

Recognising and Resisting Spiritually Abusive Leadership

In the past couple of years the evangelical church has tragically been engulfed by a number of appalling leadership scandals. These have included Bill Hybels, Mark Driscoll and Ravi Zacharias in the USA, and John Smyth, Jonathan Fletcher and Steve Timmis in the UK. Some of these scandals have included physical and sexual abuse, whereas others have concerned the misuse of power and authority in leadership. More and more victims of such 'spiritual abuse' are coming forwards, and there is an urgent need to reevaluate leadership models that might facilitate such abuse. This seminar will examine the rapidly developing discourse on 'spiritual abuse' in churches. We will consider what spiritual abuse is, why it happens, how we can guard against it, and how we care for victims who have experienced it. This will help us ensure that we lead healthy churches in a biblically healthy way.

John Stevens is the National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, a family of over 500 Bible-centred churches in the UK, a position that he has held since 2010. Prior to this, he was one of the founding pastors of City Evangelical Church Birmingham, which was planted in the centre of the UK's 2nd largest city in 1999. He was instrumental in starting the Midlands Gospel Partnership, was the course Director of the Midlands Ministry Training Course and is a visiting lecturer at Oak Hill Theological College. John is also one of the pastors of Christchurch Market Harborough, a church he helped to plant when he took up his current role. He was converted whilst studying law at Cambridge University, and after taking a post-graduate degree at the University of Oxford worked for 16 years as a University Lecturer, ending his career as Deputy Head of the Law School at the University of Birmingham. John is married to Ursula and they have four children aged between 12 and 7. He blogs at www.john-stevens.com on theology, church life and ministry, culture, and politics.

SESSION 1: WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

1. What is leadership?

2. Jesus' example of servant-leadership
 - Mark 10v35-45
 - Philippians 2

3. The Biblical paradigm of shepherding

- Ezekiel 34
- John 10v1-21

4. NT instructions for Christian leaders

- 1 Peter 5v1-4

SESSION 2: WHAT IS 'SPIRITUAL ABUSE'?

1. Abusive Christian Leadership

- Sex
- Money
- Power

2. Recent Evangelical Leadership Scandals

- John Smyth
- Jonathan Fletcher
- Ravi Zacharias
- Brian Houston - Hillsong
- Mark Driscoll
- James McDonald
- Steve Timmis

3. What is 'Spiritual Abuse'?

“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. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision-making, the requirement of secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, the requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.”

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/16-february/comment/opinion/understanding-spiritual-abuse>

4. What 'Spiritual Abuse Isn't

‘Being hurt by the church is not the same as being spiritually abused. For instance, all churches are made up of sinners. There will be disagreements, slander, short tempers, misunderstandings, and acts of selfishness and pride. Pastors won't always say the right things and elders won't always lead well. Nursery workers can lose their patience and Sunday school teachers might replace the curriculum with their own agenda... We live in a culture that likes to use the word “abuse” freely and often in the wrong context. Being treated poorly is categorically different than being abused.’

<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/how-to-heal-from-spiritual-abuse.html>

5. 'Spiritual Abuse' and Church Discipline

- Matthew 18v15-20
- 1 Corinthians 5v1-4
- 1 Timothy 1v3, 20

6. 'Spiritual Abuse' and Complementarianism

- 1 Timothy 2v11-15
- 1 Corinthians 14v34-35
- 1 Peter 3v1-6
- Ephesians 5v22-24
- BUT – 1 Corinthians 7v3-7; Ephesians 5v25-33; 1 Peter 3v7

6. Is 'Spiritual; Abuse' Biblical?

Jesus' criticism of Pharisees and Teachers Law – Matthew 23v1-39

Treat their traditions/interpretations as law
Mark 7 - cleaning inside cup - washing hands
Add to God's word demands not required

Impose burdens on people but do not lift finger to help
Law but not grace - demanding sacrifice and commitment

Love places of honour
Want to be honoured and greeted - treated as superior

Become performers
Sermon on the Mount - everything from or show
Long prayers - miserable fasting - ostentatious giving
Maintains status

Exercise powerful relational discipline
Include and exclude - who associate with
Shunning people don't keep their standards

Lack compassion and mercy
People written off when fall short their standards
God essentially hard taskmaster - Parable Talents
All justice and no mercy
Perfectionists and activists

Convinced their superiority
Parable Pharisee and Tax Collector - 'I am not like other men'

SESSION 3: WHEN IS LEADERSHIP SPIRITUALLY ABUSIVE?

1. Claiming Excessive Authority

Exceeding the limits of healthy, biblical authority...

- actions, decisions or lifestyle that clearly contravene scripture;
- lording it over others – overriding people’s conscience with leader control, rather than commending Scripture to them;
- demanding personal obedience, privately browbeating or publicly humiliating others
- urging the church into beliefs or practises without reference to Scripture, or avoiding or obscuring inconvenient Bible passages
- adding burdens demands and expectations that Scripture does not,
- imposing leader authority outside the boundaries of church life. This is sometimes done by reducing the whole of life to the missional community, thereby extending their own authority into every area of life, overriding personal liberty.

(Powerful Leaders, Marcus Honeysett)

2. Claiming Exclusive Authority

Warning Signs of a culture that could lead to Spiritual Abuse

- Claims of unique authority
- Controlling tendencies
- Closing down of debate / contrary opinions
- Secrecy around leadership activities & decision making
- An elitist attitude (e.g. vilification of other churches)

Amended: <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/how-to-heal-from-spiritual-abuse.html>

3. Case-Studies of Potential 'Spiritual Abuse'

Brian is married but has confided he is addicted to same-sex porn which is putting huge strain on his wife. The elders of his church have counselled him to stop this behaviour and to repent of his sin. Brian refuses to give it up - saying, 'it's just who he is'. Despite many conversations and pleas Brian's behaviour still has not changed. Because of this he was removed from membership and put out of the church. When Brian talks about this situation with friends, he tells them his church spiritually abused him because of his sexuality.

As an adult, Margot has trouble letting go of the legalistic teachings learnt in her childhood. She is often distressed and confused when making decisions on what to wear because modesty was often associated with body shaming. She is uncomfortable going to pubs with her friends and feels guilty watching 18-rated movies. She married a Christian because that was the right thing to do - but the marriage broke-up after she couldn't stand 'feeling trapped' any longer. Margot knows her parents taught her what they thought was right, but she sees things differently now and is often angry about her upbringing, which she now views as having been abusive to her.

Jennifer is married to a man who won't allow her to get a job. He interprets his complementarian beliefs as meaning he alone should provide financially for the family. He also disapproves of her having friends who attend other churches as he fears she will get confused and influenced by their weak theology. Jennifer nonetheless feels safe and considers herself to have a happy marriage. She is content staying home and having a small circle of like-minded friends, and thinks everyone should live this way.

John is currently attending a church that encourages parents to physically chastise their children if they are not submissive. This church teaches regularly on financial tithing and members are often asked about this when the elders visit them. The elders discourage their members from reading books by authors outside their church circles and regularly mock modern versions of the Bible. John is starting to question some of these practices and wonders if he should contact their denominational authorities about his concerns.

SESSION 4: HOW CAN WE PREVENT ABUSIVE LEADERSHIP?

1. Leaders Should Guard Themselves

- Maintain a close devotional walk with the Lord
- Recognizing and resisting temptation
- Personal accountability and friendships

2. Institutional Structures Should Guard Leaders and Led

- 1 Timothy 3v1-13; Titus 1v5-9; 1 Timothy 5v19-21
- Appointment of leaders
- Character of leaders
- Plurality of leaders
- Accountability of leaders

3. Institutional Policies and Procedures Should Protect Leaders and Led

- Complaints procedure
- Anti-bullying policy
- Safeguarding policy

SESSION 5: HOW CAN WE INVESTIGATE CLAIMS OF ABUSIVE LEADERSHIP & CARE FOR VICTIMS?

1. Investigating Claims of 'Spiritual Abuse'

- 1 Timothy 5v19-20
- Independence
- Openness
- Evidence
- Corroboration
- Explanation
- Action

2. Caring for Victims

- Listening
- Investigating
- Vindicating
- Supporting

3. Unproven Claims of Spiritual Abuse

- Malicious accusations
- Misunderstandings
- Lack of evidence

For Further Reading:

1. Marcus Honeysett, *Powerful Leaders*
2. Lisa Oakley & Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*
3. Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*
4. Diane Langer, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*
5. Wade Mullen, *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse--And Freeing Yourself from Its Power Paperback*
6. Scott McKnight & Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing*
7. Andrew Graystone, *Bleeding for Jesus*
8. John Stevens, FIEC podcasts <https://fiec.org.uk/resources/series/independence>