

# ***Trusting God Again – Recovering from Spiritual Abuse – Dan Hitz***

## ***Part One of a Two Part Series***

*The effects of spiritual abuse are very similar to the effects of sexual abuse – distrust, fear, lost hope, and inhibited development. Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse find themselves susceptible to strong church systems that seem to provide an arc of safety and protection, but they lack the discernment to understand why they continue to feel the familiar sense of control and manipulation. This article is the result of many years spent in a spiritually abusive church, walking through the aftermath, and receiving healing and hope through the power of Jesus Christ and safe members of the Body of Christ. Those who have been wounded through a spiritually abusive system can learn to trust and live as God intended. There are safe pastors and churches in the beautiful Body of Christ with whom they can thrive.*



Having found Jesus Christ after growing up in a dysfunctional family, I was yearning for spiritual boundaries and a father figure to lead me in life. **When I entered His Chapel (not the real name of the church), I found a strong leader who loved Jesus Christ and committed his life to leading others into the Kingdom as he understood it.** The holes in my heart from my

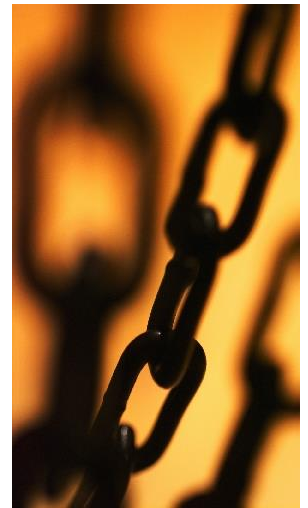
disconnect from my own father seemed to be filled by a pastor who cared enough to step in and direct the life of this young 24-year old, broken man. Regardless of whether the rules were clearly defined or simply implied, every member of His Chapel knew what was expected of them and who wasn't living up to the rules. We truly believed that we had the truth that other churches weren't willing to pay the price to live. If we followed the teachings of this system, we would be safe in God's presence and be like the five wise virgins who had readied their lamps when the Bridegroom came (Matthew 25:1-13). If we strayed or left the system, not only would we be like the five foolish virgins who found themselves lost when the Bridegroom arrived, we would open our hearts up to demonic influence that would lead us astray. We needed this system to make it to the Kingdom of God.

**As the years went on, my contact with others in the Body of Christ continued to decrease as other Chapels in our fellowship showed themselves “unwilling to pay the price”.** I began to notice inconsistencies in the system rules and the behavior of those in authority, but was taught not to question the judgment of those God chose to place in authority over me. I obediently did not address – or acknowledge – things which seemed unhealthy. I was charged by God to ensure that my wife followed the teachings of the system and to teach them to my children. We needed His Chapel to hit God's mark for our lives. This pastor had known my worst failures and had truly led me to the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Surely others in the Body of Christ would reject me if they knew my past struggles – and those in the present. **Like an enabler in an alcoholic family, I expected my wife and kids to avoid rocking the boat and to continue supporting the dysfunction.**

**In a healthy church, the leaders function is to support the members of the system.** God is the source and the leaders are servant resources, helpers, from the source to the members. Leaders use their strength to help and equip the members of their church to fulfill the calling of God on their lives. The needs of the leaders are met by the Lord and the other leaders that He has placed over them. **In an unhealthy church the thoughts, feelings, and desires of the members don't matter. Their needs go unmet as the members exist to meet the needs of the leadership.** Leaders attempt to find spiritual and emotional fulfillment through the religious performances of those whom they were called to empower and set free. Those who resist – or question – the teachings of the church are labeled divisive and shamed into compliance. The place intended by the Lord to be the safest place becomes the least safe place – the person intended to be the safest becomes the most damaging. Members of spiritually abusive systems leave such systems at a great emotional cost. The cost of remaining in the system is greater.

In their book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen (1991) define spiritual abuse as “the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment” (p.20). The website [www.spiritualabuse.com](http://www.spiritualabuse.com) states,

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 placing themselves over God’s people to control, coerce or manipulate them for seemingly Godly purposes which are really their own.



**Simply put, spiritual abuse is when church leaders get their own needs met by using God’s name to manipulate other people to do what they want them to do.**

God has a lot to say about such leaders in Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 23. To those of you who have suffered the devastating effects of spiritual abuse I want to make one thing clear:

**The years you spent in the spiritually abusive system were not a total waste. Like most abusive families, most spiritually abusive systems have both positive and negative qualities.**

Yes, my family and I did suffer in the system; however, there were some benefits as well. I would not be in the ministry today without the positive lessons learned at His Chapel. One of the first sermons I heard when I walked out of the unhealthy church system and into a healthy place was out of the book of Nehemiah. The pastor had tied a rope around the chandelier and talked about the times in our lives when we see our walls in utter destruction as Nehemiah saw the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11-20). It is during those times that we need to hold onto the rope that is unraveling as we walk with God through the rubble to discern the foundational truths that we still believe. You may find as I did, there are many.

Those who have been wounded by spiritual abuse demonstrate the spiritual aspects of the symptoms of childhood sexual abuse. **As a woman who was sexually abused by her step-father may mistrust safe men in her life, those who endured spiritual abuse may mistrust all pastors and church leaders in general.** I have a godly love for the pastor that God has placed me under today, but when I first started attending the church that was not the case. I didn’t trust spiritual leadership.

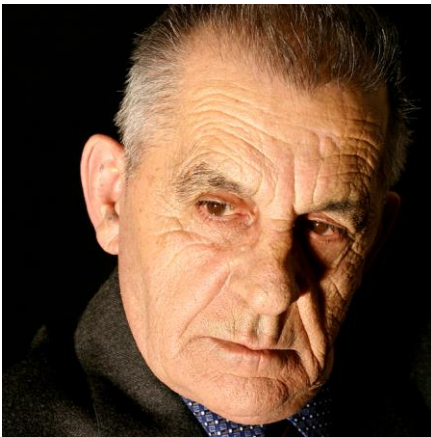


Every move this pastor made was scrutinized for safety. Six months after attending the church I walked into his office and told my entire story. I was watching to see if the grace presented at the pulpit was walked out in the daily life of the church. I pushed the envelope and gave him the chance to destroy me or build me up. I wanted to know if he was safe then and there. I’m happy to say that nine years after that day I have a deeper love and respect for him than I ever did. He continues to prove himself safe – complete with his admitted human frailties. Those who have endured spiritual abuse may have a **distorted image of God**. Either He is seen as impotent, tired and apathetic for allowing the abuse in the first place, or he is seen as a mean and vindictive God just hoping that we’ll sin and give Him the chance to punish us. We can acknowledge the “severity of God”, but seem to struggle seeing the “goodness of God” (Romans 11:22). This can lead to living under the “Dot Theory” of Christianity where we are

convinced that we either figure out *exactly* what God wants us to do or we’ll miss the mark for our lives and end up in a spiritual train wreck. We don’t realize that God is merciful and leads us graciously. Spiritual abuse survivors may also have a **distorted self-identity as a Christian**, never feeling good enough or truly loved. They have a **hard time receiving grace** as many of their years were lived out in condemnation of “goopy grace” or “sloppy agape”. God may get angry with us and deny

us the Promised Land just like He did with most of the Israelites in the wilderness. Some involved in spiritual abuse have **difficulty with personal responsibilities**. Their performance orientation tells them that they are only as good as the works they are doing, so they may take on too many spiritual responsibilities and/or avoid starting others fearing they won't be able to do them well. Their family responsibilities may suffer because they are required to fulfill their responsibilities at church. The fears and restrictions of the religious system limit their involvement with others which inhibits learning through experience and creates a **lack of life skills**... Kids shouldn't argue, so the parents intervene without giving them a chance to learn how to resolve issues on their own... Secular college is unsafe so don't go... Much of life is learned outside the classroom in our interaction with others. Healthy spiritual systems allow *safe* trial and error. Survivors may have a **difficult time admitting the abuse** for many reasons. They have been taught not to question authority – not to “touch God's anointed” – or they may suffer the fate of Aaron and Miriam who were judged for talking against Moses (Numbers 12:1-15). Acknowledging the problem and leaving the system would rock their entire world. “Could it really be that bad?” “I joined this church voluntarily and accepted the teaching, how can it be abuse if I embraced it?” Fear of reprisal from God and others may follow them long after they have left the system.

**The characteristics of spiritually abused people play into the characteristics of spiritually abusive churches. Power posturing** among the leadership demands instant obedience rather than obedience



because it is earned. The pastor elevates himself above the Holy Spirit and may even evaluate the words that his congregants receive from the Lord to see if they fit the vision he has for his own kingdom. True God-given authority does not micromanage or have to demand obedience. Healthy Christians gladly follow healthy leaders because of the anointing God has placed on their lives and ministries. Abusive systems implement the **“No Talk Rule”** in which complete obedience is demanded and members are not allowed to question authority or hold them accountable. Johnson and VanVonderen (1991) explain that under the No Talk Rule, the problem isn't the problem, you are the problem for pointing out the problem. The implication is that you are bad for having a problem with the problem. **Performance**

**preoccupation** means that a Christian's spirituality is measured by how well he/she performs external spiritual tasks rather than the true spiritual condition of his/her heart. Obedience and submission to spiritual authority are strongly emphasized as the needs of the church are more important than the needs of the family. Members are required to be at church every time the doors are open as absences are duly noted. Abusive church systems employ **unspoken rules** because if the rules were spoken out loud everyone would recognize how foolish they were. One abusive church pastor prohibited his members from attending movie theaters, even if the movie being shown was an acceptable film, because the demons who were present during the “R” rated horror films are still in the theater when the “G” rated movies are shown. If someone were to ask why the same rule doesn't apply to motel rooms when illicit sexual activity has surely been performed in almost every hotel room at one time or another, he would be quickly dismissed or labeled divisive. Spiritually abusive churches demonstrate a **lack of balance**. They may be either dogmatic or hyper charismatic with more balance placed on the subjective rather than the objective or vice versa. Objectivism elevates education and dogmatic interpretation over and above Scriptural life experiences. Subjectivism elevates feelings and experiences over Biblical teaching. Godly leadership requires the balance of a heart submitted to the Holy Spirit. Abusive spiritual systems operate under a shroud of **isolation and paranoia** which is often paired with a sense of elitism and disdain for others. Congregations not in the same system are viewed as polluted streams and system members may be discouraged from visiting them because they may pick up evil spirits which will lead them astray. Members may also be discouraged from seeking help from counselors, support groups, and public agencies who may point out the dysfunction and talk against the system. If a leader is questioned by an outside agency for an actual problem, it is presented as an attack from the evil secular society or demonic opposition for upholding righteousness. Abusive systems demand **misplaced loyalty** as the church is elevated above family members. At His Chapel, those who missed the Easter Sunday service to spend the holiday with family members were rebuked from the pulpit. Those who leave abusive

systems are routinely shunned – even if they are members of one’s own family. **Scare tactics** are used to keep members compliant to the system. Abusive pastors may publically announce the trials of those who have left the church to instill fear on current members who may be considering leaving themselves. He/she is upheld as an example of what will happen to anyone who walks out from under God’s umbrella of protection. Those who leave the church and do well are presented as blessed by the devil who will give them whatever they want to keep them away from God’s blessing. The bottom line is that the members believe that leaving the church puts them in spiritual danger. Those who remain are careful to follow the church rules lest their misdeeds be used as sermon illustrations on Sunday morning.

**A person who has never experienced an abusive system may have a hard time understanding why someone would choose to remain in one.** The very characteristics of the system influence members to remain. They fear the **shaming** they have witnessed of others who have left. “If I leave, what will be said about my issues?” Abusive churches often seek to discredit the theology of those who leave to create the illusion that the problem was with those who left rather than the system itself. **Individuality is deconstructed** as members conform to the image of the system rather than the image of God. Self expression is unwelcomed. **Fear of losing God’s** blessing runs deep in the hearts of the members. Members are **socially invested** in the system and have deep relationships with other members which will be lost when they choose to leave. They may also be **emotionally, financially, and spiritually invested** and have gained status from playing by the rules. In the case of an employee in an abusive church, his income, social interaction, the education of his children, and even housing may be solely controlled by the system. If he/she leaves, the effects are felt not only by him, but by his family as well. Through **denial**, the person may try to convince him/herself and others that it can’t possibly be that bad – or that things seem to be getting better. After one more year of hope, the situation remains just as bad.

**Spiritually healthy churches do exist.** They are places where the leaders’ **power and authority are used to serve, equip, and empower** the members to reach their full potential in God. Jesus spent many hours teaching his disciples, yet he still took the place of the lowest servant and washed the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:3-17). In healthy churches, **rules are spoken out loud** and they are Biblical. The believers are fighting the “good fight of faith” with Biblical actions rather than answering charges for oppressive practices. Members are **free to respectfully ask the pastor questions** about teachings they don’t agree with, and to present problems with church policies that may need to be adjusted. **Honesty and openness** are present with no double standards. There is **deference to Christ** as the true Head of the Church, His agenda, and His methods. The leadership of the church recognize that **Christ is in each one of us** and that each one of us is valued by God and worthy of respect. **Loyalty to Christ takes precedence over loyalty to the system** and the human desires of the pastor. When God does call members of a healthy church to leave the local body and join another church, they are **blessed and encouraged as they begin a new chapter** in their lives.



*Next month’s article explains the recovery process and the characteristics of healthy churches.*

#### **References and Resources**

***The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse***, David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, MN, 1991. A workbook is also available.

***www.spiritualabuse.com*** – This website offers informative articles, resources, and forums on recovery from spiritual abuse.

***http://www.nacronline.com/video-workshops*** – This resource page from The National Association for Christian Recovery offers videos on recovery from spiritual abuse and other issues which may be viewed online for free or purchased on DVD.

***The Grace Awakening***, Charles R. Swindoll, Word Publishing, Dallas, TX, 1996.