

A man in a dark t-shirt and shorts stands on a sandy beach, looking out at the ocean. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds from a sunset or sunrise. The water is dark blue with white foam from the waves washing onto the shore. In the distance, a lighthouse or tower is visible on the horizon.

DEALING WITH SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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Dealing with Spiritual Abuse

Discovering what spiritual abuse is

Sometimes in life you get hurt by other Christians. It happens, even though we wish it didn't. How do you deal with that, especially if that hurt comes through leaders that are highly gifted, or are strong visionaries and have strong personalities to match? When does strong leadership become spiritual abuse? How do you know if you've been subject to spiritual abuse? What do you do about it if you have, and how do you recover from it? These are a lot of questions, but they are very valid ones which I hope to answer for you over this series of posts.

Wrong mindsets and models

Let me say upfront that not all strong leaders are abusive, and even amongst those that are there are very few of them who set out to be abusive. For most of them it happens because they've learnt from wrong leadership models, or fallen victim to pride.

Somehow, we've accepted the idea that the strong decisive alpha male role model is the one that we need for running churches and ministries. It is only one type of leader and it is not a scripturally sound one. Scripture is very clear that leadership is a serving role, it is not about personality or a strong leadership style. Jesus is our ultimate leadership model and He was very clear that He came to serve, not to rule over people (Matthew 20:28). In 1 Timothy 3 we see Paul lay out what leaders should be like and Scripture talks about it in many other places, also. In 1 Peter 5:3 it says that leaders should be "Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."

Scripture doesn't use the term "spiritual abuse" anywhere, but it alludes to it in several places, and God shows that He is definitely against leaders abusing people. Passages which discuss spiritual abuse include Ezekiel 34:1-10; Matthew 20:25; 23:1-33; Luke 22:24-27; and 1 Peter 5:3. Each of these passages involves God condemning leaders who mistreat the people under their care in order to promote their own welfare or ideology.

Strong leadership or abuse?

When does leadership cross the boundary and become abuse? It doesn't happen overnight; it happens usually over time. The analogy of the frog in the pot is a very apt one in this case. In that analogy it is said, *"To cook a frog you should put it in a pot of cold water and slowly turn up the heat until it is boiling. If you put the frog in boiling water it would react and jump out, but put it in cold water and slowly heat it and it will accept the slow changes and not realise it's in danger until it is too late."* Spiritual abuse usually happens like that – slowly

over time things get worse and few people recognise it. Those that do recognise it and speak up are called dissenters and ostracised; the others don't want that to happen to them, so they say nothing and then it's too late.

Most abusive leaders don't start out as abusive; they start out with good intentions and a call of God on their life. However, many church leaders receive little, if any, biblical training on how to be a good leader; they often get training that favours secular leadership models over biblical ones. If they've gone to theological college they may receive some biblical leadership training, but if not, then all they have to learn from are the leaders they've seen in action, or books and videos. Most leaders learn on the job as they go, and, sadly much of the decision-making process tends to happen in crisis moments and be reactive, rather than flowing from good training, preparation, and wisdom.

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There are different types of bad leaders – strong, pushy ones that rely on personality or gift, insecure, or unconfident ones, and unwise ones. While all these types of leaders may cause problems, they are not necessarily all abusive leaders.

Strong leaders may rely on their personality, strengths, and gifts to lead, usually using these to build their ministry. They often employ secular business and growth models to church life believing that church should be run like a business. They will either believe they know what's needed and don't need help or input from others, or they will model themselves after other strong leaders they have seen operating, seeking to emulate their success. Success and reputation can often be very important to them and a person's success in ministry is often measured on the size of their congregation and their influence over people.

Many leaders while presenting as confident and strong are, in fact, insecure and unconfident, and think that they have to present a tough, having-it-all-together image for people to respect them. While that may work to some degree, in the end people respect you more as a leader if you're accessible, show that you're human, and admit your faults when you're wrong. People can truly respect someone like that. A tough, has-it-all-together leader will engender some respect, but people will always be a little fearful and unsure of them in the end.

An immature or untrained leader will often look to other leaders that they see functioning well in the church, and try to model themselves on that leader, forgetting that all they are seeing is the public face, not necessarily the true person. This, of course, presents a distorted view of what a leader is actually like. I have seen many leaders present one way in public and a completely different way off stage; a very simple example is those that yell all the time when preaching yet speak very normally off stage.

An immature leader will think that they have to prove they have a right to lead, and will often do so by taking a firm stand and demanding respect, forgetting that respect is earned. You cannot demand it just because of a title you hold. Someone trying to prove their value through their position will not find it easy to serve, because their perspective of their position will demand that they be seen to be above others. That will cause them to think that they should be the one being served.

While we have many church leaders that are good, and do the best they can, there are some who, while meaning good, are unwise in the way they handle things, and cause a problem in their churches because of it. They are often a mix of immature and untrained. That doesn't mean that they are abusers; it simply means that they are leaders who need to grow in certain areas. Pray for them! They need the Lord to speak to them and minister into their growth and character at this stage, otherwise, if those things are undealt with, they are prime targets for the enemy to cause them to become leaders that step over the line from simply being unwise leaders to being abusive ones.

Recognising the Signs of Spiritual Abuse

What is spiritual abuse?

Jeff Van Vonderen, co-author of the classic book 'The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse', defines spiritual abuse like this:

"Spiritual abuse occurs when someone in a position of spiritual authority – the purpose of which is to 'come underneath' and serve, build, equip and make God's people more free – misuses that authority by placing themselves over God's people to control, coerce or manipulate them for seemingly godly purposes, which are really their own."

How does spiritual abuse start?

Spiritual abuse begins when leaders think that they have the right to govern however they like. It happens when they begin to place their vision first, people second, and they believe that their value and reputation is based on achieving results. Godly values and character become of secondary importance and may be sacrificed in order to get their vision accomplished. They often believe that they are truly 'God's man for the hour' and that they are better than those around them. They may be threatened by other gifted people and feel the need to squash them in order to be seen as being the best. Then they will use their position to demand respect and loyalty from their congregants, often finding their sense of value in their position. These are some of the things that begin to set a leader up to becoming abusive.

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In my church and ministry life I've encountered leaders that have stepped over the line from strong leadership to abuse. Some of these leaders have openly used people to achieve their vision, then dropped them when they no longer needed them. I've served under leaders who have bullied and spoken down to people, myself included, and then those same leaders have talked about people behind their back, openly disparaging them to others. I've heard leaders openly state that they are the ones who God will use in their city and that their vision is the one that will achieve what God wants. The same leaders have told their congregations not to go to so-and-so's meetings because they disagreed with what was being taught. We've had leaders tell people not to come to our meetings because they disagree with what we teach. I've personally been told that I was too extreme, I was 'new age', I had a 'feminist

viewpoint and was therefore out of submission and covering', that I was 'a jezebel', in one church was told 'that there was a place for my husband but not for me', and more.

For many years I questioned myself and thought that I was out of order and that I was the problem, when in fact that wasn't fully true. Did I have things that I needed to work through? Yes! Did my childhood wounding make me view things through lenses which were faulty? Yes! Was I sometimes unwise in what I said and how I handled things? Definitely! But many times, I just didn't fit the mould that they wanted to squeeze me into, or I didn't agree with their viewpoints and said so. This caused me to be labelled by some as being rebellious, and even dangerous, when in fact all that I was doing was questioning. For many years I questioned myself, seeking to fit in and be acceptable, but in the end, I realised that I was just seeing flaws and wrongs and speaking out against them, and that was not wrong. Sadly, my childhood wounding sometimes caused me to be reactive rather than respectful in doing so, and I had to learn how to work through that. I had to learn to address things in a way that was respectful, and also learn to love God's flawed leaders, realising that we are all human and we each have our flaws.

So, you see I do have some experience in this area, having gone through it myself. It takes a lot of processing and working through when you've been the subject of spiritual abuse. From the realisation that it's happened to you, to working through the feelings of betrayal, grief, anger, sorting out what your part was in it all, forgiveness and more, there is so much that happens. It took me a long time to come to a place of healing from the abuse I suffered, and I learnt so much along the way; especially about how not to treat and lead people.

9 signs of spiritual abuse

The following are 9 signs that spiritual abuse may be happening. Don't take any of them individually to mean that abuse is definitely happening, however if there are several of them that ring true then seek some advice from a mature trustworthy Christian outside your church.

There will be...

Distorted viewpoints...

...on leadership and respect for leadership – Spiritually abusive leaders generally have a distorted view of leadership. They often lead in an autocratic or dictatorial style, where they are the one who has control, who makes the decisions, and others are there to do what they decide. They demand respect because of their position, rather than earning it by their example and character. They will surround themselves with people who have similar viewpoints on subjects or can be manipulated to agree with their viewpoint.

...on theology – Often they will unhealthily promote selective biases in theology and push particular emphases from Scripture, such as 'submission', 'end times', 'hyper faith', 'spiritual warfare', giving sacrificially' etc.

A culture of silence, fear, and shame

Spiritually abusive leaders end up creating a culture of silence, fear, and shame, where people feel that they can't speak out in disagreement or ask questions of leadership for fear of being labelled rebellious, divisive, or even worse, 'having a jezebel spirit'. If you do question them you will be made to feel that you are wrong to do so, and that the problem lies with you, not them. These leaders may use personal slander against those who speak out, and subsequent isolation on leaving the church or ministry, and a policy of non-contact with those who have left.

An authoritarian leadership style

Abusive churches or ministries often have a charismatic leader, one who often starts off well but eventually slips into believing their own hype, calling for obedience to themselves, arrogance, perfectionism, and pride. They actively discourage questions about their decisions, making the person feel like they are somehow questioning God or questioning God's appointed authority. They will try and replicate themselves in those who serve under them. When people don't measure up to their standards then it is the people that are assumed to be at fault, rather than the leadership style. That church member will then be seen as weak or unsuitable and will be overlooked for future leadership possibilities. A true godly leader will be servant-hearted, not having dominion over others but serving in humility beside them. Jesus and the apostle Paul were great examples of this (2 Cor. 1:24)

No accountability

Abusive leaders often have no one that they are accountable to, in life or ministry. They usually only respect other leaders who are as strong or stronger than they are. There is often a secretive atmosphere and they will not be open with their leadership or disclose details of their own lives to other leaders or congregation members. They often believe that a leader should not get too close to those they lead. Healthy pastors are accountable to others, open, welcome input and invite participation.

No respect for personal liberty or expression.

Often in abusive situations leaders will place unreasonable demands on members. Church volunteers are often made to work long hours with unrealistic expectations of excellence, many times providing for materials from their own pocket instead of being provided for from church funds. Abusive leaders may demand that things be done their way or not at all. They will manipulate people into feeling that they must do what they are told or else they will be seen as not being faithful to the vision. Members are discouraged from having vision other than that which their leader carries. They are there to serve the leader's vision, not to have dreams of their own. Serving visions outside their church is seen as being rebellious.

Spiritual elitism.

Church members will be led to believe that they are spiritually or morally superior in some way, or have better theology than other churches around them. Other churches and denominations will be frowned on and talked about as being not as good, and members will be encouraged to stay away from them. Abusive churches do not encourage their people to join in with combined church services or events, while at the same time demanding that they be at all of their events. People who are hurting, or seen as weak, are given little help, and

looked down on. Anyone who is not like the leadership, or who is disapproved of by leadership, will be made to feel 'on the outside' and that 'they don't fit'. They will sometimes even be told that they may fit better in another church.

Hyper-spirituality.

Insecurity and pride both cause leaders to have to prove that they are spiritually superior in some way. "God told me" or, "God showed me" can often be used as an excuse to support their behaviour and to stop questions. Leaders like this don't have godly counsellors in their life; instead they have 'yes men and women'. Immature leaders who haven't been properly trained will feel the pressure to pretend to be more than they are, in order to appear spiritual enough to lead.

Financial manipulation and control

There will often be a heavy emphasis and legalism around tithing and giving, encouraging people to give only to their church or to give above their ability. They will often use manipulation to encourage giving – things like pushing for people to give sacrificially and making them feel bad if they don't. There's nothing wrong with a church asking for money; it's needed to provide the things necessary for that church to function, but 2 Corinthians 9:7 says that giving should be done cheerfully and without compulsion.

Prophetic manipulation

Sometimes abusive leaders will use prophecy as a way to gather people to themselves, to lure them into their church, or to dominate or intimidate them. God hates this passionately (Jer 23; Ezek 13:4-5; Matt 7:15-20; 1Jn 4:1-6; 2Pet 2:1-3)

How to Approach and Deal with Spiritual Abuse

As I shared earlier, I have seen first-hand the hurt and devastation that spiritual abuse brings – in my life and in the lives of others I know. Some people have recovered, and sadly, some have not. Too many still hurt deeply from the wounds they received at the hands of these leaders, one's whose job was to watch over, equip, and protect the flock; instead they ended up being agents of the enemy whose avowed purpose is to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10).

You've read the list in the previous section that gives signs of spiritual abuse happening. What happens if you recognise that it's happening in your church, to you or to others you know? What do you do? How do you handle it?

What to do if you suspect spiritual abuse is happening

- Hopefully your church has an accountability structure in place, through which situations can be resolved (Pastors reading this – if your church doesn't have a policy in place, please make one – for your safety and that of your congregation.)
- Don't jump to conclusions based on one or two happenings. Remember you may be looking at a strong leader, an insecure leader, an unwise leader or a wounded leader. Leaders are human and they sometimes do dumb things, and they will, unfortunately, hurt some people in the way they handle things. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are abusive. You may simply be looking at humanness in action. Keep your eyes open, but give grace. If it is an ongoing pattern it will reveal itself over time. It's that consistent pattern of such behaviour that will begin to show you whether a situation is abusive or not.
- Approach the leader in question and ask for clarification concerning the things you're concerned about. Scripture is clear that when we have something against someone else we need to talk it through with them first before involving others. (Matthew 5 & Mark 11) How the leader handles your enquiry will tell you some things that you need to know. Are they open to being asked why they did something? How do they respond? With grace, and apology where necessary, or by making you feel that you were wrong in thinking what you do?
- If talking to the leader in question doesn't work then you need to look at talking to the wider church leadership – a meeting with the elders etc. Only after that avenue has been exhausted should you go elsewhere. If talking things through with your church leadership doesn't work, seek advice from an outside trustworthy Christian advisor – the church's denominational leadership or another minister in your town or city. If it can't be resolved easily it may need to be dealt with on a denominational or even a

city-wide basis, but hopefully not.

- If abuse is proven and there is no recognition of it, or repentance from the leader or leaders involved, then you should leave the church. This may be hard, especially if you have built good friendships there, but it will be necessary for your continued spiritual health and healing.
- If people ask you why you are leaving then simply tell them the truth, but don't gossip and spread rumours of abuse amongst other church members or Christian friends.
- You will feel bad for those who are still in that church, and you will want them to see and recognise that there is abuse happening. Some people will be ready for that, and sadly, some won't; that is just a fact. For some, it will confirm their feelings and suspicions, for others they will take it as an attack against the leader. You cannot take on the responsibility for their responses. Again, don't gossip; but how do you talk about something like this in a non-gossip way?
 - Try to talk about actual instances of the abusive behaviour, not feelings. Try and do so from an objective viewpoint. This is not a time to let your anger and hurt boil over. Don't call the leader names, don't pull the church down through your words; that will build walls, not bridges of understanding for people. If you are carrying offense over the way you've been treated then people will hear that in your voice, and the things you say will possibly cause others to pick up your offense.
 - Don't get into arguments with people over it. Feelings will run high; this is a volatile subject. But arguments won't help. If feelings get high then back away rather than get into an argument.
- Above all, pray for those involved; for the leader or leaders involved, for the other congregation or ministry members. Pray for eyes to be opened, works of darkness to be exposed, and for hearts to be opened and turned to the Lord in humility.

We war not against flesh and blood...

Remember, ultimately you are not just dealing with people but there are powers of darkness at work in the background - spirits of pride, deception, domination, control and witchcraft, religious spirits, possible narcissism, and more. These are the real enemies, not the people they are influencing. The real battle is in the spiritual realm and what we seek is the freedom from these things for all who are involved. Sure, that battle plays out in the natural realm and people do need to own up to and face their abusive attitudes and behaviours, but ultimately there is stuff at work in the unseen realm as much as what is seen in this realm. You may need to call others to prayer over this; don't feel that you can battle these things just on your own. In calling others to prayer, deal with facts where necessary but don't share more than is wise or prudent. Know that the battle is the Lord's not yours, so ask the Lord to show you

how, and what, to pray, so that you come into agreement with Heaven's heart and desire for the situation. Pray from faith, knowing that God desires their freedom even more than you do, and pray until you know the victory in prayer.

Recovering from Spiritual Abuse

The effects of spiritual abuse

Finding out that you've been a victim of spiritual abuse can be devastating! It can cause many questions to arise in your heart and cause you to distrust yourself, your relationship with God and leaders in the church in general. How do I know? Because it did those things to me! It took a long time for me to process that hurt and abuse, seeking out help in person and through books and internet articles, and learning to re-trust both God and myself again. I want to now share some things that I learnt during that time that will help you move through the recovery process.

If you've been spiritually abused these are some of the effects it may well have on you...

- You'll question a lot of what you believe – about God, about the church, about leaders.
- You'll doubt and question yourself, and you'll blame yourself for being a victim.
- You'll doubt your ability to discern things properly and to hear God correctly.
- You'll want to separate yourself from others.
- You'll be tempted to become untrusting of leadership in general.
- You'll question whether you ever want to be a part of a church again.
- You'll go through a grieving process.
- You'll get angry – very angry, probably.
- You'll be tempted to wallow in hurt and self-pity.
- You'll want to strike back, especially by telling others how bad that leader or church is.
- You'll want to blame God for it, or for not protecting you from it.

You need others in this process

If you've been the victim of spiritual abuse then you need people who will walk with you through the healing process, and they should be people outside the situation itself. Make yourself relationally accountable to friends and trusted people. By relationally accountable I mean have people who love you, will walk beside you through the process, and who are not afraid to ask you questions. For this you're not looking for hand-holders who agree with your wounded views, you're looking for people who will help you move through it and will ask you questions like....

- How are you processing your hurt or grief?
- Are you aware of the stages of grief, and if so, where are you in that process? (The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.)
- How's your relationship with God? How has this situation affected how you see Him? How has it affected your trust in Him?
- Have you forgiven those leaders and others involved?
- What's the quality of your relationship with other Christians like at the moment?
- What are you currently looking to in order to fill the gap that this situation has created in your life? Are you using things to anesthetise the pain – like alcohol, food, TV binge watching etc?

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Some things to help you move through the healing process

- **Realise that not everything taught or done in the spiritually abusive system was wrong.** It's important for survivors to recognize that good things and bad things can exist in the same system. Keep the good and throw out the bad.
- **Get perspective.** To do so you will probably need to remove yourself from the abusive situation. As long as you stay in it you won't be able to see clearly. Don't be afraid to take time out from church – taking time out from church can be necessary and healthy, however, staying removed from fellowship will, in the end, bring its own problems. Ask, "What does fellowshiping with other believers look like for me in this season?" "How can I do it in a healthy way?" If you've been abused, then most likely your thinking has been distorted. You'll have bought into some lies that need

correcting, and to do so you'll need to put some distance between yourself and the situation for a period of time (if not indefinitely) in order to clear your mind and get back on track. A few ways that can help with that are:

- Talk to friends from other churches that are known for being healthy.
 - Talk to a pastor from a healthy church.
 - Get prayer ministry, if needed.
 - Read about spiritual abuse to understand how it works.
- **Own any part that you had.** Survivors of spiritual abuse must recognize that they may have played a part in allowing the abuse. That can happen in different ways – seeing abuse happen and not speaking up, excusing wrong behaviour, or justifying it, taking the official viewpoint against other churches or individuals, and more. Often, we can unconsciously treat others the way that we see leadership treating them, thereby perpetuating the abuse, even when we don't mean to.
 - **Forgive.** Forgiveness is a necessary part of moving on and getting free of the effects of the abuse. It may take time to forgive, and you'll find that forgiveness comes easiest when the hurt is dealt with and healed. Making yourself forgive by willpower alone when you are unhealed will put a band aid on the problem, not fix it.
 - **Be patient with yourself.** Healing does take time, and you will need to give yourself permission to feel angry, to question, and to feel the hurt. But you also need to give yourself permission to celebrate your gifts, abilities, strengths, character etc. These will have taken a bashing, so go easy on yourself. Build yourself up again and relearn to trust yourself.
 - **Don't lock yourself away;** community is important – spiritual or otherwise. Spend time with friends, make new ones, join a community group, get a hobby that involves others. These things are important for learning to trust others again.
 - **Find help** – someone to talk to that's not involved in the situation; read books on healing. If you need to, seek counselling. Journaling helps; use that tool. Don't wallow in your hurt, be intentional about seeking healing and wholeness. There are lots of places you can get help – other churches, counsellors, healing prayer ministries etc.
 - **Learn how to walk in relationship with God again.** Your devotional life during this time is very important; it's there that God will minister His love and healing to you. Make sure that you don't neglect this. Any previous rules and requirements that you lived under in relation to devotional life may have made you think that you were on the inner circle with God, but they've probably pushed you farther away. Redevelop

that loving friendship with God again, based on relationship, not rules.

- **Be aware that your views on what form a spiritual life should take, may change.** What you thought were necessities because of strict rules may now be seen as unnecessary or even harmful. For example, if you fasted every other week because the church said you should, re-look at that and ask God what He thinks about it. If you thought you had to do certain things to please God and be close to Him, re-look at what the Bible says about that. God wants you to be free of religions restrictions.
- **Establish healthy boundaries.** Boundaries are not about excluding people, they are about setting healthy ways for people to be in your life. You may need to say “No” to some people being as close to you as they were. Some people may come to you and try to minimize or deny what’s happened to you. They may say things like, “You’re overreacting, it wasn’t that bad.” Or, “You’re just stirring up trouble and being rebellious.” “You’re resisting the discipline that God wants to bring in your life.” “They can’t be abusive, they’re good people and they really helped me.” “The devil is using you to divide this church.” If you can’t find a healthy way for a person to be in your life by setting boundaries then you may need to distance yourself from them. There are some good books out there on making healthy boundaries, so get yourself one and make boundaries that will help keep you safe in the future.
- **Pray for those who hurt you.** Even when leaders are abusive we are still told in Scripture to honour them and pray for them (1 Timothy 2:1-3). Honouring them doesn’t mean glossing over, or hiding, abuse; it means that we face the facts, but still walk in honour - loving the person because Christ loves them, respecting their position and speaking in a way that addresses the problem but doesn’t put them down personally.

I know from experience that it’s a devastating thing to be a victim of spiritual abuse, but there is hope and healing; there is a way back to being able to trust the Lord and His people again. It may take some time and some tenacity on your part, but it is worth it. The church family is something that God loves very much and He longs for it to be healthy, just as He longs for you to be whole and healthy.

When congregations attack

At this point we're going to shift focus, and talk about another type of spiritual abuse – when congregations attack and abuse their pastors and/or the pastor's family. Yes, this does happen, and it happens all too frequently. Too often at Pastors conferences I've attended, I've heard pastors laughingly refer to themselves as suffering from, or recovering from, 'sheep bite', covering up very real pain with a joke in order to try and deal with it. When this type of attack and abuse happens, it causes damage not only to pastors and their families, but also to the churches involved. The result can often be irreparable damage to a church, the pastor's reputation, and their ability to pastor in other situations.

A pastor or leader does need to be held accountable for how they lead and treat God's people. Their work should be open to regular review and we should expect evaluation, and correction if necessary. This is necessary for the protection of our congregations. But evaluation is different from attack and abuse. Your church should have an accountability structure in place, through which situations can be resolved. There should be a policy in place for dealing with questions, criticism and accountability issues. If your church doesn't have a policy in place for this, then please make one – for your safety and that of your congregation.

Too often at Pastors gatherings I've attended, I've heard Pastors laughingly refer to themselves as suffering from, or recovering from, 'sheep bite', covering up very real pain with a joke in order to try and deal with it.

When sheep bite

What does congregational abuse look like, and what causes it to happen? There are many reasons why individuals or congregations may attack or abuse their leaders, so let's look at some of the underlying things that lead to that. Obviously in a few blog posts I'm not going to be able to cover every single thing that could come under this category, but here are some to think about.

First up, we need to realise that asking questions of a leader isn't the same as questioning their leadership. Sometimes people don't understand why, as a leader, you do something, and they want to know your reasoning. This isn't an attack, it's about gaining understanding so they can cooperate (or not) from a place of understanding.

Distinguishing between Criticism and Abuse

I think it's important to distinguish between healthy criticism and abuse. We can find out which is which by asking some questions.

- **Is this criticism or question an honest attempt to find out information or address a problem?** Sometimes questions or criticism are simply an honest, albeit clumsy or maybe unwisely worded attempt to address something. The underlying motivation is the important thing, and asking this question will clarify whether it's about information, a certain problem, or whether it's something more.
- **Is the criticism focused on performance or on a specific person?** There is a difference between criticizing someone's performance, which can at times be legitimate, and criticizing a person's integrity or motive, and the latter may become abusive. There may very well be a legitimate reason to question performance. If there is then we should be free to do so, especially when the welfare of others is involved.
- **Is this a plea for help, or an attack?** Most criticism is usually hard to take, and we all too often feel it is an attack against us personally. If our self-worth is attached to our position or performance this will be doubly so. Often behind questioning and criticism is a plea for understanding or for help. Sometimes people just don't know how to ask for it, and their attempts may be awkward and easily misunderstood if we don't recognise it for what it is.
- **Is this thing really my responsibility, or fault, or is the person using blame and shame as a weapon of attack?** As church leaders, the buck often stops with us. We understand that not everything will work properly all the time. We are often working with volunteers with other responsibilities, differing levels of expertise, and more, so we can't always expect perfection. Heaven knows we certainly aren't perfect, and we can't do everything perfectly, but if the fault is ours we should accept any responsibility for errors.

Where does this type of abuse start?

Unrealistic expectations

Sometimes people can have unreasonable expectations of their pastor. They rightly think that the pastor is there to serve them, but also, they wrongly think exactly the same thing. Yes, the pastoral role is a serving one, and they are there to serve the church, but pastors are not there to pander to our whims, likes and dislikes and personal theological biases.

Here is a great statement regarding serving and servant leadership... *"In the Kingdom of God, the fact that I am your servant does not make you my master."* The goal of a servant leader is not to jump to people's every whim, but to do everything that they can to help

people grow and go in the direction that God wants them to. This understanding can free the servant leader from the ungodly expectations of others.

People often make unreasonable demands on a leader's time, spiritual gifts, and even their natural abilities. They often also have unrealistic relational expectations concerning how a pastor will relate to them and how much time a pastor should spend with them.

In this area of unrealistic expectation, people can wrongly subconsciously expect the pastor to be perfect, have no faults, and sometimes even to have no opinions of their own. When this expectation is shattered, as it must be, then what happens is a congregant is left feeling let down, or betrayed, and at that point they will often react unwisely, resorting to attack, and attributing wrong motives to the leader. But leaders are human and suffer from human frailties with personal motivations, opinions, and differences.

Many people have unrealistic expectations of a pastor's spouse and children and, sadly, will sometimes attack them as a way of getting at the pastor. The pastor's children are often held to a higher level of character and behaviour than is expected of other people's children. The pastor's spouse is often seen as part of the package, and getting 'two for the price of one' is often an unspoken expectation. When this doesn't happen then people can think that the pastor's spouse isn't supportive and doesn't care for the church.

“In the Kingdom of God, the fact that I am your servant does not make you my master.”

Transference

Many people look to their pastor or leader as a 'parent' replacement, especially if they didn't have good parental models growing up. They will sometimes actually ask the pastor or leader to be their 'spiritual Mum or Dad', and while that may not necessarily be a bad thing in itself, if that request comes with the expectation that the pastor will then be responsible to meet all their emotional and spiritual needs then it is wrong. If a person has wrong expectations of access to the pastor, favour being shown etc., then that's wrong. This places a pressure on the pastor that should never actually be there. Our pastors are there to help us grow but they are not there to take the place of our earthly parents or our heavenly Father. Our spiritual parenting should come from the Trinity, not our earthly leaders. The end result of transference will always be a person feeling let down, because no person can be all that we need; only God can be that. When a person feels let down they are ripe for the enemy to push them over into wrong responses, which may lead to attack and abuse if not identified and dealt with.

Deifying spiritual leaders

Some people put their leaders on pedestals, lifting them up above mere mortality, and in doing so expect perfection of them. Yet leaders are human and have faults and failings, and at some point, they will let you down; they are human after all. When a deified leader fails to

deliver what is expected, then hurt and anger ensue, setting the stage for those hurt feelings to become attack, and for abusive actions to take place.

Viewing leaders through wounded eyes

We all come into the church with things that have shaped how we view things – childhood and adult wounds, worldview, schooling, theological biases, and more. These things shape how we view leaders and unless we recognise that, we will automatically view our church leaders with suspicion, through the eyes of our wounds. For many years I found it hard to trust leaders because, as a child, many of the people in my life who were authority figures treated me in ways that abused and damaged me. Over the years I've found the following statement to be true in most cases of attack and abuse I've seen.

"Much of the 'transference' (both negative and super-positive) that we receive from members of our congregational family is a direct result of the 'baggage' they failed to leave at home."
Edwin H. Friedman, in 'Generation to Generation'.

How to Recognise Abuse Against Leaders

How does abuse against leaders manifest?

Abuse can happen unconsciously, consciously, and sometimes even through neglect (not doing things that should be done). The following are some of the ways it can manifest.

Through criticism and gossip

Many criticisms are petty and do not actually need vocalising. Those that do need vocalising need to be shared with the right person, not just anyone who will listen. Gossip about leaders does so much damage! Criticism is different from facing facts. You must face the facts about something in order to make improvements, but facing facts becomes criticism when you begin to assign blame and attack a person, rather than address the issue or problem. It becomes gossip when you begin to share that criticism with other people in order to spread the story. Gossip then repeatedly seeks to draw others into the situation by sharing about the problem over and over, making it a 'person issue' without bringing any potential solutions to the problem. It becomes an abuse when you do that deliberately in order to attack the leader and influence people against them.

Through financial neglect

Too many Pastors and ministry leaders are underpaid, as well as being underappreciated. Finance boards can twist verses like "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8) in order to make pastors feel that they should work for little or nothing. We have had people say to us that the training seminars we hold should be free and quoted that verse at us as their proof. Yet at the same time Scripture also says that a workman is worthy of his hire (Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18). I remember an old joke about some congregation members praying for their pastor; they said in their prayer, "God, we'll keep him poor and You keep him humble". Sadly, this actually happens; some Christians equate humility and holiness with poverty, and therefore don't recognise the worth of their pastor and don't pay them accordingly.

Through other neglectful practices

Some pastors are abused by simple neglect, and while that might not immediately sound abusive, it can be. Any parent that neglects a child would be called abusive, but somehow, we think it is okay to neglect adults. How does this sort of abuse manifest? It manifests through a lot of little things that add together to make pastors and leaders feel unappreciated and unrecognised for the work they do. Neglect can happen when we take people for granted, especially when they're really good at what they do and there are no problems that need attention. It can happen in little things, like not thanking the Pastor for all they do, not acknowledging the hours spent in preparing teachings, or the hours spent in counselling or home visits, for being on call 24 hrs a day 7 days a week, and when it is assumed that they will be the first at church and the last to leave. Or maybe it's in something like unintentional isolation - not including the leader and their family in activities because you think they would

be too busy or wouldn't want to come. There are so many ways neglect can happen in our relationships. Most pastors don't need, or want, constant acknowledgment for what they do, but a little bit of encouragement can go a long way towards promoting job happiness and fulfilment for them, just as it does with the rest of us.

Through the manipulative use of personality, finances, and power

Some congregation members will try to manipulate their leaders by withdrawing support if things are not done how they like it. Others will use their position in the church or community to try and force the pastor to do things how they want. This is manipulation and abuse and needs to stop!

Through deliberate isolation, rejection and passive aggression

Many pastors feel isolated because there are some things they just cannot share with members of their congregation, and that is a part of a pastor's responsibility. This can sometimes set them apart from their congregation a bit, but when a congregation member uses deliberate rejection and isolation to attack a pastor, that is wrong. Another way people show their displeasure is by using passive aggressive behaviour. Passive aggressive people either can't or won't communicate their dissatisfaction in words, instead they use non-verbal behaviour to show their displeasure. They often use angry looks, get sulky, resist requests, walk away when spoken to, put up a 'stone wall' of silence and more. These behaviours are never okay and when used deliberately are a form of attack and abusive behaviour. If you have something against a leader talk to them about it openly.

Through assigning spiritual value to natural things

We sometimes assign spiritual value to things that actually have none, thereby making the issue a faith issue, rather than simply an ordinary one. In church history, there have been many fights, and even church splits, over things like - traditions that no longer have functional value, introducing instruments into worship, the moving of an organ or piano, the colour of the new carpet, and more. People have chosen sides and formed battle ranks, believing that when traditions are being challenged that it is actually their faith that is under attack, and they have fought as if their spiritual life is at stake, often attacking and even destroying pastors in the process.

Through issues of faith

Faith issues are usually seen as right and wrong, and if you're not on the side of right and true faith, then you're wrong, and off in your beliefs. If people fear that their faith is under attack then it is often hard for them to stay calm, especially when they have mistakenly attached their sense of spirituality or spiritual wellbeing to an issue. When this happens personalities and differences of perspective and opinion become battles between right and wrong, good and evil, traditional belief and heresy. Opponents to their way of thinking may even wrongly be seen as agents of Satan at work in the church. Sadly, many good leaders have been wrongly accused of working against the church and for Satan.

It is because we care so much about our faith that we often fight. Whether or not what we fight over is worth fighting over, is often set aside in the passion of the moment. William Willimon, author of the book 'Pastor' says this *"If we didn't really care about one another and the faith, there would be no conflict. The person who wonders why the meetings of his or her*

book club are more placid than those of the branch office of the Kingdom of God need only measure what is at stake to understand why church fights are so fierce."

Through prayer and prophecy

Sadly, sometimes people will use prayer or prophecy to attack, or seek to manipulate, a leader or leadership. The way this is used can look so spiritual, and because it is wrapped up in spiritual language and behaviour it can feel very acceptable. Too often intercessors will use prayer (both private and public) as a means to express their personal opinion and to influence others to their way of thinking, going so far as to openly pray against leaders or insinuate things about them in their prayers. There have been many situations where this has happened, or where disgruntled parishioners have openly used the giving of a so-called 'prophetic word' to speak against a leader. This is manipulation and witchcraft, not true spirituality, or reasonable Christian behaviour.

Another way abuse happens is...

Through the lack of support a leader receives from leaders of their denomination

Sometimes pastors are abused by their denomination. Denominations may promise support but, in reality, not give a pastor the support and ongoing training that they need, leaving the pastor to swim or sink on their own. While this may not be deliberate abuse, it can be abuse by neglect. Denominational boards should have a policy for the ongoing support and training of the leaders who are part of that denomination, and should see that it is put into practice.

Recovering from Sheep Bite

Responding to Abuse

How should we as leaders and pastors respond to being on the receiving end of attack and abuse? As painful as it may be, attack and abuse from congregation members needs to be addressed and challenged. This is crucial for your ongoing health and that of your church.

- **Critique or attack?** Know the difference between what is simply badly handled critique and what has stepped over into attack and abuse. Is this a 'one-off' situation or is there a repetitive pattern? We should not be quick to label a church members criticism as a personal attack. I remember back in the early 1990's there was a quite a backlash from the overly strong discipleship emphasis of the 1970's and 80's, and 'controlling' was an accusation thrown at many leaders (rightly or wrongly) as people discovered they had the right to have a voice and question a leader's actions. Many leaders suddenly felt they were under attack when it was often simply a congregation members clumsy and badly worded attempt to communicate how they were feeling or ask questions.
- **Get perspective.** Sometimes to do that you need to talk to someone outside the situation. A peer or mentor will be able to help you sort out what is criticism and what crosses over into abuse. Others you could turn to for help may be denominational leaders, other pastors, Christian counsellors, inner healing ministries etc.
- **Confront the abuse.** Abuse of any sort must be confronted, but confront lovingly and wisely. Abuse does need to be confronted and addressed. Scripturally this is done first in a one on one meeting, and if that doesn't work then others may need to be brought into the situation (Matthew 5 & Mark 11). Don't be passive. Don't think it will just go away; it won't. Trying to avoid conflict will lead to the issue not being addressed properly and will, in the end, not be good for you or your church.
- **Be aware.** In addressing the abuse be aware that you may be opening yourself up for more abuse if recognition and repentance doesn't happen. You may be accused of being misunderstanding by some, or of attacking the person or people involved. If possible, work out beforehand what your response will be.
- **Own any part that you had in it all.** As leaders sometimes we don't communicate the best, or in our busyness we can speak abruptly to someone because our mind is elsewhere, own your behaviour. People will lose respect for you if you dismiss or cover up your bad behaviour. Leaders on the receiving end of spiritual abuse must recognize that they may have played a part in allowing the abuse to get as far as it did.

- **Forgive.** Forgiveness is a necessary part of moving on and getting free of the effects of abuse. It may take time to forgive, and you'll find that forgiveness comes easiest when the hurt is dealt with and healed. Making yourself forgive by willpower alone when you are unhealed will only put a band aid on the problem; it will not fix it.
- **Make sure that you don't attach your self-worth or value to your position.** This is so crucial. What you do, or what position you hold, is not who you are. If you do attach your identity to your position or your performance then you'll take everything as an attack. Along with this, don't be thin-skinned; criticism is painful, let's be upfront about that, but not every criticism is an attack.
- **Build yourself up in the Lord** – spend time with Him; ask Him for a word (prophetic or from Scripture) to support you and carry you through. Your devotional life during this time is very important; it's there that God will minister His love and healing to you. Make sure that you don't neglect this.
- **Be patient with yourself.** Healing does take time, and you will need to give yourself permission to feel angry, to question, and to feel the hurt. You may also need to get prayer ministry or counselling; these are not admissions of failure or weakness, they are signs of wisdom. You also need to give yourself permission to celebrate your gifts, abilities, strengths, character etc. These will have taken a bashing, so go easy on yourself. Build yourself up again and relearn to trust yourself.
- **Pray for those who hurt you.** Ask the Lord to show you how He sees them and to give you a love for them. Walking in honour doesn't mean glossing over, or hiding, abuse. It means that we face the facts, but still walk in honour - loving the person because Christ loves them, respecting them, and speaking in a way that addresses the problem, but doesn't put them down personally.

Have others who will walk with you through the process of healing

The following paragraph and list are a short excerpt from Part 4 of this series but is very applicable here too, so I've included it again.

If you've been the victim of spiritual abuse then you need people who will walk with you through the healing process, and they should be people outside the situation itself. Make yourself relationally accountable to friends and trusted people. By relationally accountable I mean have people who love you, will walk beside you through the process, and who are not afraid to ask you questions. For this you're not looking for hand-holders who agree with your wounded views, you're looking for people who will help you move through it and will ask you questions like....

- How are you processing your hurt or grief?
- Are you aware of the stages of grief, and if so, where are you in that process? The stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They may

not necessarily be moved through in a linear fashion, you may go back and forwards through them as part of the process.

- How's your relationship with God? How has this situation affected how you see Him?
- How has it affected your trust in Him?
- Have you forgiven those involved?
- What's the quality of your relationship with other Christians like at the moment?
- What are you currently looking to in order to fill the gap that this situation has created in your life? Are you using things to anesthetise the pain – like alcohol, food, TV binge watching etc?

The light at the end of the tunnel

As a leader who is the victim of spiritual abuse, it can feel like everyone is against you. You feel like you want to desert your calling and you'll want to blame God for what 'His people' did to you. You may want to never pastor again and in the healing process there is much to work through. Recovering from spiritual abuse takes time and determination. It is all too easy to sit back, wallow in our hurt and blame others, yet that does no one any good.

If you've been a victim of spiritual abuse, determine to work through it; get help, if needed, and turn *to* God in the process, not *away* from Him. Yes, you may have questions about why He let this happen etc. and you may or may not get answers to that question. Sometimes we don't get all the answers we want in life, and in the end, we have to be okay with that. Life doesn't always come wrapped up and sorted prettily; sometimes it's tough, rough and we get hurt along the way. But in it all we have this unfailing promise – God will never leave you or forsake you, you do not have to go through this alone (Deuteronomy 31:6,8; Joshua 1:5; 1 Chronicles 28:20; Hebrews 13:5). He wants to take your hurt and wounding upon Himself and bring you to a place of healing and being able to once again step out and go after the dreams that He has placed in your heart.

The end... or a new beginning

If you've been the victim of spiritual abuse, it can seem like the end of so much you've held dear but maybe in that ending is also the seed of hope, the seed of a new beginning. This series turned out to be so much bigger and more in depth than what I had in mind when I first started to write it. The more I looked at it the more there was to look at, and a lot of it wasn't pretty. In a different way, though, the more I looked the more I also saw hope. Why, because God is who He is! He has great plans and purposes for his church and he is committed to our maturity. As scripture says of God

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 2:22,23).

He is the God of the second and third chance and God is at work in each of his children's lives, seeking to bring us to a place of maturity and wisdom. As we cooperate with Him in that process things are changing, old wrong mind-sets and ways of doing things are being recognised and discarded. We are viewing each other differently as we transition out of orphan mind-sets and behaviours into that of mature sons and daughters of a loving Father, and this is good. And in that, there is hope for the church to truly be the light she is meant to be, and to bring freedom to so many who need it in the communities around us.

When I released this series of blog posts a few people wrote to me asking questions. Those questions are tackled in the following section of this document.

Q&A - Extra bits

In this addition to the actual series of blog posts I wrote on spiritual abuse, below are some questions that I've been asked in relation to this subject since writing the series.

Q - *Hi, I've found spiritual abuse happening at the last two churches I went to, but I'm aware I can't keep leaving churches just because I feel they may be abusive. What do I do?*

A - Once we have been a victim of spiritual abuse then our abuse antenna is tuned to recognise it easily, and sometimes we become highly sensitised to it and suspicious of leadership in general. If that happens we can make the mistake of calling strong leaders 'abusive' and we need to guard against that and make sure it is abuse you are seeing not just strong or wounded leaders reacting unwisely in a situation. Once you recognise abuse, however, you can at least guard yourself against becoming its victim.

If you see abuse happening then you should address it. Talk to the church leadership and ask them nicely if they could explain to you what was happening in what you heard or saw. You can use phrases like – “Can you help me process something. I heard (or saw) this, (then say what you heard or saw) but I don't want to jump to conclusions, so can you tell me what you meant by... (the thing you heard or saw happen)”. Listen to their explanation then reflect back to them what you heard them say and ask if that's correct. Use a phrase like, “So what I'm hearing you say is that ... is why that happened.” Give them a chance to respond to that or explain further, and if you're not satisfied with their answer, ask more questions. Their response will give you an indication of whether they are open to dialogue about their leadership style or skills, or not. At the end of your discussion thank them for taking the time to process with you.

A good leader, while finding critique and process awkward or hard (as we all sometimes do), will take what you ask and think it through, and should come back to you and give you feedback on the discussion you had.

It is hard, however, to stay in a place where abuse is obviously happening and not allow anger, frustration or even bitterness to shape how you see, and respond to, the leadership in that church. If you can't find a way through those feelings, then you need to consider whether staying there will actually cause more problems, because people do pick up on your attitudes and responses; you can't always hide them. Often what happens next is that people unwittingly begin to make remarks against how a pastor leads, and in doing so they begin to spread suspicion, and may even resort to divisive comments and behaviour. The other important thing to do is to pray for those involved, to ask the Lord to expose what needs exposing and to give people wisdom in dealing with it.

Q – *I recently left a church I'd been in for years because I recognised that an abusive culture and leadership style had developed. The other day a friend from that church dropped by to visit me at home, and said they were passing by and thought they'd drop in. It turned out that they actually came on purpose, with the idea of seeing how I was and trying to persuade me that 'I was wrong in believing what I did' and that 'things have changed'. When I realised that they came on purpose with an agenda, it hit me like a physical blow, and I burst into tears. Is this normal? What do I do?*

A – Feeling sudden, overwhelming surges of emotion is normal and is part of the process. You'll find that it will come in waves, some days will be better than others. Over time, however, as you work through your grief and feelings of betrayal, those times will diminish.

As far as their saying "I was passing and thought I'd drop in," if that is proved to be wrong by other things they say, then question them on it. Ask, "Was it a planned visit?" Don't be afraid to ask, as they should not be allowed to tell a 'lie' if they did come deliberately and with a pre-planned agenda. And yes, you will have well-meaning friends who are still in the church who want to help you by showing you where you 'misunderstood' and were 'wrong' etc. Their love and concern will be genuine, but because they haven't seen what is truly happening, they will try and get you to come back and admit your 'wrong' perspective or response.

You'll need to have something prepared to say to people like this before hand, so that when it happens you don't feel so blindsided by it. I used to say something like, "I really appreciate your visit and your love for me, but this is something I have to work through before the Lord, so please don't try and use our friendship to try to influence me one way or the other." Some people got offended by that because from their perspective they were just trying to help; some people did understand, even though it was hard for them, but it was a rough time.

Q – *Our pastors left our church because of abusive behaviour by a person in a position of authority over them. They are looking at possibly starting a new church. What is your advice in a situation like that?*

A - In regards to the leaders who left starting something new, I would advise them not to look at starting a new church immediately. They need time to process and work through what has happened to them. They will need time to examine their beliefs - both what they believed the Bible taught and the leadership protocols they operated under. There may also be denominational process and beliefs to work through. Some teaching they had, or taught, may have been influenced by denominational beliefs and tradition rather than being scripturally right. They will need to examine leadership styles – the denomination's and their own – to find out what is good and worth keeping, and what is not, otherwise they will most likely replicate the old leadership patterns and beliefs in their new situation. If they are wanting you to be involved then you have the right to ask them some questions like the following ones. While these will be hard questions to ask and answer, they are necessary.

1. How are you processing what you've been through, and who do you have as reference and accountability in that process?
2. What beliefs from the situation have you identified that need transforming so that we don't repeat the same thing going forward?
3. What will you do to make sure the same beliefs and practices aren't carried over into anything you start?

Q – *I left my old church a few weeks ago because of leadership abuses of authority, teaching and isolation; things like saying that we didn't need any other teaching from anywhere else because our apostle was the only person we needed to listen to. I haven't started going to another church yet. Part of me thinks I need to be in a church and part of me is scared of going straight into another situation where I could be abused. Do you have any advice on that?*

A - Don't be in a hurry to join another church. You may need some time to heal and work through the issues that were the reason you left. It is not wrong to take time out, if you do so wisely. Taking time out from church can be necessary, however staying removed from fellowship will, in the end, bring its own problems. Ask the Lord, "What does fellowshiping with other believers look like for me in this season?" "How can I do it in a healthy way?" If you've been abused, then most likely your thinking has been distorted. You'll have bought into some lies that need correcting, and to do so you'll need to put some distance between yourself and the situation for a period of time (if not indefinitely) in order to clear your mind and get back on track. Talk to a pastor from a healthy church and get prayer ministry or counselling, if needed. Also read about spiritual abuse, to understand how it works, so that you can recognise it in the future.

Q – *I am good friends with two people who are on opposite sides in a spiritual abuse situation; one is the person being accused of spiritual abuse, and the other is the victim. They both talk to me about the situation and unload their feelings on me. When one is talking to me it causes me to feel badly toward the other person, and then when the other talks to me I feel bad toward the first person. In the midst of that I feel torn between my friends and I feel like I'm expected to take sides. In doing so I somehow feel like I'm dishonouring both friends because of it all. How do I work through this?*

A - Getting caught in the middle between two friends who are on opposing sides in a situation is a hard place to be, as you do love both of them and you want to be a good friend to both. But to be a true, good friend to them both you will need to be strong. Put in some boundaries. Boundaries provide a safe way for people to be in your life; they are not about excluding people. Let them know that you love them, and that you want to continue being their friend, but that you won't be drawn into any issues they have with another person unless they are enlisting your help to resolve the problem; and you will not allow them to put others down and unload their hurts or offenses onto you. If need be, lay out some ground rules for going forward – no gossip, no putting the other friend down, no trying to influence

you to take sides. Tell them they should go to the other person and work out their problems, as Scripture says. That will be hard for you to do, and they may question your friendship, especially if you have just listened without questioning in the past, but it is necessary, otherwise you will become part of the problem, not help in its solution. This is the scriptural way to deal with something like that, and the way of a true friend walking in wisdom.

Q – *I just don't know if I can trust church leaders again. How will I know if I can trust a leader?*

A – You can't know whether you can trust a leader by one visit to a church. Assessing trustworthiness takes time, observation and taking note of several things. Our trust isn't something we should give automatically. People, leaders included, need to earn our trust; we should never blindly or naively trust or follow anyone.

As adults, we should know how to assess a person's trustworthiness, yet many of us have never been taught how to do this. In knowing whether a person is trustworthy or not, the following list has some things to consider. Not all of the following will be easily assessed, but you can generally find out what you need to know with some time and observation.

1. Look at their track record – Is there a history of reliability, faithfulness, and integrity? What is their record in previous relationships / situations? In most situations, the future will not be different from the past, if there has been no repentance, no re-evaluation of their values, methods, or beliefs.
2. Can they keep a confidence, or is there no discretion in their speech? Can you trust the person with what you share with them? Will they use it in a way that will harm you?
3. What kind of people do they relate to? The company they keep can tell us a lot about a person.
4. Are they willing to be transparent, or do they resent any questioning? How do they react to being held accountable for their actions? A proud heart resents questions and is not to be trusted at all. If in doubt, ask the necessary questions and observe carefully what reaction you get. (Being questioned is not the same as being distrusted.)
5. Check your 'gut' reaction? Do you get a bad feeling about this person, or do others that you can trust have a 'bad' feeling about them? If so, beware. While gut feelings aren't fool-proof they should be checked out and listened to carefully.
6. Are they forgiving? Do they hold a grudge against anyone who opposes them, stands up to them or wrongs them? If they do hold a grudge then most likely, sooner or later, you will be treated in like manner.

7. Look carefully at how they treat their family – their parents, their spouse, their children... “Whose interests are constantly being put first?” is the deciding question here.
8. How do they view their stewardship as employees or bosses? What is their attitude to their employers / employees? How do they talk to them?
9. Are they blame-shifters, minimising their responsibility, or are they able to accept their responsibility for their mistakes?
10. What do they do with emotional pain – run from it, or face up to it and try to bring it to resolution?
11. Who was it who introduced them to you as being reliable? Is that person a good judge of character?
12. Trust takes time to build. Can you afford to be honest with the person? How will they react if you take the risk of saying what you really think? Every positive response to the effort of being honest helps trust to develop. Every offended response tells you that they can't handle your efforts to be straight up with them, so intimacy and friendship cannot develop yet.

Q - *What if any new leaders or church I go to betray the trust I put in them?*

A – That is a possibility; after all we're dealing with human beings. It will take time to begin to trust again, but somewhere along the line you must make the choice to begin to trust again. If you don't then the option is to stay in a state of hurt, suspicion, and possible bitterness and offense. Don't stay in that place, for your own sake and for the sake of those around you; make the choice to learn to trust again, but this time to trust from a base of understanding how to assess a person, or church, for trustworthiness. Make sure that in moving forward you don't put old issues onto new leaders; each situation must be entered, and assessed, on its own merits. In assessing a new church or leader use the things shared in this teaching for assessing trustworthiness. If you use them you'll be able to assess whether a person or church is likely to be a safe place. We cannot guarantee that there will be no possibility of things going wrong in any new church you go to, but if you've checked them out for trustworthiness, and know the signs of abuse, then you will be warned more easily than if you don't.

Q – *I left my church because of the very things you mentioned in your series of articles. I was deeply hurt and still am, months later. I try and talk to people I know about it but they say things like, “You don't need counselling, you just need to get over it and put the past behind you.” I'm trying, but the hurt is very real. Why can't I just get over it like some of my friends seem to have been able to do?*

A – ‘Just getting over it’ isn’t as easy as people think. There are two things I want to share with you in regard to your question –

1. Your emotions and trust have been violated, and you will feel betrayed; this is normal and natural. In this case your friends are not offering you good advice. Don’t stuff it down and think it’ll go away; it won’t! It’ll simmer in your subconscious and pop up in other ways. It’ll surface as unreasonably strong responses in situations you face, as anger towards people and leaders, suspicion of anyone in a place of authority, and suspicion of God. It can even have physical repercussions, causing physical sickness and disease to develop. Science and medicine have confirmed many times that undealt with issues can cause sickness to develop.
2. In regards to your friends seeming to get over it much quicker than you – that may be how it appears, but it may or may not be the truth. The only way you can truly know is to ask them. But know this, you are not them and your journey through this won’t be exactly the same as theirs. People deal with things differently, taking different lengths of time to work through things. Your journey is your journey, and you can’t walk theirs. If you need help, seek counselling or prayer ministry from reputable ministers, but don’t measure your progress against your friends; that isn’t helpful to you or them. Some people were given good life skills by their parents, being taught how to work through issues, however many were not, and simply try to muddle through. If that’s the case for you it’s not too late to learn, and there are many good places and ministries where you can learn how to walk through things in a healthy way.

Q - I suffered from spiritual abuse at a church I was at. I attended the church for many years. The church started off okay but then gradually things got tighter and rules put in place for so many things until it actually became a cult. In the end, we had to get permission to cut our hair, go to a family wedding, and much more. Some people were even told who they should marry. Why didn’t I see what was happening until it was too late and I was caught up in it all? How can a good church become like that? Don’t they see what’s happening?

A - This is a huge question, and is not easily answered, but as I said in the early parts of this teaching, most leaders don’t set out to be abusive; they set out with good intentions, and if abuse is going to develop, it usually does so slowly, as you’ve shown in your situation. The spirit of deception is not usually blatant; it is often very subtle and slow in its strategy against people, and because of that many don’t recognise its work until it’s too late. It will just twist the truth a little, get you to believe that and when it’s established that foothold, then it will take it a bit further, until a person or church find themselves deep in error. Many of them don’t realise they are trapped and those that do, wonder how-on-earth they got there.

Some leaders have had bad role models, or have been taught that they shouldn’t let their congregation question their leadership, and often the verse about ‘not touching God’s anointed’ is used to support that. But that brings you into a vulnerable place where no-one can question you. Throw in a little insecurity or woundedness in a leader and any question

may very well feel like an attack against them personally, which leads to them attacking back or shutting a person down in some way. Add to that the possibility that a leader may begin to believe they are the only true anointed one, right about everything and add a bit of pride and deception to the mix of anointing and skill and being unaccountable, and you've got a potential cult in the making.

Years ago, as part of the pastoral team of a church, we were told in pastor's seminars and training days to keep our distance from the congregation, to not let them get too close to us or share things of importance relating to the fellowship with them. It was posited that this would make the church feel unstable, like we didn't know what we were doing as leaders. It's training like this, which separates leaders from their congregation making a fertile ground for the enemy to sow his tares and begin to subtly lead people into deception. Another thing we see often, is found amongst the many independent churches that have sprung up over the past few decades and that is the leaders rarely have people they are accountable to. This is dangerous and very often the beginning of a slippery slope. This is partly why we need to be accountable, to have those who can speak into our lives as leaders.

Some recommended books.

The Life-Giving Power of Honour – Rob Packer

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse - David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen

Toxic Churches - Marc Dupont.

Faith That Hurts, Faith That Heals - Stephen Arterburn, and Jack Felton.

Breaking Free - David R. Miller.

Churches That Abuse - Ronald Enroth.

52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday: ...And Why the Truth Is So Much Better - Steve McVey

'**Boundaries**' series of books – Henry Cloud and John Townsend

'**Keep your Love On**' – Danny Silk

Places to go for healing ministry

Restoring the Foundations NZ - <https://www.restoringthefoundations.org/teamprofile/murray-heather-mccall/>

Restoring the Foundations worldwide - <https://www.restoringthefoundations.org/>

SOZO New Zealand - <http://www.bethelsozonewzealand.com/>

SOZO worldwide - <http://bethelsozo.com/>

(There are many other places you could go for healing ministry, I have just chosen two that I personally know of.)