

SPIRITUAL ABUSE



UNSPOKEN CRISIS

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Overview

Spiritual abuse is not a widely discussed topic. It occurs when a leader manipulates people to achieve selfish goals. Most abusers are unaware of the harm they inflict. Internal factors contributing to an abusive environment are: Christians wanting to trust their leaders; not wanting to be disloyal; not wanting to be “a problem”; and accommodating abuse because they become invested. A likely external factor in the rise of spiritual abuse is our culture’s obsession with results and an insatiable “thirst for more.” There are two types of spiritually abusive leaders: insecure leaders use power to protect themselves; narcissistic leaders seek to accomplish some great cause for validation and self-worth. Narcissistic leaders are fueled by narcissistic followers who also find value from belonging to a great cause. Signs of an abusive system are: power-posturing; distorted loyalty; people are being used; unhealthy centrality of the pastor; an elitist attitude; inability to discuss concerns; and people being labeled as divisive for raising valid issues. Those trapped in abusive systems can either flee or fight. Throughout this booklet reference is made to recent events at Mars Hill Church.

Spiritual Abuse

Unspoken Crisis

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

(Jesus, Mt. 11:29)

“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

(Peter, 1 Pt. 5:1–4)

Not Widely Discussed

There is surprisingly little written on spiritual abuse. In doing research for this short book I could only find a handful of books that directly address the topic. The first apparent book was written in 1991 by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen and was titled *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. In 1993 *Healing Spiritual Abuse* by Ken Blue appeared. Blue acknowledged: "Surprisingly... until recently we [the church] have said virtually nothing about spiritual abuse, the one social problem Jesus himself seemed to care about most."¹ In 1999, Mike Fehlauer wrote an article for *Charisma Magazine* titled "Five Warning Signs of an Unhealthy Church." It was "one of the most-responded-to articles ever published in the magazine."² As a result, Fehlauer would go on to develop his ideas into a full-fledged book titled *Exposing Spiritual Abuse* in 2001.

¹ Blue makes the case that the manipulative control the Pharisees and Sadducees had over the common people was spiritual abuse. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), Kindle Locations 104-105.

² Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2001), 5, 11.

Spiritual abuse seems to be getting more attention in recent months with the highly visible implosion and closure of Mars Hill Church. For possibly the first time, Christian pastors are considering whether the practices they have come to accept are in fact producing spiritually abusive environments. Every major church leadership expert seems to be forced to provide an opinion of what went wrong. This booklet is an attempt to glean from the writings of “spiritual abuse pioneers” Johnson, VanVonderen, Blue, Fehlauer, et al., to help make sense of why Mars Hill imploded so quickly. It is an academic perspective to be considered alongside the myriad of other opinions being offered.

What Is Spiritual Abuse?

Abuse in its broadest sense is using or treating something in an improper way.³ The result of abuse is harm.⁴ There are many kinds of abuse. *Physical* abuse is physically treating somebody improperly resulting in physical harm; *emotional* abuse happens through emotional means resulting in emotional damage; *spiritual* abuse is performed through some “spiritual” means

³ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “Abuse,” accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abuse>.

⁴ This harm can be done to the abuser (as in the case of drugs) or the victim (e.g., sexual abuse).

and damages a person spiritually.⁵ Any type of recognized “spiritual” leader can be spiritually abusive (e.g., fortune tellers, psychics). In a Christian context, spiritually abusive leaders can include pastors, televangelists, Bible teachers, mentors, disciplers, ministry directors and counselors.⁶

The harm caused by spiritual abuse is the byproduct of selfish “ministry” activity. Therefore a good definition of spiritual abuse should include the aspect of selfishness. One clever acronym does this: Spiritual A.B.U.S.E. is Acting spiritual to Benefit oneself by Using Self-centered Efforts to control others.⁷

A good formal definition is:

"Spiritual abuse can occur when a leader uses his or her spiritual position to control or dominate another person. It often involves overriding the feelings and opinions of another, without regard to what will result in the other person's state of living, emotions or spiritual well-being."⁸

Therefore for the purpose of this booklet the following definition is proposed: *Spiritual abuse is when a Christian*

⁵ David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1991), 13.

⁶ June Hunt, *Biblical Counseling Keys On Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst* (Dallas, TX: Hope For The Heart, 2008), 56.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Johnson and VanVonderen, 20-21.

leader causes injury to others by acting in a self-centered manner in order to benefit themselves.

Spectrum of Abuse

Spiritually abusive environments vary in their level of abusiveness. Abusive leaders fall within a spectrum. Grandiose, authoritarian and dictatorial leaders are at the top end. These deliberately exploit the weak by using “threats, intimidation, extortion of money, demands for sex, public humiliation, control over private lives, manipulation of marriages, elaborate spying and similar practices” to obtain their objectives.⁹ On the low end are leaders who subtly use guilt and manipulation to boost financial giving, volunteer service in their church or simply attendance at the weekly prayer meeting.¹⁰ Regardless, any abuse is abuse.

⁹ Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), Kindle Locations 56-58.

¹⁰ Hunt, 7.

Spiritual Abusers Don't Intend To Harm

Abusive Christian leaders typically do not intend to hurt people. They are unaware of the damage they inflict upon others.

"They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers."¹¹ Lief Moi, one of the three founding pastors of Mars Hill Church, acknowledged this point: "I want to make it clear that neither myself nor any other leaders of MH [Mars Hill] as far as I know made decisions that we did not believe were for the glory of God and the best for the church."¹²

Internal Factors Leading To Spiritual Abuse

There are many internal factors that contribute to a spiritually abusive environment; here are the main ones. *First, Christians want to trust their leaders.* People want to believe that their leaders are more mature in the faith than they are; therefore

¹¹ Blue, Kindle Locations 41-44.

¹² Lief Moi, "Lief Moi's Confession," Repentant Pastor, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://repentantpastor.com/confessions/lief-mois-confession-2/>.

they can be trusted to lead their followers to greater maturity than themselves. They assume that a “servant of God” has the best interests of the people in mind. If a pastor’s conduct is in question people want to give their pastor the benefit on the doubt.¹³

Second, people generally do not want to be disloyal. If a spiritual leader approaches such a person with a “word from the Lord” about how the Lord needs them to do something for the Kingdom, giving money towards a cause, etc., they may feel tremendous pressure to give in, despite any red flags they may have.¹⁴ People who have difficulty setting boundaries are more susceptible to being taken advantage of. Others fall victim to overt Scripture twisting or assume Christian leaders deserve unqualified obedience because of their spiritual office.

Third, people typically don’t want to become “a problem.” When a churchgoer senses something may be wrong with a leader’s conduct towards them they may feel uncomfortable bringing it to anybody’s attention. They may be afraid they will become “a problem” for noticing there’s a problem. “Admitting

¹³ Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People On to God’s Agenda*, Kindle Edition (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2011), 214-215.

¹⁴ Johnson and VanVonderen, 47.

the abuse out loud—or even thinking that what you experienced was abuse—often feels like you’re being disloyal to family, to church, even to God.”¹⁵ Since nobody talks about the problem it is free to continue and possibly escalate.

Fourth, people hesitate to leave or confront because they become invested. It often takes time to discover a leader has a problem. During this time people make significant connections and contributions to the ministry. People who have spent years sacrificially building up a ministry may hesitate abandoning that ministry. They may be afraid their investment would be in vain should the ministry collapse once the sin is exposed. Similar to an abused wife, the spiritually abused victim may face other serious consequences as a result of their departure. Johnson and VanVonderen put it well:

“Why do people stay in spiritually abusive relationships? The abuse victims I have counseled give many reasons: There is too much at stake to leave—friends, the years invested, people’s opinions. They are afraid. They are terrified by the perpetrator’s threats to harm them, hurt their parents, or take the kids if they leave. They have become so dependent on the abusive system that they don’t know if they could leave and survive emotionally or financially. They feel they are to blame for inciting the abuse, and they are only getting

¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

what they deserve. Just about the time they decide to leave, things improve for a while, so they keep changing their mind."¹⁶

External Factors Leading To Spiritual Abuse

Executives in corporate America today are obsessed with results. This obsession has spilled over into the church. "The Western world is mesmerized by size... If a leader has grown a religious organization to a significant size, people interpret that as a clear sign of God's blessing."¹⁷ The mantra today seems to be build it "bigger, better, faster, stronger." Bill Clem was a campus pastor and elder at two Mars Hill locations. He said Mars Hill fell into the "bigger is better" Seattle mindset:

"Welcome to the whole Seattle mindset, Clem says. 'Some say, "Let's deliver packages," but Seattle says, "No. Let's make it Amazon." Some say, "Let's have coffee," but Seattle says, "No. Let's make it Starbucks." "Let's have a grocery store." "No! Let's make it Costco." Microsoft. Google. Boeing. Seattle is about power, expansion, and world domination."¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

¹⁷ Henry and Richard Blackaby, 125.

¹⁸ Ben Tertin, "The Painful Lessons of Mars Hill," Christianity Today, December 8, 2014, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/december-online-only/painful-lessons-of-mars-hill.html>.

Mark Driscoll acknowledged an idolatrous obsession with success¹⁹ and admitted this sin is generally tolerated in the church. People who are driven by productivity, success and results can easily “hide” in a burgeoning ministry environment. “It works well in a church because no one would ever yell at you for being a Christian who produces results.”²⁰

This obsession with results and size means more and more leaders are running their organizations like business executives. They are watching what makes corporate America successful and applying the same principles to the church. “Pastors are expected to act more like CEOs than shepherds; the pastor’s office is located in the executive suite, next to the boardroom where the leadership team meets.”²¹ The concern is that pastors are uncritically following the ways of the world. The churches acceptance of worldly principles is one of the main reasons why Henry and Richard Blackaby wrote their book *Spiritual Leadership*:

¹⁹ “For me it is success and drivenness [sic] and it is productivity and it is victory that drives me constantly... that’s my own little idol.” Quoted in Mike Anderson, “Hello, My Name Is Mike, I’m a Recovering True Believer,” Mike Anderson, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://mikeanderson.com/hello-name-mike-im-recovering-true-believer>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Henry and Richard Blackaby, 18.

“We are concerned that many Christian leaders are reading secular books and accepting their teachings uncritically. Much secular leadership theory is based on presuppositions that may appear sound yet promote ideas contrary to the Scriptures. Secular and spiritual leaders may use similar methods, but spiritual leadership includes dimensions absent from secular leadership. Spiritual leaders who merely use secular methods may experience some degree of worldly success, but they will not fulfill their calling as spiritual leaders.”²²

A Thirst For More

Our results-driven culture has produced a thirst “for more” in our churches. *First, there is a thirst for more money.* Clem said that at Mars Hill Church “everything hovered around congregation benchmarks. For 500 attendees, you got an executive pastor. 800? You could add a worship pastor. And if you boosted it up to 3,000 loyal listeners, the ‘award’ was a youth pastor.”²³

Second, there is a thirst for more people. Tim Gaydos was a pastor and elder at Mars Hill’s downtown Seattle campus from 2006-2013. He said,

²² Ibid., Kindle Location 65.

²³ Terlin.

“Statements like, ‘Good leaders have followers’ or ‘Living things grow’ become mantras at churches like Mars Hill, says Gaydos. This logic extrapolates quickly to ‘great leaders have tons of followers’ and ‘the faster things grow, the more alive they are.’ Soon, small attendance numbers and slow growth become problems to conquer.”²⁴

Third, there is the thirst for expansion. Gaydos added, “Mark made it no secret that he wanted to become the biggest church in America... Push further. Grow faster. Give more cash to fund ‘The Front.’”²⁵

Watching and Emulating “Success”

Mark had phenomenal success *producing results* in the area of money, people and expansion. He planted a church with a dozen people in one of the most unchurched areas of the country and ten years later it was named the eighth most influential church in the United States.²⁶ Other churches modeled their ministries after Mark Driscoll. Mark was a featured speaker at the largest leadership conferences, founded

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rose Egge, “Mars Hill Church One of Nation's Fastest Growing,” Ballard News Tribune, July 14, 2008, accessed August 3, 2008, http://web.archive.org/web/20080803000401/http://www.ballardnewstribune.com/article/2008/07/14/news/local_news/news03.txt.

the leadership website "The Resurgence," and the Acts 29 Network which provided leadership to other church planters. "Leaders of the largest churches or companies are automatically viewed as experts." *Leadership Journal* did an autopsy report on Mars Hill that said pastors "see the booming 'success' of men like [Mark] Driscoll and want to emulate."²⁷

Types of Abusers

The Insecure Leader

The first and most common spiritual abuser is the insecure leader.²⁸ Insecure leaders are chronically plagued with doubt and fear. They seek to obtain a sense of self-worth from their ministry. They may have been hurt in the past and seek power as a means to protect themselves in the future.²⁹ They may have been hurt by an abusive parent. Some feel the need to win the approval of others because of a lack of affirmation from a parental figure.³⁰ They may have been hurt themselves by another spiritual abuser in a previous ministry experience.

²⁷ Tertin.

²⁸ Blue, Kindle Location 993.

²⁹ Ibid., Kindle Locations 993-996.

³⁰ Henry and Richard Blackaby, 57.

Regardless of *how* they were hurt, they find their ways into positions of leadership where their hurt causes further damage to others.

“‘Hurt people hurt people.’ Hurt people in positions of power often misuse that power to control and manipulate those they feel threatened by. They do so to create a sense of order and personal safety.”³¹

There may be more insecure leaders in the church than anybody would care to admit. George Barna conducted a survey for senior pastors asking if they believed they had the gift of leadership; only *six percent* said yes. Incredibly, ninety-four percent of senior pastors surveyed *did not* believe that they were equipped to lead their congregation.³² A *senior* pastor title implies an ability to lead; in most congregations it would be identified as a central skill. With so many pastors questioning whether they have this central skill, it is no wonder pastors today feel insecure!

Insecurity is a dangerous thing for a senior pastor. Insecure leaders typically build a protective structure around themselves to keep themselves safe. These “yes men” uncritically support

³¹ Blue, Kindle Locations 1012-1013.

³² George Barna, *Today's Pastors* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1983), 122, 125 cited in Henry and Richard Blackaby, 52.

their leader. Those who question, refuse to support the pastor's needs, or pose a threat to the pastor's leadership are marginalized within the leadership structure—or placed at the “bottom of the list.” These pastors are under the delusion that they are doing the right thing—and even believe they have accountability to ensure they stay on track. But in reality they are inflicting pain and misery on those at the bottom of the pastor's “list.” Through the fear of marginalization they train others within the organization to conform to the pastor's abusive system.³³

The Narcissistic Leader

The second type of spiritual abuser is the narcissistic leader.³⁴ This “is the heroic, grandiose or messianic narcissist who is obsessed by a desire to be someone great or to do something unprecedented for God.”³⁵ The biggest fear for a narcissistic leader is being unimportant or unknown. They long to do something exceptional. They dream up large goals—sometimes “big, hairy audacious goals” (“BHAG”)—and ask God to bless

³³ Blue, Kindle Locations 1022-1025.

³⁴ The most dangerous abuser is both an insecure and narcissistic leader. Blue, Kindle Location 1036.

³⁵ Blue, Kindle Location 993.

them.³⁶ Fulfillment of these goals would bring validation, self-worth and justification for their very existence.

Mike Anderson is the former Director of the Resurgence. He travelled everywhere with Mark and “was the guy who organized conferences, planned and promoted books, directed the online content, and later worked directly on all of Mark’s projects.”³⁷ Mike confessed, “Some people read the Bible and think about how crazy it was that the people building the Tower of Babel thought they could reach heaven and make a name for themselves. We were trying to do just that.”³⁸ Mike’s confession is similar to founding pastor Leif Moi’s: “Much of who I was and how I thought and behaved was driven by Narcissism.”³⁹

Narcissistic leaders are those who are focused on achieving their own dreams at the expense of others. They typically have a very high view of themselves or their specific calling. Their calling is accompanied by claims to a special anointing or unique gifting. They may point to past successes as a reason

³⁶ Henry and Richard Blackaby, 99.

³⁷ Anderson.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Moi.

for uncritical acceptance of their ideas. Or they may claim anointing through their passion and personal devotion to God. They may point to their education or any other special circumstances that indicate divine favor. Such extraordinary claims help bolster the public support they need for carrying out their mission of finding self-fulfillment.⁴⁰

With narcissistic leaders, the idea of biblical ministry is turned upside down in a complete role reversal. "Instead of the leaders being there for the true well-being of the flock, the flock is there for the well-being of the leaders... Abusive systems don't serve and equip people, they use people."⁴¹ The people ultimately are there to serve the pastor and help the pastor meet his ambitious goals. People who "buy in" and support the mission of "the church" (the pastor's personal goals) make the pastor look and feel good. These are promoted and given greater degrees of responsibility within the church while those who do not support the pastor's mission are ignored, or worse, cast out. Those that are not "on mission" with the leader may go through an official shunning process. The removal of those not "on mission" may even be celebrated

⁴⁰ Blue, Kindle Locations 1052-1054.

⁴¹ Johnson and VanVonderen, 175.

within the authority structure. This mentality is evident from the now infamous statement from Mark Driscoll given the day after firing two of his elders—one of whom left his law practice at Mark’s request to serve alongside him in ministry:⁴²

"I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus (chuckle), and by God's grace, it'll be a mountain by the time we're done.... You either get on the bus, or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options. But the bus ain't gonna stop."⁴³

Lief Moi later identified this way of thinking as “godless.”⁴⁴

If the narcissistic pastor is successful in getting people to buy in to his unique, important, anointed status he can soon break free from accountability. Since he is the one with the talent, answers, experience and vision his ideas for expansion soon go unquestioned by his board of “yes men.” Spiritual abuse can

⁴² Paul and Jonna Petry joined when Mars Hill when it was about 400 members. Mark asked Paul to close his private attorney practice and join the Mars Hill staff as an elder. After questioning whether it was right for Mark to restructure the board, Paul was fired. This statement was given by Mark at a leadership conference the next day.

⁴³ Christine Pack, “Mark Driscoll Proud of the Dead Bodies Behind the Mars Hill Bus?,” Sola Sisters, June 20, 2012, accessed January 30, 2015, <http://www.solasisters.com/2012/06/mark-driscoll-proud-of-dead-bodies.html>.

⁴⁴ Moi.

thrive in this environment because the narcissistic leader is free to exercise control as he wishes.⁴⁵

Such self-serving pastors leave a wake of ruined lives in their path (i.e., people who have been “burned by ministry”). They not only use people but they use people up.⁴⁶

Opportunism

The narcissistic leader is characterized by opportunism.

Opportunism is the practice of being driven primarily by self-interest with little regard given to how one’s actions impact others.⁴⁷ The Bible commands that we “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” (Phil. 2:3,4) However, opportunists put “self-interest before other interests when there is an opportunity to do so.” There is little regard for ethical principles in the quest to get ahead. Opportunist pastors may lie, cheat, and break promises with no feelings of remorse. To them, the end result justifies

⁴⁵ Blue, Kindle Locations 1060-1061.

⁴⁶ Johnson and VanVonderen, 175.

⁴⁷ Wikipedia s.v. “Opportunism,” accessed Jan 28, 2015, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opportunism>.

the means. The driving force is the overall success of the mission (their mission). Values, morals and people may be compromised in the quest for “big” ministry, “big” impact and “big” mission. The unspoken mantra becomes “success at all costs.”

Narcissistic Followers

Certain types of people are drawn into abusive relationships. “The victims have often been unwittingly groomed for such a relationship. That is to say, something in the backgrounds of these people predisposes them to submit to a manipulative, controlling style of leadership.”⁴⁸ It may be that those who fall victim to narcissistic leaders are actually unhealthy themselves—they might be narcissistic followers.

Narcissistic followers are trying to get their importance from narcissistic leaders. Leaders aren’t the only ones who want their lives to count. People (especially young people)⁴⁹ are drawn to a cause. They want to feel like they are on an important mission for God. “If a leader successfully convinces his followers that he is the unique instrument of God, that

⁴⁸ Blue, Kindle Locations 953-954.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Kindle Location 1083.

makes *them* unique by virtue of their support of him."⁵⁰ In this way, narcissist followers derive a sense of self-worth from their involvement. Their lives have purpose because they are "on mission" with the leader.

If and when a leader shows signs of abuse, people who derive their sense of worth from the mission may willingly overlook the red flags. They may rationalize blatant inconsistencies in conduct and even excuse sins directly committed against them by the leader.⁵¹ They may choose to remain and be compliant victims over speaking up and being part of nothing important at all.⁵²

Campus pastor Bill Clem admitted that with the booming success of Mars Hill he was "caught up in the buzz." This, he said, was why he and the other pastors "could put up with a lot of crap—a lot of egotism, a management-by-objective leadership in the church."⁵³ People coming to salvation "became our legitimizing story."⁵⁴ Jonna Petry, wife of Mars Hill

⁵⁰ Ibid., Kindle Locations 1069-1071, emphasis theirs.

⁵¹ Ibid., Kindle Locations 1077-1078.

⁵² Ibid., Kindle Location 1078.

⁵³ Tertin.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

elder Paul Petry, said “On the surface, so many factors look great at Mars Hill Church. Who wants to be a critic when in many ways this ministry appears blessed and is so popular? As the thinking goes, “God must be pleased. Look how the church is growing!”⁵⁵

“Like a lot of others, we were willing to overlook Mark’s immaturity, his character weakness and wrongdoing for all kinds of reasons: because he was young, because he was talented, because we really didn’t know all the facts, because we trusted, because it wasn’t our place, in order to extend him grace, so as not to offend him or lose his good favor, in order to protect the reputation of the gospel, because we were afraid.”⁵⁶

She went on to say:

“I have come to see more clearly my own sin and complicity with the abuse. I have come to understand that I was wrong in the way I entrusted my heart to people, looking to them for approval and affirmation, finding my identity in my relationships and in my ministry instead of completely and solely entrusting my heart to the Living God and finding my identity and security in Jesus Christ alone, who loves me and died for me and calls me His own.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Jonna Petry, “My Story,” March, 2012, accessed January 27, 2015, <https://joyfulexiles.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/jonna-mhc-story-29.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Petry.

Anne Graham Lotz agrees followers are partly to blame. In a recent interview she was asked her opinion of Mars Hill. She said “that congregations bore [sic] some responsibility for the behaviour of their ministers.”⁵⁸ She then referred to Jesus’ rebuke of the church at Thyatira because the church was unwilling to take a stand against a leader (“Jezebel”) who was leading them astray.⁵⁹

It seems that narcissistic leaders are fueled in some way by narcissistic followers. If a person suspects they may be part of an abusive system, it may be good to ask, “Am I willing to take abuse in order to be part of something significant? Am I a narcissistic follower?”

Signs of an Abusive System

How can a person know if they are caught up in a spiritually abusive system? Here are common symptoms.

⁵⁸ Mark Woods, “Anne Graham Lotz On Mars Hill: ‘It Might Have Been Better If They’d Had Millstones Tied Round Their Necks and Been Thrown Into the Sea’,” *Christian Today*, November 18, 2014, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/anne.graham.lotz.on.mars.hill.it.might.have.been.better.if.theyd.had.millstones.tied.round.their.necks.and.been.thrown.into.the.sea/43160.htm>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Power-Posturing. Pastors who power-posture put a heavy emphasis on submitting to their authority.⁶⁰ This may be accompanied with subtle or overt statements about how important the leader is to the mission based on their unique experience, abilities or calling.⁶¹ The pastor might use fear and bullying to keep people “in line.” They may act dictatorial and become emotional when their opinions are challenged. There might also be a heavy top-down hierarchal structure where average churchgoers are required to submit to those placed over them.⁶² Those aspiring to lead may need to climb this ladder by “[proving] ones commitment to the organization.”⁶³

Distorted Loyalty. Abusive pastors have a distorted view of loyalty. They may say they are only concerned about building up Jesus’ kingdom but in reality there are only interested in building their own empire. This can be seen in a number of ways. One organization requires their youth workers sign a “loyalty statement” where they promise to not minister to youth in their area for a period of time should they leave that

⁶⁰ Johnson and VanVonderen, 63-64.

⁶¹ Blue, Kindle Locations 203-205

⁶² Hunt, 14.

⁶³ Fehlauer, 40.

organization.⁶⁴ Certain pastors may require volunteers or staff to commit to not planting other churches within a certain distance of their church for fear they might “steal the sheep.” Some require their staff to sign “gag orders” as a condition for a severance pay when terminated. These are all signs that a pastor is not really concerned about “loyalty to Christ, but about loyalty to a given organization, church, or leader.”⁶⁵

People Being Used. The people’s needs go unmet; the church’s needs are more important. The majority of activity is related to the expansion and operation of “the ministry.” Families are reduced to “giving units.” There is a continuous emphasis on financial giving. People feel manipulated into serving in greater and greater capacities within the church. The bulk of energy is given to retain new families while older families are ignored. There is a high turnover rate in staff. People once “on mission” become disillusioned or “burned out.” If there are a “pile of dead bodies behind the bus”⁶⁶ it is safe to say something is very wrong.

⁶⁴ Johnson and VanVonderen, 76.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁶ Pack.

Selective Service. The church is overly concerned about portraying “excellence.” People who do not fit a desired criteria—they are too old, too young or too overweight—are not allowed to serve in visible ministries (e.g., ushering and the worship team).⁶⁷

Centrality of the Pastor. There is an unhealthy emphasis on the pastor(s). The pastor may claim a special anointing based on gifting, education or experience. He subtly or overtly communicates how indispensable he is to the mission. There is a sense that those on staff deserve to be there. “The mindset of the leaders—about themselves, Scripture, and their followers—is that they have ‘broken through’ to some higher level of spiritual achievement, so they have ‘earned’ the right to lead.”⁶⁸ The pastor may be seen as a celebrity or even as “the brand.”⁶⁹ He delights in the limelight and refuses to “share the

⁶⁷ “‘The Five-Seven-Nine Rule’ author talks about a music director who rejected a lady’s application to serve on the worship team. She had a wonderful voice, but the music director told her husband, ‘She’s too fat to be one of the praise singers.’ The husband ‘later discovered that they actually had a policy to weed out overweight applicants. It was called the ‘Five-Seven-Nine’ rule. A woman who wanted to be a praise singer had to be able to wear a size five, seven or nine dress.’ He approached the pastor concerning the policy. ‘He was told by the elder that by bringing up the policy he was in rebellion to spiritual authority.’” Fehlauer, 16-17.

⁶⁸ Johnson and VanVonderen, 82.

⁶⁹ “During a creative meeting with the Executive Elders Mark explained the brand of Mars Hill. He said that the brand of Mars Hill is a man standing in the pulpit with a large heavy bible in his hand. He also said that many things will change at Mars Hill, but one thing will never change: ‘it’s me in the pulpit holding a bible.’” “Statement of

pulpit” with others in their congregation who have been gifted with the ability to teach.

Elitist Attitude. “A church with an elitist attitude believes ‘no one else’ is really preaching the gospel—except that church. Or at least, no one is preaching it as effectively as they are!”⁷⁰

Their mission is the most important of any in the area. People are discouraged from participating in activities or ministries that support other churches.

Inability To Discuss Concerns. There is an atmosphere where people do not/cannot question the pastor or the leadership structure—even regarding the spiritual abuse itself. “It is not permissible to talk about problems, hurts and abuses in the abusive system.”⁷¹ Questioning is seen as a sign one is not “on mission” with the pastor. People with valid concerns who break the “no questioning” rule become part of the problem. When a member is hurt by the pastor or a leader “the victim is made to

Formal Charges and Issues-Mark Driscoll,” August, 2014, accessed January 31, 2015, <http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/warrenthrockmorton/files/2014/08/FormalCharges-Driscoll-814.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁷¹ Johnson and VanVonderen, 32.

feel at fault for questioning or pointing out the problem."⁷²
Concerns are stifled in order to keep "unity at all costs."

Labeling People as Divisive. People who do raise valid concerns are labeled "divisive." The church has a practice of "shunning" or putting people "under discipline." This shunning and/or discipline is not out of love for the goal of restoration; rather it is a means of protecting the interests of the church and/or controlling people.⁷³

What To Do If Trapped?

There are two responses one can have if they discover they are in a spiritual abusive church: flight or fight.⁷⁴ The best response depends on the circumstances of the situation and should be prayerful considered. It is important to remember that abuse by definition is harm resulting from improper use. If a system is truly abusive and inflicting harm something *should* be done.

Flight. Should the victim simply leave quietly? This could be the best thing to do for the victim (and their family) so healing

⁷² Ibid., 32.

⁷³ Blue, Kindle Location 1485.

⁷⁴ Johnson and VanVonderen, 214.

can begin. "If you were hit by a bus, you would need time to recover. Something almost as serious as that has happened to you. Take time. Let yourself heal. Finally, resist the temptation to stay away from church just because of a bad church experience."⁷⁵ The extent of abuse should also be considered. "If abuse is minor and rare, we should probably shrug it off. If it is significant, we should confront the perpetrator. If it is systematic, ongoing, unrelenting and well defended [sic], we probably need to leave."⁷⁶

Fight. Can the victim really make a difference? Recent events at Mars Hill Church indicate a resounding, "Yes!" If victims chose to stay and confront the issues directly they must be prepared for a prolonged and arduous battle. Change will not likely come overnight; resistance should be expected. The victims will likely be vilified and possibly shunned for their stand. Some may have the stomach for such a battle. "Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton... say, 'We must have the courage to follow Christ's example and overturn the system, be it a marriage or an organization, if that system is wrong. Silent

⁷⁵ Blue, Kindle Locations 1293-1295. These words written in 1993 seem to take on special significance in light of Mark Driscoll's statement that people not "on mission" with him should be run over by the Mars Hill bus. See Pack, "Mark Driscoll Proud of the Dead Bodies Behind the Mars Hill Bus?"

⁷⁶ Ibid., Kindle Locations 883-884.

submission in the face of violence, dishonesty and abuse will only enable that abuse to be passed on to generations."⁷⁷

For those where the abuse is on the low end of the spectrum the battle may not be so fierce. Most spiritual abusers are unaware of the damage they are causing. Some may be open to good, honest, Spirit-led confrontation, especially if it is conducted the proper way. However, other times it may not be helpful to engage the abusers. "If... there is a bottleneck of power-posturing leaders at the top, who are performance-oriented, the chances of things changing are very slim."⁷⁸

Finally, the victim may be worried that their confrontation of the problem or even their departure from a ministry may bring about the collapse of the system. It may be difficult to abandon the years of sacrifice and investment made to a particular ministry. For those, this advice may be helpful: "Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for abusive leaders is to leave them. Sometimes the most humane act is to let an abusive church die."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid., Kindle Locations 300-302.

⁷⁸ Johnson and VanVonderen, 215.

⁷⁹ Blue, Kindle Location 1291.

Learning From Recent Events

If anything can be learned from the recent collapse of Mars Hill, it's that there can be a wonderful outcome when a few speak out against abuse. Mars Hill Church has officially been dissolved but its congregations continue to live on; hopefully its pastors, its people, and the church at large have learned some painful lessons along the way.

Church leaders are already beginning to recognize that the recent collapse of Mars Hill Church is "a great lesson for church leadership during the next 20 to 30 years."⁸⁰ Mark Driscoll's "success" gave him a meteoric rise to fame; he was instantly crowned and paraded as a church leadership expert. Many leaders willingly followed his advice—even remodeled their ministries after his—and in doing so may have unwittingly subjected their own congregations to spiritual abuse. Perhaps, now more than ever, "It is time for judgment to begin with God's household." (1 Pet. 4:17)

It is too early to tell what the long-term effects of the fall of Mars Hill will be. But some good has already begun trickling down. One encouraging example is with mega-church pastor

⁸⁰ Tertin.

James McDonald who frequented the stage with Mark at many leadership conferences. McDonald has reflected on his spiritual abuse within his own mega-church. He confessed his sin, asked for forgiveness, and publically exonerated three elders that were vilified a year ago when they spoke out against a “culture of fear and intimidation” and a lack of transparency in the church, including financial matters.”⁸¹

This is a great first step. But more needs to be done. Thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of pastors looked to Mark Driscoll for leadership. It is my hope and prayer that Christian pastors and leaders everywhere soberly examine their own ministries. May they consider from what heights and with what speed they too may fall (cf. Rev. 2:5; Luke 10:18). Where people have been injured because of their self-centered motives may there be exoneration. Where pastors need removal may they be removed. Where people need healing may they be healed. In this way may the church be strengthened. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

⁸¹ “James Macdonald Asks Forgiveness for Unbiblical Discipline of Harvest Bible Chapel Elders,” Christianity Today, September 15, 2014, accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/september/james-macdonald-asks-forgiveness-for-unbiblical-discipline-.html?paging=off>.

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