

Spiritual Abuse

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Introduction

Spiritual abuse is a relatively new term but the practice it defines is probably as old as civilisation. The available literature on spiritual abuse, which generally comes from the USA, has been written in the last ten years. In New Zealand, awareness and emerging evidence of this issue has occurred over more recent years. Spiritual abuse appears to be a significant problem facing the Church. Curtis Hinds,¹ speaking from ten years involvement in international ministry, considered spiritual abuse the number one sin committed in the church. Some authors² have written sequels to their books on spiritual abuse after their earlier books prompted a huge response from people identifying with the material. Even in talking to a small number of people affected by spiritual abuse³, I was made aware of the serious impact, and the growing numbers affected in my own city. Unfortunately there appears to be an inability on the part of abusive leaders to see the destructive impact they have. Two leaders referred to by respondents were involved in what I consider to be serious situations of abuse, yet they continue to be invited to speak at Christian gatherings nationwide.

Defining Spiritual Abuse

All the definitions of spiritual abuse in the literature involve the use of *power* or *authority* to *manipulate* and *control*. The authority is often a leader but may be, for example, from a church board towards a leader, or a system such as a set of beliefs or a way of doing things which doesn't allow for individual freedom.

Richard Gula uses Rollo May's⁴ continuum of power to illustrate how power can be used to control and dominate but it can also be used to liberate and empower others.

"The moral challenge is to see that in our interactions with others, the right use of power moves away from dominating others through exploitation and manipulation, and that it moves towards liberating others through nutrient and integrative acts of power."⁵

In spiritual abuse, power is exercised in ways which restrict rather than develop another's freedom.

¹ Curtis Hinds is a Canadian who considers himself to have been both an abuser and abused. He gave a seminar entitled "Coming Out Of Spiritual Abuse" several years ago. I was told this seminar was sponsored by Victory Christian Church, Auckland. I managed to obtain a copy of the tapes from that seminar but in spite of two phone calls to the church I have not been able to confirm the venue or the date.

² Jeff VanVonderon, Ronald Enroth

³ I interviewed four people, received questionnaire responses from a further four people and spoke to two counsellors who have worked with spiritual abuse victims.

⁴ Rollo May, Power and Innocence pgs 99-119, cited by Richard Gula, Ethics in Pastoral Ministry, pg 85

⁵ Richard Gula, Ethics in Pastoral Ministry, pg 86

Spiritual Abuse in Practice.

Nicki⁶, who is in her early thirties, was attending a Christian training centre offering a number of courses. During a chapel service, people were asked to break into small groups and pray regarding a situation. Nicki and five others from her course, formed a group and although the background music was particularly loud, which made it difficult to hear each other's prayers, they persevered, with different members of the group feeling they had leading from God as they prayed. As the prayer time came to an end the leader of this centre walked towards them from the other side of the room and "launched in, no questions, just both barrels blazing." He proceeded to bombard them very loudly with what they experienced as verbal assault, most of the time gesticulating at them with his finger. He told them, among other things, that they had a spirit of rebellion, a critical spirit, and a religious spirit. He criticised some group members for having originally sat at the back of the chapel, telling them Satan would pluck them off. After a further verbal tirade at the group, he turned and walked away, leaving them in varying states of confusion, shock and distress, wondering what they had done to precipitate such an outburst. Members of this group recognised the total inappropriateness of the leader's actions and over the following days initiated procedures to talk with him about what had happened. In a subsequent meeting, which involved all members of the course to which the prayer group belonged, the first thing that took place was the leader reading Philippians 2 v 1-18. Used in this setting, Nicki and others experienced the passage as silencing and disempowering. The leader also expressed some concerns about this class in general, and when asked for specifics, would only say that they were not enough in the spirit, because if they were, they would see things as he did. They were also astonished to learn that what had triggered his outburst in the chapel was that they had been instructed to *stand* and pray and, as none of them had heard this said, they sat. This had been interpreted by the leader as an act of direct disobedience. In spite of the fact that they communicated to him their unawareness of that specific instruction, he still justified what he had done, saying that God had told him to do this and Jesus would have done it that way. Nicki told him she felt confused because he was saying God told him one thing, whereas she was feeling God was saying something very different to her, and asked what she should do with that discrepancy. His reply? "It comes down to this honey, I'm the teacher, you're the pupil. Judge for yourself."

This situation highlights several aspects of spiritual abuse.

A. Control through position.

Abusive leaders tend to set themselves up as an ultimate authority. They consider themselves to be God's authority, with an ability to hear God's voice not available to all Christians, interpreting any difference of opinion as a challenge. One respondent quoted a senior pastor under whom he worked as saying "If anyone has a different opinion from me, someone will have to go and that someone won't be me." Such leaders often become increasingly isolated from those they lead, including fellow staff members. A respondent told of working with her husband in youth and pastoral ministry for five and a half years, yet the senior pastor spoke to her on only about ten occasions.

⁶ Not her real name. The description of the event that took place however has not been altered.

B. Physical and psychological manipulation.

Physical gestures such as shaking a finger and speaking in a loud voice become means of intimidation and control. Using a place such as this chapel service can cause those on the receiving end to feel publicly shamed and humiliated and sends strong messages to those witnessing it about how to avoid a similar fate. Fear, as in "Satan will pluck you off", is used to manipulate. A respondent told me she and her husband were instructed by the senior pastor under whom they worked to tell people who wanted to leave their church that they would be out of the will of God and who knows what would happen to them.

C. Denial of a person's spirituality

Abusive leadership treats others as spiritually inferior to themselves, makes shaming responses about another's spirituality and fails to recognise the ability of another to hear God for themselves.⁷

D. Use of religious language

In spiritual abuse the Bible can be misused, with passages used in isolation and out of context for the leaders own purpose. The use of phrases such as "God told me" and "Jesus would have done it that way" become totally disempowering.

E. Performance based spirituality

Spiritual abuse can happen when spiritual disciplines and belief systems are used to make others live up to a spiritual standard. External performance then becomes the means of proving how spiritual a person is. Jeff Van Vonderen says this shows itself as

"understanding that behaviour can't initially gain God's approval (saved by grace through faith) yet living as if spiritual growth from that point on depends on personal effort."⁸

Curtis Hinds explains it as a change from

"come as you are" to "come as you are and we'll change you to who you are supposed to be."⁹

This problem is not new! Jesus warned his followers to be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16 v6) and in Matthew chapter 23 we find out how much value they placed on external appearance. Paul's letter to the Galatians challenged them to return to the gospel he preached to them, after certain people had maintained that it was necessary to adhere to some Old Testament laws, especially circumcision, in order to be a follower of Christ. The implication becomes that the more you do and the more you know, the more God will be pleased with you and bless you. I believe it is important to reflect on what is being added in our day to the gospel Paul preached, on what are the "heavy loads"¹⁰ being placed on people's shoulders. One respondent said in her church she "felt a lot of pressure to perform, the sermons

⁷ At a further meeting to try and work through this situation, Nicki told the leader she felt he had spiritually raped her with his response to her question. She told me that it took the most precious and central part of her life and spirit, and if you "take away my direct line from GodI die."

⁸ Jeff VanVonderen, When God's People Let You Down, pg 123

⁹ See footnote 1

¹⁰ Matthew 23 v 4

were often around praying harder, working harder, serving more and especially giving more." In this system, any personal difficulty one has can be solved by doing more spiritual activity. Coupled with this, I believe, is the often unspoken belief that their way is the right and highest way. If a person is unable to find meaning for themselves with that particular approach they can be made to feel a lesser Christian who needs to repent, try harder, or get their priorities right.

Who Are the Abused?

While no one is really immune, there are characteristics which make us more vulnerable to spiritual abuse. These include a strong need for affirmation and approval, a prior distorted image of God, a background of previous abuse and a difficulty understanding the concept of grace. When these attributes combine with a strong desire to please and serve God, the likelihood of submitting to spiritual abuse is increased.

A group who seem to be particularly vulnerable are those who could generally be described as in the process of making or having made the transition from Fowler's third to fourth stage in their faith journey. It is my observation that some in this category find themselves experiencing symptoms of spiritual abuse without having been the recipient of the more obvious kind of abuse as experienced by Nikki. Alan Jamieson says

"The transition to the fourth stage of faith is probably the most difficult to traverse and involves the greatest dismantling of what was learnt and experienced in the previous stage."¹¹

It seems that the effects of trying to do this dismantling in a non supportive or even hostile environment can impact a person quite deeply. It may not be immediately clear to the one making the transition exactly what is happening for them. They notice that the old ways of doing things no longer seem relevant or meaningful for them, yet their faith community holds these things as sacred, fundamental and even non negotiable to the life of a good Christian. Expressions of doubt may be quickly silenced. It can be a very confusing and isolating time for the journeyer. During this process I believe it is the system rather than an individual which becomes abusive for such a person. There may be some who would hesitate to call this abuse. However, I believe it can be very important for one suffering from symptoms of abuse to be encouraged to recognise and name it as such for the purpose of moving through it and finding healing and freedom.

¹¹ Alan Jamieson, [A Churchless Faith](#), pg 127

Who Are the Abusers?

There will be as many different reasons people abuse as there are abusive situations. However, some common threads are a deep seated insecurity, fear of failure, lack of relational skills, and a wrong or unbalanced understanding of the truth of God. Abusive leaders may use others to fulfil their own needs and make them look successful. It appears to me that they are lacking in self-awareness.

Effects of Spiritual Abuse

Juanita and Dale Ryan say "Spiritual abuse is the kind of abuse which damages the central core of who we are."¹² Several respondents expressed their ongoing difficulty in trusting their own reality. One said "It challenges all that you are and all that you know. It destabilises the very foundation of your life." Consequently, every area of a person's life can be affected. Those who spoke to me or completed the questionnaire typically referred to a wide variety of effects, as listed below.

Physical

- high blood pressure
- chest pains
- trouble with eyesight at stressful times
- physical exhaustion
- general deterioration of health
- stomach churning, sweating at the thought of involvement in activities such as going to church or reading the Bible

Social

- lack of ability to trust people, especially those in authority, both in and out of the church but also extended to Christians in general, with a cautiousness in social interactions
- loss of friendships due to people taking sides or false information being circulated by the abuser
- loss of friendships due to pressure of ministry commitments required of them leaving inadequate time for socialising
- withdrawing socially because of feeling so empty

Emotional

- very low self esteem
- feelings of inferiority, shame, not measuring up
- guilt because of inability to perform to expectations
- deep depression
- strong feelings of anger, resentment
- loss of confidence in capabilities as a person
- fear that what was said will happen to those who walk a different path may actually come to pass
- suicidal feelings

¹² Juanita and Dale Ryan, Recovering From Spiritual Abuse, pg 9, cited in Ken Blue, Healing Spiritual Abuse, pg 15

Spiritual

- serious disillusionment with Christianity, resulting in considering dumping it
- close relationship with God stripped away
- confusion about what God required
- questioning own ability to hear God
- thinking something must be wrong with them spiritually
- lack of freedom to worship in own way
- disillusionment because what appeared to be God's will for their life was destroyed

I found that while spiritual abuse resulted in a significant struggle in relationship with God for some respondents, others had a strong sense of God and experienced relationship with God as carrying on separately from the abuse. However, this did not mean that the effects of the abuse were minimal.

Spiritual Direction of the Spiritually Abused

I believe spiritual directors have a lot to offer to the spiritually abused in their journey of healing. However, I wonder whether more needs to be done to increase the profile of spiritual direction in the wider Christian community in order that those who could benefit from such a ministry know of its existence and how to access it.

I offer the following thoughts for directing those who have been spiritually abused. They come from my reflections on comments made in interviews or questionnaires, and my own experience as a directee.

- 1) Seek to know the love and compassion of God for yourself and the directee so as to provide a loving and safe environment.¹³
- 2) Be aware that trust is a significant issue for victims of spiritual abuse. It may take time for the directee to build up a good level of trust to both tell their story and uncover and express their deeper feelings.
- 3) Recognise that a directee may be fearful about speaking of their experience. Phrases such as "touch not the Lord's anointed" and shaming messages about unloving thoughts and attitudes may have been a strong part of their background. Gently give permission and encouragement to talk.
- 4) Listen sincerely to the directee. Seek to respond with understanding to their story, acknowledging the emotional impact and validating their experience.¹⁴

¹³ Curtis Hinds says that we have been used to dealing with our problems by teaching about it. He says you cannot be exhorted, counselled, preached or shaken out of spiritual abuse - the only way is to be loved out of it. I agree with him that being loved is central to the healing process, but I also believe that at appropriate times it can be helpful to have some input which allows us to look at what abusive leaders and systems have taught us from another perspective. It can be necessary to challenge the truth we have lived by to see if it really measures up with the fuller picture of God's truth. So it is not about a choice between love or teaching but about love permeating everything that takes place.

¹⁴ Nicki spoke of her need for validation, but commented that she did not want just blind validation. She wanted someone who would help her explore what happened, help her to know how she got to where she was, how reality was perceived, where right and wrong was. She saw this as helping her to learn from the experience. While this is a constructive long term goal, I suspect some abuse victims may

- 5) Make allowance for the fact that some of what are considered to be basic spiritual disciplines, for example Bible reading, prayer and church attendance may have become so enmeshed with the abusive system that they become toxic to the victim of spiritual abuse. Be open to other ways a person can nurture their relationship with God at this stage of their journey.¹⁵
- 6) Be sensitive with the use of God-language. Some language may have different layers of meaning for the directee and may trigger unnecessary resistance.
- 7) Encourage the directee to begin to listen to their own inner thoughts and feelings. Positively reinforce expression of these and guide the directee away from automatically judging them in a negative way.
- 8) Be careful that the directee does not come to depend on the director as an authority figure, replacing the previous abusive one. Over time, help the directee develop their own inner authority and a growing confidence that they can hear God's voice for themselves.
- 9) Help the directee question that which has been taught to them in God's name. Where appropriate, offer Bible passages that broaden an understanding of God, for instance those about love, grace and rest. Books which speak of relationship with God in new ways could also be helpful.¹⁶ Distorted images of God which may have resulted from teaching and experience may also be addressed in this way. Books specifically about spiritual abuse may also help increase their level of understanding. (See bibliography)
- 10) Some abuse victims may need professional counselling in place of or alongside spiritual direction. Supervision will be important in making any decisions here.
- 11) Listen to and be open to the Spirit. Hold this directee as a much loved and valued person before God and be open to how God may choose to be uniquely at work in the process of divine healing.

Final Comments

As the level of awareness about spiritual abuse continues to grow, there will be increasing numbers of people who recognise themselves as being affected. My reading indicates that the abused are much more likely to arrive at this understanding than the abusers. It is my prayer that both the spiritually abused and the spiritual abusers will find their way to ministries such as spiritual direction and begin to move into the healing and freeing love of God.

initially be too fragile for this more exploratory approach and their prior need may be simply to be listened to and believed.

¹⁵ For instance, enjoying God in creation, the use of art and music, journalling, meeting with a trusted friend for sharing and encouragement.

¹⁶ I have found authors such as Sue Monk Kidd, Philip Yancey, Henri Nouwen, Joyce Huggett and Joyce Rupp to be helpful here.

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Web sites

www.spiritualabuse.com

www.spiritualabuse.org

www.SAFEchurch.com

Appendix 1 : Questionnaire

Questions re spiritual abuse

1. What were the circumstances and nature of the abuse?
2. Did you recognise the situation / person as abusive straight away? If yes, what was it that alerted you to this? If not, what helped you to do so at a later time?
3. What do you see as the effects of the abuse on your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual life?
4. What have you needed in order to process what you experienced?
5. Where do you feel you are now in the journey towards healing?
6. What would you want to say to anyone you knew to be in an abusive situation

Please feel free to add other comments that have not been included in answering the above questions.

Appendix 2 : Further Information from Questionnaires and Interviews

- Most of the respondents did not initially recognise their situations as abusive. They listed friends, a family member, a professional counsellor, a spiritual director, reading books and listening to a tape series as helping to bring awareness. One person spoke of it as being like the parts of a jigsaw slowly coming together. She also commented that the "don't talk" rule in operation in her church meant understanding took longer to grow.
- All respondents spoke of the recovery process being ongoing over a period of two to three years. While they now sense some distance from the initial feelings, they still notice its effect in areas such as trusting their own reality, trusting others and feeling safe in Christian situations. For one respondent, filling in the questionnaire was the first time she has ever put her thoughts down on paper and she found this a valuable exercise.
- Four of the respondents spoke specifically about a new freedom and excitement in their relationship with God since working through the abuse.