

# SPIRITUAL ABUSE

By Jeff Rath 3-99

## Introduction

**Jeremiah 23:1** Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD.

Sometimes the ministers who are supposed to help God's people are the ones doing the harm. The place of fellowship and worship has sometimes become the place of abuse and destruction. Some of these abusive ministers have driven God's people to depression, divorce, disease, destruction, and even death.

**John 10:10** The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it* more abundantly.

**Matthew 7:15** Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

God warns us of these false prophets and false ministers. They devour God's flock instead of feeding the flock.

**2 Timothy 3:13** But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

These abusive systems continue to get worse and worse. The longer a Christian is in an abusive system the worse off he is.

**Acts 20:29** For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

**20:30** Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

We are not to be disciples of ministries, churches, or organizations. But instead we are to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father.

**1 Peter 5:2** Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

**5:3** Neither as being lords over *God's* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

It is my goal to expose abusive practices that are practiced in the name of Christianity and the name of God. I want to give you a way of measuring an organization according to the Word of God to see if it is abusive or not. If you have a suspicion that the group you are in is abusive, then put them to the test. See if they are doing what would qualify as abusive or not. It is not my goal to trash churches or ministries. I only want to see God's people get deliverance from abuse.

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You can either use the Word of God to help people or to hurt people. In an abusive system the Word of God is used to hurt people. If the Word of God is spoken in love, it helps people, but if it is spoken with other motives then it can be used to abuse and hurt people. In the book of Job the miserable comforters used the Word of God to attack Job and increase his misery. They should have used the Word to help Job.

**Job 16:4** I also could speak as ye *do*: if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could heap up words against you, and shake mine head at you.

**Ephesians 4:15** But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ:

## Breakthrough or Breakdown

Unfortunately some of the Ministers and Ministries that people go to for God's help are not providing help at all - - in fact some of these Ministries actually drive people deeper into their problems instead of helping them. One of the signs of spiritual abuse is that the abused person will feel like he or she is both on the verge of a breakthrough and on the verge of a breakdown.

This is an excerpt from a book that I recommend highly.

### ***The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse 1991 David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen***

Jeri sat in the office of a Christian counselor, explaining that she felt desperate, and felt like she was going crazy. "Either that," she said dryly, "or I'm on the verge of a major breakthrough in my spiritual growth."

"Those are two big opposites," the counselor noted. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Well," she began, choking up, "I went to my pastor a few months ago because I was feeling depressed a lot. He pegged the root problem right away, but I can't seem to do anything about it."

"Root problem..." the counselor repeated. "What was that?"

Jeri looked down at her shoe tops. "I guess I would have to say the problem is, well, *me*. My pastor says I'm in rebellion against God."

Jeri's pastor was either incompetent or an outright liar or both. Instead of offering compassion, love and spiritual tenderness this pastor came up with a "root problem." Quite often those who are so very quick to accuse others of having a "root problem" have an even larger problem themselves.

**Matthew 7:2** For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

**7:3** And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

**7:4** Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam *is* in thine own eye?

**7:5** Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly

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to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

Jesus Christ called the spiritual abusers hypocrites, because they were quick to jump on the faults of others and refused to acknowledge their own faults which were even worse. The spiritual abusers will hold their followers to a standard that they themselves do not follow, and they will demand that people try to earn what God has already freely given them.

## False Accusations

Jeri's Pastor gave her some Scriptures to memorize and she was told to get her mind off of herself and onto others. When the pastors instructions did not help Jeri then she became a problem. She exposed the pastor's incompetence and the pastor cannot let his people see that he doesn't really know how to solve the problem, so he has to accuse her of having some "root problem."

**John 8:48** Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?

Jesus Christ was accused of having a devil - - those doing the accusing were spiritually incompetent and they were liars. Accusing people of being possessed of devil spirits is one of the false accusers' favorite tools. I have met numerous people who were falsely accused of being homosexual, spiritualists, or some other evil thing. The one common thing that these people had in common was that they disagreed with an abusive spiritual leader. They therefore became a problem and the way a spiritual abuser deals with problem people is to falsely accuse them. Often the more outrageous the accusation the more effective it is. These false accusations work in several ways - - they silence the person accused, they intimidate those who stay, and they keep those who stay from communicating with those who leave. In a spiritual abuse system discerning of spirits turns into the counterfeit - - "Genuine Spiritual Suspicion." That way you don't even need revelation from God to accuse people of being possessed. If it looks like a duck it must be a duck. I call this "five senses discerning of spirits." It takes the spirit of God out of the equation and allows the spiritual abuser to let his devil spirit fantasies run wild. He can dream up all sorts up new types of devil spirits. The problem here is that when someone focus' on devil spirits they can start to see them everywhere. It is not good to get obsessed with devil spirits.

**2 Corinthians 2:11** Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

We need to be aware of Satan but we can't be obsessed with evil spirits to the point that we see spirits where they don't even exist.

**Romans 2:4** Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

It is not the knowledge of how bad the Devil is that leads people to God. It is the Goodness of God.

**Titus 1:15** Unto the pure all things *are* pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving *is* nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

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If you are looking for something bad in someone you will be able to find it. If you are looking for something good in someone you can find that too. The spiritual abuser looks for the evil. He may do it under the guise of some good reason like “keeping the household clean.” God’s people are NOT trash that needs to be removed from the household of God. The only way that you can have a completely clean household is to get rid of ALL of the people, because we are ALL imperfect. If you look hard enough for devil spirits in people then you will see them even when they are not there, because you will imagine them and you will convince yourself that they are there even when they are not.

One of the great weapons that a spiritual abuser has in his arsenal is the accusation. Hitler proved that if you tell a lie often enough then people will believe it. Spiritual abusers are very adept at accusing others. They quite often do this screaming at the top of their lungs. This makes the lies and accusations more formidable.

When I was little my family attended a Lutheran Church. My father’s ancestors came from the part of Germany that Martin Luther was from. As a result my family were Lutherans. One Sunday my mother asked the Pastor a question how could innocent little babies be born in sin. This is a logical question, but the problem is it exposed the pastor’s ignorance and inability to explain so out came the accusation: “That’s just the Devil in you making you ask that question.” Well we did not attend that church after that because my parents had the sense to go somewhere else when they were being abused. Martin Luther started the Reformation by rebelling against the abusive and corrupt Roman Catholic Church, but years later the Lutheran Church no longer represented the beliefs and principles that Martin Luther stood for. When an organization was started by a great man of God there is no guarantee that this organization will continue to follow his teachings after he is dead.

## **You can’t stay and you can’t leave**

The spiritual abuser will quite often make it both hard to stay and hard to leave. This is a really cruel manipulation. The poor Christian is told that other groups are devilish, and counterfeit. They are told that if they leave something terrible will happen to them, or that God will be very displeased with them and that He won’t answer their prayers. Yet if they try to stay then they will be told that they have to live up to some impossible standard to earn God’s love and praise. This is called performance based Christianity. This is the opposite of grace based Christianity, because the believer has to earn what God has already freely given him. The problem here is that nobody can live up to the standard - - not even the spiritual abuser himself lives up to the standard that he is promoting. Jesus Christ was the only man that ever walked perfectly - - the rest of us can only make it by God’s grace. Then when people don’t measure up to the standard they are kicked out, excommunicated, marked and avoided, or some other form of removal from the group that they are now desperately trying to stay in. This is where fear motivation, control and demanding of obedience are manifested.

There is a great record in the John Chapter 9 - - this is the record of the man that was born blind. One of the miracles that proved that Jesus Christ was the Son of God was the healing of a man born blind. This had never been done before. The Pharisees were spiritual abusers who were not interested in the blind man’s deliverance. They were instead interested in accusing and kicking out those who didn’t follow their religious standards.

**John 9:26** Then said they [the Pharisees] to him [the man born blind] again, What did he [Jesus

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Christ] to thee? how opened he thine eyes?

**9:27** He answered them, I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear *it* again? will ye also be his disciples?

**9:28** Then they reviled him, and said, Thou art his disciple; but we are Moses' disciples.

**9:29** We know that God spake unto Moses: *as for this fellow*, we know not from whence he is.

**9:30** The man answered and said unto them, Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and *yet* he hath opened mine eyes.

**9:31** Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.

**9:32** Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

**9:33** If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.

**9:34** They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out.

Here the Pharisees kicked out the man because he was healed on the wrong day and he had the courage to stand up to them and question them and because he was not intimidated by them.

**John 6:37** All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

Jesus Christ did not kick out his followers. He kicked out devil spirits, and he backed down Scribes and Pharisees, but he didn't turn on his own followers. But spiritual abusers will often accuse people of having devil spirits, but instead of casting out the spirits they cast out the people. The reason is that the people don't have spirits to cast out because the accusation was false to begin with. There are occasional situations where someone may have to be asked not to attend a church or fellowship. But if removing people from the fellowship is the norm then there is something wrong.

In an abusive system the follower is taught that the ONLY truth and protection come from staying in the group. This puts a deep fear of leaving into the follower. The follower will do anything to keep from getting kicked out, and the follower would not even dream of leaving even though the treatment he receives in the group continues to get worse.

**Isaiah 35:8** And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it *shall be* for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err *therein*.

**35:9** No lion shall be there, nor *any* ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk *there*:

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I have seen these verses used to teach that “the way of holiness” is staying in the group and that those that leave the group will end up being devoured by the lions and other ravenous beasts. This again builds fear and negative believing so that people don’t have the courage to leave or that when they are out they are convinced that something terrible will happen to them. When people get in that state of mind they will quite often get what they fear.

**Job 3:25** For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me.

## Legalism – “How To” versus “Have To”

Another form of spiritual abuse is legalism. Are you being taught how to do God’s Word or are you being taught that you have to do God’s Word. The first is deliverance the second is bondage. Jesus Christ taught his followers how to receive the great things of God’s Word but the Pharisees required people to do what they said the law was.

**John 8:2** And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

**8:3** And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

**8:4** They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

**8:5** Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

The Old Testament law said that if a man committed adultery with a married woman then he and the woman should be put to death. It is interesting to note that the Pharisees did not say that the woman was married and they did not bring a man to be stoned either. Here the Pharisees were not interested in the truth of the law they were interested in making Jesus Christ look bad, and they were willing to kill the woman to achieve their goal. The Pharisees were twisting the Old Testament law and making and trying to misapply it to this situation.

**8:6** This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with *his* finger wrote on the ground, *as though he heard them not*.

Jesus Christ thought about this situation and he considered the scriptures that applied to the woman. The heart of Jesus Christ and God his Father was love and forgiveness not legalism.

**8:7** So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

**8:8** And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

**8:9** And they which heard *it*, being convicted by *their own* conscience, went out one by one,

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beginning at the eldest, *even* unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

How did they know she was an adulteress, maybe she was found pregnant without a husband. Where was the man that committed adultery with her? If she was caught in the act or pregnant then there must have been a man involved. Maybe this woman was servicing the Pharisees' sexual desires. It is quite common that spiritual abusers are also sexual abusers of their followers. In 1 Samuel chapter 2 it is recorded that those who were supposed to be priests would lay with women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle. They used the place of worship as a place to find women to have adultery with. They were sexual and spiritual abusers.

**8:10** When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

**8:11** She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

## Jumping Through Hoops

Another form of spiritual abuse is where the leader requires his followers to “jump through hoops” to earn his and God’s approval. This is performance based Christianity. This is nothing more than causing Christians to earn what God has freely given them. Another problem here is that not only does the poor Christian have to jump through hoops; but the hoops keep moving. Just when the poor Christian is getting used to jumping through hoops all of a sudden the hoops move. The standard keeps changing. There is “new light” or “new revelation,” I have also heard it taught as the new “present truth,” as if truth changes all the time.

**Ephesians 4:14** That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

God never desired for his children to be lead about by abusive leaders who keep setting up performance standards that the believers must adhere to in order to earn God’s approval.

**Ephesians 2:8** For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God:

**2:9** Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Salvation is so big that there is nothing that we can do to earn it. It HAD to be given to us. There are no good works we can do to earn it. There are no bad works we can do to lose it.

**John 3:16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

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## *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse 1991 David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen*

“Many will easily recall the story of “The Wizard of Oz.” Curiously, we can gain some insights about spiritual authority from this popular tale. Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion go to the Wizard because they believe he has the power to give them what they need. Dorothy needs to go home; the Scarecrow needs a brain; the Tin Man needs a heart; and the Lion needs courage. The Wizard sends them out on a quest to get the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West. If they bring back the broomstick, he will give them what they need. They accomplish their mission by melting the witch and getting the broomstick, then return to the Wizard’s place to ask him to deliver on his promise. But, in fact, he is not expecting their return, and is quite put out at being held accountable to keep his promise.

Our heroes enter the huge chamber where the Wizard of Oz conducts his business. They are met face to face by the Wizard himself, a big, scary head—not a real person, just a serious face, surrounded by billowing smoke and fire, making a lot of noise. With a thunderous roar, the Wizard demands to know how these four dare to challenge him. Here is the point: it’s at this moment that Dorothy’s dog runs over to a small room and pulls back a curtain, and what is revealed to us is a simple, flesh-and-blood man who has been hiding behind a mask of power. He operates behind a curtain pulling levers, making smoke, fire, and noise. The result *looks* impressive but is only a facade. Even when he roars “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

The “Wizard” is in fact a power abuser. He controls a whole city with a facade that postures power and punishes people for noticing. In a kingdom where the problem was that the Wizard couldn’t deliver, Dorothy and her crew became the problem for noticing there was a problem.

It is sad to think how often religious power-brokers control their spiritual kingdoms with power facades. They rain Bible verses on people about authority, submission, judgement, prosperity, or the end times. They penalize people for noticing the “the man behind the curtain” is just human, with no authenticity or authority at all.

As a maddening, last lesson from the story, after all is said and done the Wizard tells them, “You already have what you needed all along.” They had risked life and limb for what they already had.

In too many Christian families and churches, Christians are told to jump through spiritual-performance hoops to earn God’s approval—something they already have for free because of Jesus’ death on the cross.”

## **Control**

Another way that a group can be abusive is control. This will destroy the individual’s courage to ask questions or dare to believe something different from what is taught in the spiritually abusive system. I have fellowshipped with five different groups in my lifetime. One of them started out wonderful, but after time changed into an abusive system. This group originally encouraged its followers not to just take the teacher’s word for something but to ask questions. So I asked what chapter and verse gave them the right to look into my personal finances when they were coercing me into selling my house. This question made them very mad. I had the courage to challenge their abusive actions - - I therefore became the problem. They had to either intimidate and control me or kick me out, or both. They gave me three verses to back up their actions. The first one was because the reverend said so. Well I looked all through my Bible and there is no verse with that reverend’s name on it. The second was Acts 5 - - this was misapplied



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because that verse talked about people who lied about their giving to the church. I had been honest when I told them how much I made and how much that I gave - - in fact I had already given them more information than they had a right to know. The third was a verse that was misquoted - - they had left out a word. I finally came to realize that they were incompetent and liars. Therefore I no longer had any desire to fellowship with them.

**2 Corinthians 3:17** Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty.

**Galations 5:1** Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

### Conclusion

How do you identify a spiritual abusive system? First and foremost you will know anything, anybody and any group by their fruits. Is the fruit joy or fear? Is the fruit deliverance or destruction?

**Matthew 7:15** Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

**7:16** Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

**7:17** Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

**7:18** A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

**7:19** Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

**7:20** Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

The spiritually abusive system will steal, kill, and destroy. But true Christianity will bring forth life more abundantly. There are several questions that you can ask to determine if a system is abusive or not. If you get the wrong answers to these questions then you may have experienced spiritual abuse.

- 1 What is the fruit?
- 2 Are you allowed to disagree?
- 3 Can you talk to those who have left?
- 4 Is the system grace based or legalism based?
- 5 Are you allowed to ask Questions?
- 6 Is the standard always changing?
- 7 Are a lot of people being ostracized?
- 8 Are you required to "jump through hoops" to earn God's approval?
- 9 Are people being falsely accused?
- 10 Do you have to answer to leadership on small personal matters?
- 11 Are other groups outside the system always portrayed as evil and wrong?
- 12 Does the system teach that only they have the real truth?

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13 Is there more confronting than comforting?

14 Are you required to give money rather than asked to give money?

15 Are you required to win new recruits to the group?

So what do you do if you get the wrong answers to these questions? Well you should consider leaving. Unfortunately many victims of spiritual abuse will give up on Christianity. Some people will find a church that will treat them nice and they will go there even though they disagree with the doctrine. But it is available to find groups that love people and also teach the Word of God rightly divided. God will raise up new ministers to replace the abusive ministers; that is a promise from the Word of God.

***Jeremiah 23:1*** Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD.

***23:2*** Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD.

***23:3*** And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

***23:4*** And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the LORD.

For further study see:

“Legalism Versus Grace” by Jeff Rath

“Owe No Man Anything” by Jeff Rath

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse by David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen

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