

The Yeast of the Pharisees: Spiritual Abuse by Pastors and Counselors

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Spiritual abuse began in the Garden of Eden: Satan manipulated God's words and convinced our earliest parents to follow him instead of God. This event epitomizes all spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse occurs across denominations, in non-denominational churches, and across faiths—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, et al. It usually has little to do with the theologies of major religious groups and more to do with the personality of individual leaders. Spiritual leaders with personality pathology—especially narcissistic, antisocial, obsessive-compulsive, borderline, and histrionic traits—may become spiritually abusive. Because of emotional, relational, and cognitive problems characterizing these personalities, the Bible, theology, and church relationships can be distorted by such leaders to the point of serious harm.

Christians believe that human beings have a spirit that connects us to God. As such, spiritual abuse consists of actions that distort or sever our relationship with God. Since identity derives from knowing who we are in relation to God, spiritual abuse harms self-concept and self-worth. Spiritual abuse also causes mental and emotional distress, and is therefore a form of mental/emotional abuse. In extreme cases, it includes physical and sexual abuse justified by the abuser as God's will through the twisting of scriptures.

Spiritual abuse has debilitating effects and is thus a legitimate focus in counseling or pastoral care. Depending on its manifestation, spiritual abuse may involve actions—such as severe mental/emotional abuse or physical/sexual abuse of children—that professionals are legally required to report to state child protection agencies. When perpetrators of spiritual abuse are licensed or certified counselors/pastors, ethics compel reporting the perpetrator's behavior to licensing boards or church/denominational oversight authorities.

Spiritual abuse is usually more severe in church than in counseling settings. Pastors are often accorded great respect and authority in critical life domains— marriage, sexuality, relationships, and finances. They lead communities that exert social pressures and offer belonging and fellowship. Abuse in these contexts affects most aspects of life.

Spiritual abuse occurs on a continuum. Some churches are virtually free of it; others are occasionally and mildly abusive; still others abuse frequently and with great intensity. Experiences of spiritual abuse are also unique to the individual. Some—such as those inclined to perfectionism, obsessions, anxiety, or self-derision—are more likely to hear messages as inflexible rules or condemnations. Others in the same environment and exposed to the same messages might not experience trauma.

Spiritual abuse can arise in counseling offices, but is usually less severe than in churches, for several reasons. Counselors are rigorously trained to be person-centered, to listen, and to respect the beliefs and choices of their clients. Counselors are less commonly accorded the same authority as pastors, nor is counseling typically imbued with the authority of God. Counseling is temporary; counseling is commonly and easily terminated. But church membership can be seen as a lifetime commitment. Leaving counseling does not mean separation from family and friends, but leaving one's church may.

Scripture addresses spiritual abuse best through Christ's scathing words to the Pharisees (Matthew 23), who are perfect examples of spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse has 12 features.

Authoritarianism. Rather than modeling and teaching obedience to God, abusive leaders expect believers to obey them. Councils of elders, deacons, etc., are expected to rubber stamp leaders' intentions rather than provide accountability.

Coercion. Rather than respecting freedom and conscience, as God does, and offering messages that persuade based on scriptural integrity and reason, abusive leaders use strong-arm tactics to coerce believers into overruling better judgment and following their demands.

Intimidation. Rather than building up the Body in the bonds of love, abusive leaders use threats of punishment, excommunication, and condemnation to force people into submission and continued church membership.

Terrorism. Rather than inviting people to follow Christ with the Gospel of love and forgiveness, abusive leaders intensify believers' fear, shame, and false guilt, teaching that problems in believers' lives are due to the believers' personal sins.

Condemnation. Rather than refraining from judgment lest they be judged, an abusive leader liberally condemns those who leave his church, outsiders, and those whom he defines as sinners. The message is that believers will join the ranks of the condemned should they deviate from the leader's teachings or leave his church/denomination. Individual members become the scapegoat when something goes awry in the congregation.

Classism. Christ was no respecter of persons. Abusive leaders are preoccupied with power, promoting church hierarchy, referring to and treating people according to their titles and roles. Those lower on the hierarchy are taught that their needs don't matter.

Conformity. Abusive leaders have the greatest hold over inexperienced, naïve, and dependent individuals who are seeking a strong leader. These individuals suppress their objections to the leaders' teachings for fear of being shamed or ostracized. Hence, abusive churches often appear unified, but beneath the surface there is discontent, anguish, whispers, rumors, secrets, and a desire among many to leave.

Manipulation. Rather than taking scripture in context, interpreting the Bible with the Bible and according to long-held Christian beliefs, abusive leaders twist scripture to convey their personal opinion rather than God's intent.

Irrationality. Because scripture is manipulated, one interpretation may contradict another. Interpretations may contradict reason and obvious reality. This requires suspension of critical thinking. Some abusive leaders claim to receive direct messages from God about their church or individual members, but these messages typically deviate from Scripture and reality.

Legalism. Rather than treating others with love, grace, and forgiveness, as Christ commanded, abusive leaders offer little grace. They communicate instead that one's worth and the amount of love one deserves depend on performance and status in their church. Abusive leaders expect believers to make heroic financial, time, and emotional sacrifices for their church and its members.

Isolation. Rather than respecting family ties, community obligations, and friendships, abusive leaders are concerned that such influences will interfere with their control over believers, so they encourage isolation from family, friends, and the outside world, and wage war against the

outside world as a sewer of sin devoid of anything redeeming.

Elitism. Rather than modeling and encouraging humility, abusive leaders beam with false pride and teach the same to believers. An attitude arises of, “We’re it! We’re special! Everyone else is condemned!,” partially compensating for the shame and worthlessness that believers feel because of other experiences in the abusive church. The leader instills that believers must protect the church’s image at any cost.

Ensnarement. Rather than promoting maturity among believers, abusive leaders inevitably promote self-doubt, guilt, and identity confusion, since believers struggle with the contradiction between what their conscience and reason tell them and what they are being taught. This ambivalence, coupled with fear of condemnation and loss of direction and fellowship, make it difficult and painful for believers to leave abusive churches.

Think about a cult, for at its most severe, a spiritually abusive church is a cult. It has so diverged from solid Biblical teaching and grown so warped in the authoritarian rule of one man, that it has become a place of idolatry where God is no longer worshipped. “Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough... Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees...” (Galatians 5:7-10, Matthew 16:6).

Assessing Religious Abuse

Assessment is simpler when clients already define their religious experiences as abusive. When clients do not recognize their possibly abusive experiences, cautions apply:

Respect adult clients’ religious choices. Labeling religious experiences as abusive may interfere with religious autonomy. However, therapist authenticity, integrity, and responsibility require that possible religious abuse be addressed openly. It may be useful to assist clients in articulating the issues to arrive at their own conclusions about abuse. Remember, not everyone experiences the same events in the same manner; seemingly harsh religious experiences may not traumatize everyone.

Regarding children, utilize an objective standard of abuse. Most authorities agree that religious abuse has definitively occurred when the experience has led to serious and diagnosable behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental disorders. Short of this, it is inadvisable to use the word “abuse” to describe religious experiences.

A psychometrically valid and reliable questionnaire may be useful in this assessment, such as the Remuda Spiritual Assessment Questionnaire (www.remudaranch.com), which contains a factor score measuring spiritual abuse. It is short, easy to use, with either paper and pencil or computerized administration, and free of charge to healthcare professionals.

Treating Religious Abuse

It is not possible in this overview to detail treatment for spiritual abuse. Detailed treatment resources appear in the bibliography. However, there are some basics. Common issues arising among clients in recovery from spiritual abuse include betrayal of trust, learning anew whom to trust, fallout with and forgiveness of God and family, grief over lost years, and understanding grace and God’s loving nature. Those who have experienced spiritual abuse often evidence the following additional difficulties:

- Feelings of worthlessness as opposed to dignity and self-respect
- Efforts at control as opposed to an ability to surrender trustingly to God
- Shame vs. self-acceptance
- Guilt about vs. recognition that past sins have been forgiven
- Anxiety about performance and punishment vs. peace
- Moral rigidity vs. grace and unconditional love
- Isolation and secrecy vs. a sense of belonging and ability to be authentic with others
- Addictions/compulsions vs. healthy boundaries and coping skills
- Confusion vs. clear understanding of the Gospel and nature of God
- Hopelessness vs. a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction

Regardless of spiritual abuse history, spiritual interventions are contraindicated when clients don't want them, are psychotic or delusional. If spiritual interventions are warranted, inform clients at treatment inception that you may use spiritual interventions and obtain informed consent. Spiritual interventions are most effective once trusting therapeutic relationships have developed. However, Christian counselors should express a commonly understood Gospel truth, including Christ's atoning sacrifice, forgiveness rather than punishment, and God's unconditional, unmerited grace and love rather than legalism, performance, or the need for perfection.

Primary spiritual interventions include: teaching spiritual concepts; bibliotherapy; prayer; spiritual imagery and meditation; forgiveness; counsel from pastors or spiritual directors; encouraging involvement in a healthy faith community; cognitive restructuring focusing on the nature of God; a mature understanding of suffering, self hatred and perfectionism as obstacles to receiving God's love; and an application of clients' values to their own lives to reduce cognitive dissonance. Self-help groups, such as Christian Recovery International, may be recommended.

It may be necessary to guide clients toward finding a healthy faith community. The four F's suggest that healthy faith communities offer:

- Food: sound Biblical messages promoting personal growth and maturity
- Fellowship: supportive relationships
- Fit: commonality with other members
- Fruit: service to community and one another

It is a sad commentary about the modern church that abusive Christian leaders are so pervasive that we must write articles like this and give them prominence in order to warn the faithful. Yet it is also true that perverted pastors, false prophets, and evil leaders have always existed in the history of Israel and the Church. And most importantly, if we cling to God and stay vigilant, He promises to make the way straight for us.