

Clarity Trumpet

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If the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

I Corinthians 14:8, 9

The Rise of Spiritual Abuse

Does the Ministry of which You are a Part have Cultic Characteristics?

What Exactly is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is present when there is the misuse of power, position and influence for the personal gain of the leader or leaders of an organization or movement.

Cults are notorious for practicing spiritual abuse. Of course, no cult or false religion would ever admit to abusing anyone; nor would any noncultic church, group, or movement, but when it is being practiced, denying its presence doesn't make it go away. Unfortunately, it seems, spiritual abuse is on the rise in this country.

How Can You Recognize a Spiritually Abusive Situation?

There is a pattern that can be easily identified by anyone who is genuinely concerned that God's work be done in a truly Christlike manner. The pattern is not usually too difficult to detect once you are alerted to the fact that "something is just not right." Several elements are almost always present. I've seen these characteristics in operation time after time over the forty-five years of my Christian life and ministry.

- *There is the need to have absolute control and to have the final authority over a ministry, which means, over people and circumstances.* The abusive leader is normally obsessed with the control factor. Even when

there is a body to "answer to" -- whether the body is a board (elders, deacons, trustees), a congregation, or supporters -- it doesn't matter; the abusive leader must be totally in charge. He or she will use intimidation, flattery, manipulation, coercion, threats, and sometimes, even force, to get uncooperative people to either fall in line or to leave.

- *The abusive leader is a deceptive leader.* Genuine sincerity is a stranger to such a person. Since he is abusive he can't afford to be transparent before others (as Jesus and the apostle Paul were). The good front he puts on most of the time is just that -- a front. Whatever he does is for furthering his own selfish goals. It is part of getting his way, of winning others over to him so when show-down comes he will have the right people on his side (by the way, show-down *always* comes; usually over and over again in such ministries).

Such a leader is normally pretty adept at shifting the focus from his own faults and sins to "those others" who are "the real cause" of the problems. If *they* would straighten up or leave, the problems would vanish. And when the "trouble makers" do either fall in line or leave, things do seem to improve -- *until* the next skirmish when more of *them* are causing fresh problems. And the cycle repeats itself once again.

- *An abusive leader tends to be somewhat paranoid.* He, she, or they (in the case of an abusive *group*) build a wall around themselves. Secrecy is the order of the day because if outsiders know too much they would not understand or agree with what is being done or how it is being accomplished. They would "persecute" and "judge" the abusive leaders; they might try to take over; or worse, they might even make the leaders publicly accountable for their actions, their handling of money, their treatment of people. The abusive leader cannot afford to be found out, so cover up is essential -- not because anything is wrong, they insist, but because those lacking in spiritual discernment would destroy the ministry.

- *The abusive leader as a rule loves things and uses people.* Manipulation is a primary trademark of the abusive leader. One such pastor advised a fellow pastor who was having struggles with members in his church: "Whatever you do, keep the buildings and get rid of the people; you can always get more people!" -- hardly a shepherd's heart, but typical of one whose whole approach to ministry is one of manipulation in order to have

or keep control at any cost.

When such a leader wants the support or backing of particular key people he pours on the charm, and he can be most charming when he desires the backing or support of others; however, such charm is only a means to an end -- *his* end of gaining or maintaining control. Though he may compliment those publicly whom he wants to influence, and though he may offer them a key position or title, or give them special treatment, he will never do so at the expense of relinquishing control.

On the other hand, when he wants to get rid of someone who is "standing in the way of progress" the tactic is pressure, such as questioning one's loyalty to God or the organization, talking negatively about them to others (behind their backs), or criticizing their performance (normally before others).

- *The abusive leader or religious system works very hard at creating and maintaining a superlative image.* This often leads to (or springs from) a ministry of legalism, though the label would always be denied. Instead of "legalism" the abusive leader or leaders would say, "We have high standards." But when "high standards" of an unbiblical nature are used as threats to hold over the sheep to keep them in line, that is legalistic no matter what other label one might give it.

- *Exclusivism* ("We are the only ones" - or - "We are the best, the largest, the greatest, the most effective, the most blessed of God"). It becomes the *us versus them* syndrome. "We are in the right; *they* are instruments of the enemy." And major energy is expended to convince the sheep that it is so.

- *Performance based approval is heavily promoted* -- that is, you are told that the more you attend, serve, or give the higher your approval rating is before the organization and before God. Impossible perfectionistic requirements are sometimes placed upon the faithful. Failure to measure up simply demonstrates how essential it is for the sheep to blindly follow the leader or leaders who *always* perform as God directs him or them.

- *Questioning or challenging authority is not permitted*; to do so is tantamount to being disloyal, a trouble maker, or an apostate. Dissenters are viewed as the problem rather than the issues they raise (manipulation at work again).

Why Do Some Remain Under a Spiritually Abusive Leadership?

- Some are unwilling to confront; they do not want to cause waves.

- Others do not want to go outside of their comfort zone. They have become accustomed to things as they are and shrink back from having to go through the whole process of finding another church or group with which they will feel comfortable.

- Sometimes family or close friends are also members and to even contemplate separating from them is unthinkable, especially with the real possibility that they may not understand.

- Some who consider leaving have already seen the pattern when others before them have left, and the reasons for their leaving have been distorted by those who have ulterior motives, i.e., the abusive leaders.

- The mistaken (and perhaps somewhat prideful) feeling that: "My wholesome presence is needed here. If I leave he, she, or they will have even more freedom to rule in their unbiblical way." Such well meaning folks need to realize that they are only responsible for their own actions and attitudes, not those of others.

- Putting one's personal advantage ahead of principle. In the case of staff people, they may not want to risk losing their jobs, their security. Or in the case of those who are involved in important ministries, they are often unwilling to give up that ministry (or the prestige of it) and to trust the Lord for something else in a new environment.

- Some like strong leadership even if it is abusive at times. An amazingly high percentage of people seem to like to be told what to do. So, the abusive leader never runs out of folks to mold after his or her own image.

- If one is currently on the good side of the leader it is easy to turn a deaf ear to those who are being (or have been) hurt, and to accept the leader's consensus that "they are just negative, complaining trouble-makers."

- If results in the ministry are satisfying the attitude often is: "Well, he got us here. . . the ministry is growing, giving is up, we're out of debt. . . so what if he wants full control. Let him have it." It's the age-old, ongoing debate: *Which is more important, personal character and integrity, or visible results?*

A Warning

If you are a believer who finds yourself unhappy with the spiritual leadership over you, do not allow yourself to carry a chip on your shoulder as if you are just looking for something -- *anything* -- about which to find fault. To use a military term, do not be on a "seek and destroy" mission. If there is any destroying to do, leave that to the One who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay" (Romans 12:19). God is quite capable of bringing down those who promote themselves, and He promises to do so; so you can leave that to Him.

However, don't be naive. If there is clearly something wrong in the teaching, the behavior, the attitude, the methods of those who are your spiritual mentors, duty demands you bring it to their attention -- always with healing and reconciliation in view. If a spiritual leader is definitely in the wrong and will not listen to you, you have the option of bringing it to the attention of the controlling body of the church or organization if there is one, and *if* it is not comprised of yes men who always side with the leader, or of men who blindly follow the organization's mandates. If he remains unchanged but still in control, and if those over him refuse to do anything to correct the situation, you have the further option -- and duty -- of separating yourself from the group.

Satan loves to have God's child dominated by overbearing individuals or organizations, because he knows the absolute havoc it will *eventually* wreak upon the believer. Instead of walking by faith and looking to the Lord Himself for direction (through His Word) such a believer begins looking to "the man" or "the organization" to make his decisions for him.

Words of Encouragement

Jesus was so plain: *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light* (Matthew 11:28-30). If the burden or yoke you are now carrying is heavy, it cannot be from Him. Perhaps you have unknowingly taken on man-imposed burdens and weights. If your leader is truly Christlike he or she will also be "gentle" and "lowly in heart." If that's not the case, you should perhaps look elsewhere for godly leadership.

Again, listen to Jesus: *If you abide in*

My Word, you are My disciples in deed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free (John 8:31, 32). If, instead of liberty and freedom, you feel a constant burdensome weight upon your shoulders, you may be in bondage. If that's true, you may not be *abiding* (settling down) in God's Word. And if *that* is true, you will have confusion instead of *knowing* the truth, and you will not be free in your spirit.

Finally, there's that wonderful promise in Isaiah 26:3: *You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.* Normally it is not possible to have a *mind stayed on the Lord* in peace when one is under a domineering, demanding leader or organization; instead, confusion rules the day. God's Word, however, states: *God is not the Author of confusion but of peace* (1 Corinthians 14:33); and, *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (Galatians 5:22, 23). Check out these characteristics of the Holy Spirit with the leader or leaders over you, and then look into your heart to see if you have His fruit. If not, a change of attitude or location, or both, may be in order.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20, 21).[∞]

For further research into this growing problem: **Churches that Abuse** (Ronald Enroth), **Counterfeit Revival** (Hank Hanegraaff), **Faith that Hurts, Faith that Heals** (Arterburn & Felton), **The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse** (Johnson & VanVonderen)

Note: The next *Clarity Trumpet* will be a continuation of this topic, focusing on one other aspect of spiritual abuse.

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