

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY ABUSE: WHAT IS IT?

There is a big pink elephant in the middle of the heart of ministry leadership that a lot of people are ignoring. It is taking up space that it has no legitimate right to occupy. It is noisy! It stinks! It is impeding spiritual growth and manifesting eternal consequences in the lives of many Christians.

What is really going on in ministry leadership that is causing countless people to fall victim to the manipulation and control of their spiritual leaders? Bishop George Bloomer boldly pinned it as authority abuse. David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen call it spiritual abuse. Whatever the term, it is like Stage IV cancer eating away at the very heart of ministry. For the sake of this article we will refer to it as spiritual authority abuse.

After reading the book ***Authority Abuse*** by Bishop George Bloomer, I promptly realized that not only have I been a victim of spiritual authority abuse, but I have also unknowingly been a perpetrator of this tragic abuse. While reading the entire book one night in August 2004, I was first of all relieved that what I had been experiencing was not a figment of my imagination. What was happening to me was very real and devastating many others, yet no one was openly saying anything.

I knew my friends, other co-workers and other people I knew had endure hurt in their churches. They were left broken, offended, confused and stuck in a rut unable to diligently work in their God given purpose. I had always wondered why so many anointed and powerful men and women I knew could not muster up any strength to come to worship, use their gifts and talents in ministry or even read their bible.

One female minister I know who spent 5 years serving under a spiritually abusive ministry stated, "At first I did not know what was going on. I had been in physically abusive relationships in the past. But being spiritually abused is worse than that. It still hinders me today. It has decreased my zeal for working in ministry or operating effectively in my God-given purpose."

The Traits of A Spiritual Authority Abuser

Ministry leaders must understand the power, proper usage and effects of their God-given spiritual authority. When they do not understand their gift of spiritual authority, then abuse begins. Spiritual authority abuse is the misuse of a God given authority that is intended to equip the saints for works of service.

Ministry leaders have an awesome amount of authority over people. Paul Benware, Professor at Philadelphia College of the Bible writes, "Authority in the church is the power granted to men to lead the flock of God according to the Word of God, guiding, protecting and feeding them for God's glory."

Bill Hybels writes in his book ***Courageous Leadership***, "When the spiritual gift of leadership comes alive in churches everywhere, the church will become the hope of the world and a most influential force for good." Unfortunately, the reverse is happening more often than it should. As a result, many Christians have decreased their church attendance/activity, questioned their belief in God, gotten distracted from their purpose or have run away totally from the kingdom of God.

In the light of recent stories reported about sexual abuse and financial scandals within the church, how can Christians honestly know if they are a victim of spiritual authority abuse? Sadly, the atmosphere of spiritual authority abuse is similar to that of physical and sexual domestic abuse. According to an article on

domestic violence published by the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence (LCADV), at the root of any abuse is the uncontrollable quest for power and control.

The 8 behaviors given by the LCADV are outlined below and are modified to reflect a spiritual authority abuser:

- **Using coercion and threats:** Making and/or carrying out threats to ruin reputations in Christian community, stripping of positions or forcing them to do spiritually immoral & illegal things.
- **Using economic abuse:** Constantly asking for money and making them feel guilty or rejecting them when the person does not give in.
- **Using male privilege:** Allowing women to be servant and allowing men to make all the decisions about ministry; Women have no real authority in their delegated positions
- **Using children:** Using children to relay messages or mistreating children when the abusee has not cooperated with the abuser.
- **Minimizing, denying and blaming:** Saying the abuse did not happen, that the person is not a faithful or loyal Christian or not taking the concerns of abuse seriously.
- **Using isolation:** Controlling what the person does outside of abuser's sight, what they listen to, read, where they go, who they talk to other than the abuser.
- **Using emotional abuse:** Putting the person down, playing mind games, humiliating them, making them feel guilty for thoughts that the abuser does not agree with.
- **Using intimidation:** Making the person afraid of talking about negative feelings, leaving ministry or relationship.

Other behaviors that accompany spiritually abusive situations are jealousy, controlling behavior, unrealistic expectations, hypersensitivity, rigid rules, verbal abuse and the "Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde" syndrome. When someone abuses their position of spiritual authority it has a domino affect in the lives of both the abuser and the abused.

In scriptures such as Mark 9:42 and Proverbs 28:16, God makes it emphatically clear that those in authority have a responsibility to lead correctly or negative consequences are sure to follow. If you examine the lives of such leaders as Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-31:13), Abimelech (Judges 9:1-57), and Haman (Esther 3:1-7:10), you will see how their authority abuse ended in their physical death while hundreds that followed them were left dead mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Safeguards Against Spiritual Authority Abuse

What can be done to guard against becoming a spiritual authority abuser or being a victim of it? First, you must know and love who God has created you to be! God has created each person uniquely in His own image. You should avoid falling into the trap of changing who you are just to fit someone else's expectations.

Also, pay close attention to how you lead others. Bill Hybels says that you need to learn how to lead yourself before you can lead anyone else. Finally, you must understand the qualities of a Godly leader. Godly leaders have a sincere love for who they influence.

Healing Is Possible

Healing is possible after experiencing spiritual authority abuse. One gentleman shared, "When I realized that I was involved in an abusive ministry, I began to question God's authority. I did not attend any worship services for about two years. But once I allowed God to heal me, I had a clearer view of the role God and my spiritual leaders in my life."

Once you have realized that you have been a spiritual authority abuser or the victim of abuse, then you must ask God for healing, forgiveness and guidance. The Lord will let you know whether to confront the problem, leave the situation or expose it. Be sensitive to what God is saying to you. The next step is to immediately seek Christian counseling and support. Do not hide the fact that the abuse has occurred. Like any abuse, talking about it will be hard at first. But God heals what we are willing to reveal. 1 John 1:9 says, *"But if we confess our sins to Him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong"*.

Many times abusers have been abused themselves. So, you must pray for the abuser as well as the abused. Prayer is a stabilizer in a very difficult situation. The prayers of the righteous do avail much!

Conclusion

Ministry leadership is to be a daily service that leads others to a deeper connection with God. If you notice anyone operating contrary to this, it is a warning that something is out of order. It may be possible that your ministry leadership is operating under on the disguise of spiritual authority abuse. An even deeper question to ask, are you operating in spiritual authority abuse?

I encourage you to frequently take a long and detailed self-check of how you lead the people whom God has placed you over. Check your motives as to why you want to be in leadership. If your only motive is to try to improve your ego, social status or because you think it will clean up your reputation, then you are setting the stage for a spiritually abusive reign.

Also, while doing your self check, ask those you lead to honestly give you a constructive evaluation of your leadership. Ask them to assess your strengths, weakness and strategies for helping you improve. For example, maybe they have said that you are neglecting some areas of need because you have too much to do. Suggest that they assist you in their area of gifting to meet this goal. This will give them a sense of empowerment as well as help you in your leadership.

If by chance after your self assessment you discover that you are abusing your authority, then rectify the situation immediately. First, you must repent of your actions. Then apologize and ask for forgiveness from those you have abused. Next, you should seek professional Christian counseling. Ask God for wisdom and discernment as to how to restore and reconcile those whom you have abused. Then surround yourself with authentic Godly mentors who have the willingness and ability to counsel you. Select Godly mentors who will speak the truth in love seeking to help you achieve effective Godly leadership.

My purpose in writing this is to expose this dirty secret that is taunting a plethora of people in many churches today. After reading my article, I strongly encourage you to read the books **Authority Abuse** by

Bishop George Bloomer and *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen. I guarantee that you will gain more revelation so that you can overcome and deal with the receiving and giving of spiritual authority abuse.

Below are questions to ask yourself concerning the ministry leadership that you are under or the leadership you give. Answering “no” to 2 or more of these questions may reflect a problem.

- Do they embody high moral and ethical integrity in word and deed? (Titus 1:5-9)
- Do they enlighten you and give helpful advice?(2 Timothy 4:1-5)
- Do they educate, equip and empower you for works of service and new opportunities. (Ephesians 4:11-16)
- Do they embrace and develop your gifts and talents. (1 Corinthians 12:1-31)
- Do they encourage you in your failures and successes without judgment or jealousy? (Titus 2:1-7)

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