false, *church-self* that serves the demands and expectations of the church. All the while, the true, *core-self*, the God-given personality the member was born with, is

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<sup>11</sup> Paul R. Martin, *Cult Proofing Your Kids*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1993), 55.

suppressed. Tragically, it is suppressed by the member himself, as he is deceived and manipulated by the church.

Survivors experience *flashbacks*, as numerous circumstances, interactions, and conditions that correspond to conditions and experiences in the abusive church remind them of the past. Such episodes may trigger responses in the survivor that may seem inappropriate or extreme. An animated, loud, demonstrative preacher can trigger the survivor into feeling the same emotions and tensions that he experienced under the preaching of the abusive pastor. A casual statement from the pastor affirming the positive, beneficial results of regular attendance, financial support, or even the practice of healthy spiritual discipline can trigger the survivor into experiencing the same emotions he did when those personal, spiritual disciplines were demanded of him in the abusive church.

Survivors struggle with *depression*, including persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, purposelessness, pessimism, joylessness, and exhaustion. The level of depression experienced by the survivors of spiritual abuse often merits medical and psychiatric intervention in the form of counseling, anti-depressant medication, and even physical therapies designed to help the survivor in his recovery. One of the most harmful results of pastors not appreciating the phenomena of abusive churches and Christian cults is that they are slow to refer survivors to the specialized counseling and medical care that can provide significant assistance in their recovery.

Survivors struggle with *self-medicating*, seeking the alleviation of emotional pain and stress through illegitimate, self-prescribed, and often harmful drugs (this includes behaviors that serve the same purpose). I often ask those who have recently exited a high-demand group, abusive church, or cult if they are self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, or other harmful behaviors, and if perhaps, they are due for a visit to their primary care physician. I am not interested in the morality of whether or not they are taking drugs, or drinking, but am concerned for the failure of those forms of self-care to bring about genuine healing from their experience. The self-medicating may have begun in the abusive church, and may have been tolerated, encouraged and even exemplified by its leaders.

Survivors especially struggle with *guilt*—the realization that one has compromised one’s personal standards of ethical behavior, speech, and thought. Cult Exit-Counselor Carole Giambalvo writes: “Former members will feel guilt for having gotten involved in the first place, for the people they recruited into the group, and for the things they did while in the group.”<sup>12</sup> It is notable that former members of abusive churches often possess an exacting certitude of the degree of personal responsibility that they believe they rightfully should bear for their moral failures while in the cult. They may say, “I know it was a bad place, but I certainly chose to be there. No one was twisting my arm to get me in the door—no one *made* do the things I did.” But this line of reasoning is nothing more than

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<sup>12</sup> Giambalvo, “Post-cult Problems,” 151.

a typical response of abuse victims: “I was abused, so there must be something wrong with me, or I must at least share the blame with my abuser.” For sake of argument, assume someone sold you a car and told you it was in great shape, ready for a long road trip, perhaps a trip to Yellowstone National Park from Oregon. However, having set out on the trip, you hear a funny knocking noise when you are in the middle of eastern Oregon. The engine seizes up, and the car dies there. You are lying on your back on hot pavement looking at a cracked oil pan that had been leaking oil for the past hundred miles. The seller told you the car was in great shape, but did not mention the oil pan (though he knew about it). Is it your fault that you trusted someone who you honestly thought you could trust? Of course, not. You were tricked, deceived, taken for a ride. Survivors of abusive churches and cults often take a long, long time—years even—to admit they were tricked and taken advantage of, and their guilt might be better viewed as grief. In the twelve years that I was a member of an abusive church, each of my four grandparents died. I had grown up in the same city and neighborhood as my grandparents, and visited them often. Once I dived headfirst into the meetings, services, and activities of my new church, I rarely made time to visit Grandma and Grandpa Garrett and Grandma and Grandpa Strouts. After leaving the abusive church, I carried great guilt over my absence in their lives. There seemed no way to make up for it. They were gone. It helps to have gained an understanding of how abusive churches work, and of how they convince their members that it is truly justifiable, even spiritual, to reject their families. Nonetheless, I long for the day I will see them again, on the far shore.

The guilt that a survivor carries may be exacerbated by the accusations heaped on him as they left the group. He may well have walked away from the church being called a traitor, a defector, or a failure. These accusations were likely to have been hurled by friends, with whom he had shared deep, significant life experiences. He may even feel guilty for leaving behind friends and family in the church, and question whether he could have done or said something to convince them to leave with him and escape further deception and abuse.

Survivors struggle with *shame*. Shame, while closely tied to guilt, carries a much stronger social dynamic. We feel guilt over the wrong things we do; we feel shame for who we believe we are; we feel bad for how we are viewed by others; we feel pain because of what we have done. “Shame,” Lewis B. Smedes writes, “tells us that we are unworthy. To begin with, shame is a very heavy feeling. It is a feeling that we do not measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be. The feeling, when we are conscious of it, gives us a vague disgust with ourselves, which in turn feels like a hunk of lead on our hearts.”<sup>13</sup>

The abusive church may have shamed its members through public (group) condemnation, mock-trials (often with a twisted, *ecclesial* tone to them), and the emotional withdrawal of members, friends, and even spouses for sins committed against the church. One former member, Peter, recalls the emotional withdrawal of friends in the abusive church, when he was undergoing a grilling by the senior

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<sup>13</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve* (Lexington, KY: HarperOne, 2009), 6.

pastor for some sort of sin. When asked, “Did you experience fear of group shaming, or of disapproval from the leader(s) of the group?” he answered:

Yes, certainly. The group typically acted in unison, well aware of the dangers of taking a different viewpoint from the leader, or for advocating for a group member who was undergoing "correction." In fact, "points" could be scored with the leader if a person somewhat skillfully joined in a negative assessment of beliefs, motives or attitudes. This could be done legitimately, but the dynamic fostered darker motives. As dysfunction progressed, some people had the very difficult experience of having group members voice unqualified support for a concern or viewpoint, only to deny that completely later, when it came up in the presence of a leader.<sup>14</sup>

Shame courses through the veins of the abusive church, and is perhaps the leaders' most powerful controlling tool against the healthy independence of members. Sadly, while the member may successfully walk away from the abusive church, he often carries this destructive tendency of shame within himself.

Survivors of abuse often have a nagging certainty that they are being watched in every social environment—including churches. In the same way, victims of sexual abuse and crime often carry a sense of shame. Internally, they ask, “How could THAT have happened to ME?! What’s wrong with me?” Victims of spiritual abuse often struggle with the basic idea that there is something wrong with them simply because they were victimized.

Survivors of spiritual abuse are often *angry*. They are offended and provoked as they come to grips with what the leader and the group did to them during their time in the church. As time passes, they may better understand the

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<sup>14</sup> Email correspondence with Peter, October 4, 2016.

unstable, vulnerable position that they were in when they were recruited into the church, and how the leaders took advantage of their condition. Improperly processed, this anger can be misdirected to the survivor, resulting in all sorts of self-punishing behaviors. When I left the church, within weeks I was enraged at God, blaming Him for the twelve years there that I accounted as wasted and devastating to my family. “So, is THAT the way You answer the prayers of twenty-two year-olds who want to serve You?! THAT’S what You do when they ask you to lead them . . . send them to a CULT?! You are one lousy Father, God,” I railed. As the years have passed, I no longer lay that burden on Him.

However, the anger of the survivors of spiritual abuse can also be something positive. It should not be feared, for something terrible *has* happened. They *were* mistreated, disrespected, and used. *Of course*, they are angry! A survivor related to me the great relief he experienced when he was reassured of the normalcy and healthiness of his anger towards the abusive church in which his wife chose to remain when he left it. His counselor said, “Goodness, *of course* you are angry! There’s a group of evil cult leaders trying to break up your marriage and your family, and they do not even really care about your wife. I’d be furious, too!”<sup>15</sup> With that counsel, my friend breathed a sigh of relief, acknowledged his perfectly legitimate feelings of anger and righteous jealousy for his wife, and discovered that he was indeed recovering from his spiritual abuse.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Joshua, August 2010.

His wife was out of the church within months, and today they are enjoying a happy, healthy marriage relationship.

There are other psychological-emotional wounds carried by those who have left their abusive churches other than depression, guilt, shame, and anger. They struggle with feelings of isolation, loneliness, insecurity, lack of confidence, embarrassment, indecisiveness, and a host of other feelings. They fear they might be losing their minds, and wonder if they will ever regain any semblance of their pre-abusive church lives back.

They often *struggle* greatly to accept the ambiguity of many theological, faith-related issues of which they believed their views were unambiguously, irrefutably correct and purely logical. Abusive churches and cults do not teach their members to tolerate diversity of opinion, but argue that there exists only a *right* way to see things, and that all other views are simply wrong. There is little room for *either/or* in the dogma of the abusive church, particularly in issues such as politics, gender roles in the church and home, education of children, relationship of husbands and wives, styles of music, social standards, dietary practices, or relationship to the government. Abusive churches simply do not tolerate members who disagree with leaders in areas that are considered matters of conscience (and not orthodoxy) by other Christians.

For the member who leaves such totalist ideology and dogma, it is very difficult and confusing to accept that other Christians simply disagree about some issues that were held by the abusive church as litmus tests of authenticity of faith, and even of salvation itself. Cult expert Steven Hassan writes that moving

back into a world of grey zones can be rough: “It is often difficult for the former member to give up the black and white way of looking at life once they are out of the abusive church. Having been trained to think in a totalistic manner about just about everything—it takes time to accept the many grey areas of life, and to come to peace with legitimate ambiguity, etc.”<sup>16</sup>

I experienced a bizarre combination of self-loathing and self-righteousness after leaving my abusive church, especially in the worship services of the *normal* churches I attended. I recall sitting in a Sunday service just months after leaving the church, inwardly criticizing the music, the content of the sermon, the skills of the preacher, and (what I perceived to be) the shallowness of the programs and vision of the church. Moments later, I was emotionally overcome with excruciating shame. I left the service, whispering to my wife, “I have got to go. See you at home.” Five minutes later, there I was, head down, shuffling down the street, with one step hating the church, with the other hating myself. It can be tough for the survivors of abusive churches to simply show up to worship, let alone to remain for the whole service.

Survivors experience *sleep disorders* and *nightmares*. Even survivors who are purposefully engaged in the hard work of recovery from their time in an abusive church will experience frequent nightmares and sleep disorders as they struggle to accept what happened to them, and as their sub-conscious minds

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Hassan, *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Somerville, MA: Aitan Publishing Company, 2000), 325.

churn up repressed and otherwise forgotten traumatic experiences. I had dreams and nightmares nightly for years. Initially, the dreams were marked by my sense of powerlessness while in the abusive church. I was back in a position of fear and under its thumb of control. In time, however, the dreams began to change, as in them, I began to speak out, shout back, plan rescue attempts, and lead revolts against the abusive pastors of the church.

### **Spiritual Wounds**

Survivors of spiritual abuse carry significant spiritual wounds. They may have significant disappointments and unresolved struggles in their relationship with God. They are likely to have unanswered questions regarding the Bible, the church, and anything that touches on the religious motives and passions that drew them to the cult in the first place. It is likely that they joined the church, and remained in it despite its increasing abuses, without a great deal of prayer and meditation. Having finally left the churches that abused them, survivors often harbor deep disappointment with God. Some question the existence of God. Others, believing in God's existence, question his personal commitment to them. Can they expect God to lead them? Can they trust that they will even recognize God's leading? Some of the great theological themes in the Bible, such as the sovereignty of God, his providence, leading, protection and love for people, are hard for survivors to believe as they struggle to heal from the wounds received in the house of God.

## Marriage Wounds

The Apostle Paul warned of abusive religious leaders who would “*forbid* marriage.”<sup>17</sup> While a few abusive churches forbid their members to marry, many *hinder* (another translation of the same Greek word) the marriages of their members, and even arrange marriages in the church. I have spoken with survivors of Christian cults in which the pastor purposefully split up marriages, providing supposed biblical arguments and giving permission, even direction, to one spouse to seek divorce from his mate.

The marriages of the survivors of spiritual abuse have usually been terribly interfered with by the leaders and churches they have escaped. In *Reflections on Marriage and Children After the Cult*, therapist Lorna Goldberg relates the significant role that the cult leader plays in the marriages within the cult (and, by way of application, the abusive church): “Typically, after entering a cult, the recruit quickly learns that his relationship with the cult leader must supersede all other relationships: Cult leaders need to be the most important figure in the life of each member. To achieve this, cult leaders need to control every significant aspect of a member’s life.”<sup>18</sup>

The marriage relationship is the most committed, intimate relationship two people can voluntarily enter into with one another, and naturally exists in

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Timothy 4:3.

<sup>18</sup> Lorna Goldberg, “Reflections on Marriage and Children After the Cult: *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <http://www.icsahome.com/articles/reflections-on-marriage-and-children-after-the-cult> (October 8, 2016).

exclusivity of all other relationships. Marriages are, therefore, a great threat and concern to spiritual abusers. Abusive pastors routinely infuse suspicion and division into the marriage relationships of their followers, demanding there be no secrets between spouses kept from the leader. Spouses are encouraged to divulge their mate's personal issues, failures, and even statements made in the privacy of the home. In its extreme forms, this interference with the marriage relationship may even include abusive leaders prying into the intimate, sexual areas of the marriage, under the guise of *counseling, encouragement, or discipleship*, but with the actual intent of unraveling the intimate safety marriage partners share. In the environment of the abusive church, any loyalty that is not centered on the leader(s) of the church is attacked, destroyed, or re-directed back to the leaders.

Goldberg presents case studies showing that the manner in which spouses view each other is altered while in the abusive environment.<sup>19</sup> These views, naturally, continue in the post-cult/abusive church marriage relationship. Because of the interference, denigration and violation of their marriages, survivors of cults often carry deep, emotional scars caused by shame, distance, anger and resentment, infidelity, and the lack of safety and intimacy. They struggle with trusting each other. They wonder if their marriage can be saved, or if their marriages are even worth saving.

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<sup>19</sup> Goldberg, "Reflections on Marriage and Children After the Cult."

It is also tremendously problematic when the marriage itself began in the abusive church, whether arranged or simply permitted by leaders. Goldberg notes:

Often, cult leaders match members for marriage; or, at least, they are consulted before marriage between cult members is permitted. Furthermore, to ensure that the recruit does not form an authentic intimate relationship with other cult members (even after marriage), cult leaders often control the recruit's sexual life. The nature of this sexual life usually will be a reflection of the cult leaders' sexual predilections.<sup>20</sup>

For those marriages that began in the abusive church, achieving a healthy marriage is difficult, as the only identity that either spouse knows of his mate is that of the abusive church member, and not the pre-church individual. Whether the marriage existed before membership in the abusive church, or began while the partners were in the church, the damage inflicted on marriages by abusive churches is ruthless, deep, and lasting. Married couples who come through the doors of healthy churches are often carrying tremendous burdens and disappointments.

### **Parenting Wounds**

Abusive churches do great damage to parents. It was an autumn evening in 1996. Sharon and I, and our three daughters were at the dinner table, talking about the start of school for the older girls, Bryn, then twelve, and Rachel, then ten. (Our youngest, Grace, was almost two.) The subject of the abusive church

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<sup>20</sup> Goldberg, "Reflections on Marriage and Children After the Cult."

we had left just weeks earlier came up often at the dinner table. “Do you think we’ll ever go back there?” asked Bryn. “Yeah,” her ten year old sister quietly asked. “Are we going back?”

Sharon and I looked at each other with a look that silently cautioned that the answer to the girls’ question was critical. All of our children were born while we were members of the church, and Bryn and Rachel had spent all their young lives in it, living semi-communally for six of the years we were members. The other children in the church were like siblings to them. They spent countless hours with the same kids, learning to walk at the same time, having little-girl tea parties together, loving the same toys, playing on the same little league teams, worshipping the same pop stars, and attending the same schools. The kids were close, and their closest friends were still in the abusive church, and enjoyed genuine, close, healthy relationships with many of the women in the church. Sharon and I were sensitive to the fact that when we left the church we had also suddenly, forcibly, separated the girls from their best friends. With each hour that passed after walking away from the church, our certainty that we would never return strengthened. We lived in our own nice, rented home, and the girls had already begun the school year in new schools, in a new neighborhood. Going back to the church was out of the question. Now, we were faced with what we believed to be a critical issue in our family’s experience—telling our daughters we would never return to the church, and to their dearest friends.

“Well,” I began, “we’re not so sure about it . . .”

Sharon continued, “Because we’re not sure it’s where we really want to be, as far as . . .”

“—what’s best for our family,” I finished.

The table was silent, as the girls looked at Sharon and me.

“So, no, we’re not going to go back.” “Ever?”

“No, we’re never going back. Ever.” *There*, I thought. *We said it*. After a brief, awkward pause, both Brynny and Rachel looked at each other, and then got up from the table. I looked at Sharon, whose face revealed the same worry that I was feeling. “Oh, no,” I thought, “they are going to run to their rooms. They are crushed, disappointed. It’s going to be a long night.”

But they did not run to their rooms. Instead, they giggled, locked arms, and began swirling around the kitchen floor like exuberant square dancers, chanting, “We’re never going back! We’re NEVER going back! We’re NEVER GOING BACK!”

Sharon and I stared, open-mouthed, in shock, and turned to each other. We both were thinking the same thing: “What have we done to these kids?” (In the near future, we would learn what had happened to several of the girls in the abusive church, and the unrestrained joy of our daughters that evening would make more sense to us.) There we sat at the kitchen table in stunned silence, watching the spontaneous, joy-filled dance of freedom on our kitchen floor, and wondering how we as their parents could have got it all so wrong.

Parents who expose their children to abusive churches and cults face great hurdles in the recovery process after leaving the abusive environment. They may struggle with methods of disciplining their children that were harsh, painful, and simply abusive. They may reflect back on their parenting

experiences and see that they were uninvolved with their children, or overbearing and harsh; quick to punish and admonish them, but slow to praise and accept them unconditionally.

If they lived in a communal or semi-communal setting, they will likely grieve the degree that other (non-related) adults were allowed to participate in the correction and raising of their children. They grieve to realize the manipulative, parental-type authority that the abusive leader exercised with their children, and (in extreme cases) that the leader may have even sought a parent-role with the children. They may face the painful realization that their children viewed the abusive pastor with the same fear, loyalty, and submissiveness as they had. They may worry that their children seem slow to abandon their loyalty and affection for the abusive pastor.

They grieve over the lost resources of money, time, and energy that went to the abusive church, and not to their children. As their children begin to believe they truly are free of the abusive church, they may begin to relate their experiences to their parents of what life was like for them in the cult, including emotional, physical, and in some cases, sexual abuse. The parents confidence withers as they realize how extensive the effect of the spiritually abusive church was on their children, who memorized verse after verse of the Bible while they learned whom to obey in the church, and whom to fear. Indeed, recovery from spiritually abusive churches and cults can be very difficult for the children raised in them. Their road to healing will be distinct from the recovery experience of their parents, who at least possess a *pre-church* experience that the child lacks.

There is perhaps no greater responsibility in life than that of parenting a child. To bear the sense of failure that accompanies the realization one's children have been abused in a church is to bear a tremendous burden. As I will discuss in coming pages, it is a burden that a loving, understanding pastor and church membership can help to bear in caring for parents who survive abusive churches.

### **Economic Wounds**

The demands that high-control churches and cults make on their members certainly include the demand that they give their money to the church. Besides the loss of wealth suffered by cult members, there is often the loss of *potential* wealth through the cult's insistence on near perfect attendance of its programs, ministries, and special events. The time that a member might have spent working, taking overtime shifts, developing his business, or taking on odd jobs, was sacrificed to the group instead.

Survivors often have diminished wealth, and are in a process of regaining financial stability. They are sometimes distressed that while they are at a stage of life where they expected to own their own home, be secure in their professions, and have retirement savings, they often have none of those resources, and find themselves starting over in terms of building up their wealth and savings.

### **Educational and Professional Wounds**

Recalling that abusive pastors demand total obedience from their members, and unilateral influence over all of their decisions, it is likely that many

of the survivors of spiritual abuse that come through the doors of our churches will have experienced the interference of the spiritually abusive pastor in their educational and professional goals. They will feel that they have lost opportunities for advancement in the workplace, and have abandoned dreams and goals on the altar of loyalty to their churches and pastors. Some may have put career plans on hold, having been told by their abusive leaders that they should rather be investing their time and energies in the abusive church. For example, the International Christian Churches (ICC) has a history of counseling its college students to cut back on class loads or even abandon college altogether so as to be more available to recruit other students and to participate in its activities and training.

Survivors of spiritually abusive churches often walk through the doors of healthy churches feeling like professional and academic failures. They feel like unfortunate, spiritual gamblers who have thrown the dice in a bid for greater meaning and productivity as Christians, and rolled snake eyes.

These are just some of the main areas of trauma and woundedness that the survivors of spiritual abuse bear as they seek recovery from their experience. These wounds are not left at home on Sunday when the survivor seeks a healthy church in which to worship, and they are not left in the car in the parking lot of the church, either. No, wounds of spiritual abuse come right through the door with the survivor and are, in fact, the wounds that the survivor hopes to find care for in the healthy church.

What are the indicators of a healthy church, particularly a church in which a survivor of spiritual abuse can feel respected, cared for, valued, and truly safe? What are the qualities of the pastors who lead such healthy churches, *safe* pastors? In Chapter Eight we will consider the qualities of the safe pastor, and the safe church he serves.

## **Chapter 8**

### **SAFE PASTORS, SAFE CHURCHES**

Pastors and their church members do not need to become experts in the area of cults and spiritually abusive churches in order to care for victims. They already possess the greatest resource imaginable—the presence of the Spirit of God to guide, empower, and encourage them in their efforts to love and care for all who come through the doors of their church. The antithesis of the abusive pastor is the humble, loving pastor. The antithesis of the abusive church is the gracious, accepting church of the Good Shepherd. It is to healthy pastors and healthy churches that we now direct our attention.

#### **The Pastor as a Safe Shepherd**

Pastor Ralph could not have had much of an idea of what had happened to us in the abusive church we had left just a few months earlier. Sharon and I felt strongly that we should immediately find a good church after leaving the cult, even though neither of us felt like going. We still felt we needed a lot of time to heal and to figure out what exactly had gone so wrong over the past twelve years of our lives. But two of our daughters were just entering adolescence. They were adjusting to our new life outside of the abusive church community in their own ways, and we felt they would benefit from attending a church that would care

about them, offer programs for their age group, and support us in our efforts to be good parents. We visited a small Baptist church near our home, and we were immediately taken by its friendliness, safe environment, relaxed worship and teaching, and the kindness and humility of its pastor.

Pastor Ralph remembered our names, our kids' names, and was friendly and kind, but never intrusive or pushy. For the first couple of months we attended (with somewhat spotty regularity), our main contact with Ralph was when he was in the foyer of the church on Wednesday nights, talking with the kids after their youth meetings; high-fiving, shaking hands, and giving a hearty good-bye to the kids as they got into their parent's cars. He also would wave at the parents, sometimes greeting them by name. We watched him closely.

Survivors of high-demand groups are often anxious when they go to church. They observe the behavior of the church members, and especially the pastor, before venturing to open up about their own personal experiences of spiritual abuse. They value anonymity and often struggle to trust churches and church leaders. Healthy church members and their pastors understand this need.

After a few months at our new church, we asked to meet with Pastor Ralph. We would not have been so bold to ask for his time, but our daughters had shared something with us from their experience in the cult that had severely shaken us, and we desperately needed some help. Sharon and I, along with our close friend Roger, went to Pastor Ralph and Lois' house for coffee and dessert one evening. We hemmed and hawed around about the church we had left, about its abusive pastor, its heavy-handed control of members, its strange semi-

communal living arrangements, and how we had been mistreated and misled. I doubt that we really divulged anything that made us look too strange, or made our former church look too horrible. Nevertheless, as we shared our experience with Pastor Ralph I sensed that he suspected there was more to our story than we had shared. And there was.

“Well, that’s crazy! I can’t believe that a pastor could act like that! He went to seminary?” Ralph asked, referring to our former pastor.

“Well . . . he took a few classes, and then dropped out. He only wanted to study Greek, Hebrew, and theology, and did not want to take what he called the marrying and burying classes,” we told him.

“He should have . . . might have learned a few things,” Ralph wryly commented. There was an awkward pause.

Sharon spoke. “But we just found out . . . Our daughters told us . . .” I looked into Ralph’s face, and saw his jaw clench.

“. . . that they were . . . molested. By the pastor. He molested them.”

At that instant Ralph’s leg violently extended forward, his foot slamming into the coffee table in front of him, sending cups, saucers, forks and plates rattling across its glass surface. At the same time, his spine straightened, throwing him back onto the back of the couch.

Startled, we all jumped back. I expected Ralph to swear, but he did not—out loud, anyway. His face showed a depth of anger and intensity that I had never seen before from this happy, friendly pastor who high-fived the kids when

they were leaving Awana night each week at church. His anger set us all back, in an instant and made us feel loved and understood.

Pastor Ralph was not an expert on cults and abusive churches, but he was a genuine, seasoned pastor. He had been in ministry for many years, had seen a lot, and had made hard choices of sacrifice, obscurity, and integrity. When he heard of the horrific abuse of two of the children who had come to his church, he could not contain his fury. I think he would have attacked our former pastor, had he been in the room, in the same way a shepherd would attack any predator that threatened his beloved flock.

In seminary, I was taught the skills and information that a good pastor needs to have in his head. In Pastor Ralph's living room, I observed the passion and love that a faithful pastor must have in his heart. When Ralph's wife, Lois, looked in on us from the kitchen to ask what the ruckus was in the living room, we said, "Oh, nothing. Everything's fine." But I could have said, "Pastor Ralph is showing me what it looks like to be a real pastor of a church."

The word *pastor* is derived from the Greek word *poimen*, a shepherd. Jesus could have referred to himself by many, legitimate titles, e.g., Priest, Savior, Preacher, Prophet, Master, Lord, King, Messiah, or Rabbi, and others referred to him by these titles. But according the gospel writers, he seems to have preferred to be known as a shepherd. The text of the New Testament suggests that he and the apostles even reserved the word, when used as a title,

for Jesus alone.<sup>1</sup> "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep," he said of himself.<sup>2</sup> He also viewed people as a type of human flock. As he looked out at the crowds that followed him, seeing their spiritual, physical, and material impoverishment, "He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd."<sup>3</sup> In one of his final, post-resurrection days on earth, he implored Peter, "Tend My lambs . . . shepherd My sheep . . . tend My sheep."<sup>4</sup> Peter got the message regarding the way Christian leaders were to relate to those under their care. Later in his life, he wrote to his fellow pastors that they were to sacrificially *shepherd the flock of God*, never using compulsion or seeking to get rich. Instead, they were to serve voluntarily, setting an example worthy of following.<sup>5</sup>

People have vast opportunities to hear great preaching today, not only in church on Sunday, but on the radio and the internet. There are religious writers who produce wonderful study guides and devotionals. There are theologians—past and present—who unwrap the mysteries of the teachings of the Bible in meticulous detail and order. However abused Christians, whose wounds were inflicted in the house of God, in the church of Jesus Christ, have need of the

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<sup>1</sup> While the verbal form of *shepherd* in the NT readily is used to describe the duties of elders, pastors, and church leaders, an examination of the word in its singular noun form reveals that it is used only used of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> John 10:11.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 9:36.

<sup>4</sup> John 21:15-17.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-3.

care, understanding, nurturing, healing, tenderheartedness, and patience of a shepherd. They need pastors who have bowed the knee in submission to the Great Shepherd, and who refuse to act or speak in any way that does not follow his example of sacrificial, loving care for the flock.

Most pastors feel ill equipped to respond to the needs of the survivors of abusive churches. Aside from the broad discussion of those religious groups historically deemed *cults* by orthodox, evangelical Christianity, seminaries do not provide extensive training in the phenomena of churches that (despite their professed orthodox theology) abuse their members and function in a cult-like manner. Langone reminds pastors that it is *not* the formal creeds and statements of faith by which an abusive, cult-like church is identified, but instead they are known by the effect that they have in the lives of those who belong to them. “Clergy should recognize that joining cults is often related much more to psychological and social influence factors than to an evaluation of a group's theology.”<sup>6</sup> Pastors see firsthand the psychological and social wounds carried by survivors of abusive churches. As the proper care of a physical wound is necessary for successful healing and recovery, so a proper response to the spiritual abuse survivor is indispensable.

Pastors and church leaders may be tempted to resort to an academic approach in the care of spiritual abuse survivors, acting as information sources, and not spiritual practitioners in the care of the wounded soul. They may suggest

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Langone, “Clergy,” *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <<http://www.icsahome.com/elibrary/studyguides/clergy>> (October 14, 2016).

that the survivor attend a Bible study, to become better grounded in the Scriptures, and perhaps find spiritual healing in their studies. Nevertheless, the survivor of a spiritually abusive church, whether Bible-based or not, will find it difficult to find healing through Bible study. She is likely to have spent a significant amount of time in the abusive church studying the Bible. She may be familiar with the works of contemporary and historic theologians. She may have a strong ability to study the Bible on her own. In my abusive church, all adult members learned to study the Bible in its original, Greek language, and many had also learned biblical Hebrew. More Bible study is not the answer for someone who has perhaps spent years studying the Bible in an abusive (often Bible) church!

Pastors may also feel that participation in a small group that focuses on building solid friendships with church members is what the survivor needs, that if they can just get *locked in* to a healthy, close, small group, and begin to make some friends, then healing will begin. Again, such a plan for recovery will probably fail. The survivor has likely left a group in which he had close friendships, developed over years and intensified by the shared experience of zeal and commitment to the church that was misunderstood and rejected by family and (former) friends.

Some pastors believe that simply attending a healthy church will bring healing to the survivor of spiritual abuse, as if a person with an infection could be cured simply by spending time around people who do not have infections! They assume that simply hearing good, orthodox preaching will heal the survivor of the

wounds of spiritual abuse, but often, the survivor has sat under powerful, orthodox preaching for years. Sitting under the preaching of an authoritative, rhetorically powerful, charismatic speaker, who preaches from the Bible, will do little in itself to heal the wounds inflicted by an authoritative, rhetorically powerful, charismatic speaker, who preaches from the Bible!

If our small groups, Bible studies, church activities, and biblical preaching are not likely to bring the healing of spiritual abuse, what will? What can a pastor offer to a person who ventures into a worship service on a Sunday morning and reveals that tiny tip of an iceberg that suggests he has been hurt by an abusive, high-demand church? It begins with the way a pastor treats the victim of spiritual abuse. The gracious welcome before or after a worship service, not lasting more than a few minutes, can begin to suggest the possibility of healing and restoration to the victim. However, the pastor should consider the following insights.

The first thing the pastor should realize is that the survivors of abusive churches have chosen to visit his church because of its similarities to the beliefs of the abusive church. People who leave abusive churches have not abandoned all of their values and beliefs about their religious faith. Jacobs notes in her study of deconversion (including departure from an abusive religious group) that though the subjects of her study had suffered greatly at the hands of various

abusive, self-styled messiahs, “not one of the devotees expressed a total rejection of the religious path as a result of their experiences.”<sup>7</sup>

Those who seek a new, healthy church after leaving an abusive Christian church should be treated as wounded brothers and sisters in the faith. They should not be evangelized or proselytized when they visit the church. If they are unclear or undecided regarding the basic truths of the gospel, there will be time for that later, when the survivor continues to attend the church, and suitable, healthy relationships develop with the pastor and church members.

Pastors should gain an introductory knowledge of how thought reform works in abusive churches. Such a basic understanding of thought reform as it is utilized by abusive churches and pastors will allow the pastor of a healthy church to respond to survivors with belief and understanding, instead of confusion. Gaining an understanding of thought reform, cultic behavior, and abusive churches is often a tremendous, empowering experience for the survivor of spiritual abuse. Simply by pointing survivors to some good educational resources, pastors communicate that they understand the issue, believe the victim, and respect the victim’s ability to take personal steps of recovery. Many survivors of abusive churches are asking themselves, *What just happened to me!?*

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<sup>7</sup> Janet Jacobs, “Deconversion From Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (3) (1987): 294.

Pastors must avoid trying to recruit the survivor of spiritual abuse to church membership. They have likely escaped churches that had overweening desires for numerical growth, and know that every church wants to grow, and every pastor would love them to join his church, so there is no need to remind them. Often a pastor does advise that a person would benefit from a strengthened commitment to the church community when such issues come up with the survivors of spiritual abuse, the pastor who simply advises, “Just make a commitment to this church,” is skating on thin ice. Survivors have been told, by a pastor, that they should join the church. They joined, and their lives unraveled. It is enough simply to thank them for attending church that day and to assure them, “You are always welcome here.”

Survivors of spiritual abuse often tell me of their abuse experience, often only after the service. I wonder if they might want to evaluate the *feel* of the church and hear the sermon before *outing* themselves as having belonged to an abusive church, which makes perfect sense to me!

When a survivor tells the story of their time in the abusive church, I realize a pastor may feel concern over the tendency of people to embellish, and to criticize the pastors and churches that they have left. However, as the pastor gains a firm grasp on the common elements of spiritual abuse, he will readily identify the legitimacy of victims’ stories. It is rare for a person to enter a new church and launch into imagined tales of financial, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. It is likely that as the survivor opens up small parts of his story of

spiritual abuse, small snippets of similarity with the eight conditions of spiritual abuse from this project will emerge unsolicited.

Pastors also must develop a personal policy regarding the referral of spiritual abuse survivors to qualified mental health professionals. Not all survivors require such professional intervention, as meaningful discussions and friendships with other spiritual abuse survivors, along with education, has been proven to be of great assistance in recovery. However, many will benefit greatly from the wise, professional assistance of a counselor who is well informed regarding the processes of thought reform and coercion that occur in abusive churches. Before meeting the survivor, pastors should identify trusted, qualified mental health counselors to whom the survivors can be referred, should they wish to pursue such a course in their recovery.

Finally, in meeting the survivors of spiritual abuse, the pastor must be humble and gentle. Survivors have been deceived and hurt by pastoral imposters, ecclesial predators who donned the appearance of legitimacy, all the while seeking to use, steal, and ravage the members of the church.

While abusive pastors may have an adequate theological education, and may hold to the historic, orthodox tenants of Christian theology, they *all* lack a biblical, truly orthodox theology of the pastorate, and their church members have suffered greatly because of its absence. The pastor who is interested, emotionally connected, and unhurried will make an impression on the survivor who visits his church. Orthodox theology, great learning, and bold charisma will not break through the scars of spiritual woundedness and callouses of spiritual

slavery. Only the sincere expression of kindness, of empathy, and of understanding will reach the heart of the wounded Christian. Charles Jefferson, pastor of the influential Broadway Tabernacle in New York City for over forty years, preached:

A few things are certain. We live in a universe created by a Shepherd God. The Lord is our Shepherd. Our world is redeemed by a Shepherd Savior. Our Elder Brother is a Shepherd. The man whom humanity most needs is a shepherd. Every messenger of Christ is sent to do a shepherd's work. We are to stand at last before a Shepherd Judge. God is going to separate the good shepherds from the shepherds who are bad. The questions that every pastor must meet and answer are three: "Did you feed My lambs? Did you tend My sheep? Did you feed My sheep?"<sup>8</sup>

The primary qualification of the pastor who desires effective ministry to the survivors of spiritual abuse is that he must relate to church members with the sensitivity, patience, and tenderheartedness of a genuine, Christ-following spiritual shepherd. Spiritual abuse survivors have left churches led by great preachers, astute thinkers, highly intelligent teachers, and charismatic leaders. They do not require more of the same. However, no spiritually abusive church is led by a genuine, Christian shepherd. And that is what pastors must aspire to be.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd: The Privileges and Responsibilities of Pastoral Leadership* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 2006), 31. (Lecture notes, 1912)

## The Church as a Safe Community

Survivors of spiritual abuse have suffered great loss and disappointment in their relationship with their pastors. They have also experienced the failure and loss of a healthy Christian community, the church. They are truly the walking (spiritually) wounded, casualties of the egomania of an abusive pastor and the dysfunction of the sick church he leads. When these refugees of abuse walk through the doors of our churches, they have expectations that are specific, but not impossible to meet. They are looking for some basic, but important qualities in the churches they visit. Lawrence Pyle, director of Wellspring Retreat Center (a facility that cares for survivors of spiritual abuse), summarizes the expectations of spiritual abusive survivors:

1. They don't want a church with a lot of rules, or whose pastor thinks he's God's gift to mankind, God's mouthpiece on earth.
2. They don't want a church in which normal, legitimate pastoral care has been replaced by meddling in the members' lives.
3. They don't want a church in which the opportunities to serve God or others are restricted to just a few officially sanctioned activities, or in which they are considered "unspiritual" or "carnal" if they choose to limit their involvement in the church.<sup>9</sup>

They want freedom to pursue their faith and church involvement as they see fit.

They want pastors who are humble and do not bully their church members with long lists of rules, arbitrary expectations, and over-scrutiny. They are not looking for the perfect church, or the perfect pastor; they are simply looking for a healthy

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Pyle, "Choosing A Church" *International Cultic Studies Association* (ICSA). <<http://www.icsahome.com/articles/choosing-a-church-pile>> (October 14, 2016).

church led by a spiritually healthy pastor. Enroth writes, “How can we recognize a healthy church? In addition to matters of appropriate doctrine, a healthy church is reconciling and restorative, not adversarial and elitist. Members of healthy churches seek to deepen and strengthen their family commitments.”<sup>10</sup>

The best way for a church to be effective in caring for the survivors of spiritual abuse who come through its doors is simply for that church to be healthy and friendly. Church members do not need to become experts in spiritual abuse, thought reform, or cults. There is no need for special Bible studies, a long preaching series on spiritual abuse, or long reading lists. Spiritual abuse survivors have been forced to close off their genuine selves and build a pseudo-self in order to survive in the abusive environment. They now desperately need to find acceptance for who they are, as they are. Churches have an amazing power—often tragically unrealized—to be the healing agents that God calls his people to be in this beloved, hurting world. What other organization has been promised divine empowerment and unlimited access to the one God of all creation as it carries out his desires on this planet? As Jesus promised his disciples on the day he returned to the Father, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses,” or as he assured

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<sup>10</sup> Enroth, “Dysfunctional Churches.”

Peter, "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."<sup>11</sup>

What other human agency has the Spirit of God coursing through its veins?<sup>12</sup>

### Safe Churches are Honest

Abusive churches recruit and retain their members through deception, in that what is promised to members is never received. Healthy churches do not attract members by promising experiences, benefits, and results that they have no business promising. The honesty and transparency of the church is seen in the lives and words of its members throughout the week. In a safe church, there is an insistence on honesty in all its aspects, from the pulpit to the pew, and in the day-to-day interactions of the congregation. Besides simply telling the truth, safe churches refuse to make promises that they cannot keep, or suggest that God is going to do things that he hasn't clearly promised to do.

Safe churches do not hide their problems and failures, nor their intentions and goals in ministry. Their pastors do not speak of God's love while nurturing a hidden lust for greater numbers, stature, and reputation. The kindness and warmth with which they are received on their first visit is extended to them on every visit, whether they formally join the church or not.

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:8; Matthew 16:18.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 4:31; Romans 8:14-15; Galatians 4:6; 2 Timothy 1:7.

### Safe Churches Do Not Pressure Members to Give

In the abusive church, members are prized for the material and immaterial resources that can be extracted from them. They are groomed to feel guilty when they are not giving-until-it-hurts. Safe churches, however, seek to give *to* their members. The financial state of the church is shared with openness and honesty, but never in a way that manipulates or frightens members. Safe churches do not throw out percentages of expected giving, such as those that demand a *tithe* (ten percent) of their members' income. The leaders of safe churches are sensitive to the specific challenges their members are facing, and respectful of the great financial burdens that many bear.

Safe churches have distinct, relaxed attitudes towards money, born out of a confidence that they are providing an important service. They are respectful of the privacy of their members, never prying into their personal finances or resources. The leaders exemplify trust in God for the church's financial needs by fully respecting the freedom of the church member to give according to desire and conscience, and not by compulsion or guilt (2 Cor 9:7). The pastor maintains a purposeful ignorance of the giving amounts and patterns of individual members, so as to avoid any suggestion that might taint the reputation of the church and the pastor. Safe churches focus on the positive, good things that they desire to give to their members, rather than the resources they desire their members to give over to the church.

Safe churches are also respectful of the time and energy of their members. They do not demand attendance at a growing array of church-focused

meetings designed to serve the pastor and the church. Safe churches are sensitive to the many challenges of raising children in today's world, especially with the likely necessity that both parents provide incomes.

#### Safe Churches Encourage Healthy Friendships with Non-Christians

Whereas the elitism and ingrown relational tendencies of abusive churches cause their members to avoid forming or maintaining close friendships with non-Christians, safe churches never criticize or usurp the relationships that its members have with those who do not share the Christian faith. Rather than seeking the dissolution of the member's relationships with family and friends, whether Christian or not, a healthy church encourages satisfying, healthy relationships with all people. The biblical commands to "honor all people," and "show every consideration for all men," are followed in healthy churches, without distinction or reservation.<sup>13</sup> Safe churches encourage their members to treat all people for what they are: beloved people for whom the God of all creation saw as worthy of sending his Son to save and redeem.

#### Safe Churches Respect Other Churches

Abusive churches poison their members with a form of elitism that views other churches and pastors as inferior Christians, worthy of disdain or pity. Critical of the theology or perceived lack of zeal of other Christian churches, the

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<sup>13</sup> Titus 3:2; 1 Peter 2:17.

abusive church works hard to instill a sense of superiority in its members. As one survivor wrote of the church in which he had been spiritually abused, "They think they are top tier, sold out, cross-carrying disciples. They think everyone else is weak, not dedicated, not motivated by a love for God, and would rather be tied up with school, or relationships, money, or hobbies, instead of God."<sup>14</sup>

A safe church, however, welcomes the friendship of other churches. It is generous in its tolerance of the differences between itself and other churches, and seeks to relate to them as spiritual family members, and not competitors or opponents in ministry. The pastors of safe churches do not criticize other churches, denominations, or Christian movements. They are secure in their own faith, and in the beliefs of the church, and see no need to attack other churches that might differ with them on minor or secondary issues of the faith.

In their tolerant, friendly manner of relating to such churches, healthy churches follow the instruction of Jesus himself. Luke records an instance in which Jesus' disciples came across a follower of Jesus who was engaged in ministry in his name, and yet was not a member of the group travelling with Jesus. The disciple John reported, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you."<sup>15</sup> Jesus reminded them that other people were out there,

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<sup>14</sup> Email correspondence with Lyle, September 18, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 9:49-50.

doing good works in his name, and they should not be criticized, disdained, or hindered from their ministry. After leaving the tight-laced, narrow world of their abusive church, survivors today find it refreshing, and a bit jarring, when they hear their pastor sincerely express respect and kindness towards fellow pastors and neighboring churches.

#### Safe Churches Encourage Self-Confidence and Independent Thinking

Abusive churches insist on occupying an expansive, expanding place in the lives of their members. Safe churches, however, foster the growth of mature, healthy independence. Unhealthy dependence on the leaders or the church body itself is discouraged in favor of the member's positive, personal development as a follower of Jesus Christ.

In safe churches, pastors do not tell people who to date or marry. They trust in parents' abilities to apply the Bible to the raising of their children. They expect members of the church to make decisions for life out of personal conviction, rather than robotic obedience to their pastors. While the leaders are always present to encourage and counsel members who desire input, they never present their counsel as obligatory. They are not offended when a member decides to take a course of action different from that advised by the pastor. The safe church does not exist to create disciples who follow orders in a hierarchal structure, but followers of Jesus who voluntarily join the church to share in a life of worship, friendship, and service.

### Safe Churches Handle Confession Appropriately

In abusive churches, compulsory confession serves the leadership. It erodes the health of the church community and hurts the person who confesses. Safe churches, however, respect the privacy and dignity of their members, and never compel them to confess private sins in a public or group setting. Generally, sins are to be confessed in private. Of course, in issues of criminal behavior police and appropriate authorities must be involved!

The sins that members most often need to confess to one another are those of mistreatment, disrespect, and insensitivity. Jesus taught that the first step of the process of forgiveness takes place in private discourse<sup>16</sup> and that when we ignore offenses, our religious observances become meaningless.<sup>17</sup>

Safe churches are careful to admonish their members to practice a regular spiritual discipline of the confession of sin.<sup>18</sup> They categorically disdain the abuse of confession, and they seek to be places of forgiveness, reconciliation and hope, rather than interrogation and emotional torture.

### Safe Churches are Kind and Respectful to Members Who Leave

In my career as a paramedic, I had the honor of travelling to distant, rarely visited countries with *Northwest Medical International*, a humanitarian aid organization based in Tigard, Oregon. As a member of a small team, I taught a

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 18:15.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 5:23-24.

<sup>18</sup> 1 John 1:9.

first aid course to police officers in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. They really know how to say goodbye in Uzbekistan. There is a sense of responsibility that the Uzbek host bears for the safety and wellbeing of his guest. When visiting an Uzbek home for a meal, for example, goodbyes were not said at the host's doorway—they were said at the doorway of our apartment, after our host had escorted us home, after personally seeing that we arrived safely. Then, in bidding farewell, my Uzbek hosts made a lasting impression on me. Standing in front of me, locking their eyes to mine, the host gripped my hand. The handshake was one of those uncomfortable ones, where the person really squeezes, all the while shaking your hand and does not let go. No, this was not an American handshake, by any means. Shaking my hand, he said,

Now we say goodbye. We have been blessed to have you in our home. We hope that our food has pleased you and filled you and that you will never be hungry for the rest of your life.

(Still shaking the hand. Still staying strong with the eye contact, too.)

And, we wish you a long life, with many children, and much joy, and health, and riches. We wish for your wife to bear you many children and for you and her to know love and blessing always. We wish for your children to be strong and healthy, and that they will come here one day, too.

(Now, I'm feeling the love, and am not so sure I want to leave, after all.)

And you must know this: if you ever are here again, you are to stay with us, here, in our home. You must come again. If you are ever poor, or hungry, or in need—you must come to us, and we will care for you. If you are in trouble, come here. If you are alone, come here. If you have done something wrong, and someone is chasing you—even the police—you must come here, and we will protect you from them. Even if you are wrong—we do not care. We will protect you always, for you are family to us.

That is not the way we say goodbye in America. But, as I closed the door after being escorted home—Uzbek style, and wished well with such promises and kindness—I felt truly valued, respected, and blessed. To this day, almost twenty years later, I feel I would be welcomed if I knocked on the door of several homes in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. I want people to feel that way after saying goodbye to my church.

Survivors of spiritually abusive churches regularly visit Grace Bible Church—my church in downtown Portland, Oregon. Over the years, I have noted a pattern. It is rare for a survivor of spiritual abuse to stay at the first church or two that they visit after leaving the abusive church. A healthy, safe church is non-controlling and respectful regarding how it says farewell to those members and frequent guests who decide to leave it, or simply decide not to return. A safe church holds its members loosely and gently, and says goodbye with kindness and warmth. The pastors and leaders of the safe church communicate with those who leave, for they are eager to be assured that the member has not been offended, hurt, or mistreated. The safe church is concerned that the member knows that she or he is valued, respected, and always welcome to return to the church. I fear that we sometimes make it *hard* for people to join our churches

when we communicate that leaving will be a painful process for them that will deeply disappoint us.

### Safe Churches Are Saturated with Grace

Abusive churches practice and teach a hard, exacting, *mean* theology, which is often dismissive, if not antagonistic, to grace practiced amongst their members. They would struggle greatly with the late theologian Lewis Smedes, who wrote, “To be accepted whether or not we deserve to be accepted has always been an outrage to careful and rigid moralists.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that God truly loves and accepts his children without consideration of their behavior and merit is a life-changing truth to the survivor of an abusive church. The fact that God lovingly cares for each person adopted into his family through his Son is a truth that every abusive church utterly fails to grasp. The grace of God cannot be rightly preached from the pulpit of the abusive pastor. No, the grace of God, rightly taught and applied, is a threat and an affront to the abusive church and its pastor. “Easy believism!” they’ll cry, when challenged that salvation and its assurance comes solely through faith in Jesus, without human merit, validation, or demonstration. Abusive churches subscribe to a very *difficult* believism!<sup>20</sup> “Faith without works is dead!” they warn, when a believer refuses to point to his

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don’t Deserve* (Lexington, KY: HarperOne, 2009), 110.

<sup>20</sup> I am not the only alumnus of Western Seminary who recalls the late Dr. Earl Radmacher’s reply to complaints against *easy believism*. “So, what do you want? *Hard* believism?!”

own obedience as the means of the assurance of God's grace. Faith without works *is* dead, but everything that is dead was at one time alive. The God of grace is also the God who calls dead things to life, and He has certainly called many a dead faith to life among His people. Grace is the generous, healing, life-giving gift of God gently breathed through the day-to-day experience of the safe church. Pastor Neil Damgaard suggests:

My belief is that a great many churches and Christian fellowships are reasonably safe and do provide an edifying environment. However, it is unfortunate that too many have experienced and even propagated the antithesis of grace—control, undue influence, harshness, legalism, and any number of other unhealthy and unsafe maladies—at the hands of churches and religious organizations of almost all denominational stripes. I would deem these practices mutations of spirituality that damage and injure people even when at the same time they maddeningly espouse theological orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup>

Paul Martin agrees that confusion about grace is a mark of abusive churches and non-Christian cults:

Almost all former members of religious cults or extremist sects (including those that are doctrinally evangelical) are confused about such things as the grace of God, the character of God, submission to authority, and self-denial. It is noteworthy that groups with widely varying doctrinal stances—from the Hare Krishnas to Jehovah's Witnesses—uniformly distort God's grace and character.<sup>22</sup>

In every nasty, domineering, controlling, rule-oriented, try-a-bit-harder church, there is an absence of grace applied to the life of the believer and the

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<sup>21</sup> N. Damgaard, "A Safe-Haven Church An Introduction to the Basics of a Safe Religious Community," *International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)*. <http://www.icsahome.com/articles/a-safe-haven-church-an-introduction-to-the-basics-of-a-safe-religious-community> (October 12, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Martin, *Cult Proofing Your Kids*, 48.

church. Is it any wonder that of the many theological truths and spiritual experiences encountered in the recovery process, it is the doctrine and reception of the grace of God that has most affected the thinking and spiritual experience of the survivors that I have spoken to regarding their process of recovery?

Safe churches are not perfect churches. Like all churches, they are comprised of people who share a deep neediness for forgiveness, restoration, community and an even deeper appreciation for God's kindness and love. They are not full of self-satisfied, completed saints, gathered merely to keep each other company until the Lord sweeps them up to heaven. They are communities where healthy relationships are sought, where all people are respected and treated with fairness and honesty, and where the claims of Jesus Christ, as found in the Bible, are preached, taught, and offered as the means of forgiveness, acceptance, and eternal life. They are also places that seek to form and maintain health, respectful relationships, not only between members, but also with all people. Rather than seeking the control and subjection of members, and emotionally bullying members into beliefs and behaviors that are unfamiliar, safe churches are places where everyone is granted time and space to process the claims of the Christian faith. They are free to determine their response to those claims without undue pressure or manipulation. In safe churches, people are not used or taken advantage of, but are instead respected and valued.

## Chapter 9

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

This project has introduced the topic of spiritual abuse, explored select examples of spiritual abuse found in the Bible and introduced the reader to various perspectives on spiritual abuse from both secular and Christian sources. Drawing on these sources, interviews, and personal experience, I presented a list of eight indicators of spiritual abuse by which to evaluate its presence in a church. The particular trauma experienced by survivors of spiritual abuse, and their experience when re-entering healthy churches, has been discussed. Finally, the particular spiritual qualities of safe churches and their pastors, qualities that are critical in the care of spiritual abuse survivors, has been suggested. I hope that this book is useful to the family and friends of people who are either current or former members of abusive churches. I also hope that it is useful to the members of healthy churches that would like to be better equipped in helping out survivors. I hope that it is also of some use to my fellow pastors who desire to be better equipped to deal with the survivors of abusive churches when they come to our churches.

### **For Friends and Family**

Through the years, since I left an abusive church, I have been contacted by many family members whose loved ones have become embedded in abusive churches. They often contact me after months or years of a deteriorating relationship with their family member or friend, and sadly, when they are sure the relationship is irredeemably lost. If your loved one, family member, or friend is in an abusive church, here are some basic truths to remember, and some positive actions you can take so that (as far as you are concerned) the door is open for the building of a genuine (though not perfect!) relationship.

First, remember that most people leave abusive groups and cults, though they may remain members for many years. Inevitably, the false, disingenuous personality (or, *self*) developed by the member to become a functioning, accepted member of the abusive church is finally overcome by the person's true, authentic self. As I reflect on my time in an abusive church and the process of leaving it, I see that the inmost parts of my psyche, the private thoughts and beliefs, were never really destroyed or even replaced by the outer, church-pleasing personality that I developed in my time there. No, the *real* me, the Ken that I was born as, and is my core personality, was simply shut down, repressed by my attempt to fit in and avoid displeasing my leaders and fellow church members. My authentic, true self battled for me, and eventually won. Your friend or loved one has not really been lost; he has simply been masked by the false, cultic, abusive church self that is being formed by the policies and social environment of the group. While the control and influence of the leaders of cultic

groups seems overwhelming and total, as Michael Langone notes, “not absolute, because ultimately most people leave cultic groups.”<sup>1</sup> Never give up on your loved one! Never give up hope!

Second, a tremendous impact for good is made in the life of the member of an abusive church when an outsider treats them with kindness, affection, and acceptance. Many of the friends, parents, and family of abusive church members attempt to argue their loved one out of the church through theological debate, attacks on the leader of the church, or the application of a good-sized serving of guilt for the person’s abandonment of his relationships. While it is certainly understandable that a concerned parent, sibling, spouse, or friend would resort to these tactics, the fact is, they simply do not work. By the time a member of an abusive church has made the decision to join and live as a fully committed member, he has long since rejected the theological rationale of outsiders, and may even believe his own grasp of theology exceeds that of outside voices. He has come to see the abusive leader as a great man or woman of God, misunderstood by the outside, uninitiated world, as many great religious leaders of history have been. Moreover, they have been well prepared by the abusive church leaders for the onslaught of concern, criticism, and guilt that they will encounter from family and friends. However, for the member to be treated with kindness, affection, and respect by his family and friends, without argument, (perceived) slander of their church leaders, or shaming indictments of their failure

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Langone, *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 9.

to maintain relationships with family and friends, is tremendously powerful, and makes a deep, if unacknowledged, impact on the member.

Make long-standing, open invitations for coffee or breakfast or lunch, anytime. Remind your loved one that he can call you, anytime, and you will always be available to him, no questions asked. Express affection, acceptance, and commendation for the good things that he is accomplishing in his church. Perhaps he is excelling in study or devoting time to service of the poor and needy. Perhaps he is becoming a person of a better character and more mature integrity, and is gaining social skills that did not exist before membership in the abusive church. (All of those are distinct possibilities!) Do not be shy about praising what is good. Do not withhold affection because of his membership in the abusive church. Be as present in his life as he will allow. Remind him of the love you have for him, and of the cherished memories you will always have of your relationship with him. (Deep down, he has not forgotten those memories, either!) Learn the names of his friends in the church, and invite them over for dinner or a barbeque. Do not stop inviting him to every family event, holiday, and special occasions, even though he often does not show up. Do your best to rise above the tension, awkwardness, and distancing that often marks the relationships between abusive church members and their (non-member) family and friends. Visit his church regularly, and avoid the temptation to be consumed with a criticism of the church, or to engage in arguing or defending your beliefs. Just visit, because someone you care about belongs to that church, and you do care, after all. Leave your anti-cult books at home; walk through the doors of your

loved one's church with nothing but your love, and your prayers for their good and blessing. Ask God that he would fill you with his Spirit of power, love, sound thinking, and he will.<sup>2</sup> Genuine love is simply more powerful than all the dogma, coercion, and religious zeal in the world, and will win out in the end, overcoming all fear.<sup>3</sup>

Third, family members and friends of those who are in abusive groups usually find great benefit in learning about the general processes of thought-reforming groups (such as cults and abusive churches) from an academic standpoint. It can be discomfiting to read of the horrific abuses that take place in such groups, particularly when you are imagining your loved one as a member of the same. However, it is also liberating to see that you have not been thrown into an undiscovered wilderness, but are simply entering a world that is new to you, and that world is well researched and understood by professionals and survivors alike. There are numerous excellent books and articles available that address the phenomena of spiritual abuse from a secular and Christian perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, find others who can identify with your experience as a friend or family member who are deeply concerned about a loved one who is a member of an abusive, cult-like church or high-demand group. It is likely that there are survivors in the area of the abusive church to which your loved one belongs. Just having a cup of coffee with someone who *gets it* regarding abusive churches can

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:18.

<sup>4</sup> See bibliography.

be both powerful and empowering. Once you start asking around, somebody will know somebody who knows a person who has some knowledge of spiritual abuse, and perhaps, even of the specific group of your loved one. Do not be afraid to reach out; when you do, you'll find that you are not alone.

### **For Church Members**

As I look back on my experience as a survivor of an abusive church seeking to reintegrate my family into a normal church, I recall very positive ways that church members treated me that went a long ways to help me feel welcomed and safe. The churches that were the most helpful to me and my family treated us with warmth and respect, and believed us when we told of our experiences in the abusive church.

We were treated warmly, welcomed without question or qualification, and accepted simply as members of the community who decided to visit the church. Our daughters were welcomed into the youth ministries of the church and treated with kindness and understanding. What little the youth pastors learned of our family's experience led them to treat our girls with extra kindness and respect, all the while wholeheartedly embracing them into all the activities of the church for kids. Coming from the high-pressured environment of the abusive church, the girls appreciated simply being able to attend, hang out with their new friends, and do fun things. (They'd gotten plenty of the *heaviness* of religion in the abusive church!)

The warmth shown to me by a woman who simply remembered my name made a deep impact. We had heard of a new church that met in the student center of a local university on Saturday nights and decided to try it out. (Remember, just walking through the doors of a new, normal church is difficult for many of the survivors of spiritual abuse.) As I entered the door of the student center where the church met, I was greeted by a friendly, smiling woman who was handing out bulletins for the service. There was a bit of a line to get in, as the service had about 150 attenders.

“Hi,” she said, “My name’s Keli. Thank you for joining us tonight.” She handed me a bulletin for the service.

“You bet,” I said. “I’m Ken. Thanks.” And that was it, until the next week.

“Hi Ken! Good to see you!” And *that* was it, too. No pressure, no forms to fill out, and no intrusive questions. Just a kind greeting and a name remembered. The reason that the simple remembering of my name meant so much to me was that it told me that effort had been made by someone to think of me, and to be prepared to treat me with kindness should I attend the church again. That kindness was often repeated and reflected by the congregation. My family found a great amount of healing there.

Church members also do much to contribute to the healing process from spiritual abuse when they simply believe the accounts told to them by the survivors of spiritual abuse. An account that includes any of the eight indicators of spiritual abuse described in this book should raise concerns. Admittedly, there is a need for discernment regarding this issue. No one wants to contribute to a

false account, a slanderous accusation against a healthy church or pastor, or to gossip about the same. However, one need not suspend good judgment to be of support to a victim of spiritual abuse. It is well known that when victims of sexual violence do not think their stories will be believed or seen as significant, they are less likely to report the crime.<sup>5</sup> However, simply believing the victim can be an extremely powerful act of healing.<sup>6</sup> In much the same way, survivors of spiritual abuse have little to gain by fabricating stories that are untrue, or make themselves appear naïve, or to have been duped by a religious con man. In my experience with survivors of spiritual abuse, most of them do not share the full, gory details of their abuse, but instead reveal the less intense, seemingly minor aspects of their experience in the abusive church in order to discover if they will be believed should they reveal the more hurtful and significant aspects of their abuse. They should not be queried regarding the orthodoxy of the church they have left, let alone the legitimacy of their own faith. Instead, they should simply be believed, welcomed, and invited into a church community that will gladly walk with them through the recovery process. In such a safe, healthy church

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<sup>5</sup> “Why Victims Wait to Report | *Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR)*.” <<http://www.pcar.org/news/why-victims-wait-report>> (January 8, 2017), “Why-Is-Sexual-Assault-Under-Reported.pdf,” n.d. <<https://www.umd.edu/ocrsm/files/Why-Is-Sexual-Assault-Under-Reported.pdf>> (January 8, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> For a particularly moving personal account of the power and healing to the victim of simply being believed, see Words, In Others’. “He Wrote It Down.” *In Others’ Words*...n.d. <<http://inotherswords.com/2015/01/18/1473/>> (May 17, 2017).

environment, the details of the survivor's experience can be shared in time, and in the context of truth and acceptance.

### **For Pastors and Church Leaders**

In addition to the principles that the friends, family, and church members should observe in caring for survivors of spiritual abuse, pastors and leaders of healthy churches must give attention to two additional areas. They must protect their churches from the incursion of outside, high-demand or abusive churches and ministries, and they must see that they themselves do not resort to spiritual manipulation and power plays as the means of controlling members of their churches.

Abusive, high-demand church leaders feel no compunction at luring members away from healthy churches. Observing the attempts of the International Churches of Christ to draw people away from churches into their own ICC ones, Flavil Yeakley warned, “[ICC leaders] believe that they will be doing your members a favor if they persuade them to leave your congregation and join their congregation.”<sup>7</sup> Through careful attention and a casual but focused survey of local ministries, churches, and (especially) campus-based groups, pastors of healthy churches can become aware of destructive Christian groups that may deceive members away from healthy churches, to join their own, abusive churches. Yeakley gives this advice to pastors of healthy churches who

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<sup>7</sup> Yeakley, 83.

encounter recruiters from abusive churches: “Confront the discipling [spiritual abusers] when they arrive in your area. Tell them that you consider them brethren but brethren who are dangerous to the work you are trying to do. Let them know in no uncertain terms that you will not tolerate any abuse of the people whom God has given you to lead and protect.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to confronting abusive ministries when appropriate, pastors and church leaders must also see that they themselves never abuse the trust and authority granted them by their churches. The Apostle Paul believed his authority was primarily to be employed in building up those entrusted to his care, and not tearing them down.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, healthy, faithful leaders today must exercise their authority in service of the actual, flesh and blood congregation they are called to serve, and not in service of their own goals, desires, and agendas for ministry. This means that as pastors and leaders, we must submit ourselves to the collective will and good of our congregations, and, short of any areas of biblical imperative, we must seek the spiritual growth in maturity of our members, and their healthy independence from us.<sup>10</sup> One of the most accurate barometers in my ministry of whether this healthy independence is taking place is for me to consider how consistently I am delegating leadership responsibilities and ministry tasks to my fellow members. I must ask, “Are the members of my church demonstrating increasing freedom in following after the calling of God in

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<sup>8</sup> Yeakley, 118.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1:28-29.

their own lives, and do they freely take advantage of the resources and facilities of the church? Are the members of my church serving the Lord as partners, or as followers of their pastor? The more freedom people feel to live out their faith according to their own consciences, and the less they feel the need to ask for my permission, the more I believe they are being respected, challenged, and empowered to carry out the ministry of our church, without my oversight! If you treat your church members with the same tenderhearted concern, patience, and compassion observed in our Lord Jesus, you'll never come close to acting as a spiritual abuser.

So, how can you best help friends, family members, or acquaintances who have survived an abusive church experience? Simply being a loving, respectful, welcoming friend will go a long way in helping to restore them to spiritual health and vitality. It was not a blazing theological revelation, or an excruciating process of self-examination that led to my greatest experiences of healing and restoration from spiritual abuse. Rather, it was simply the many small experiences of receiving the love and kindness and mercy of God through the words and actions of people who cared about my family and me.

### EPILOGUE: HEALING...NOT YET HEALED

The store was so cluttered with postcards, coffee cups, shell-dolls, agates and kitchen kitsch that I could not see who was speaking, but could only hear their voices from across the shop. I was up early, Sharon was sleeping in (that's what I call it when people do not wake up at 5:30 a.m.), and so I headed down to the hotel lobby where we were staying at the Oregon coast to find a cup of coffee and a quiet place to enjoy it. The front desk host directed me to the gift shop for my coffee.

“. . . and so I'll be praying for you," I heard a woman say.

"Well, thank you. I appreciate that," replied a man.

"I'm going to pray for your healing. . . "

"Thank you," he interrupted.

". . . that you'll be healed right out of that wheelchair, and raised to your feet."

Across the shop, and hidden behind rows of *Moose droppings* cookies and *Big-Foot-Lives!* T-shirts, I felt the awkwardness. He barely missed a beat.

"I have been healed."

"You've been healed?" she asked, startled.

"Yes, I have. I was healed two-thousand years ago, at the cross. The legs will work again one day—but the healing started back then. But it's also coming."

"Well...er, yes. Well, that's good. That's right. Amen. Amen, brother." She quickly left the shop. I found the counter to pay for my coffee.

“Thanks.”

“You bet,” he said. “Take it easy.” I noted the faintest beginning of a smile on his face.

I often think of the conversation I overheard that day. Well intentioned, superficial, nice *Christianese* crushed by the reality of continued disability swallowed up in fierce, dignified confidence. People are often in quite a hurry to heal after leaving an abusive church. Their friends and family, who love them, are often in even more of a hurry for the healing to happen. They do not mean any harm when they suggest that the recovery process might be speeded up a bit, or perhaps is even going on a bit longer than is necessary, and that with a bit of fervent prayer, God will just get us “back up on our feet.”

“Why can’t you just move on?”

“Do you ever think you’ll be, you know, back to normal again?”

“Your kids need you to put this behind you. You’ve got to think of them, you know.”

“Have you forgiven the abusive pastor yet?”

“Have you forgiven yourself? If you can just accept what happened, you can get beyond it.”

“You need to just find a church, make some new friends, learn from the experience, and don’t give *them* the satisfaction of seeing you miss a beat.”

“You need a counselor.”

“You need a different counselor.”

These are all well-meant, flawed, statements. I walked out of an abusive church on August 28, 1996, over twenty years ago. Yet I am still recovering, still working through things, still healing, still needing to talk, to process, and to receive words

of grace from friends, old and new. I do not carry shame anymore for the things I did while I was in the dark church, and I am not (as) angry at what was done to me and to my family. But I often think of that twelve year chunk of life, from the age of twenty-four to thirty-six, when I stuffed down, plastered over, and tried to ignore my genuine, true self, and instead sought to build a false-self in which I could (I supposed) survive the church. The true self never really went away, always pressured and nagged at the false self, and in the end, launched a full-out war on the imposter. I think the true self did that to save me, and when I started listening to it, healing began.

It started back then, and it continues every day. And it is coming.

## APPENDIX

### SAMPLE EXEGETICAL SERMON: JUDE

The following sermon is intended as an example of how the issue of spiritual abuse might be preached to a congregation. Rich in both biblical and historical narrative and vivid imagery, the short letter of Jude allows a congregation to appreciate and understand the phenomena of spiritual abuse through the identification and exposure of the agents of abuse: the false teachers who attacked the churches to which Jude's readers belonged. I preached the book in several sermons over a period of a couple of months, but have combined all of the individual sermons here.

#### **Exegetical Study of Jude—Facing Off with Spiritual Abusers**

In Jude's day, the titles *false teacher* and *false prophet* were synonymous. Today, we can add a third title, the *abusive pastor/leader*. What are the attributes, the indicators, that enable us to recognize these sinister leaders who have always plagued the people of God? The book of Jude provides timeless, proven insight into the character and methods of those leaders who either arise from within Christian churches or enter them for personal gain, rather than faithful service. Abusive churches are the handiwork of abusive leaders—I have never found an exception to that. In the following short lessons from the book of Jude

we will discover not only the historicity of abusive leaders, but their motivations, methods of operation, and the certain judgment they face for their abuse of the people of God. We'll also discover the source of healing from the wounds inflicted by them.

### **The Fingerprints of Spiritual Abusers, 1-4**

1 Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, To those who are the called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ: 2 May mercy and peace and love be multiplied to you. 3 Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

Verses 1-3 provide the introductory material for the letter. Jude, a biological brother of the Lord Jesus, was going to write a letter of general encouragement for Christians, but then became aware that false teachers had made an entrance into the church (or churches) to which he wrote. The presence of such men (who probably would have functioned as pastors or itinerant evangelists and prophets) prompted Jude to change his purpose in writing. From his simple explanation of why he'd changed the topic of his letter, we gain insight into the seriousness of the issue to Jude. Verse four answers the basic question, what are some of the foundational qualities of these persons? He'll develop his exposure of these qualities in the rest of the letter.

4 For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jude lists four key ingredients to the ministry of a false teacher. We can think of these ingredients as a type of character *fingerprint*—and unmistakable means of identification.

Fingerprint #1: They enter the ministry quietly and inconspicuously

False teachers do not show up at the door of a church with a nametag that says, “Hello, my name is . . . and I’m going to ruin your life through my false teaching.” Jude tells us that they show up quietly. Their entrance into the lives of those they would lead is low-key, and is not generally a noticeable event. False teachers require time to accomplish their agendas in order to win loyalty and credibility in the church, so they do not usually make a big splash when they show up on the scene. Often, it is difficult to discern when a false teacher's ministry started spiraling downward. The descent happens subtly. Often, there are secret sins, which have been successfully hidden for years before they are unleashed on the church. Once the leader's sins do start to become known, the controlled members of his church may begin to cloak the abusive and defective character of their leader in their interactions with those outside of their churches. They have been taught to protect the shortcomings of their leader through denial and deception in their conversations with others, thus setting the stage for their leader to *creep unnoticed* into the lives of others who visit the church.

Fingerprint #2: They are already known to God as false teachers

Although they might shock or surprise those whom they lead, they are not pulling anything over on God. This is important for those leaving the ministries of such leaders to remember, for the first question a person has when they are delivered from such a person is, “How in the world did this happen?! Where were you, God?” It’s not possible to say why God allows people to be hurt in his church, certainly it’s an inscrutable mixture of the depravity of the leaders, effectiveness in recruitment, and the abuse of people’s trust—a mix that I am unable to perfectly separate to this day! However, in terms of the recognition of the false teacher, it is important to establish from the start that our most reliable information will come from an authoritative, inspired source, the Word of God. The line of corrupting, false prophets found in the Old Testament, such as in Ezekiel, chapter 34, continues in Scripture, morphing into the false teachers written of in the New Testament, such as those Paul warned the Ephesian elders of in Acts, chapter 20. Moreover, the morphing has continued to this day. False prophets, false teachers, abusive pastors . . . they all are alive and at work today, still creeping in unnoticed, and still out to use God’s people for selfish, immoral gain at the expense of the followers they deceive.

Fingerprint #3: They have neither fear of God nor respect for His grace.

They are ungodly—they have no concern for Him, let alone a sense of awe or fear of Him. Grace itself is not a motivation to obedience and gratitude to these men (and women), but a free pass to indulge their personal wants and

desires. However, they rarely apply the same standard of *grace behavior* to those who disappoint or threaten them that they demand for themselves. The practical application of God's grace in their lives is opposite that of the intended effect of grace described in the Bible, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2.11-12). In the ministries of false teachers, grace may be spoken of, but more often as a salve of the conscience than a motivation to obedient living.

Fingerprint #4: They reject the authority of Jesus Christ.

False teachers have a very particular, observable struggle with authority, particularly that of the Lord Jesus. Their struggle isn't presented as that of a struggle with Jesus—that would be foolish on the part of the false teacher. Their denial of his authority is expressed in a persistent, unrepentant state of living, continuing in various forms of sin and abuse without true confession and repentance. That's why most false teachers are not well known, and seem to fly under the radar of their local religious communities. The rules, customs, and laws of the communities they live in get in the way of the appearance of authority and command they work to maintain in the eyes of their followers. The taproot of their struggle with authority is a persistent, unrepentant denial of the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, as evidenced in their refusal to be humble, obedient, servants of His church. And, as all false teachers will learn one day in the heat of judgment, it is h/s church, not theirs.

## **The Ancestors of Abusive Religious Leaders, 5-7**

### Israel in the Wilderness

5 Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe.

Beginning in verse 5 and continuing through verse 10 Jude presents examples of those who have fallen away from a valued position of favor and salvation before God, and then suffered judgment for their apostasy (falling away). The historical context of verse 5 is found the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the story of Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The Hebrews were a nation of redeemed, saved people who had been rescued from bondage in Egypt, miraculously delivered from Pharaoh, and formed into a whole new people under the provisions of a covenant that they entered into with God. The covenant (otherwise known as the Mosaic Covenant) established a relationship in which they were now to be known as God's people, and he was now and forever to be known as their God. What an opportunity! What gratitude and joy would mark out those former slaves who now were God's special, chosen, redeemed people, right? Not so fast . . .

Instead of rejoicing in this life of favor and deliverance that they had been given, this new opportunity to live out a life of faithfulness and intimacy with God, what did they do? They created a golden calf to worship instead of God himself (for the full story, see Exodus 32). Things only got worse from there. The story of Israel's forty-year wilderness journey is an account of repeated instances of the nation's betrayal of their covenant with God, grumbling against him and their

leader, Moses, complaining about their living conditions as they traveled in the wilderness, and persistently pursuing idolatrous worship. Having been saved out of Egypt by the gracious, redemptive action of the Lord, the nation soon fell away from their relationship with him, and suffered his judgment as a result. Note the certainty of the salvation of those who fell away—they had participated in the rite of the Passover, and entered into the covenant relationship with God at Mt. Sinai. God refers to them as his people numerous times, and treats them as such. Note the nature of their unbelief: Despite their experience of God's faithfulness and goodness and power—they deliberately rebelled against him. Note the nature of their judgment: They were allowed to live with the choice they'd made, and to die natural deaths in the wilderness. Paul writes that "...with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness." In short, they left no legacy but that of the warning against apostasy to be gained by considering their countless graves in the sand.

In a similar way, false teachers in the Christian church are presented as people who have defected from an initial relationship with God. I realize that there are many who would question whether a true, false teacher ever really had a saving relationship with God. I think the implication may be even more somber—the awful, chilling truth that it is possible to receive the salvation of God, and then to live as an enemy of God and corruptor of his people.

By way of application, in verse 5 Jude answers a question regarding the ministry of a leader in the church who seems to have fallen far away from his initial commitment to live as a servant of God: Can a leader really be *that* bad,

and be a part of the people of God? The answer serves as a warning for all who lead in the church. Yes, a person can begin well in ministry, and end in utter ruin and failure, his ministry forgotten and disdained by the faithful—lost under the sands of the harsh wilderness of self-indulgence and refusal to repent of sin.

### Fallen Angels

6 And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day.

Okay, so what does this verse have to do with abusive pastors and false teachers? It's a tricky one, and I do not think it's wise to get too dogmatic about the interpretation of this verse. This is a challenging verse! The first question is, *who are the angels that* "did not keep their own domain" and are now kept in eternal bondage? There are at least three views:

The first view is, *just don't ask*. Some commentators argue that we aren't supposed to know anything more than is found in the text itself, and to go further is error. That does not seem to me to be a satisfying or intellectually responsible approach, although it is certainly tempting! The second view is that these angels are those fallen angels who joined with Lucifer (the Devil) in his initial revolt against God. This view has some problems, too. It requires that such angels (actually demons), generally, are presently kept in bondage, and yet there are plenty of demons at work in the world today, seemingly unbound. Finally, a third view is that these are the *Sons of God* of Genesis 6:1 and following, who left heaven and procreated with the "daughters of men," producing a race of giants

on the earth, who were subsequently destroyed in the flood of Genesis 6-9. This was the view of the early church and of the Jewish scholars in Jude's day. However, the identity of those "sons of God" of Genesis 6 is tricky, and is the subject of several views, all within the possibility of reason, but none conclusive above the others.

In application, what we *do* know with certainty is that these angels defected from a privileged position, in heaven with God, and a privileged purpose, singing his praises to go somewhere else, away from God's presence. When pastors or leaders in the church step away from God's purpose and will for their lives, and injure people in the church, in the eyes of God they join company with an entirely different band of "angels" and have no destiny but certain judgment.

### Sodom and Gomorrah

7 Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.

Scottish theologian William Barclay wrote, "Preaching is a matter of often reminding men and women of what they already know, but have forgotten or are refusing to consider."<sup>1</sup> The writer Jude, in much of this short letter, is doing just that: reminding his readers of things, they already know. In this verse, Jude

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *Letters to John and Jude*. 2 Rev Ed. (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1976).

recalls the sudden, overwhelming destruction of the ancient city of Sodom found in Genesis chapters 18 and 19. Besides the account of the desire of a mob to rape the angelic visitors to their city, the writing prophets provide a catalogue of the many other, and equally devastating, sins of the people of Sodom. They were materially rich, enjoying lives of ease, and yet disregarded the poor and needy.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, they tolerated and practiced adultery, and valued deception in their interactions.<sup>3</sup> But most of what is said about Sodom in the Bible has to do with the sudden, catastrophic, total annihilation that the city experienced at the hands of the Lord as judgment of its many unrepented sins (i.e., Jer. 50:40; Lam. 4:6). Just as Israel was judged with forty years of living, wandering, and dying in the desert of unbelief, and just as angels are judged with incarceration and eventual, final judgment for their rebellion against God, so Sodom was judged with sudden, complete extermination of sins. The destruction of Sodom was ever-present in the Jewish mindset, as the prophets wrote of the overthrow of the city centuries after it had happened, as if it had happened only the day before.

Notice that the three apostates (those who have fallen away from God) in verses 5 through 7 experienced judgment in three distinct temporal aspects. Israel's judgment occurred over a forty-year period, with all but two of those over the age of twenty at the time of the departure from Egypt dying in the wilderness, outside of the Promised Land. The apostate angels' judgment was both

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<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 16:49.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 23:14.

immediate and long-term, extending from the moment of their rebellion into eternity. Sodom's judgment was sudden, unexpected, and complete.

The application of these verses is that our sovereign, righteous God judges sin both *how* he wants, and when he wants, and there is no immunity to his scrutiny and assessment. Those who have suffered under the leadership of false teachers often cry to God, "Father, will You ever judge those who have damaged us, and our families and friends?!" he has answered in the letter of Jude—he *will* judge, in his way, and in his time.

#### **The False Teacher's Rejection of Spiritual Authority, 8-9**

8 Yet in the same manner these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. 9 But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."

In verses 5-7, Jude lists three historical examples of spiritual apostasy. Beginning with verse 8ff, he constructs a bridge between the attitudes, actions, and fate of past apostates and that of the false teachers who were attacking the churches of his day.

A significant key to understanding this intriguing verse is to determine what *the same manner* means. According to the most immediate context (the preceding verse), Jude is referring to the sin and judgment of the ancient city of Sodom. Jude states that these people defiled the flesh, in association with *dreaming*. The Old Testament speaks of *dreamers of dreams* who seduce people

away from loyalty to God.<sup>4</sup> Such *dreamers* are teachers who concoct unreal stories, accounts and explanations, and then direct the lives of their followers according to those *dreams*. Perhaps the phenomena can be understood when one considers the more fanatical, date-setting visions that often drive the behavior of aberrant, cultish sects of religious groups.

These leaders both *defile the flesh and revile angelic majesties*. Again, staying close to the preceding verses will help keep us in the ballpark of a reasonable interpretation. Remember, these men had turned *the grace of God into licentiousness* (sensuality). They used the doctrine of the grace of God as a way of justifying sin (verse 4). Their theological deception was used for physical gratification at the expense of those they led. Further, like the men of Sodom who scorned and attempted to abuse the angelic messengers who had been sent to them, these false teachers had an arrogant, insulting disregard for the holiness and unique position of the angels. Jude quotes a popular, non-biblical book of his day, *The Assumption of Moses*. This book was primarily used by Jews as a devotional aide. Its writer tells the story of an argument that occurred between the devil and the archangel Michael over rights to the body of Moses after his death. Lucifer (the devil) argued he had the rightful claim of the body of Moses, as Moses was a murderer and sinner, and certainly did not merit the care and concern of the Lord. Rather than engage in the debate, Michael recognized that Lucifer possessed a dignity before God, and therefore, Michael would not himself

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 13:1-5.

pronounce judgment on him, but instead appealed to the righteous judgment of the Lord.

For our application: False teachers today can be identified by a number of historical symptoms that are found both in Scripture and in religious history. They enlist their followers into their personally concocted visions, plans and schemes in order to satisfy their own sinful desires, and they exhibit a marked disrespect for the unseen, angelic powers that exist to carry out the work of God on earth. There are startling similarities between the false teachers of Jude's day and those whom I have met. Based on verses 8-9, I suggest that *generally* I am not called to pronounce any great words of judgment on false teachers, but am to wait for the Great Shepherd to rebuke their sin. My job is to avoid such men, and to warn others to do the same.

### **The Self-Destructiveness of the False Teacher, 10**

10 But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed.

The false teacher inevitably attacks the core truths of Christianity, such as faith, grace, and repentance, because these truths inevitably challenge the behavior and desires of the false teacher. He has never truly known them. Having rejected the truths that they seemingly once held, they become men who reason, and then act, according to physical sensations and desires alone—just like animals. Puritan author William Gurnall wrote, *“None sink so far into hell*

*as those that come nearest heaven, because they fall from the greatest height.”<sup>5</sup>*

I believe that in this verse Jude describes the descent in the mind and behavior of the false teacher from the spiritual to a mere instinctual mode of existence. They do not truly understand the spiritual truths regarding the Christian faith of which they speak. What they *do* understand are physical, earthy matters, just like the animals, which live purely on instinct. Furthermore, this animalistic way of life, making decisions and relating to the world around them only by the physical senses, ends up bringing the destruction of the false teacher, and his spiritual incapacitation will only increase as time passes.

By way of application, as the thought processes and behavior of a goat, for example, are all subservient to only a few basic drives, such as food, safety, and survival, so the goals and actions of the abusive leader erode into such an instinctual basis of existence. These leaders do not get better, wiser, or even more powerful. With few exceptions, they peak in their ministry influence, and then become prey and victim to the habits of thought and conduct upon which they built up their ministries in the first place. If you are in the ministry of such a leader, run, do not walk, away. Things are unlikely to improve as long as there remain followers for them to use.

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<sup>5</sup> William Gurnall, *A Puritan Golden Treasury*, compiled by I.D.E. Thomas, by permission of Banner of Truth (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truthy, 2000), 20.

### Woe to Three Types of Wolves, 11

11 Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.

Verse 11 functions as a literary hinge to the letter of Jude. It is the last mention of historical apostates before Jude describes the character deficiencies and sins of the false teachers who were presently finding a home in the churches to whom he wrote. He lists three biblical characters, all guilty of unique, historic acts of apostasy. The Bible itself provides the answers to exactly what these false teachers did that gave them such an infamous place in the history of God's people. Notice, apostates can come from varied backgrounds, like that of a pre-Flood, though historic, farmer, a Mesopotamian magician, and a Jewish priest.

#### The way of Cain—persecution of the righteous (Gen 4)

In Genesis chapter 4 we are introduced to Cain, both the first murderer and first apostate in the Bible. He and his brother Abel both offered sacrifices to the Lord one day. Cain was a farmer, and offered produce. Abel was a shepherd and offered an animal from his flock. The Lord favored Abel's sacrifice, a blood sacrifice, but had *no regard* for Cain's produce. Cain then killed his brother, "And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's deeds were righteous."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4:5; John 3:12. See also Hebrews 11:4.

In application, the abusive pastor who goes the *way of Cain* attacks those who live in a righteous relationship with the Lord, particularly when the leader's own faith is revealed as being self-serving and human-centered by comparison. Spiritual abusers can pass off their counterfeit faith more easily when there aren't many members with genuine, sincere faith to whom they might be compared.

The error of Balaam—pursuing ministry for the money (Num. 24, 25; 31:16)

Balaam was a popular religious man (magician) from ancient Mesopotamia who was hired by a king to prophesy/cast an evil spell over the nation of Israel. However, once he saw the nation of Israel, he was constrained by the Lord to say only what the Lord had told him to say—all good things, not evil! The king was infuriated, and refused to pay Balaam . . . that is, until Balaam came up with another idea. The greedy prophet counseled the king to use temple prostitutes (women who had sex with worshippers for a price paid to their temple) to lure the men of Israel away from their people and their God, and worship idols instead.<sup>7</sup>

Money is the bottom-line motivator for the false teacher who rushes *headlong into the error of Balaam*. Many abusive pastors love money and are not above condoning and encouraging moral compromise in their followers if doing so gains them access to their followers' bank accounts.

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<sup>7</sup> See also 2 Peter 2:15; Revelation 2:14.

The rebellion of Korah—pulling down God’s mediator (Num. 16)

Korah was a distant cousin of Moses, and a priest. He led 250 priests in a type of *priests’ strike* against Moses and his brother, Aaron. He argued that “the entire nation is holy,” and therefore everyone could speak to and receive the word of God without the intermediary (go-between) ministry of Moses and Aaron. (Over two dozen times in the Old Testament the word of the Lord is said to have come to the Israelites through Moses.) Korah and the priests who joined him in the rebellion were executed by the Lord when the earth literally swallowed them alive.

What does Korah have to do with abusive leaders today? Modern-day Korahs presume to function in a type of mediatory role themselves, standing between God and the people. They plead with God on behalf of the people, or rebuke their followers, supposedly in the name of God. They rarely promote a genuine, healthy independence in their followers, but usually take measures over time to insure that they will always become a sort of go-between in their members’ relationship with God. They would never admit it, but they want and even need, to take the place of the Lord Jesus, who the Bible teaches is the “one mediator also between God and men...”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Timothy 2:5.

### Five Snapshots of the Abusive Leader, 12-13

12 These men are those who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; 13 wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever.

In verses 12 and 13, Jude provides vivid snapshots of the false teacher, each descriptive of a particular method by which the false teacher operates in a Christian church.

Like a hidden reef, they are deceptive

The picture here is of the rocks that every sailor fears, those just under the surface of the water, barely visible, if at all. Like hidden reefs, the false teachers were tough to spot. A trained eye could spot them in a second, but to those who were new to the faith, these apostate leaders were a shipwreck waiting to happen. The love feast in the ancient church was a meal at which the Lord's Supper was observed, but in the context of an extended time of fellowship. False teachers capitalized on the friendship and sharing that took place at these feasts. They sought ways to manipulate others for gain, *caring for themselves* instead of their brothers and sisters in Christ. Abusive pastors often use the social gatherings of their churches to advance their personal agendas just as much as they may use the pulpit.

Like a waterless cloud, they are disappointing.

The people of the ancient Mediterranean world depended on rainfall to irrigate crops and replenish water supplies. These false teachers came into the church promising refreshment and health, like a good rain. They looked so promising, from a distance, with their theories, and personalities, and dreams and visions. However, like a cloud that appears to bear rain and then proves to be dry, so these teachers did not deliver on what they'd promised. The believers who sat under their teaching were not taught, not cared for, not built up in their faith. Interestingly, the false teacher is *carried along* by a force outside of himself, though he may not know it. The Satanic backing of these men may not be evident at first, but with time, and repeated disappointment, demonic elements often can be discerned in what they do and say.

Like an uprooted tree, they are desolate

With a triple shot of descriptive words, Jude tells us that these men were not only lacking in any real fruit from their ministries, they were actually as dead as a tree ripped from the ground. Its leaves may stay intact and green, for a short while, but soon the tree will appear as it really is, dead, uprooted, fit only for fuel. Autumn is the time of year when our orchards bear their fruit here in my home state of Oregon; to find a tree fruitless in the autumn signifies that it is diseased, dying, or dead. The spiritual life that a member seeks for his faith cannot be found in the dead ministry of the abusive pastor.

### Like a wild sea, they are dangerous

Ancient mariners had a much healthier respect and fear for the sea than we do today. Sea travel was dangerous, and shipping lanes usually stayed within sight of the shores of the ancient Mediterranean lands. Boats were small, and made with lesser quality materials than ours today. Death at sea was common. These false teachers were like the waves on a stormy day, churning up their shame like a wild sea churns up sea-foam and threatening destruction to all who dared to challenge them. The prophet Isaiah likened the waves of the sea to danger and sin: “. . . But the wicked are like the tossing sea, For it cannot be quiet, And its waters toss up refuse and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’”<sup>9</sup>

### Like wandering stars, they are directionless

A wandering star is actually a wandering planet. We enjoy seeing one, and at certain times of the year, we look to the sky in hopes of seeing the dazzling beauty of a “falling star” as it shoots across the sky. But stars served a much more practical purpose in Jude’s day—they were sources of guidance for navigation on land and sea. This was before the age of compasses, radar, and GPS guidance systems. For guidance and direction, a wandering star was useless. It provided no fixed point by which one could reference oneself in order to know which way to go. In the same way, these teachers give no direction, no

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<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 57:20-21.

guidance, and no wise counsel by which a person may make decisions about the direction of his life. Although the apostates dazzle and draw a lot of attention, they offer no real help. You won't find home or safety in following them.

Jude also tells us that a place has been set aside for these spiritual abusers—a place of endless, gloomy, darkness. Just as these men abuse and misuse the light of the Bible and the ministry for themselves, so they will be banished to a place where they will live in eternal darkness. This verse strongly asserts that at least some of the false teachers that Jude wrote of were not saved and have an eternal darkness awaiting them.

### **The Certain Judgment of the False Teacher, 14-15**

14 It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, 15 to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."

This is the only instance in Scripture in which the words of a pre-Flood prophet are revealed. In the early chapters of Genesis, we learn that there was a thriving, busy culture on the earth, in many ways similar to many of the cultures of the world today. There were cities, agriculture, animal husbandry, fine arts, education, and manufacturing. Despite its advances (and incredibly long lifespans), this antediluvian (pre-Flood) world was destroyed by God for its persistent apostasy from the Lord (see Gen. 6:1-7). During this age, Enoch prophesied concerning the future judgment of the Lord that would befall the *ungodly*. We do not know where Jude obtained this information about the

ministry of Enoch. However, we can gain a clear picture of the reason that false teachers will receive such an overwhelming, devastating response of judgment from the Lord: Their ungodliness will incite the Lord to personally intervene with *myriads* of angels, all for one purpose, to judge false teachers.

Enoch uses the word *ungodly* no less than five times in this verse. The word describes behavior and speech that issues from a denial of the authority, demands, and worthiness of God. God will judge these men for their *harsh* words, as the main currency of a teacher is his speech. The Greek word that Jude used to translate this idea is the word from which we derive the medical term *sclerosis*, which is a process of hardening, with resultant inflexibility and brittleness. When a false teacher's conversation and admonition seems coarse, inflexible, and harsh, it is probably indicative of a deeper struggle with God himself.

Just as God cares deeply about the behavior of the abusive pastor in the church, he also notes his speech, both in content and style. Part of the reason for their judgment is the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him. Elsewhere in the Bible we are warned, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James 3:1-2.

### The Speech of the False Teacher, 16

*16 These are grumblers, finding fault, following their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage.*

You might be wondering, Why all the emphasis here on the speech of a false teacher? What about the lousy things they DO? That's a fair question, and I think the answer may be found in the nature of teaching, particularly in the religious environment of a church. The pulpit is a powerful tool and can be used for horrible ends. I would imagine that of the most terrible crimes *done* by groups of people in history; most of them have begun by something that was *said* to them by a compelling speaker. Jude identifies three attributes of the speech of the abusive leader.

Their speech betrays dissatisfaction with their lot in life.

If you listen closely, you will hear the low-toned murmuring of dissatisfaction with their circumstances—it's audible, but not always comprehensible. They grumble over the fault they find in others or in life in general. In the original language, the word *fault* comes from the history of Greek philosophy. To find fault meant to express dissatisfaction with how things had gone in life, and was therefore primarily aimed at God. Abusive pastors and leaders often keep an extensive list of the things they are disappointed about concerning how they have been treated, disrespected, forgotten, unrecognized, etc.

Their speech betrays a desire for personal indulgence

The controlling motive behind all of the grumbling and faultfinding in the abusive leader is his unmet desires, goals, and lusts. If you scratch lightly on the surface of the words of the abuser, you will find a core desire to gain something. Illegitimate wealth, sex, and power are the usual suspects regarding the lusts of the spiritual abuser.

Their speech betrays a pattern of deceit for personal gain

The speech of the abusive leader is often marked by an inflated self-assessment which leads them to flatter those whom they want to manipulate. To *flatter* someone is to compliment somebody too much, often without sincerity. Spiritual abusers are astute observers of people—it is a survival instinct for them to recognize the weak spots, the insecurities, in their followers, and then to exploit those vulnerabilities in order to gain something from them. Sadly, many have learned through personal loss what the price tag is of such flatter.

When the speech of a religious leader, a pastor, or a teacher in the church always seems to end up being about his hurt feelings, pains, losses, unmet desires, and when it also seems insincere and manipulative, it is time to walk out the door. Hopefully, you will decide to leave such a leader before he takes more from you than you ever dreamed you would give up.

### **Healing from Spiritual Abuse, 17-25**

Having introduced his readers to the dark, dangerous world of false teachers, and laying out in detail their destructive effect on the church, Jude concludes his magnificent, potent letter with practical instruction in how we can care for the victims of these wolves of ministry. The first step? Go directly to the Bible.

#### Return to the Word of God

17 But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, 18 that they were saying to you, "In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts." 19 These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit.

In verses 17-25 Jude concludes this letter with some practical direction on how to recover from the abuse suffered by Christians when false teachers find a home in the church.

We are to remember what has been written about already, so that, the presence of false teachers in the church should never really take a Christian by surprise. I have been quite surprised by the number of Christians with whom I have spoken over the years who seem a bit surprised that I would think that there were really such types of leaders in the church of today. I think to myself, "Good grief, what a wonderful strategy of the devil, to convince Christians that such spiritual wolves have long since become extinct, or are somehow limited to the more far-out extremes in ministry, such as in Waco, Texas, or Jonestown, Guyana!"

We are to remember that in the Bible the *apostles* have addressed the issue already. They warned of the continued presence of false teachers as the history of the church unfolded, and referred to the false teachers as *mockers*.<sup>11</sup> To mock means to make play out of or to ridicule something. Abusive pastors have a knack for ridiculing the traditional, biblical values and ethics of their followers. Jude instructs his readers to remember that the Bible teaches that such false teachers will never be the source or instigators of true, spiritual community and witness. Instead, they are *devoid* (empty) of the spirit. The first response of a Christian to the ministry of a spiritually abusive leader is to go to the Bible as the primary source to consult in identifying such corrupt and destructive leaders.

#### Rely on the Love of God

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.

Jude continues his instruction on how to recover from the ministries of false teachers by reminding his readers that they should take effort to stay closely identified with and immersed in the love of God. The surrounding clauses in the sentence tell the reader how to remain in this divine love.

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<sup>11</sup> Jude 18; 2 Peter 3:3.

*. . . building yourselves up on your most holy faith . . .* We are to seek continued spiritual growth, both in our grasp of the theological truths of the Christian faith, and also in its practical outworking of the faith in the day-to-day decisions of life.

*. . . praying in the Holy Spirit . . .* We are to commit to a life of prayer, making frequent, regular contact with our Father in heaven. We are to seek and depend on the power of the Holy Spirit of God to assist us in our praying, enabling us to communicate with God, and to remain diligent in our prayer lives.

*. . . waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.* We are to live in a constant, eager state of expectancy and desire for the day when our Lord Jesus returns for His church. As Christians, we have already received the wondrous mercy of the Lord Jesus in the deliverance from sin. But there will come a day when we receive that mercy in the most incredible, intense way possible—in the personal, physical presence of Jesus Christ at his return!

To someone who is unfamiliar with the heartbreak of belonging to an abusive church, these commands may strike them as basic, elementary stuff. However, these areas are some of the primary ones that are compromised in the lives of those who live under the oppression of an abusive pastor, and they often become part of a syndrome of painful memories for those who have left the abuse. People who leave abusive churches readily ask how a loving God could have allowed what they have been through to happen to them. They may have trouble believing that their prayers will be answered, or even that they have a right to pray, having belonged to such a defective expression of Christianity. Finally, they often have lost all hope for the immediate future, let alone the

blessed hope of Jesus Christ actually returning one day to dispense mercy and kindness to them.

### Reach out to the victims of spiritual abuse

22 And have mercy on some, who are doubting; 23 save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.

Verses 22-23 speak of three different approaches toward those who are still in the grips of an abusive spiritual leader. There are many opportunities for those who wish to care for brothers and sisters in Christ who have been wounded by an abusive leader. Just as not all abusive churches are the same—so not all members of abusive churches are the same. Here, Jude addresses three strategies of care for three unique types of members of abusive churches: the unsteady, unsaved, and unrepentant.

We are to have compassionate regard for those who struggle with doubts.

Doubt is the uncertainty of belief or opinion that often interferes with decision-making, and is also expressed as a deliberate suspension of judgment. This kind of doubt often plagues those who belong to abusive ministries. In spiritually abusive ministries, the expression of doubt is never tolerated and is therefore hidden beneath some overt, showy behavior designed to impress upon the leaders just how committed the (secret) doubter really is! This approach causes the person to become a hypocrite, speaking and acting in ways that are inconsistent with what he truly believes. In time, the person begins to doubt that

he is even capable of discerning truth. The result is a type of emotional-cognitive paralysis, in which a member of a church feels that something is wrong and goes against what they believe to be true. But since they no longer believe in their own ability to know what is true—they do nothing but simply try to fit in to the group and avoid being noticed for their doubt. We are to have mercy on such people—kindly listening, drawing them out, and providing a safe relationship of friendship. (We are seeking to win the person, not an argument about their church!) We must also remember that these people have become experts at hiding their true feelings—even from themselves. Our compassionate and respectful presence is often a powerful tool that God uses to extricate a person from an abusive church.

We are to intervene to save some who are in the abusive church

Paul wrote to Timothy that he be gentle in his correction of those in his church, so that “*perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will*” (2 Timothy 2:25-26). There’s no dancing around the issue: in the Bible the word *flame* is used to speak graphically and dramatically of judgment. No one forced Sharon and me to leave our abusive church; we just drove away when we had finally had enough. But as I look back on that day, I can readily identify the love and gentle confrontation of a few kind people that provided at least some fuel for our departure from the church. The era of deprogramming is long gone, its effectiveness still questioned, and it resulted in extreme, excruciating emotional

turmoil to both cultists and their families and loved ones. I do not believe that snatching an abusive church member from his church means physically removing them (which is illegal, anyway!). I wonder if this verse might be reasonably applied through the fervent prayer and openhearted availability on the part of those who wish to help an abusive church member leave his situation.

We are to maintain a cautious compassion for those who are still trapped

We are to approach our friend who is embroiled in an abusive ministry with love and respect, all the while hating the atmosphere he/she lives in—whatever it is. Immorality, false asceticism, abuse, addiction, self-righteousness, whatever the lifestyle, we are to be cautious as we minister to those who hurt, and who have been caught up in sin—in the same way a doctor must be vigilant so as to not contract the disease from his patient that he is trying to heal. People are much more vulnerable to the lure and arguments of abusive leaders than they want to believe. The garment that Jude speaks of is the soft, often seamless garment that was worn under the cloak. This garment was worn closest to the body. While you must love the person that you are helping, you must see their *sins* (not them!) and predicament as filthy, disease-ridden pieces of clothing—fit only to be burned. If the victim is a Christian, you can be confident that the Holy Spirit is at work in their life--your kindness and emotional protection will go a lot further to help them recover from an abusive church than a rapid-fire barrage of truth and perspective. That's the kind of manipulative talk that pulled me *into* an abusive church!

Remember the faithfulness of God

*24 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

Jude closes his letter by calling his readers to acknowledge the singular distinctions of God in their salvation. Considering the subject matter of the book, it is reasonable to conclude that Jude is presently a subtle but powerful contrast here between the one true God, and the many false prophets who had begun to attack the Christian church.

Only God, and *not* the abusive pastor, can keep us from stumbling. Though all people suffer, face hard times, and fail to live up to what they believe they should be—God is able to keep his children from permanent, hopeless ruin, and will certainly see that they stand in his presence one day without fault, blameless and worthy. Only God, and *not* the abusive pastor, is worthy to claim the title *Savior*, for through the Son he has saved all who simply trust in him. Only God, and *not* the abusive pastor, possesses the glory, the power, and the authority to rule all creation, for all time.

Jude describes here a God who is unchanging in His power, goodness, and relentless passion to save people. He is the God of the believer's faith, and the God of all faith. As Ezekiel wrote of God as Shepherd of His people Israel,

For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment."<sup>12</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel 34:11-12,16.

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