

Spiritual Abuse

Jeff VanVonderen is the coauthor of *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* and *When God's People Let You Down* as well as several other books. He is a longtime participant in and supporter of the NACR. He has also recently accepted a position as the executive director of Spiritual Abuse Recovery Resources, a sister ministry of the NACR (www.spiritualabuse.com).

STEPS: Your book on spiritual abuse was published almost a decade ago. But it's still in print. I guess the problem hasn't gone away yet?

Jeff: The response to the book has not really diminished that much. Usually a book will be out there for a couple of years and then go out of print. But people keep finding *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* as if it's a new book. The stories I hear from people haven't gotten any nicer over the last decade either. The wounds caused by spiritual abuse are still very deep. And to be honest, I don't see that much improvement in the system overall. I think it's pretty clear that spiritual abuse is not some kind of fad.

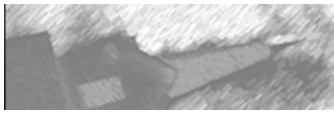
STEPS: Nor is it something that you and [coauthor] Dave Johnson invented, is it?

Jeff: Not at all. What we did was to stumble across some language that worked for people. It's a language that matches the feelings and wounds that many people have experienced. We give people a way to talk about this kind of thing. But spiritual abuse is certainly nothing new. Spiritual abuse has been here since biblical times. We just came across a way of talking about it in our time, and put it into a package that made sense to a lot of people.

STEPS: Talk some more about spiritual abuse in the Bible. What did it look like then?

Jeff: It looked essentially the same then as it does now. Spiritual leaders exploited people for their own gain. Authority was misused in order to get things done in the name of God that weren't really about God at all. Jeremiah talked about those who heal other people's wounds superficially. Their real wounds were not dealt with; they were just glossed over for the sake of external appearances. That's part of the dynamics of spiritual abuse. I think that God's big gripe with the leaders of Israel, if you look at Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jeremiah, was that they were not using the authority they had been given for the benefit of the weak, for those who didn't have a voice. They were using their authority for their own purposes and for the sake of human kingdoms. The result in people's lives then was the same as now: spiritual exhaustion rooted in misconceptions about who God is, about what God wants from us and about God's stance toward us.

The New Testament gives essentially the same picture. There aren't a lot of times when Jesus is harsh; Jesus is not known for harshness. But about spiritual abuse he was very harsh. For example, in Matthew 23 he not only describes the dynamics that were going on between the Pharisees and the people, but he also warns people about the Pharisees. He urges them to stay away from the Pharisees. He calls the Pharisees names. He paints pictures about them. For example, he talks about the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs." That might seem like



merely a picture of hypocrisy—being one way on the outside and a different way on the inside. But there is more than that in this picture. People at that time believed that if you touched a tomb you would be defiled. So Jesus is not only calling the Pharisees hypocrites; he is saying that if you fall under their influence you could become defiled—spiritually affected in a negative way. “Ravenous wolves” is another picture Jesus drew of spiritually abusive leaders. He’s talking about leaders who devour instead of build up. It is very clear when the Bible talks about the purpose of authority that it is for building up, for encouraging and for setting people free. The pictures that Jesus drew paint a stark contrast between the abusive use of authority and appropriate uses of authority.

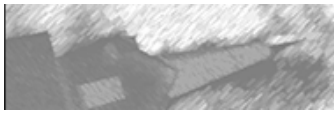
The abuse of authority was also a central concern for Paul. His main adversaries were the people who thought he was being too graceful. They felt a need to correct his teaching and to help people understand that the Good News is not just about what God has done but also about the things we need to do. They were called the circumcision party, because they added that particular religious behavior to Christ’s behavior as a means of securing God’s approval. This theme of “legalistic teachers” comes up all the time in Paul’s letters. He warns the church at Ephesus that the people who try to add to the Good News in this way will not only come from outside the Christian community but from inside the Christian community as well. So they have to be on their guard [Acts 20:29–31].

In the book of Titus, Paul provides a long list of the qualities desirable in a leader. But then he says that leaders need to take a proactive stance in terms of building people up in grace, and a defensive stance in terms of guarding the flock from people who try to destroy it—especially those who try to add some kind of religious requirements or behavioral demands on top of the grace of God. It is the people who say you need Jesus plus something else, that Paul is warning about.

The letter of Galatians is another example. It is a very angry letter. It’s all about the idea that God’s approval comes from Jesus plus something that you do. Paul attacks this view from every possible angle he can think of. Once again he calls the Jesus-Plus people bad names and wishes bad things will happen to them. Very early in the book of Galatians he asks the people to whom he is writing, “Where is the sense of blessing you once had?”

Most of the people I work with, when they first became Christians, it was very clear to them that it was not about performance. It was only about what God did. And this gracefull message gave them a sense of blessing. They felt restful. Even if that feeling didn’t last very long, their spiritual journey started in a very deeply grace-full, rest-full place. They knew they needed a gift and that God had provided just the gift they needed. But then what happens very quickly is that people get taught or led to measure themselves based on themselves instead of measuring themselves based on what Christ did. That leads rapidly to a loss of that sense of blessing, of rest, of grace. What happens is that people start trying to “measure up.” And that, of course, doesn’t work.

STEPS: It seems to me that grace-based faith has always had this kind of Achilles’ heel. Performance orientation sneaks in so easily, even in churches whose formal theology emphasizes grace. And things start to fall apart real quick when that happens.



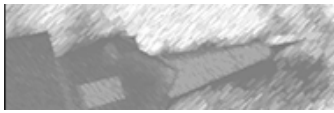
Jeff: Before we became Christians our performance and other people's assessments of our performance were really all we had to measure ourselves by. We live in a world that promotes that very heavily. It's the most natural thing we do. It's one of the first things that little kids do. They make stuff and then they show it to you and say, "Look what I did!" It's a very natural, normal and certainly not an evil thing to do. What the gospel does is that it says, "You can't do anything." And, "You don't need to do anything." That is not common sense in our world. In my opinion this is the "foolishness of the gospel that makes foolish the wisdom of the world." It's the too-good-to-be-true thing.

Christians tend to think that people don't become Christians because they aren't willing to give up the bad things in their lives. But I think the real reason that people don't become Christians is that it's just too good to be true. We can't trust things that are too good to be true. It makes us anxious. We find ourselves waiting for the other shoe to drop or for the too-good-to-be-true thing to disappear. Or it might feel like we haven't really heard the punch line yet. People are waiting for the "but" that comes after "God loves you." They know it is there. When I was on the staff of a local church, people would hear that it was a safe place. They would come hear David Johnson preach, and they would sit there and cry because it sounded too good to be true. Some people would look ahead in the biblical text from which Dave was preaching to find the "but." This sounds good, but wait until he gets down here to this part. Then the other shoe will drop. People anticipate that the rest of the story will be Bad News. It couldn't be just Good News. That would be so totally foreign to what I have experienced in life so far. But that is exactly what the Good News is.

So, to get back to your question. We resist grace because we are culturally programmed to focus on performance, on what we can do, on how responsible we need to be. But there is a second factor. When a person becomes a Christian, they have a heart that is warm toward God. They want to do the things God wants them to do. They care about that now. Even if they can't change their life around in the way they think they should, they still care about it now. And that makes them particularly susceptible to teaching that says, "You want to do God's agenda? Well, we know more about that than anybody, so we can help you. We'll tell you what God wants, and then you can work real hard to make that happen." Now, not only are new Christians susceptible because we all live in a world that is oriented toward performance. They are susceptible also because spiritually abusive people can take advantage of their new desire to do God's will.

STEPS: I suppose that all of these factors that set people up for spiritual abuse are even more problematic for people who have already experienced other kinds of abuse.

Jeff: Sure. Any kind of abuse teaches us unhealthy relationship skills. The skills may help us to survive in the abusive situation with as little damage as possible. But they leave us unbalanced. We may only know how to navigate in unhealthy relationships. So that's what we unconsciously look for. It's not unlike the woman who is married to an alcoholic and he dies and she swears she will never marry another alcoholic and then a few years later she is married to another alcoholic. It's because we tend to do the things we already know how to do. In this respect, spiritually abusive systems are no different from other kinds of abusive systems. You find the same dynamics as in domestic violence, sexual abuse and other forms of abuse. People tend to gravitate toward what they know about already, even if what they already know is very



unhealthy.

STEPS: You have already talked a bit about the role of authority in spiritually abusive relationships. In your book you list “power posturing” as one of the key features of spiritual abuse. What is that about?

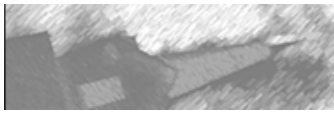
Jeff: Spiritual abuse is always a power issue. In order for abuse to happen, by definition, it has to come from a place of higher power to a place of lesser power. People in low-power positions can't abuse people in highpower positions. If hurtful things come from one person to another who are in power-equal positions, I don't call that abuse. If a father beats up his son, that's physical abuse. If two siblings beat up each other, it's just fighting; it's not abuse. A sibling might get beat up just as much as he would if he were fighting with his father. It's certainly hurtful behavior. But it is hurtful behavior between peers. When it becomes abuse is when there is a power differential. This issue is one of the reasons I wrote *When God's People Let You Down* as a kind of follow-up to *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. There are lots of hurts that people experience in power-equal relationships. The hurt can be enormous, but that doesn't make it abuse.

STEPS: You are also pretty careful in both of your books to emphasize that it is not always easy to figure out who has the power in a dysfunctional system. It's not always the people who have power in a formal sense.

Jeff: That's right. An example would be when a congregation is abusive toward a pastor. It might seem like the pastor is in the power position, but really the power may be concentrated in some group of people. It might be a formal group, like a Board of Deacons, but it could also be an informal group like a family that gives the most money or that has been in the congregation for the longest period of time. We also tried to be very careful to say that not all exercise of spiritual authority is abusive. Just because someone does not like the way the authority is leading doesn't mean that it is spiritual abuse. And just because someone in a position of authority does something to hurt someone else doesn't mean that it is spiritual abuse either. Just because a father does something to hurt a son doesn't mean it's abuse. How the father handles the situation afterward is often what determines whether it is abusive or not. It could be just a mistake, or an error in judgment. Maybe the father apologizes and makes amends as soon as he recognizes the harm that he has done. Whether or not something is abusive must take many factors like this into consideration.

STEPS: We've already talked a bit about the second characteristic you give for spiritual abuse: performance preoccupation. It seems like in the real world this is where the “subtle” part comes in.

Jeff: That's right. Scripture does say that some behaviors are good and some behaviors are bad. And obedience is important. And holiness is an issue. But when it becomes abusive, when it becomes dangerous, is when it's somehow added to God's performance in Christ. For example, Scripture is pretty clear that if you support the kingdom of God in your heart, then you should support it with your wallet as well. So giving is good. If you are part of the program, help make the program happen. The issue is not whether people should give money to help do



kingdom stuff. But if giving money to do kingdom stuff becomes part of what you do to get God's approval, that's when it gets dangerous. This is particularly true with finances, because it is so measurable; it's easy to tell whether you are "doing the right thing" or not. So when it seems to pastors that they are just encouraging people to do good things, the bottom line may be that they are reinforcing a performance-based religiosity that can be very toxic.

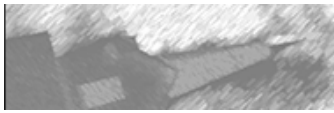
STEPS: Another thing that seems to be a source of the "subtle" part of spiritual abuse is what you call "unspoken rules." I've talked to many people who have experienced spiritual abuse but who are terribly confused about what has happened to them. Often as soon as you give them some vocabulary to describe their experience—even just the expression "spiritual abuse"—they recognize it immediately. It seems like the unspoken rules somehow keep people confused about what is happening.

Jeff: That's because with unspoken rules you can't tell that they exist until you break them. Suppose you have a rule that says "Don't disagree with the pastor or you are in trouble." You won't know that rule is operative unless you disagree sometime with the pastor and say something about it. Then you'll probably find out about the rule right away. As long as you agree or pretend to agree, you don't even know that rule is there. But if you break the rule, you find out that it's been a rule the whole time.

Probably the most common unspoken rule is the "Don't talk" rule. This rule is what gives such power to the "Don't disagree with the pastor" rule. The "Don't talk" rule is the worst one. If you break one of the other unspoken rules and then find out that it was a rule all along, the "Don't talk" rule is what really puts you in a bind. If you already learned how to stuff a lot of pain as a child in order to make your way through a dysfunctional family system, then it's sometimes not that hard to use the same skills in a religious system. But it's not a very healthy way to live. A 14-year-old in a very painful family system might try to survive by "holding their breath"—telling their friends, "I can't wait until I'm 18, 'cause then I'm out of here." Somehow age 18 represents when they'll have enough power to do what they need to do to survive. People sometimes do the same thing in church. They sit in churches like that, holding their breath, waiting for some act of God to save them. In both cases it's using the "holding your breath" strategy to survive. It is a strategy that may have seemed to work at one time in life, but it is not a very helpful or hopeful approach to any kind of adult relationship.

STEPS: Tell me something about "lack of balance," which you also list as a feature of spiritually abusive systems.

Jeff: Unbalanced systems are those that focus too much on certain aspects of the Christian experience. The two examples we picked are objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity means that everything is so black-and-white that there is no room for people's individual experiences, talents and things like that. People have to just fit into the system or they are not acknowledged, get neglected or are told that they are divisive, demonic or something like that. On the other side are systems in which people's gifts and experiences are given the ultimate authority. Extreme examples of this would be situations where you objectively know from Scripture or your own experience that something is misguided, but when you say so, you find that the subjective experience of a person in authority takes priority. That gives the ultimate authority to man rather



than to God.

STEPS: You know, talking about all this stuff does not feel good. I'm aware of feeling a little nauseated, and I'm starting to feel the beginnings of a headache as we talk. I wonder if people reading this in STEPS might start checking out because this whole topic is so painful. If you have experienced spiritual abuse, it is not stuff you can just talk about abstractly without feeling some of the pain all over again, even if the abuse is many years in the past.

Jeff: Spiritual abuse is painful. For me the pain of talking about it is not so much that it brings up old pain from the past. It's not about old wounds so much anymore. But I experience it as painful because we've been chipping away at this issue now for 15 years but we really haven't done that much to change things. Every day I am reminded of the pain people are in because of this. Every day I hear from someone who has experienced this. They are not only in pain emotionally and psychologically, but also they are full of fear about God, thinking that they are in trouble because they haven't gotten it right, or been good enough, or been Christian enough. That is really painful territory. And it's difficult territory to work in.

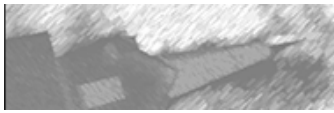
STEPS: I think one of the most painful pieces of this puzzle is when you find people in abusive situations and they are unable to leave, unable to make healthy choices. Just as spouses in violent relationships sometimes return again and again to be abused, people who are in spiritually abusive relationships often find it very difficult to leave.

Jeff: The phenomena of not being able to leave has two parts. First, if you are outside a spiritually abusive system, you are the enemy. And secondly, although it is very easy to get in, it is very difficult to get out once you are in. It is exactly the same as in any very dysfunctional family. The fear is that if a person gets out of the family, they might tell the secret. So there is a lot of incentive to keep people inside the system.

People in abusive systems think that the inside of the system is the only safe place. If you associate with or connect to people outside the system, that is not safe. You can get hurt doing that. So just stay in here where it is safe. Those people out there will lead you away from God or from the things God wants. So it's safest to stay in here with the leaders, who are the only ones who really know what God wants. The paranoia is that any kind of break from "us" and return to "them" would be disastrous. What makes this even more hurtful is that an individual's relationship with God is taken hostage. It's not just that the leader is worried that you are going to fall from grace if you associate with outsiders—or that you might tell outsiders what it's like in here. It's more like if you do tell the truth, you will be wrong and God will get you for that. God will be the enforcer. Bottom line: Stay in here or God will punish you.

STEPS: People in spiritually abusive systems have usually invested a lot in the system.

Jeff: Sure. You invest so much—and you are required to invest so much—in abusive systems that your world becomes pretty small. Sometimes people forget relationship skills that are necessary for relating to people outside the system. After a while you don't have anybody outside the system that you are close to. So that makes the dependence on the system even stronger. On a human level, when we invest a lot, we hate to lose our investment. So we



sometimes invest more to try to get a return on the original investment. Which means we have more to lose. Which means there is an even higher incentive to invest more. Some people have invested incredible amounts of their money, their emotions, their time and their energy in abusive systems.

A family I worked with recently was part of a small network of families. They only had associations with people in this small network. Their kids took piano lessons from someone in the group. If they leave that group, their kids lose their piano teacher. They lose the contacts with their sports teams. They lose not just the investment in the system—all the energy, time, money and emotions that they invested in getting the group to function—but they also lose all their social contacts and all the extracurricular things that are dependent on the group. This is very similar to the reason why a woman who is being battered doesn't leave. If she leaves she has nothing. Going from something, albeit abusive, to nothing can be even more terrifying than staying where you are. So you stay, hoping it will turn around. Even if it is irrational to outsiders, the desire to stay put is very powerful when you are facing the loss of everything you know.

STEPS: In *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* you talk about the roots of secrecy in spiritually abusive systems. One root is the need people feel to be public relations agents for God—to have a “good testimony” so that people will think good things about God. And that leads people to all kinds of spin-control strategies, evasions and outright deceptions.

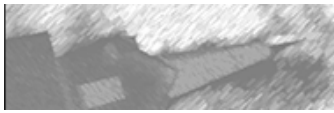
Jeff: So, if you have a leader who has a struggle in a system that is abusive—well, let me give an example. I have worked with a church where the pastor sexually exploited several of his counselees. The church could have dealt with the problem honestly. Maybe that would have meant saying, “This is what happened” and saying either “He’s out of here” or “He’s getting help.” But what they did was to make a secret about it. The leadership didn’t answer anyone’s questions about it, because That would make God look bad, they thought, and it might also make us look bad for having hired this person. What it did was to lock up all the pain, using the “Don’t talk” rule. Strategically they were aggressively not talking about it in order to not give God a bad name.

STEPS: Like we are well enough to be in charge of God’s reputation. That’s hard-core crazy.

Jeff: Right. Ten years later there are still two “camps” in that church. One group that still thinks the leadership did the right thing. And another group that is still angry about how the situation was handled. Those two camps are divided on every issue that comes up. Even totally unrelated issues like who to buy the carpeting from are contaminated by this history of denial.

STEPS: Let’s change the focus a bit and talk about how to recover from spiritual abuse. First, what about recovery for perpetrators of spiritual abuse? People in general don’t tend to be very hopeful about perpetrators of any kind of abuse. And for some good reasons. What’s your take on that?

Jeff: I think that pessimism is justified. First of all, in order for someone to recover from something, they have to realize that there is a problem, something to recover from. And when you have so much invested in being “right,” in being the one who “knows,” and you have led so



many people down the road—well, it takes us back to the equity issue. Perpetrators of abuse have a major equity investment in the system. It's hard to lose that. Also, it would have to be a horrifying realization to recognize that many of the things you have been doing for God have really hurt people. There is an incredible amount of equity that would be lost by admitting the need for help in this area. God will always offer grace. That is not the issue. The issue here is whether or not a perpetrator has a capacity to receive grace. Most don't even think they need it. Grace just bounces off. It's just like with any other issue. If the person who needs help doesn't think they need help, then no one can help them.

STEPS: What is it that breaks through these kinds of barriers to receiving grace?

Jeff: It can just be tiredness that finally gets us to the point where we are ready to receive help. Sometimes all the pretense and denial is just too exhausting to continue, and we give it up. My instinct about what Jesus would say to perpetrators is that he would say, "Try harder." He would say, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Then maybe a few would say, "I can't." And there would be hope for those folks. But most would say, "Okay, I can do that." They would just try hard, try harder, try their hardest to be better, to be more correct. And maybe later they would be tired enough to understand what Jesus was really saying to them.

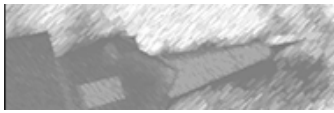
STEPS: It's kind of like in early AA when people who came to meetings and were asked, "Have you lost your marriage yet?" or "Have you lost your job yet?" And if the answer was no, some old-timers would say, "Well, you probably still need some more experience with alcohol. Go out and get some more experience." If you are not yet sick and tired of being sick and tired, then the cure won't work.

Jeff: Yes. So go do some more, and if you get tired, we'll still be here to help out. When Jesus interacted with the rich young ruler he told him, "Do everything that the law requires." And the guy said, "I've done that already." He should have said right away, "I haven't and there's no way I can do that." But he was still deep in denial. So Jesus gave him a task that he couldn't do: "Give up everything and follow me." That he couldn't do. Now some people look at that text and see it as just about selfishness—that the man was too selfish to give up his wealth. But I don't think that text is about selfishness at all. The man should have answered, "I can't" to Jesus' first question. If he had said "I can't" then there would have been grace. But when he was still that deep in denial, Jesus said in effect, "Well, you must need more experience before you will be ready to receive the help you need."

STEPS: Just to be clear, you are not pessimistic about recovery for people who have abused others but who recognize what they have done and repent and seek healing.

Jeff: That's right. I'm not pessimistic about recovery for anybody, for anything. I'm hopeful. That's why I do what I do. But I am aware of the track record and of how difficult it is for spiritually abusive people to see what's real and to change that pattern.

STEPS: The effects of spiritual abuse can last for a long time. Decades later it seems like it can still be easy to get triggered back into the abuse stuff.



Jeff: That's true and it relates to another dynamic that we haven't talked about yet. Spiritual abuse is talked about mostly in psychological terms. But there is also a spiritual dynamic to it—a dynamic of the spirit. Spiritual abuse is not just something that comes in a spiritual way or comes from spiritual people. In that sense it's like physical abuse, which is not something that comes only in a physical way. When physical abuse happens, something physical is hurt. And when spiritual abuse happens, your spirit gets hurt. And that has long-lasting consequences.

Recovery is never easy for any of us. But I think that recovery from spiritual abuse is in some ways the most difficult of recovery journeys. One reason is that the person who has the greatest potential for helping us recover from spiritual abuse is the person we feel most alienated from.

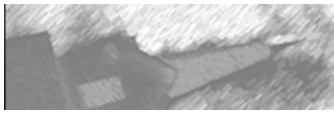
Let me explain that a bit. When someone gets physically abused, they don't necessarily distrust the Department of Social Services. The abuser wasn't acting as a representative of the Department of Social Services when they abused the person. Similarly, when a woman gets abused sexually, she doesn't necessarily distrust the person from the women's shelter who offers to be helpful. She may distrust men in general, but the agency that is designed specifically to help is not necessarily a problem. The abuser was not acting as a representative of the agency designed to help abused people. So the woman who has been abused is not likely to think, If I go to the people who are from the agency that is designed to help me, I'm going to get hurt even worse. In the case of spiritual abuse, however, there is always a major problem with the "agency" that is specifically "designed" to be helpful: God. The fear is that if you go to God, you will get hurt even worse than you have already been hurt. Spiritual abuse always does damage to our relationship with God. It's the worst. It's a wound of the spirit. It's a wound right down at the core of who we are.

STEPS: If you experience an abuser as acting on behalf of God, or speaking for God, or acting as an agent of God, you are really stuck.

Jeff: Abuse always happens in a relationship. And in the case of spiritual abuse, the abuse happens in the context of relationships where someone is in the role of representing God. Later, when the abuse has come to an end and we are looking for healthier relationships in which to recover, we may find other people—even people who may actually be faithfully representing God—but it will be difficult for us to trust in those relationships, difficult to invest again in relationships and difficult to relax.

STEPS: It seems like the struggle to trust people again is a very normal part of the recovery process after any kind of abuse. We usually start slow, risk a little, be vulnerable a little and gradually learn to trust again. But it's much more difficult to give ourselves permission to have just a little bit of trust when it comes to our relationship with God. We often massively shame ourselves when our faith is hesitant or partial.

Jeff: Yes. One of the messages of the abusive system is that you have to have complete, total trust. So in recovery from spiritual abuse it is really important to give ourselves room to have little bits of faith. And also to learn to pay attention to our spiritual radar and to reconnect with our sense of blessing—and with the God who gives us that sense of blessing.



Jeff VanVonderen is an author and speaker. He is the executive director of Spiritual Abuse Recovery Resources, a ministry of [Christian Recovery International](#). He also provides seminars, consultations and intervention services through the ministry of [Innervention Inc](#). This interview first appeared in STEPS magazine, a publication of the National Association for Christian Recovery. All rights reserved.