

Breaking Free: What I've Learned About Spiritual Abuse

by
Barbara Milligan

While my husband, John, and I felt that we had good reasons for leaving our church home, we didn't think at first that what we had experienced was spiritual abuse. We had gotten involved in the church knowing that the pastor, Richard, and his wife, Jill (not their real names), were young and perhaps immature in some ways and that they came from a legalistic background. So from the beginning we had guarded ourselves from them in the hope of being active in the church community without experiencing a major conflict.

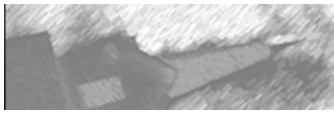
But as we spent the weeks and months after we left trying to sort out our feelings about what had happened, we wondered if we, along with others, had become the victims of spiritual abuse in spite of trying to keep our eyes open. We wondered if perhaps our eyes had not been open enough. And if we should have responded earlier to the clues.

Clues like what happened at the first women's meeting that I attended, held in someone's home. The meeting itself was wonderful—full of energy and honesty and joy and trust and compassion. I was impressed by two women who showed strong leadership skills in the ways they made all of us feel comfortable, gave us a sense of purpose in meeting together, responded compassionately toward the hurts and anxieties that were shared, and got all of us involved in praying for each other. It was a group that I immediately wanted to belong to.

But the group was doomed. Near the end of that meeting, everyone fell silent as someone asked when we could meet again (this apparently was the first women's meeting in a long while). One of the two leaders squirmed in her chair, studied her fingernails for a moment, and replied in a quiet voice, "We may not be able to meet again very soon. Jill called a few minutes ago and said she has to lead the meetings but that she's too busy right now."

Fire alarms went off inside me, and the room came alive with protests. "So why can't one of you lead the meetings?" some logical person asked, nodding toward the two leaders. The woman who had spoken earlier said she had volunteered herself and the other leader but that Jill had said no. Beneath the woman's gracious manner I saw a hint of bewilderment and disappointment in her eyes.

I left the meeting feeling angry. If that meeting was any indication, those two women were every bit as capable of leading a women's ministry as any pastor's wife. So why did she refuse to trust them? Were the deep personal needs that were being met by that group not important to her? Did she even recognize those needs? And was it not important to her that other people's leadership gifts be developed? I felt discouraged about the church as I began to wonder how often other people's needs were being swept aside because of Jill's lack of trust and her desire for control, and why the pastor was allowing such things to happen. Because we were still new at the church, I also wondered with dismay what kind of future John and I would have in a church where the opportunities for people, including ourselves, to share feelings might be rare.



Then there was the time that Richard asked John and me to meet with him after he'd heard that John and I were leaving the church. We scheduled the appointment, and we rehearsed with each other what we would and would not say. So we were caught off guard at the meeting when Richard announced that he wanted to read us a list he'd made of John's "character flaws."

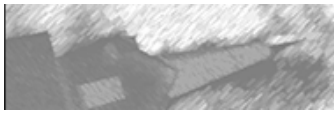
Outraged at Richard's presumptuousness, especially because he had never bothered to get to know John (the few times they'd gotten together, Richard had done all the talking), John told Richard he wasn't interested in hearing what Richard had to say about him. When Richard persisted we got up from our chairs, only to be blocked at the door by Richard, still insisting that John listen to his list. Richard finally relented but asked John to take the list home with him.

John took it. And no, he didn't burn it. He kept it, as a reminder of "how arrogant and how wrong" Richard was.

Although John and I left the church after that meeting, we returned a few months later, because we were unable to find another church that was as close to doing what we believed represented the kingdom of God. Also, we loved the people and we missed them; they were energetic, expressive, responsive, loving, and eager to serve God and each other. And we had had some wild adventures with God in that church—receiving his heart for some of the people, developing our gifts, helping others discover and develop their gifts, and growing together in love and faith. Despite John's alleged character flaws, Richard allowed us to serve in a leadership role in the church. And so we became even more involved in the lives of the people as we tried to help them in their struggles, enjoyed a new sense of purpose and belonging, and kept what we hoped was a safe distance from the pastor and his wife.

John and I soon began to notice, however, some other things that disturbed us. First, there was the gradual and steady disappearance of the more spiritually mature people in the church. And no one seemed to know why any of them had left. Then there were the subtle beliefs that originated with the pastor. There was the belief that if you are truly serving God, either you are in "full-time ministry" or you are preparing for it, and the rest of us working folks are a disappointment to God. (Don't ask who was funding the full-time ministries.) And that God wants to heal you emotionally or physically, but if the problem isn't gone after we've prayed for you two or three times, then you must be doing something wrong. And that the best way to heal an emotional need is to get busy for God—never mind your troublesome feelings, which aren't important anyway. These beliefs were never publicly spoken, of course; in fact, I believe Richard would have said quite the opposite, if pressed. But the actions we observed revealed his true colors.

Not surprisingly, all the ministries of the church had to endure Richard's invasive micromanagement. And the central feature of any meeting involving the pastor was hearing him lecture for an hour or more. Then there were the self-serving claims Richard made in the church newsletters: Because the church was obeying God, he had blessed it by multiplying its numbers and enabling it to spin off several other churches and numerous highly successful ministries. A gross exaggeration. In addition, we learned that there was no one within the church whom Richard and Jill trusted as intimate friends. Whether they had intimate friends outside the church, I don't know, but Richard's persistent attempts to bring under his authority the pastors of



other churches in the area made me wonder if he trusted anyone but himself and his wife.

Part of the overall problem was that any attempt to confront someone in leadership had disastrous consequences. Anyone who expressed an opinion that the pastor didn't like was understood to be unsubmitive, if not outright rebellious. Worse still, the associate pastors aspired to become clones of the pastor and were afraid to challenge him on anything. But none of this was common knowledge; it happened in secret.

Stunned by what we were discovering, we tried to communicate with a few people who had left the church. But we were disappointed when they wouldn't talk to us about their reasons for leaving or their feelings about it. We soon woke up to a startling realization: We had become members of an oversized dysfunctional family, governed by the unspoken rules Don't talk, Don't trust and Don't feel.

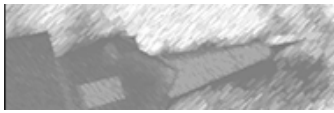
We didn't last long after that. As much as we loved our church family, we could not continue supporting an organization whose leaders refused to see the harm they were doing. We began to question why we hadn't recognized sooner what an increasingly legalistic and addictive organization we had been supporting. Legalistic because no one could live up to Richard and Jill's standards of performance except—according to their perceptions—Richard and Jill. And addictive because even those of us who were aware of Richard and Jill's addiction to control seemed addicted to excusing their behavior. Because we didn't want to lose our "family," we excused Richard and Jill's behavior tacitly by supporting the church and helping them stay in positions where they could abuse their power and injure other people.

Having quietly left the church for the last time, we watched from a distance as more people did the same, many of them spiritually bruised and bleeding, some of them hemorrhaging from a sense of betrayal. And as we listened to their stories, we learned more about the subtleties of spiritual abuse. Subtleties that we had noticed but had dismissed as issues that we knew we had to put up with—and not talk about—if we were to remain in the church where we thought God wanted us. In addition, we learned what we would have to do to eventually become free from the spiritual abuse we had experienced. Here are some of the things we learned:

Saying the "right words" means nothing unless the words are backed up with action.

The book of James has much to say on this subject. Probably one of the most important scripture passages for pastors and church leaders to follow is James 3:13: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." Without loving actions, performed in true humility, the "right words" are nothing more than what my husband calls mouth music.

True humility, however, is a concept that often confuses us. A person can look and sound genuinely humble, especially from the pulpit or the Sunday school lectern. That person may truly love God and want to serve him. But does that person recognize and respond to the needs of others, and listen to and heed the requests, suggestions and constructive criticisms of others? Is the pastor, who preaches on the importance of accountability, willing to be accountable to his congregation? Is the prayer-ministry leader, who talks about compassion,



teaching prayer volunteers how to listen and respond compassionately to those who ask for prayer, rather than give unwelcome advice? Is the home-group leader, who says he's there to help group members care for each other, open to changing the meeting agenda after being told that he wasn't allowing enough time for everyone in the group to express a personal need?

If not, they may be spiritually abusing those they are ministering to, because as representatives of God, they are portraying a God who says one thing and does another. They are not, in true humility, backing up their words with actions. They are not acting humbly toward the people they are supposed to serve. And that brings us to the next thing we learned.

Leadership, as Jesus defined it, means servanthood.

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant," Jesus said (Matthew 20:26). He illustrated that statement soon afterward by wrapping a towel around his waist, dropping to his knees and washing the filthy feet of his disciples, including those of his betrayer.

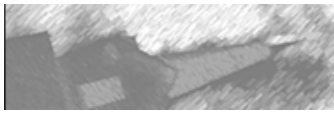
God illustrates the converse for us in Ezekiel 34, where he tells Ezekiel to warn the shepherds of Israel, the pastors of that era, that they are only taking care of themselves. "You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured," God says. "You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally" (Ezekiel 34:4). Richard hadn't seemed to us like a harsh and brutal person; his public demeanor was nearly always mild-mannered. Yet the effects of his abusive behavior, and of his wife's abusive behavior, were harsh and brutal. If pastors are not serving those whose bodies or souls are weak, sick, or injured, if they are not extending any care toward those who have lost interest in the church or in God, or if they are presenting, by their words or actions, a faith based on performance (see Galatians 3:3), their behavior might be aptly described as harsh and brutal. They are only taking care of themselves. They are not following Jesus' example and acting as servants for their people.

I am capable of adding to the problem of spiritual abuse, even if I'm not in an official position of church leadership.

God's message through Ezekiel also includes some strong words for the sheep, or any of us in the pews, who practice showing no regard for others: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?" (Ezekiel 34:18–19).

Although we don't intend to do so, we can increase the pain of another person's spiritual abuse experience. This does not mean that God expects us to be perfect or that whenever we mess up we are spiritually abusing others. What it means is that we need to love others as God has loved us. And that when we do something unloving, we need to admit our wrongdoing and make amends to those we wronged.

God has brought us into the good pasture of his grace and love. He has given us his living



water to drink from. If we are unforgiving, or deceitful, or judgmental, or thoughtless toward others, if we use “Christian” jargon that alienates others, if we do not extend the same grace and love to others that God continuously extends to us, we may be hurting others spiritually. We are trampling the pasture of God’s grace and love, and muddying his living water. If, however, we extend God’s love and grace to others, we are offering them the same good pasture and clear water that we ourselves have received from God.

Breaking the “Don’t talk” rule is vital to recovery.

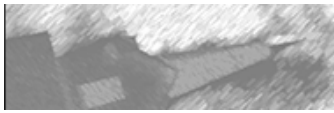
When John and I left the church, and for a long time afterward, we had an aching need to talk with others who had had similar experiences in our church. So we were disappointed to find that those who had left before us were still reluctant to talk, that the few friends we tried to talk with who remained in the church didn’t understand, and that those who left after us were in such intense pain themselves that they had no energy to respond to our pain. We were angry at this situation, but not at any of them. We felt deep sorrow that, just as siblings from abusive homes are often alienated from each other as adults, we had discovered barriers between ourselves and others that extended beyond the abusive system that most of us had escaped from. The “Don’t talk” rule is not easily broken.

Thank God that John and I at least had each other to talk with! Nearly every day for several weeks we shared what we were feeling and thinking in response to the abuse. We didn’t do it because we were trying to become spiritually healthy; we did it because we couldn’t not talk. And, of course, the emotional safety that was already built into our relationship gave us the freedom to talk.

Yes, our conversations were often difficult, because they caused us to feel again the pain of the abuse. But talking helped us identify exactly what had happened, who had done what, and what was hurting us. It helped us sort out all our mixed feelings—the shock, the anger, the confusion, the sadness, the disappointment, the grief, and the occasional guilt feelings over not asserting ourselves sooner. And it helped us realize that we weren’t crazy, that the abuse was as bad as it seemed, that it was truly abuse, and that there was a reason we felt so much pain. In addition, we each found great comfort every time the other person listened and understood. And with each experience of comfort I think there was a measure of healing, perhaps too small to be noticed at the time.

That is not to say we never felt bound and gagged by the “Don’t talk” rule. Whenever we talked with anyone else about our spiritual abuse experience, both before and after we left the church, we wavered between two concerns: a healthy concern that we not gossip about, or speak disrespectfully of, Richard and Jill, and an unhealthy concern that perhaps we shouldn’t be talking about them at all. While we felt compelled to warn certain people of how Richard and Jill were hurting others, we often recognized a vague, dark fear that we were doing something bad.

I still experience a remnant of that fear now, years later, as I write these words. Something inside me says, You’re making too much of this. Just wait. It’s going to get you into trouble. An important part of my personal history lies bare, for all the world to see and perhaps judge. But I know now, as I knew then, that talking about the abuse, with others and with God, was the best



thing I could do to recover from the experience. In fact, I have always found that as I talk with God about that fear and then, despite the fear, choose to talk with others about the abuse, my fear about breaking the “Don’t talk” rule either disappears or diminishes.

Grieving our losses is also vital to recovery.

Grieving is a process, and processes take time. John and I spent months, even years, grieving. We’re probably still grieving to some degree. We grieved the loss of relationships with people we cared about. We grieved the loss of the joy of worshiping with those people. We grieved the loss of our satisfaction in participating in their lives and in watching many of the ways God revealed himself to each of them. And we grieved the loss of our dreams about enjoying a long, fulfilling history with our church community.

Grieving wasn’t only a matter of identifying our losses. Having identified them, John and I needed to allow ourselves to feel the pain of those losses. For me, that meant not distracting myself with a project or with other thoughts when the pain resurfaced—that is, whenever I was in a safe, private place and I wasn’t working against a deadline. Because I knew I needed to grieve and I rarely was in a safe, private place with time on my hands, I had to build that time and place into my schedule. So during my regular time of prayer, I often invited God to help me feel the pain and to help me grieve. He did.

Feeling pain rarely has short-term benefits. I recommend it only because the long-term benefits far outweigh the pain. When we grieve our losses related to spiritual abuse, when we feel the pain of those losses, we tell ourselves the truth. The truth that what happened was abuse. That it hurt us. That we’re not crazy. That the problem was not with us. That the losses we grieve were truly valuable parts of our lives. As we keep telling ourselves the truth, sooner or later we start to grasp it. And with God’s loving help, the truth sets us free.

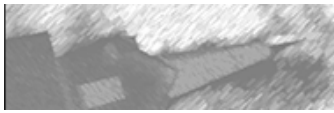
We cannot be entirely free from our spiritual abuse

experience until we forgive our abusers.

This also took time. In my case, no sooner had I told God that once again for the eleventh time I chose to forgive Richard and Jill, than God showed me yet another reason why I was angry at them. But it was wise of God to respond to me that way; my forgiveness would not be complete until I was aware of all the ways Richard and Jill had hurt me and hurt my husband.

Forgiving our abusers does not mean that what they did to us was okay. It does not mean that the abuse didn’t matter or that we will overlook it and forget about it. It does not mean that we should resume the relationship or that we should trust our abusers again. What it means is that we refuse to stand in judgment of our abusers. We give that responsibility back to God, placing them in his hands. And we ask him to have mercy on them just as he has had mercy on us.

As John and I reached a point where we could begin thinking about forgiving our abusers and praying for them, God gave us—through scriptures, mental pictures, and even dreams—images



of Richard and Jill as two needy, broken people whom God dearly loved. Placing them in God's hands, and forgiving them repeatedly as the hurts resurfaced, was one of the most important steps we took as we moved forward in our recovery.

Regaining trust probably takes longer than any other step toward recovery from spiritual abuse.

We're still working on this one. Even now, whenever we hear a pastor say something disrespectful or misleading to a congregation, our internal alarm systems go off so loudly that we feel self-conscious.

It appears ironic that regaining trust is an issue for us when we never really trusted Richard in the first place. But having spent so much time guarding ourselves from the pastor, we now find it difficult to do the opposite. While we're grateful that God has used our experiences of spiritual abuse to increase our radar sensitivity toward other environments that might be spiritually abusive, we're aware that, as much as we want to trust pastors, we are reluctant to do so. Afraid of getting hurt again, we tend to keep a low profile. Yet we know that not every pastor is abusive. So we're looking to God to finish healing the wounds that have caused that reluctance. Meanwhile, we're trying to be patient with ourselves, knowing that God is not displeased with our slow progress.

The most insidious effect of spiritual abuse, of course, is that it can damage the way we view God, so that we distrust him as much as we distrust pastors. If John and I had been less experienced Christians and had trusted Richard and Jill as agents of God, we might have begun to view God himself as deceptive, self-serving, dictatorial, capricious, power-hungry, punitive, shaming, uncaring, and unloving. In fact, we have anguished over the many people who may have begun viewing God in those ways after being hurt by Richard and Jill. Although, as far as we know, the abuse did not damage our perceptions of God—perhaps because we had never trusted the pastor to be any more spiritual than we were—it could have in one way: It could have influenced us to distrust God for allowing the abuse to happen. Both of us often asked God, "Why do you put up with pastors like that? Why don't you hand their churches over to someone more competent?"

I still can't answer those questions, any more than I can answer the question of why God lets people suffer any kind of abuse. But I do know this: God was with us throughout our abuse experience, and he was with us afterward, comforting us, helping us sort out our feelings, healing our wounds, and setting us on the path to recovery.

Barbara Milligan is the associate editor of STEPS and the author of *Desperate Hope: Experiencing God in the Midst of Breast Cancer* (InterVarsity Press, 1999). You are invited to visit her Web site at www.desperatehope.com. This article originally appeared in STEPS, a publication of the National Association for Christian Recovery. All rights reserved.