

Spiritual Abuse

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“Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.” (Ezekiel 34:4, 5 *NASB**).

My burden in this article is to address an issue that needs to be trumpeted in our churches. I want to talk about spiritual abuse. Thankfully, this issue has been addressed in various ways—books, blog posts, websites, etc., but this cancer continues to cause non-Christians to run for the tall grass, far away from “the church,” (who can blame them?) and those who have been victimized by authoritarian abuse in churches, to spend years trying to regain their sense of trust in those God has called to lead. The collateral damage that takes place in churches led by legalistic tyrants is both intensive and extensive. For those who have ears to hear, I hope adding my voice to others who recognize how the grace of God, the Gospel itself, is being torpedoed by pharisaical zealots, will motivate you to identify spiritual abuse in your church if it exists, and even if “your ox isn’t being gored,” to respond to your leadership group as if it were. Your day is coming.

Before I get into the heart of the matter, I must give a little background relative to my theological pedigree (such that it is) and the essential bullet points of my personal story.

Since the mid 1970s, I have embraced believer’s baptism and the firm conviction that God really is in control of His creation. The sovereignty of God has in the past (and will continue to in the future) delighted my heart and provided my foundation for living the remainder of my life on earth. Praise God that He has a plan and the power to make it happen, even using the rebellion of His creatures (believers and unbelievers alike) to accomplish His redemptive purposes. God knows the future because He has planned it. So I am what many people would call a Calvinist. I accept that label for convenience sake only, not because I burn incense in front of engravings of Calvin, or believe

that he was inerrant. Quite the contrary, he was as we are, flawed in various ways, both in doctrine and practice.

My zeal in putting these thoughts before you comes courtesy from the last two years of my life. Notwithstanding the perils of writing about something that is autobiographically driven (which can become heavy with heat and light on light), I nevertheless do so with the knowledge that my understanding of the events of the recent past are still in process. I continue to suffer the consequences of Providence from both the ecclesiological and family side of life. As I have talked with others who have been devastated by “God’s anointed” there is much overlap in our experiences, observations, concerns, and yes, trauma. Because of this reality, I can’t be dispassionate in how I discuss the pertinent issues related to our situation. My words, as motivated as I am to be “clinical,” will nevertheless reflect what my wife and I have been through. The word “cultish” has come up many times in my conversations with others, from their lips, not ours.

The bare history is that the devastation my wife and I experienced at our church (which we attended for some thirteen years) was concurrent with the suicide death of my daughter from my prior marriage, and the cancer death of my identical twin brother some six months later. Dealing with those two losses in the context of abandonment and shunning by men who I thought were undershepherds, many of whom were good friends, made that time painful in ways that will forever change the lens through which I look at pastors and elders. I was very close to the leadership of my church and played a frequent and public role in teaching, doing art work, and musically participating in worship. We were not back benchers; we were very involved with this fellowship of believers. In my some forty years of professing faith in Jesus, I have never heard of, much less experienced, what happened to us. Our story, in its detail, is unfathomable to those who believe us. Through this experience, we have been demonized, slandered, and have lost many precious friendships. Throughout the entire ordeal—notwithstanding my less than pristine deportment in thought, word, and motive—I was never called out by any of my elders for sinful behavior, with the exception of one comment by the former pastor that I needed to follow their protocol for leaving if I was to be godly. (I did offer to meet with the elders to discuss my reasons for leaving, but they declined that offer.) Yes, churches can be quite “cultish” without reaching the depth of Mormonism or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

I must end my "bio" simply by saying that God did not hang us out to twist in the wind. He raised up others to meet us where we were, to unconditionally love us, and to implore of me, "Tell me about your daughter. Tell me about your dear brother. I want to know about them. I am so sorry for your losses." Praise God for His provision of these people who understand grace in a remarkably deeper way than those "called" to the ministry in our last church. My wife and I have found a fellowship that, while far from perfect (as we are), seems to comprehend the grace of God in Christ.

While abusive authoritarianism in churches crosses all denominational boundaries, you will notice that my focus is primarily on those fellowships that consider themselves to be "reformed." My church of thirteen years embraces an uncompromising belief in the five points of Calvinism. They claim to teach the Bible consecutively, verse-by-verse. The cultish leadership in my old "reformed" church is tragically not unique to them. News reports and blog entries abound with the stories of "battered sheep" who found the courage to run like hades from their Calvinistic "shepherds." There truly is a dark side to Calvinism, a horrible by-product that is perverting the Gospel of grace. My conviction is that toxic pride (other than unbelief) is the greatest of sins and is what drives these men in their defamation of the Gospel, and not adherence to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. The insane irony of all of this is that humility should profusely ooze from those who say they believe that God alone is the author of salvation. What theological system more fervently teaches that all blessings, both temporal and eternal, come from a sovereign God to ill-deserving sinners? There is a massive disconnect somewhere in all of this, one of truly biblical proportions. For those who know about this, whether they have suffered the pharisaical lash of "God's anointed" or not, we simply must not tolerate this curse selling itself as a blessing. My understanding of Ephesians 4:26 gives me the impetus I believe God requires to call out those who destroy, in the name of "leading the sheep," those who are entrusted to them by God. Yes, there are things that should make us righteously indignant, things that make us angry. I am positing the idea that legalistic, abusive pastor/elder rule should be a target for our disgust—not our tolerance. The "can't talk rule" that pervades Christendom is tragically wrong and is responsible for prolonging many destructive practices in our churches.

My remaining comments will not involve exegetical treatments of Hebrews 13:17, 1 Corinthians 5:11, or the other two or three texts used as clubs by the guys in charge. There are excellent resources available for anyone who wants to delve into those texts. I simply

want to address a few practical areas for your consideration. John Reisinger, a man for whom I have high regard, has rightly stated that most church splits and the devastation that results from them are due not to a handful of rebels in the pew, but rather the tyranny from the man/men behind the pulpit.

"Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon..." but Adam's blood actually runs through the veins of elders and pastors no less than other believer-priests. The three men who God used most prominently to record divine revelation all committed murder, and one of them added adultery to his resume (Moses, David, and Paul). I mention this to say that men who lead churches are as susceptible to sin (even egregious sin) as those they oversee. In too many churches there exists a cult-like allegiance to the man behind the pulpit and his fellow leaders. I am all for appropriate loyalty to church leadership, but when that loyalty morphs into adoration or exaltation, then something terrible has happened that will inevitably lead to disaster. In such churches, people, for the most part, will no longer be vigilant to apply critical thinking to what is said from the pulpit. Mere men become "God's anointed" ("vicegerents of Christ") and as such, they take on a holy luster by virtue of their "office" that radically distinguishes them from their congregants. The sheep buy into this nonsense, and their leaders too often encourage and revel in their status, which they fortify by their sermons and practice. The elders become an elite ruling class, imbued with a seeming supernatural wisdom. A magical ontological transformation takes place when they get enough votes, and they are transferred to a different realm from that which they occupied prior. They instantly develop skills such as delving into men's hearts to decipher their "motives and attitudes." They watch each other's back and if one of the sheep raises substantive concerns about one of the anointed, he will be treated as if he spoke critically about all of them. If there is a difference of opinion regarding something said or done between one of the elders and a sheep, the remaining elders always default to the opinion of their "anointed" brother. After all, HE is a holy man of God. Dr. Walter Chantry calls these men "sanctified busy bodies" who "keep the sheep in bondage."

One of the ways leaders keep their sheep penned up is to so discredit "trouble makers" (through ad hominem attacks) that no one in the church will believe their story. My exhortation to those in churches who still are capable of critical thinking is to follow Proverbs 18:17 and go to the people who have been "disfellowshipped, shunned or abandoned" and hear their story, after which those individuals in church will be able to make a proper assessment as to who is

essentially right or wrong in the matter at hand. (To do this, the sheep actually have to believe that their elders are capable of sin.) Virtually all our friendships at our former church have evaporated, and not by our doing. If any of you reading this ever find yourselves in the position of having left a church under difficult circumstances, you will praise God for those who didn't discard your friendship like a styrofoam cup before having sought you out to hear your story. However don't hold your breath for such a thing to happen. It rarely does.

Shunning

My goodness, if shunning were a spiritual gift, what perpetual glory God would receive from our church leaders and those they inflame against the "shunnee." I fully understand (I believe) the importance of protecting the flock and dealing decisively with professing believers when necessary under the provisions of 1 Corinthians 5. But alas, like what liberals do to the Constitution, pastors treat this text as a "living" document and stretch it to fit any and all situations they feel they must to accomplish their own ends. Matthew 18, which also is used to justify abandonment or shunning, has zero to do with church discipline. It is a protocol given to address enmity between two individuals.

Given the enormity of this problem, Christians should learn what constitutes spiritual abuse/domination and make sure that it doesn't take place in their churches. If elements of abuse are present, then I strongly encourage you to deal with it. Don't ignore it to keep from putting friendships or proximity to leadership at risk (which I did at times), or tolerate abuse out of cowardice. John Reisinger stated, "It is sickening to see men grovel and lick boots in order to be in favor and power with 'the man of God.'" People who abuse their authority to hammer and oppress their people should not be church leaders. In a true plurality of leadership, this kind of abuse can be addressed when it crops up, but too often, and I think most often, churches that have plural leadership really don't function as such. One or two or three men, all of whom buy into the same philosophy of ministry, will succeed in dealing with any renegade elder who might be foolish enough to challenge something structural to their philosophy. It's a rare thing when one elder stands up against the consensus thinking of his fellow elders. It takes enormous courage and integrity. I know a man who did push back, and he quickly became a big problem to the other board members. Ministries that are characterized by this kind of leadership should not be supported, so those in the pew have great

influence and power if they stand together in their attempts to put grace back into the Gospel. If structural changes don't materialize over time, then the congregants simply need to find a door that isn't locked and leave.

Efforts to control the sheep

Various means are used by pastors and elders to keep their sheep from "straying": Sermons that stress their authority and the consequent obedience to be rendered to them, their over-arching philosophy of ministry and example of how they treat the sheep (especially those who raise critical concerns), exhortations not to talk with any people who are critical of leadership, and finally membership covenants. Fleshing all of this out would take me well beyond the scope of this paper, so I will have to be brief.

After several months of sermonizing on the authority of elders and the duties of the sheep, the people of our prior church learned where they stood. The pastor even referred to himself, in relation to the elders, as "the first among equals" in one sermon. Embedded in those sermons was their "new way" to deal with "complainers." They said that no one's issue would be addressed unless and until the elders were convinced that their "motives and attitudes" were sufficiently pristine as they raised an issue of concern. (Gosh, I thought omniscience was an attribute of God alone. Hmmm.) Only after the complainer passed this test would the substance of his concerns be addressed. This obviously is designed to put fear into the hearts of would-be complainers and to minimize their raising concerns. Additional sermons took place (with yelling) telling the sheep not to talk with those who have left the church who speak critically of leadership. And so we have the sheep sealed off from meaningful, (perhaps critical) dialogue from within the walls of the church, and they're also being cut off from criticism from without. This works really well to inoculate church leadership from criticism. There is no accountability in these kinds of places, and yes this philosophy of ministry is CULTISH.

I am convinced, notwithstanding the arguments to the contrary about the benefits of official church membership, that there is a reason why Scripture is silent about this. While many good men whom I respect would disagree with me on my take on local church covenants, I think they do much more harm than good. For those godly pastors and elders who have formal membership covenants that are not "control mechanisms," I commend them. In our case, the elders, behind closed doors, produced a membership covenant that they "encouraged" their

members to sign and date. I spoke out against it vociferously, given its controlling, and abusive language. For those who have seen the document outside of the church, most have been appalled by it. I won't publish it here, but I will address one feature of it that is a telltale sign of legalistic abuse. If ever your pastor or elders speak of church membership as a "marriage" between you and the leaders/congregants, do yourself a favor and run for the door. Every Christian is wedded to Christ alone. He is not married to men who run churches. When one leaves, he is not "divorcing" his spouse. He, in most cases, is leaving to join another group within the body of Christ, thereby expressing his belief in the unity of the body. If the elders speak of having a "parental" role to play in relation to their sheep, also run for the door. Your relationship to others in the body of Christ, including elders, is that of a sibling. We are all brothers and sisters, and certainly not the children of pastors. We have in Scripture something called the priesthood of all believers. That notion entails more than how all Christians have proximity to God through one mediator; it also speaks to the issue of function. There are some fifty-eight "one another" imperatives in the New Testament that provide the means by which the body of Christ is to serve one another in love. Nowhere in the Bible do we find "ministry" vested primarily in the hands of one man or small group of men. Church covenants of the kind I referenced are straight jackets designed to control and manipulate sheep, even in how they leave, which brings me to another area.

One can learn volumes about a church in how they treat people who leave. Do they subject the departing Christians to ridicule, threats and cruelty, or do they treat them with love and grace? Examine what your church does in this area. Have the elders flesh out in detail what criteria for leaving is acceptable to them. If they produce a list of criteria detailing legitimate reasons for leaving, ask them to show you in Scripture where they find that list. After all, these men hold to Sola Scriptura, so make them show you where their rules are found in the Bible, because they assert that to leave in a godly fashion you have to follow their rules, and surely they must admit, at least in theory, that Scripture defines godliness. There is a lot of "small print" (the white space between the lines) in most church membership covenants, so you must press this issue before leadership. One extrabiblical protocol I fully endorse is the notion that elders need to interview people who leave with a genuine interest in knowing their "whys." A godly elder board will recognize that they don't have it all figured out and that they are not immune to sinful behavior or wrong doctrine/practice. If they did these interviews routinely, they might well find a pattern of

issues that crop up with each departing family. If that is the case, and if they are wise men, they will consider, based upon a consensus of expressed concerns, that they need to make some changes. Over time, this can have a very positive impact on local churches. In our situation, I offered to meet with our elders to give them our “whys,” and they declined. What a missed opportunity they had.

In contrast to what typically goes on in this area, I want to tell you about a wonderful church and how they dealt with a former member.

In November of 2010, my identical twin brother (Don) died of a brain tumor. A year before he died, he told me that he had asked a pastor from a church he and his wife hadn’t attended in over two decades to officiate his service. This main teaching elder gladly agreed to honor his request, even though Don left over substantive theological differences with this man. Since that time, my brother and his family had attended two or three other churches.

I asked Don why he would have asked this man to do his service, given the amount of time elapsed since they ended their seven-year involvement there and the theological issues, etc., and he said, “Well, I appreciate Bob’s core theology (mostly reformed) but the main reason is that when we had our conversation with him telling him that we were leaving, he simply told us that we would be missed, and that they appreciated our family’s ministry efforts at the church. He also said that we depart with his blessing, despite our theological differences, but he wished us the Lord’s blessing in the days ahead.” In a nutshell, it was how Don and his wife were treated at that difficult time of departure. Don said, “He was just so kind and loving to us about the whole thing. We were greatly blessed by his attitude.”

Fast forward twenty-three years. Not only did Don’s old church host his memorial service, but they organized feeding the four-hundred-plus people who attended, absorbing significant financial costs in the process. This, they did for a man who hadn’t been a member there for over twenty years, for a man who left that church over differences in theology. For all pastors and elders who have ears to hear, I hope you are listening. What a testimony to the unity of the body of Christ and how His Gospel was so winsomely on display that day. I praise God for that church and the people there who sacrificed as they did to minister to me, and all who attended.

Lastly, I want to exhort church leaders—especially those who embrace the doctrines of the sovereign grace of God.

For the sake of the Gospel, please love your people UNCONDITIONALLY. (This is what we call Christianity.) My plea to you who lead in churches is to simply love as you have been loved, forgive as you have been forgiven. Meet people wherever they are in their walk of faith with a listening, compassionate ear, even for those prickly complainers. Meet them where Christ meets you every nanosecond of your life. Deep six your membership covenant if it is short on grace and long on law. If you say you believe in a plurality of leadership, take the initiative to make that a functioning reality in your church, which means you might well have to give up some of your power and authority. Create an environment in your churches that encourages communication from the sheep, even, and especially, difficult communication. (When I took our pastor to lunch to talk with him about his sermons, after hearing me exhort him to stick to the text more closely, he responded, "I don't tell you how to do your artwork. Preaching is my craft, like artwork is yours.") With love and compassion, seek people out who leave, to learn from them. I am not suggesting that you will always get valuable feedback in those situations, but over time, you will profit from that practice. Never preach to individuals from the pulpit, and that means more than not mentioning names. The sheep are not that stupid, and they will know when you are targeting others. Except under the most extreme circumstances, don't issue edicts to your flock not to speak to or remain friends with those who leave. If you want your church to grow, love your people, preach grace in your ecclesiology, not just soteriology, and be an example to them. It's monkey see, monkey do.

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Colossians 3:12-15 (NASB*)

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Micah 6:8 (KJV)

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