

Spiritual Abuse in the Pulpit and the Pew

by

Dale O. Wolery

Pastors should be the last people to perpetrate abuse. The idea is disconcerting and repulsive, but God's people sometimes do God's work in destructive ways. Surely not every clergy person is an abuser, and yet many thoughtful observers believe that spiritual abuse, intentional or not, has become the norm for modern pastors.

Any ministerial behavior, mine or someone else's, that damages someone's relationship with God is spiritual abuse. But it's not just a clergy problem. People in the pews have an enormous appetite for abuse. The fear and shame that motivate the abusers are the same feelings that often motivate victims to accept the abuse. Some church attendees wouldn't have church any other way. Within the church, spiritual abuse has become so normalized that it is viewed as the path to spiritual growth. We crave what hurts us because we believe it is best for us.

The passion and certainty with which I pen these thoughts grow out of two painful realities: that I have been spiritually abused and that I in turn have been the abuser. I have contributed to the mounting epidemic of spiritual abuse in our Christian community. Yes, my abusing was mostly unintentional, but it damaged others. The child who is whipped by a parent carries the soul scars despite any parental good intentions. I am yet surprised by how natural, how spiritual, I felt in doing God's work in destructive ways. It felt so right to do God's work so wrong.

Recognizing my own spiritual abuse as a pastor has been gradual. So has my recovery as both abuser and victim. Recognizing the abuse in others and in myself has been both painful and helpful. Those who have experienced my ministry over the years might well have been as unaware as I was that I was abusing them. (How I would love to make amends, to assemble them to apologize and together find a better way, a way of healing and grace!) Recognizing the distorted, damaging pieces on our spiritual journeys is the first step toward true spirituality.

Dogmatism

Spiritual abusers come in a variety of personalities. One kind of spiritual abuser is the Uninformed Dogmatist. Too often I ministered the Scriptures as if I were the authority, while I was ignorant even of my own spirituality, needs, desires, and feelings. My perceived need to be viewed as the authority was met, and those in my congregation who were overly dependent on authority felt that their needs were met. In fact, they encouraged me in this damaging stance, treating me like the expert, the guru, and telling me they liked it when I stepped on their toes. But instead of becoming more spiritual, we fell into a ditch together. Like a blind leader of the blind, I helped create an enslaving, damaging "discipleship." I focused on the intellectual and less meaningful details of biblical passages and missed the heart of the Good News. And I scarred some souls in the process.

Rigidity

Another kind of abuser is the Rigid Ruler. Usurping the throne of God, he calls the shots about when you should attend church, how much you should give, what you should look like, and how you should treat him, your spouse, and your children. He interprets the Scriptures for the congregation, not allowing sound reasoning or questions. The rigid performance standards with which he burdens his people destroy freedom and grace. He distorts the image of God, projecting Him as the Enforcer, the Harsh Taskmaster. The Rigid Ruler imposes his own control, using fear and shame. Congregations support this abuse by hiring pastor after pastor based on whether he has the same rigid "convictions."

Reality Bending

The Reality Bender also spiritually abuses people. As pastors, we should be ever searching for the truth about how we feel, what matters most to us, what our real priorities are, whether we are being honest about our spiritual journeys, what personal challenges we face, and whether we are wrestling with dark secrets. We should be honest and real. Instead, other pastors and I bend the truth. We project a reality we do not enjoy. When our lives become unmanageable we feel compelled to put on a happy face and act, instead of telling the truth. Such role playing bends what is real and deceives those who are trying to find out what God is like. This perverts Christianity at the core. When I have bent reality I have deceived the ones I was supposed to protect and I have modeled a view of God that is void of truth and grace. Happy "painted on" faces hurt the souls of others.

To be sure, people in the pews encourage the spiritual abuse of bending reality. It is somehow more comfortable to put the pastor on a pedestal, even if that pedestal is built on a lie, than to graciously accept him with all his flaws. This came home powerfully to me when I, as a pastor, shared for the first time that I had been seeking professional help. Elders as well as other church members were angered and embarrassed. Our push to put pastors on the pedestal contributes to the sickening cycle of spiritual abuse.

Dale Wolery is the executive director of the [Clergy Recovery Network](#). This article first appeared in STEPS magazine, a publication of the National Association for Christian Recovery. All rights reserved.