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HOW DO CHURCH LEADERS BECOME SPIRITUAL ABUSERS?

Spiritual abuse by church leaders can be deeply damaging to those who experience it. Some are 'scarred for life' by what happens to them.



Comment

John Benton



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A working definition of spiritual abuse would be something like this: 'Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. This abuse may include manipulation and exploitation; enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the misuse of Scripture, requirements of obedience through a suggestion that the leadership has

some kind of 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.'

Often the rationale of protecting the reputation of the church (and the Lord's name?) or preserving the unity of the church is used to cover over or ignore the mistreatment of the individual or individuals.

Well-worn path

How do pastors and church leaders become those who hurt and abuse their flocks?

No doubt this can come about in many ways. But the Bible indicates one very common path. Sometimes God's blessing on a church triggers it. We think of King Saul who began as a humble man, chosen by God (1 Sam. 10.21,22). But having a victory over the Ammonites and a taste of glory, he could not get enough of it. God had blessed and Saul began to bask in the attention that came his way. He wanted more even if it meant disobeying God. He was desperate to keep his public profile

(1 Sam. 15.30,31) and was jealous of all rivals, famously persecuting David and mistreating his faithful son Jonathan. He was a leader who abused others for the sake of prominence.

Sadly, some pastors and elderships walk the same path. A preaching ministry is blessed by God. People get saved. A church grows. Humility and ascribing all the glory to God somehow gets forgotten. The congregation put their leaders on a pedestal. People are talking about this church and the leadership team adore it. And if they have to exploit or coerce willing helpers behind the scenes, or deal roughly with others to get done what they think needs to happen, so be it. And that becomes not just a forgivable one-off, but a regular occurrence. They have become jealous for their reputation and suddenly individuals don't matter. You begin to hear things like: 'Well, you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.'

Overstepping the mark

But God says: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.' (Ezek. 34)

The path of 'success' can lead to abuse, and King Saul is not an isolated case. Doesn't blessed King David pull the rank of kingship to summon Bathsheba to his palace bed? (2 Sam. 11). Isn't it after Uzziah became powerful that his pride became his downfall, thinking that he could overstep his brief and take on the functions of priesthood as well as kingship? (2 Chron. 26).

And there can be a certain social background which encourages men to see themselves as the 'officer class' who have almost the right to push others

around. A few years ago **en** published the findings of research into how single women missionaries and women church workers get treated by leaders. I'm afraid churches headed up by men from public school and Oxbridge did not come off well.

Headlong hubris

As a young pastor/editor I remember being invited to a senior leaders' conference in the North of England when evangelicalism was facing a crisis. At breakfast, I was on a table with a very high-profile pastor and conference speaker.

To my consternation, using the example of Winston Churchill, this man started kicking around the idea that those in particularly senior positions, perhaps nationally known, should not be held to such high moral standards as ordinary pastors. He was speaking 'theoretically' of course, he said. 'After all, they are under such terrific pressure. They should be cut some slack.' When that man fell calamitously, it was heart-breaking but no surprise. Success can bring a certain foolish hubris. Let us not use God's blessing to excuse sin, or as a platform from which to abuse others. However well-known a minister or his church may be, the rule of God's kingdom is 'Blessed are the meek' (Matt. 5:5).

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