Spiritual Abuse Coming From Christian Leaders
An Overview of Spiritual Abuse Among Christians and Their Authoritarian Leaders Or: It’s My Way or the Highway!

Have you ever, or are you presently involved in a church body wherein you have either noticed, or felt the following behaviors: a troubling, over-reaching authority of a pastor, their spouse, the elders or deacons of the church body, or simply some other person who seeks recognition? It is a craving need for selfish attention that comes in some capacity of authority by demanding attention, some measure of control, or influence beyond what is normally acceptable? Such behaviors are usually unsolicited and only benefit those exacting such an uplift of their status.

Let’s take a look at recognizing and identifying these behaviors. Why do we want to focus on such unacceptable behaviors? Because they lead to the possibility of what is defined as “spiritual abuse.” This spiritual abuse causes discord, personal pain and agony, and sets in motion the wheels for establishing an unwanted “Jezebel spirit” of nastiness, anguish, misery, or distress directly and indirectly on and among the church body, or various targeted individuals. This is not a heavenly behavior or attitude for any church body member or leader to possess. This kind of treatment is called spiritual abuse and it has evil roots and inclinations which do not belong anywhere, let alone within the walls of a sanctuary of Christ. What causes spiritual abuse in God’s territory where peace and harmony “only” should prevail and exist?
**Definition:** Spiritual abuse is the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help. Sometimes abuse arises out of a doctrinal position. At other times it occurs because of legitimate personal needs of a leader that are being met by illegitimate means. Spiritually abusive religious systems are sometimes described as legalistic, mind controlling, religiously addictive, and authoritarian. They are highly dangerous in that they demeanor people within the church body, easily denigrate and do injurious mental and emotional harm to individuals which may easily result in spiritual abuse which is painful, degrading and unwarranted by anyone, let alone a high positioned leader within the church body, i.e, the pastor of the church. Hmmm???

An authoritarian leadership style. God calls church leaders to be servant-hearted, tender and compassionate. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he did not "have dominion over your faith" see 2 Corinthians 1:24, but
that he served in humility alongside them. Immature, untested leaders may not know how to serve, and they may end up wounding people with their harsh demands, threats and dominating attitudes. You can be certain that authoritarian leaders do not submit their lives to anyone; they are “all about themselves,” and they are truly unfit to be pastors.

**A secretive atmosphere.** The word occult actually means "secret." And secrecy is always a hallmark of a spiritually abusive church. Leaders are not transparent about their own lives, they don't allow members to question anything, and the financial records of the church are closed. A healthy pastor encourages openness, welcomes input and invites participation. You can be certain that if there is secrecy in a church, there is something to hide. Don't submit yourself to such a system. But do pray for it to change for the glory of God and not the minister or person in-charge of the sinfulness.

**Spiritual elitism.** It's interesting that most cult-like churches don't grow to be large, but there are several exceptions. In the case of one waning church, which had
shrunk to 20 extremely loyal members, in a spiritually toxic environment, members were told they were the "elect few" or the "Green Berets" who are spiritually superior to others. Spiritually abusive churches often bash other denominations, insisting that their doctrines are best and true. This becomes a breeding ground for strange teachings. We live in a time when this kind of thinking is running rampant around the world. Too many people want to be “special” in all the wrong ways.

Financial manipulation. There's nothing wrong with a church asking for money. God wants us to use our resources to fund the spreading of the gospel and to support its ministers. But in unhealthy churches, people are coerced, berated or threatened at offering time. One pastor was known for tracking his members' finances and personally demanded that they give their annual tax refund checks in the offering. This is spiritual extortion. 2 Corinthians 9:7-9 says giving should be done cheerfully and without compulsion. “You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure. “For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.” And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, “They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever.”

No respect for personal liberty. Some ministers may demand that his assistant come to his house in the wee hours of the morning to take dictation for sermons—as if he could not write his own study notes! This is
unacceptable and a form of abuse as well. There have been situations where church volunteers were forced to work unreasonably long hours and/or actually expected to perform chores or other house work for the pastor without hesitation. Also, not acceptable. Mature Christian leaders, like the apostle Paul, view themselves as "bond-servants for Jesus' sake." 2 Corinthians 4:5 “You see, we don’t go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus’ sake. —and mature Christian leaders would never treat people like slaves. If you see slavery in your church, you can be sure the Holy Spirit is grieved. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty!

Hyper-spirituality. Leaders who have not been properly trained or mentored will overcompensate for their lack of experience by pretending to have an inside track to God. Insecurity breeds pride. And in charismatic churches where we believe in supernatural guidance, this pride can open the door for weird forms of abuse. Before too long, the super-spiritual leader will invent excuses for his bad behavior by saying that "God told him" to do unreasonable
or unbiblical things. When a leader claims an inside track to God but never surrounds himself with godly counselors, watch out! He is headed for a train wreck and any lackeys he does have at this side and beckon call, are also going to be on that same train.

Spiritual abuse experiences usually include:

• A leader above you telling you that even though you may be burned out and losing your health, you had to stay in the ministry because if you didn’t you would lose all your gifting to do future ministry.

• A church that repeatedly is told that they basically have the corner on the market of Jesus and that if they have to go elsewhere, they will miss God’s highest calling.

• A leader who finds ministry to be a vehicle for his own great gain, lying and manipulating donors to earn more and more money, especially if they are afraid he may leave
to go to another church. Hey! Let him go and buy him a bus ticket!

• A ministry that shames you into doing their personal bidding and accepting their outside lifestyles, including where you go, what hobbies you may have, what personal clubs you may be part of and even the television shows you watch and the music you choose to listen to. The list goes on, and it’s all about them and not you.

• Leaders may single you out, threaten you and chide you because you brought up a concern that others saw. If you are not an antagonist, which is one deplorable thing, you had the right to make others aware of something that was or is not right in the ministry of the preacher. Deal with it, and don’t dodge it.

GET BACK! THIS IS THE INNER CIRCLE AND IT IS SECRET!
Spiritually abusive ministries and ministers usually... 

1. **Have a distorted view of respect.** They forget the simple adage that respect is earned, not granted. Abusive leaders demand respect without having earned it by good, honest living.

2. **Demand allegiance as proof of the follower’s allegiance to Christ.** It’s either his/her way or the highway. And if a follower deviates, he is guilty of deviating from Jesus.

3. **Use exclusive language.** “We’re the only ministry really following Jesus.” “We have all the right theology.” Believe their way of doing things, thinking theologically, or handling ministry and church is the only correct way. Everyone else is wrong, misguided or stupidly naive. The *Bible* is the right way without deviations, or detours into unchristian doctrines or the minister’s personal choice of interpretation. Always ask where what is being preached or espoused can be found “in the *Bible*.” Where can that dogma be found in the *Bible*?

4. **Create a culture of fear and shame.** Often, there is no grace for someone who fails to live up to the church’s or ministry’s expectation. And if someone steps outside of the often-unspoken rules, leaders shame them into compliance. They can’t admit personal failure, but they often search out failure in others and use that knowledge to hold others in fear and captivity. They often quote Scriptures about not touching God’s anointed or bringing accusations against an elder. Yet they often confront sin in
others, particularly ones who bring up legitimate biblical issues. Or they have their circle of influence take on this task, silencing critics. This behavior is very common, especially with insecure preachers or other apprehensive, diffident or reticent leaders in the church body.

5. Often have a charismatic leader at the helm who starts off well but slips into arrogance, protectionism and pride. Where a leader might start off being personable and interested in others’ issues, he/she eventually withdraws to a small group of “yes people” and isolates himself or herself from the needs of others. Such behavior harbors a cult of personality issues, and if the central figure of the ministry, perhaps the minister, left the church body, the cult-entity would collapse, as it was entirely dependent on one person to hold the place together. We should only be relying on Jesus Christ and not confiding with “Guru Gomahdi Mahhidi.”
6. Cultivate a dependence on one leader or leaders for spiritual information. Personal discipleship isn’t encouraged. Often the Bible gets pushed away (somewhat like Jim Jones) to the fringes, unless the main leader is teaching it.

7. Demand servanthood of their followers, but live prestigious, privileged lives. They live aloof from their followers and justify their extravagance as God’s favor and approval on their ministry. Unlike Jesus’ instructions to take the last seat, they often take the first seat at events and court others to grant them privileges.

8. Buffer him/herself from criticism by placing people around themselves whose only allegiance is to the leader. Views those who bring up issues as enemies. Those who were once friends/allies swiftly become enemies once a concern is raised. Sometimes, these folks are banished, told to be silent or shamed into submission.

9. Hold to outward performance but reject authentic spirituality. Places burdens on followers to act a certain
way, dress an acceptable way and have an acceptable lifestyle. Church body adherents must be a mirror image of the minister. . .oh, but isn’t that supposed to be a mirror image of Christ? Hmmm???? Has your preacher become A Grand Pooh Pa in his own image and mind? Once again, Run! Run! Run!

10. Use exclusivity for allegiance. Followers close to the leader or leaders feel like insiders. Everyone else is on the outside, though they long to be in that inner circle.

The idea of spiritual abuse is not a new phenomenon. In the Old Testament, God spoke against those who operated in their own authority while abusing the very people they were to bless. In Jeremiah 5:30-31 read, "An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?" God brought an indictment against the religious leaders of the Old Testament. We see the Lord's anger expressed against those who operate in their own authority. Consumed with their own ambition, these leaders have convinced the people that their power
is divine. Yet in reality, these false prophets are merely wielding their self-imposed influence for personal gain, claiming they speak for God.

In Jeremiah 6:13-14 we read again of self-absorbed prophets and priests who are so preoccupied with their own needs being met that the needs of the people are being ignored. "From the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for gain, and from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely. And they have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace." A common characteristic of an abusive religious system is that the real needs of the people are lost in the never-ending quest by the leaders for personal fulfillment and happiness.

Jesus Christ had big problems with the Pharisees of the New Testament, whom He openly confronted concerning the way they treated others. Read the New Testament, it doesn't take a tremendous amount of insight to see that the confrontations Jesus had were not with tax collectors, adulteresses, prostitutes or other "sinners." His confrontations were with the religious leaders and the religious system of His day. Speaking about these abusing and selfish Pharisees, Jesus said, "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers." Matthew 23:4 Or for an even clearer picture from another version of the Bible: "They tie up heavy loads, hard to bear, and place them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not lift a finger to help bear them." Jesus is referring to the people being weighed
down by rules and regulations that needed to be performed in order to gain the acceptance of the Pharisees. In the same way, many believers today have found themselves crushed beneath the religious baggage of an abusive system. Each day thousands of church members find themselves struggling to earn the favor and approval of a modern-day Pharisee.

Jesus cared deeply about His people and how they were treated. When He saw the multitudes, "He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" Matthew 9:36
Or in another Bible version it says. "They were bewildered (harassed and distressed and dejected and helpless), like sheep without a shepherd."
Notice that Jesus saw them as harassed. This word conveys the idea of some outside force pressing upon the people, causing them to feel weary, distressed and downcast. This outside force was the religious system that placed its emphasis on outward appearances. It was a system that promised peace based on one's ability to follow the prescribed rules and regulations. If one failed, then there was judgment. This was direct spiritual abuse and if was unacceptable to the Lord. In fact, He condemned it, did He not?

Not having a shepherd didn't mean that the people lacked for those who told them what to do. There were plenty of Pharisees willing to do that. It meant they had no one to lead them to spiritual green pastures. A shepherd doesn't drive his sheep as cattlemen drive their cattle. A shepherd leads his sheep to a safe place where food is plentiful and where they can find rest. Is it any wonder Jesus said: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30
A healthy church body should produce peace and rest for everyone’s soul. Establishing healthy spiritual relationships will always be a challenge, but the process will prevent you from becoming weary and worn, trying to jump through religious hoops that promise God's acceptance and love. If, in order to gain the acceptance of its leaders, your church constantly requires more and more of your life with no end in sight, and little encouragement along the way, then you may want to re-examine the church body you are part of and just maybe move on to where your yoke will diminish in being a burden on you.

God's intention all along has been for His church body to be healthy, life-giving, faith-centered, grace-centered, and Christ-centered. But because He has chosen to use frail, sin-prone individuals to lead His church, there is always the possibility that a church body may unsuspectingly fall into deception or unhealthy spiritual patterns. You must stay alert to individuals who are considered to be “empire builders” and/or “power seekers” who demand that everything goes “their way” or “the highway” for all those they tend to dominate without exception.

God loves you and He doesn’t want to have to manage every second of your life. He gave you a free will to make godly choices, if you closely follow Him and His commandments and desire for you. His way is best and it is not the proverbial highway.

“When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources
he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your heart as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.” Ephesians 3:14-19

When God gives you His peace about an impossible situation, you are not living in denial. You are living in faith. Keep trusting Him! He WILL come through for you if He has given you His peace about it.

God’s Peace to You