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Covenant Theological Seminary

**Spiritual Abuse in Church Leadership  
Finding A Way Through**

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

By

**Stacey Davis-Agee**

Saint Louis, Missouri

2018



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## **Abstract**

Spiritual abuse in leadership is a reality for the church and its leaders are turning a blind eye. As long as the church acts as if this abuse does not exist, its effects will grow. Adult education literature has begun insisting that it is time to acknowledge it, to understand what it is, to learn how it presents in a church staff environment, and to take steps to help those wounded by it. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how associate pastors experience restoration from spiritual abuse they have experienced from a lead pastor.

Four research questions guided this study: (1) What encounters do associate pastors experience with lead pastors that classify as spiritual abuse? (2) How do associate pastors become aware they have experienced spiritual abuse? (3) In what ways and to what extent do associate pastors experience healing and restoration? (4) In what ways and to what extent does theology help associate pastors toward restoration? The study utilized a qualitative research method using semi-structured interviews with six associate pastors who had a contentious experience with a lead pastor. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method.

The findings of the study concluded that the contentious experiences associate pastors experienced from lead pastors do qualify as spiritual abuse. This abuse was identified through present indicators and emerging points of awareness. As the associate pastors interpreted and identified their experiences, antidotes to the spiritual abuse became evident as well.

The study provided three primary conclusions for understanding spiritual abuse within church leadership. God's word makes it clear that God does not grant positional

authority to pastors or leaders in the church. He only calls them to servant leadership. For the associate pastors, wounded by spiritual abuse, healing and restoration are possible when they find safe people to share their stories and learn words and language to identify and acknowledge their experiences. As for leaders in academia and the church, they need to acknowledge the spiritual abuse found throughout our churches and join Christ by entering into the messiness, seeking resolution for all parties involved.

This paper is dedicated first and foremost to my husband, Carson. Your love, faith and support allowed me to believe that this was possible.

And secondly to associate pastors who have experience spiritual abuse. May your voices be heard, your wounds be acknowledged and may Church leaders choose to honor their Lord and Savior by entering into this reality of spiritual abuse found in church leadership.

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## **Abbreviations**

EMDR	Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

On October 31, 2014, Dave Bruskas, executive elder at Mars Hills Church, announced “the existing Mars Hills Church organization will be dissolved.”<sup>1</sup> A church with fifteen local bodies, located in four states with a budget of over thirty million, dissolved.<sup>2</sup> Mars Hills was a church that grew rapidly with a dynamic pastor, Mark Driscoll, in the Seattle, Washington area. Then, suddenly, it collapsed, leaving fifteen local bodies on their own. How could this happen to an organization appearing to be so successful? The bigger question is why did this happen?

A poem by Robert Frost eerily illustrates the answer, “we dance around in a ring and suppose; but the secret sits in the middle – and knows.”<sup>3</sup> What occurred at Mars Hill Church is a travesty. People were left shocked and bewildered in its wake.<sup>4</sup> As Frost illustrates, the people on the edges supposed, but they did not know what was on the inside of the organization. Pastor and writer Ben Tertin encourages believers in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Tertin, “Painful Lessons of Mars Hill: What Can We Learn from the Collapse of Mark Driscoll’s Church?” *CT Pastors*, December, 2014, accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2014/december-online-only/painful-lessons-of-mars-hill.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, “The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged,” ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1979), 362.

<sup>4</sup> Janet I. Tu, “Mars Hill Church Reeling as Pastor Mark Driscoll Quits,” *The Seattle Times*, October 16, 2014, updated February 4, 2016, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/mars-hill-church-reeling-as-pastor-mark-driscoll-quits/>.

article, “The Painful Lessons of Mars Hill,” to look to God’s word, particularly Proverbs 24.<sup>5</sup> Tertin, with the author of Proverbs, suggests that when people stumble upon another’s ruins, they need to be wise and pay attention:

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.<sup>6</sup>

What can be learned from the ruins of Mars Hill Church?

In order to learn from the ruins of Mars Hill Church, the church, its leaders and Christians must be willing to stop and truly consider what occurred. Doing so may be easier said than done. Dayna Drum, writer for *Relevant Magazine*, claims that church members allow the problems to “sit alongside of us like regular members” in the pews and ignore them.<sup>7</sup> English author and journalist Christopher Booker agrees with Drum, urging that in failing to recognize the mysteries that are lying “so close beneath our nose that we scarcely even recognize it to be a mystery at all.”<sup>8</sup> People are hesitant to have any negative thoughts of church leaders claims Marc A. Dupont, a church leader for over fifteen years.<sup>9</sup> Dupont further insists people rob themselves of the ability to “put the picture into true focus,” which dulls their understanding, robbing one of the whole truth.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tertin, “Painful Lessons of Mars Hill.”

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 24:30-32.

<sup>7</sup> Dayna Drum, “It’s Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church,” *Relevant*, October 27, 2014, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/its-time-address-spiritual-abuse-church>.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), introduction (locations 70-82), Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Dupont, *Toxic Churches: Restoration from Spiritual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2004), 28.

Therefore, in the words of famous psychologist Carl Jung, “what we resist persists.”<sup>11</sup>

## **The Problem**

Finding truth at times is difficult because it often involves revealing a problem and more specifically, a problem that is found in the “sacred institution of the church,”<sup>12</sup> according to Mike Fehlauer, author and pastor in New Braunfels, Texas. Fehlauer likens the issue facing the “sacred institution” and encountered at Mars Hills to the popular children’s story, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”<sup>13</sup> This fairy tale story by Hans Christian Andersen involves two weavers swindling an emperor. The weavers claim they created a set of clothes only the people who are worthy can see and the emperor believes them. As he parades throughout the town naked, the people will not point out the obvious, for fear of doing something wrong. Finally, a child states the obvious, “But he hasn't got anything on!”<sup>14</sup> According to Fehlauer, churches often fail to acknowledge, much less address, their issues until the damage is already done.<sup>15</sup>

Nothing about the issue the church is facing is simple, says Jeff VanVonderen,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> Leon F. Seltzer, “You Only Get More of What You Resist—Why?” *Psychology Today*, June 15, 2016, accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201606/you-only-get-more-what-you-resist-why>. This quote is attributed to Carl Jung and was originally quoted as, “what you resist not only persists, but will grow in size.” It is quoted regularly but no one identifies where the actual quote in his work is found. It is generally abbreviated to “what you resist, persists.”

<sup>12</sup> Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2001), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, trans. Jean Hersholt, SDU H. C. Andersen Centret, accessed March 28, 2018, [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes\\_e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html).

<sup>15</sup> Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 22.

one of the early writers on spiritual abuse.<sup>16</sup> He further explains the word used to identify the problem also comes with further complexities. First, it is a strong word.<sup>17</sup> Second, it can be considered a “loaded” word.<sup>18</sup> And last, Jacki Pritchard, an author who has written extensively about the subject, says that this word “conjures up all sorts of images” for every person who hears it.<sup>19</sup> The word is “abuse.”

Abuse as defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is, “to put to a wrong use; misuse; mistreat.”<sup>20</sup> Abuse has a spectrum of meanings, as people have their own experiences which define the word for them. VanVonderen is credited with coining the term, spiritual abuse. On his website, [spiritualabuse.com](http://www.spiritualabuse.com), VanVonderen provides a summary of spiritual abuse stating:

Spiritual abuse occurs when someone in a position of spiritual authority, the purpose of which is to “come underneath” and serve, build, equip and make God's people more free, misuses that authority placing themselves over God's people to control, coerce, or manipulate them for seemingly Godly purposes which are really their own.<sup>21</sup>

While VanVonderen defined the term at the end of the twentieth century, an Old Testament prophet of God, Jeremiah, speaks in similar terms. Jeremiah echoes VanVonderen, stating, “a horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The

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<sup>16</sup> Jeff VanVonderen, Spiritual Abuse Recovery Resources homepage, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.spiritualabuse.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003), xvi.

<sup>19</sup> Jacki Pritchard, *Working With Adult Abuse: A Training Manual for People Working With Vulnerable Adults* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 44.

<sup>20</sup> George Merriam and Noah Webster, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, Home and Office Edition (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1998), 3.

<sup>21</sup> VanVonderen, Spiritual Abuse Recovery Resources homepage.

prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority.”<sup>22</sup> Is this what happened at Mars Hill? Would it classify as spiritual abuse?

Drum believes that pastor Mark Driscoll’s own admittance of using a domineering spirit to handle his church is testimony to the abuse.<sup>23</sup> Craig Welch, staff reporter for *The Seattle Times*, writes that pastor Driscoll had a style that “charmed many,” further saying he was “dynamic and funny, with a potent mix of reverence for Jesus and irreverence for everything else.”<sup>24</sup> However, he explains that beyond the pulpit in everyday work life, Driscoll was found to be controlling and abusive.<sup>25</sup> Another staff reporter for *The Seattle Times*, Janet I. Tu, describes a letter about the church board’s findings on Driscoll, saying, “at times, been guilty of arrogance, responding to conflict with a quick temper and harsh speech, and leading the staff and elders in a domineering manner.”<sup>26</sup> Driscoll admitted, “I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus (chuckle), and by God's grace, it'll be a mountain by the time we're done.... You either get on the bus, or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options. But the bus ain't gonna stop.”<sup>27</sup> Dave Kraft, pastor at Mars Hill, confidant

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<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 5:30-31 (NIV).

<sup>23</sup> Drum, “It’s Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church.”

<sup>24</sup> Craig Welch, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Church,” *The Seattle Times*, September 13, 2014, accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill-church/>, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Tu, “Mars Hill Church Reeling as Pastor Mark Driscoll Quits.” Tu found the letter on the church website that is no longer available.

<sup>27</sup> Shawn Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis* (Temecula, CA: Geeky Christian, 2015), under “The Narcissistic Leader” (locations 234-237), Kindle. This quote originated in a sermon by Mark Driscoll in 2007 before he left Mars Hills church in Seattle, Washington. The audio file of the sermon is no longer available but the part of the sermon where the quote originates is found at the following link, [https://joyfulexiles.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/preaching-paul\\_edits1.mp3](https://joyfulexiles.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/preaching-paul_edits1.mp3).



and coach of Driscoll, initially said it was the “most abusive, coercive ministry culture” on which he had served.<sup>28</sup>

While Mars Hill is a blatant and shocking example of spiritual abuse due to its notoriety and size, Mars Hill is not alone. Edward J. Cumella, a licensed psychologist and regular national and international speaker, affirms that spiritual abuse is found in evangelical circles, in non-denominational circles and across all faiths.<sup>29</sup> David Johnson, co-author with VanVonderen of *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, calls spiritual abuse an illness, which he believes is more widespread than expected.<sup>30</sup> W. William Hobson, a licensed pastor, counselor for over twenty-five years, and author of *Suffer the Little Children: Understanding and Overcoming Spiritual Abuse*, would agree with Johnson, explaining that many of the people who have experienced it are not even aware the abuse happened because it happens so frequently.<sup>31</sup> How did the church arrive at such an unhealthy state?

## A Biblical Perspective

Significant voices that have written on spiritual abuse in the church agree that it all started in the Garden of Eden.<sup>32</sup> Cumella describes how Satan manipulated Adam and

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<sup>28</sup> Welch, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Church,” 4-5.

<sup>29</sup> Edward J. Cumella, “The Yeast of the Pharisees: Spiritual Abuse by Pastors and Counselors,” [www.barnabasministry.com](http://www.barnabasministry.com/recovery-yeast-cumella.html), accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.barnabasministry.com/recovery-yeast-cumella.html>, 1.

<sup>30</sup> David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (1991; repr. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), under “Introduction” (locations 104-105), Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> W. William Hobson et al., *Suffer The Little Children: Understanding and Overcoming Spiritual Abuse* (n.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2012), under “Introduction” (locations 141-142), Kindle.

Eve, using God’s own words to draw them into his own agenda.<sup>33</sup> Satan created doubt for Adam and Eve in regards to the character of God. Since that time humans have struggled with doubts, causing them to trust others before trusting God, claims June Hunt, author of *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst*.<sup>34</sup> The Old Testament gives further evidence, as shown previously, in Jeremiah 5:30-31. The prophet Jeremiah continues in chapter six, verse 13, sharing God’s declaration to the people, “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.”<sup>35</sup> Another example from the Old Testament of spiritual abuse from leaders comes from Ezekiel:

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.”<sup>36</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus and Peter, a disciple of Jesus, confront examples of spiritual abuse. Jesus describes the Pharisees and scribes as spiritually abusive in Matthew 23, listing them as hypocrites and blind guides. Dupont describes the Pharisees saying, “Outwardly, they appear beautiful and righteous, but inside they are full of

<sup>32</sup> Dupont, *Toxic Churches*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Cumella, “The Yeast of the Pharisees,” 1.

<sup>34</sup> June Hunt, *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst* (Carson, CA: Aspire Press, 2015), chap. 1 (locations 113-117), Kindle.

<sup>35</sup> Jeremiah 6:13.

<sup>36</sup> Ezekiel 34:1-4.

uncleanness, hypocrisy and lawlessness.”<sup>37</sup> Jesus says:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous.<sup>38</sup>

Jesus’ disciple, Peter, writes of how believers need to be shepherds to God’s people, not acting out in a way that is domineering, shameful or self-serving, stating: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”<sup>39</sup> Ken Blue, noted scholar and early writer of the subject and author of *Healing Spiritual Abuse*,

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<sup>37</sup> Dupont, *Toxic Church*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 23:13-29.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Peter 5:2-3.

argues throughout the New Testament, Jesus and his disciples give a clear picture of the type of leadership that God desires: servant leadership, not positional leadership.<sup>40</sup> Where did the church and believers miss the mark?

Maybe they did not miss the mark. Cumella says that spiritually abusive teachers have always existed both in the history of Israel and in the church. However, he believes while spiritual abuse may have always existed, it is not a theological issue but rather the root of the problem is within the individual leader. Cumella claims abusive leaders have a “personality pathology.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Johnson and VanVonderen caution, when it comes to spiritually abusive leaders, one should not go on a witch hunt. Rather, churches need to address the personality pathology. They say spiritual abuse is a trap, claiming, “The ones who perpetrate spiritual abuse on others are just as trapped in their unhealthy beliefs and actions as those whom they knowingly or unknowingly abuse.”<sup>42</sup> Shawn Nelson, author of *Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis*, agrees with Johnson and VanVonderen, asserting that most of the time when harm is inflicted upon the abusee, the abuser is completely unaware of what they did.<sup>43</sup> Dupont points out that God appoints leaders in the church and these leaders are human. Therefore, there will always be the potential for those leaders to misuse the power or authority granted to them.<sup>44</sup> Where the church goes

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<sup>40</sup> Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience*, 5d. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), chap. 2 (locations 241-270), Kindle.

<sup>41</sup> Cumella, “The Yeast of the Pharisees,” 1.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, & VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, under “Introduction” (locations 139-141), Kindle.

<sup>43</sup> Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse*, under “Overview” (locations 47-48), Kindle.

<sup>44</sup> Dupont, *Toxic Church*, 13.

dangerously wrong is when it turns a blind eye to the abuse, creating an environment of indifference and passivity, which allows the abuse to continue.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Dilemma**

If keeping silent sanctions the abuse then why do people turn a blind eye? Speaking up about any form of abuse is difficult for many reasons. Drum, a victim herself of spiritual abuse, explains that some believe the acknowledgement of experiencing spiritual abuse can cause a person to feel as though they are “victimizing themselves.”<sup>46</sup> She describes, “the first time I used that term, I felt dramatic and kind of whiny.”<sup>47</sup>

A lack of understanding about what occurred is another reason people fail to speak out about their abuse. Drum explains that she did not admit or recognize the abuse for several years because the situation seemed so normal. She sheds more light on her experience, saying it was not until she left the environment that she realized it was not normal but harmful.<sup>48</sup> There are others whose stories reflect the same confusion. Bill Clem, pastor and elder at Mars Hill under Mark Driscoll, says, “he [was] wrestling with what loyalty is” and that he, “kept quiet as a pastor and elder...in a commitment to ‘unity.’ I put up with stuff I probably should not have put up with because I thought I was submitting to authority.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>46</sup> Drum, “It’s Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Tertin, “Painful Lessons of Mars Hill.”

Tackling the issue of spiritual abuse is complex because there are varying degrees of control in a great number of churches and countless people who are wounded from spiritual abuse.<sup>50</sup> The church can no longer continue to turn a blind eye to people who are not only wounded but have never completely recovered from the abuse. Many do not even recognize the experience as spiritual abuse.<sup>51</sup> Jamie Marich, a licensed professional counselor, who developed the curriculum and textbook *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, asserts that spiritual abuse is the most overlooked of all abuses in clinical settings.<sup>52</sup> DuPont, in his book *Toxic Church*, shares the testimony from a leader of a church counseling ministry named Suzy. Suzy shared that, as a trained counselor, she failed to recognize what she personally was experiencing was spiritual abuse. She shared that it took her five years to “label and diagnose” it as spiritual abuse.<sup>53</sup> She describes the reason it was difficult to identify what she experienced as abuse is that in a church setting it can be a sort of family secret that people do not want to acknowledge or discuss. She also shared she is still trying to comprehend and heal from what occurred.<sup>54</sup> Cumella shares that in order to recover, one must recognize what has occurred and when this happens, the outlook gets simpler.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Jamie Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse* (McLean, VA: NetCE, 2015), chap. 1 (locations 100-101), Kindle.

<sup>53</sup> Dupont, *Toxic Churches*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Cumella, “The Yeast of the Pharisees,” 2.

## Purpose Statement

Spiritual abuse is a present day problem and has been in the church since the time of Adam and Eve. The failure on many levels to recognize the abuse and address it leaves countless believers and leaders wounded. Until the church commits to resolve this issue, many of the abused will remain silent and confused. They may leave the church, leave the faith or have a strained relationship with their Savior and Lord.<sup>56</sup> Scholars agree that the church cannot continue to allow this type of abuse to go unchecked and unhealed.<sup>57</sup> The damage a person experiences leaves not only that individual's life and heart vulnerable, but the harm can have an effect that is utterly devastating as evidenced at Mars Hill.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how associate pastors experience restoration from spiritual abuse they have experienced from a lead pastor.

## Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the focus of this study:

1. What encounters do associate pastors experience with lead pastors that classify as spiritual abuse?
2. How do associate pastors become aware they have experienced spiritual abuse?
3. In what ways and to what extent do associate pastors experience healing and restoration?
4. In what ways and to what extent does theology help associate pastors toward

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<sup>56</sup> Cheryl Schatz, "Recovering from Spiritual Abuse," [strivetoenter.com](http://www.strivetoenter.com), January 9, 2009, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.strivetoenter.com/wim/2009/01/09/recovering-from-spiritual-abuse/>; Drum, "It's Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church.": Jeffrey VanVonderen, *When God's People Let You Down: How to Rise Above Hurts That Often Occur Within the Church* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Pub, 1995), 12.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey VanVonderen, *When God's People Let You Down: How to Rise Above Hurts That Often Occur Within the Church* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Pub, 1995), 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

restoration?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to consider and understand the spiritual abuse that is occurring in the church in a way that brings awareness, healing, restoration and prevention. This study will have an impact on associate pastors who have been abused, pastors who abuse and other leaders and church members who have witnessed the abuse. The researcher hopes that congregants, pastors, seminary professors, church leaders and counselors will take an honest and open examination and identify a path forward.

The focus of the research will be associate pastors who have encountered abuse from a lead pastor. The goal is to understand how the associate pastors become aware of what they experienced, giving a face and name to it. Marich urges that this is important because in a clinical setting, few people identify spiritual abuse because they “continue to be unaware of the possibility of this type of abuse.”<sup>59</sup> The study’s aim is to understand how this awareness can lead to a safe space to process, reassess and heal in a way that brings restoration both individually and corporately.

There is also a level of importance for the pastors who carry out the abuse because evidence shows that many are unaware they have perpetrated the abuse. As described above, Johnson and Cumella urged that these pastors are trapped by pathologies of which they may be unaware and wrestling with their own personal issues. When these pathologies are not recognized and dealt with, the struggles continue, creating an unhealthy environment where the spiritual abuse will continue. This study

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<sup>59</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 441-442), Kindle.



will address these pathologies and how they lead to an unhealthy reaction, creating abuse and wounds. The researcher's desire is that pastors will recognize the need to begin owning and addressing these pathologies that are driving their actions and reactions and in doing so find their own place of healing.

This study is also vital for the congregants who witness the abuse and its outcomes within their pastors, friends, loved ones or other congregants. It is important for congregants to understand and feel empowered to have a voice because they often feel bound to remain silent, as if their hands are tied. The goal of the research is to address the theological aspect of the body of Christ in which all believers understand the license God gives them to strive for peace and unity as described in Ephesians 4:3, "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."<sup>60</sup>

The final group this research seeks to impact is all other pastors, seminary professors, church leaders and counselors. The desire for this exploration of spiritual abuse is that the reader may begin to comprehend the impact one can have on those affected by spiritual abuse. Most would agree that the best way to address spiritual abuse is through prevention.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, leaders have a duty to consider and learn. The author of *Charismatic Captivation*, Steven Lambert, asserts, "to readily identify the signs and symptoms of authoritarian abuse is absolutely essential."<sup>62</sup> As ministry leaders gain this insight, the researcher's prayer is that church leaders will desire to re-evaluate how they

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<sup>60</sup> Ephesians 4:3.

<sup>61</sup> Drum, "It's Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church."

<sup>62</sup> Lambert, Steven, "The Signs of Spiritual Abuse," [charismatic-captivation.com](http://www.charismatic-captivation.com), November 15, 2008, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.charismatic-captivation.com/the-signs-of-spiritual-abuse/>. Steven Lambert is a Bible scholar, theologian, pastor, counselor and author of a book on authoritarian abuse in the church, *Charismatic Captivation*.

educate others in the area of leadership and authority. Church leaders can re-orient their focus and teaching to engage the subject matter of spiritual abuse in all its many colors and facets. The study longs for leaders to understand how essential and important this topic is so that people begin to approach the idea of spiritual abuse with a willingness to listen, not to dismiss or shame. Through addressing this topic from a high level of leadership and seminary training, churches can begin to address prevention and provide a level of restoration that is much needed for individuals and the church.

The final goal for this paper is adapted from the words of the famous English statesmen and philosopher, Sir Francis Bacon. He writes, “Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted...but to weigh and consider.”<sup>63</sup> The researcher hopes that whether readers are believers or leaders in the church, they will weigh and recognize that all humans have a responsibility in the kingdom of God. May this research bring peace and unity to the body of Christ.

### **Definition of terms**

Abuser – the person who is inflicting the abuse on another individual.

Abusee – the person who is the victim of abuse from another individual.

Abuse – “when someone has power over another and uses that power to hurt.”<sup>64</sup>

Spiritual abuse – when a leader with spiritual authority uses their position and authority to manipulate, control or dominate.

Negligent – failing to use proper or reasonable care that can result in damage or injury to

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<sup>63</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Essays of Francis Bacon* (Overland Park, KS: Digireads Publishing, 2004), under “Of Studies” (location 2127-2130), Kindle.

<sup>64</sup> Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1(location 36), Kindle.

another.<sup>65</sup>

Trauma – “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.”<sup>66</sup>

The church – the institutionalized religion of Christian institutions that consider themselves to be Evangelical.

Local congregation/local church – a local gathering of Christians who meet together at a place of worship to participate in worship, ministry, community and the sacraments, that is led by ordained pastors and/or elders.

Lead pastor – a pastor who has spiritual responsibility over a church and its people. This includes head pastors, senior pastors or executive pastors.

Associate pastor – a Christian minister who assists the lead pastor with the pastoral care and spiritual needs of its congregants or members.

Congregant/member – a person who is a believer who is considered a formal member of a specific church body.

Believer – a person who believes in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior and engages in ministry and worship within an evangelical church.

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<sup>65</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3d. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1173.

<sup>66</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 1843.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to explore how associate pastors experience restoration from spiritual abuse they have experienced from a lead pastor. While the subject of spiritual abuse is beginning to be addressed by some in the religious community, scholars agree there is a great deal more to be done. A minimal amount of literature is available, specifically in the area of abuse from lead pastors to associate pastors. However, one can find a fair amount in the literature on understanding spiritual abuse, building a theological framework regarding spiritual abuse and finding a place of healing and recovery. Collectively, these themes will guide the research to address the challenges associate pastors encounter when their lead pastor is abusive.

### **Understanding Spiritual Abuse**

There is clear evidence that spiritual abuse exists in the church today and building a framework to define what is taking place is essential. Defining spiritual abuse is difficult for three reasons touched upon in Chapter One. First, abusees often have countless fears about speaking out: will they be part of the problem? Or will they encounter some form of retribution? Second, various perspectives on the term “abuse” encompass a wide spectrum of meaning. For example, it could refer to neglect, trauma or harm. Third, to understand what spiritual abuse is, one must first acknowledge and understand what it is not.

### *Stigmas to Understanding and Defining Spiritual Abuse*

It is difficult to define “spiritual abuse” and understand it because for too long it has been kept quiet.<sup>67</sup> In her article, “It’s Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church,” Dayna Drum says, “Spiritual abuse is one of these issues that has been sitting uncomfortably ignored in the back pews of our churches. Usually, we either act like it isn’t happening or run from it, sometimes abandoning the Church altogether because of an unhealthy situation.”<sup>68</sup> Jamie Marich, a licensed counselor who has written curriculum in the area of trauma and abuse, suggests that people are afraid to come forward with claims of abuse. She explains the “damning implication” if abusees speak about what occurred. Often, abusees fear they will displease God and by doing so, “their soul may be in jeopardy.”<sup>69</sup> Marc Dupont, teacher, evangelist, counselor and author of *Toxic Churches*, offers another fear people face: they do not want to be viewed as critical or divisive.<sup>70</sup> There is also a debilitating effect that occurs with spiritual abuse, causing a crippling of the church and the individual, explains Edward Cumella, psychologist and internationally recognized speaker.<sup>71</sup> For the abusee, spiritual abuse causes emotional and mental distress because it “harms self-concept and self-worth.” The response to this

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<sup>67</sup> Dayna Drum, “It’s Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church,” *Relevant*, October 27, 2014, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/its-time-address-spiritual-abuse-church>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Jamie Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse* (McLean, VA: NetCE, 2015), chap. 2 (location 280-281), Kindle.

<sup>70</sup> Marc Dupont, *Toxic Churches: Restoration from Spiritual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2004), 29.

<sup>71</sup> Edward J. Cumella, “The Yeast of the Pharisees: Spiritual Abuse by Pastors and Counselors,” [www.barnabasministry.com](http://www.barnabasministry.com), accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.barnabasministry.com/recovery-yeast-cumella.html>, 2.

emotional and mental distress is fear, in some cases denial and an overall environment of silence, making it difficult to address and understand.

Sometimes people keep quiet because of a desire to keep peace and unity in the church. Author Shawn Nelson explains in his eBook, *Spiritual Abuse*, people want to trust their leaders and do not want to be part of the problem.<sup>72</sup> He further explains that most people “assume” they can trust and believe that their pastor, being a servant of God, “has their best interests in mind.”<sup>73</sup> This trust creates a desire to be loyal, which leads to not being able to set proper boundaries or respond properly to red flags. Johnson and VanVonderen, speakers and authors of *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, take the issue a bit further when they add that people do not want to “be the problem.”<sup>74</sup> When it comes to the issue of loyalty, people who have been abused struggle with not only “admitting it out loud” but also just naming what had occurred as abuse. For them it feels like they are “being disloyal to family, to church, even to God.”<sup>75</sup>

The concern for others is that they might encounter retribution if the abuse is brought forward. Marich explains that this fear can feel a bit more “damning” because some believe it impacts their right standing with God.<sup>76</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen clarify that, in some environments, people are taught not to question the pastor because

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<sup>72</sup> Shawn Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis* (Temecula, CA: Geeky Christian, 2015), under “Overview” (locations 48-50), Kindle.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., under “Internal Factors Leading to Spiritual Abuse” (location 110).

<sup>74</sup> David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (1991; repr. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), chap. 9 (locations 1603-1606), Kindle.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., chap. 3 (location 690).

<sup>76</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 288-294), Kindle.

the pastor's words are from God and therefore they are commanded, "touch not the Lord's anointed."<sup>77</sup> This is a form of power posturing where the focus becomes the leader's authority to force submission and obedience. In the article "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Church," staff reporter for the *Seattle Times* Craig Welch provides an example that illustrates the fears are real, the wounds are real and the abuse is real. He describes a situation where the pastor, Mark Driscoll and the church elders changed the church bylaws to limit oversight. When this occurred, he recounts, "Two pastors objected, arguing it concentrated authority with little accountability and made it easy for Driscoll to steamroll opposition. Driscoll fired both men, held a church 'trial' and urged members to shun one pastor, leaving some aghast."<sup>78</sup>

### *Defining Spiritual Abuse*

In one of the first books written on the subject in 1993, by one of the early writers on spiritual abuse, Ken Blue claims that spiritual abuse is a "contemporary problem" which he said was relatively new.<sup>79</sup> Ronald Enroth, a professor and another early writer on spiritual abuse, agrees with Blue writing in 1994 that most people were aware of other types of abuse such as child abuse, spousal abuse, sexual abuse or physical abuse, but spiritual abuse has been overlooked until now.<sup>80</sup> Marich states that as recently as 2015 even professionals overlooked spiritual abuse in a clinical setting either because they did

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<sup>77</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 9 (locations 1603-1606), Kindle.

<sup>78</sup> Craig Welch, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Church," *The Seattle Times*, September 13, 2014, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill-church/>, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience*, 5d. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), chap. 1 (location 33), Kindle.

<sup>80</sup> Ronald M. Enroth, *Recovering from Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 15-16.

not know it existed or were unclear as to how it was defined.<sup>81</sup> These scholars agree that although it is a more current field of study, spiritual abuse has been occurring for quite some time.

In narrowing the focus to defining spiritual abuse, Blue begins by looking at the term “abuse.” He emphasizes that for abuse to happen an individual has to have power over another individual and use the power to hurt.<sup>82</sup> The broadest explanation of abuse comes from Nelson, in his book *Spiritual Abuse*, “using or treating something in an improper way and the result is harm.”<sup>83</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen state that if someone is wounded spiritually by another person, then spiritual abuse has occurred.<sup>84</sup> Two of the most quoted definitions on the subject come from Enroth and then Blue:

Spiritual abuse takes place when leaders to whom people look for guidance and spiritual nurture use their positions of authority to manipulate, control, and dominate.<sup>85</sup>

Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds.<sup>86</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, the general definition will be a blending of the two:

Spiritual abuse is when a leader with spiritual authority uses their position and authority to manipulate, control or dominate.

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<sup>81</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 101-103), Kindle.

<sup>82</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (location 36), Kindle.

<sup>83</sup> Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse*, under “What is Spiritual Abuse” (locations 73-78), Kindle.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, under “Introduction” (location 125), Kindle.

<sup>85</sup> Enroth, *Recovering from Churches That Abuse*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 37-38), Kindle.



## A Spectrum of Meaning

Marich urges that when approaching spiritual abuse, one must consider looking at it through different perspectives. In fields such as psychology and religion, “definitions are often personal and diverse.”<sup>87</sup> The term “spiritual abuse” can also conjure a variety of definitions for people who are not familiar with the topic. Graham Barker, head of the School of Counseling at the Wesley Institute in Drummoyne, admits that when he first heard the term he likened it to a cult such as the Jehovah Witnesses or sects such as the Shepherding Movement.<sup>88</sup> He further explains that most people understand the terms child abuse, sexual abuse or emotional abuse but find it difficult to grasp the term spiritual abuse. Barker also states that it can be systemic or a one-time event; therefore its faces can be countless. Scholar and author of the book *Spiritual Terrorism: Spiritual Abuse from the Womb to the Tomb*, Boyd Purcell, focuses on the systemic aspect of spiritual abuse. He describes a church environment that is extremely legalistic and defines spiritual abuse as fear that an individual will be punished for failing to live a life that pleases God and thus not be allowed into heaven.<sup>89</sup> Both scholars agree there is a range of experiences associated with spiritual abuse as well as a spectrum. Boyd further believes that those who have been abused can gain peace of mind and spiritual freedom once they can consider more fully the truth of the gospel.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 143-144), Kindle.

<sup>88</sup> Dr. Graham Barker, “The Insidious Harm of Spiritual Abuse.” *Alive Magazine*. Accessed November 8, 2016. <http://www.ccaa.net.au/documents/SpiritualAbuse.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> Boyd C. Purcell, *Spiritual Terrorism: Spiritual Abuse from the Womb to the Tomb* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2008), under “Introduction” (locations 357-450), Kindle.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, under “Introduction” (location 197).

While scholars describe different faces and perspectives defining spiritual abuse, several different lenses can clarify its range of effects. Purcell approaches the subject from the lens of both ministry and clinical perspective, believing most people have experienced spiritual abuse on some level. He created the following spectrum: Zero.... Mild.... Moderate.... Severe.... Terroristic.<sup>91</sup> Barbara Orlowski, teacher and author of *Spiritual Abuse Recovery*, agrees with Purcell in that abuse happens on a spectrum, but further clarifies that the majority of spiritual abuse cases can be measured within the degrees of mild to severe.<sup>92</sup> Marich touches on the spectrum from a clinical perspective stating that if someone has experienced between moderate to terroristic, then clinical attention is needed.<sup>93</sup>

While degrees are used to quantify levels of abuse, common terms describe spiritual abuse: harm, pain, wounded, suffering, trauma and in extreme cases, PTSD. Nelson refers to the abuse as injury, pain or harm. Picking up on this aspect, Blue focuses on pain saying, “it leads to pervasive fear,” shame, anxiety or guilt.<sup>94</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen also use descriptors such as “painful feelings” or “incredibly wounded.”<sup>95</sup> Orlowski uses the term “severe spiritual woundedness” in saying it destroys one’s trust of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., under “Introduction” (location 417).

<sup>92</sup> Barbara M Orlowski, *Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 38.

<sup>93</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 268-270), Kindle.

<sup>94</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 8 (locations 1109-1111), Kindle.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, under “Author’s Note” and “Introduction” (locations 65-66, 120), Kindle.

leaders and God.<sup>96</sup> The terms “trauma, suffering, or PTSD” are mostly used by scholars such as Marich, Langberg and Purcell; other authors agree.<sup>97</sup> Whether in a clinical setting or in scholarship, there is shared agreement when diagnosing spiritual abuse as trauma.

While scholars agree that spiritual abuse is qualified by terms such as “wounds, harm, trauma, or PTSD,” they urge caution in approaching the subject, being clear and limited in how to define it. Blue explains that if someone is arrogant, rude or thoughtless in how they respond to others, it does not meet the criteria for abuse.<sup>98</sup> He argues that if everything a church leader does is classified as spiritual abuse, then scholars will have trivialized it. He encourages counselors to approach the topic in a manner that is responsible, discerning and careful.

Johnson and VanVonderen agree saying that counselors must work toward liberation and grace, not condemnation or judgment.<sup>99</sup> While this is a real phenomenon, he believes the abuse comes from a subtle trap of unhealthy beliefs. What caught Johnson’s attention, before he even defined the term spiritual abuse, were the symptoms of what he calls a disease.<sup>100</sup> In his words, “What I see in this, I cannot ignore.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Marilyn J. Cudmore, “The Experience of Victim Suffering and Perception of Leadership Abuse in Christian Organizations,” MA thesis, Trinity Western University, 2002, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 376-383), Kindle; Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), chap. 8 (location 1808), Kindle; Purcell, *Spiritual Terrorism*, chap. 11 (location 3507), Kindle.

<sup>98</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1, 6 (locations 46-47, 872-873), Kindle.

<sup>99</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, under “Introduction” (locations 128-129), Kindle.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, under “Introduction” (location 99).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Signs of Spiritual Abuse*

The literature states it is paramount for the church to gain awareness of what is honestly occurring and openly identify the signs of spiritual abuse to begin the restoration process. The most recognized book on the subject, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, is by Johnson and VanVonderen. According to them, the seven most common signs of an abusive system are power posturing, performance preoccupations, unspoken rules, lack of balance, paranoia, misplaced loyalty and secrecy.<sup>102</sup>

Power posturing refers to leaders who spend time focusing on their own authority and making sure others remember it as well.<sup>103</sup> Nelson further describes the term as submitting to the leader's authority because of fear, shame and bullying tactics.<sup>104</sup> Nelson further argues that if a leader feels he is being questioned, he may then "act dictatorial and become emotional."<sup>105</sup> Authors Cumella, Marich, June Hunt and G.G. Bloomer refer to it as authoritarian or controlling. Authoritarian is defined as "demanding unquestioned obedience" in *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst* by June Hunt, author counselor, speaker and founder of Hope for the Heart.<sup>106</sup> In his article "Yeast of the Pharisees: Spiritual Abuse by Pastors and Counselors," Cumella explains that authoritarian leaders shun accountability, preferring "rubber stamp" agreement. While this is not the only sign of spiritual abuse, it is the symptom most commonly noted. The word "posturing" is used

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., chaps. 5, 6 (locations 852-1114).

<sup>103</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 853-854), Kindle.

<sup>104</sup> Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse*, under "Signs of An Abusive System" (locations 297-298), Kindle.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> June Hunt, *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst* (Torrance, CA: Aspire Press, 2015), chap. 2 (locations 712-713), Kindle.

to describe this category because the leader who exudes this quality assumes a level of spiritual authority that is not biblically real; therefore it is postured.<sup>107</sup>

The second sign is performance preoccupation, and for Johnson and VanVonderen it goes hand-in-hand with power posturing. With performance preoccupation, leaders are absorbed in their members' level of submission and obedience.<sup>108</sup> If the focus is on how one is performing, i.e. whether one is being submissive or obedient to God's word or plan, then they will be more focused on an individual rather than focused on God.<sup>109</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen explain that performance preoccupation applies only as the leaders' need to be in control and "merely accommodates the leaders' sick interpretation of spiritually."<sup>110</sup> Hunt agrees, saying these leaders are "twisting the Word of God to fit their own opinions and desires."<sup>111</sup> In this type of system, true obedience and holiness in one's relationship with God are not cultivated.<sup>112</sup> Terms used by other scholars to describe this symptom are manipulation, conformity, coercion, intimidation, rigidity or deceitfulness.<sup>113</sup> In *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, pastor Mike Fehlauer says that when a system is preoccupied with an individual's performance, it is no longer about opportunities but one's commitment or loyalty to the

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<sup>107</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 866-875), Kindle.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., chap. 5 (location 877).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., chap. 5 (locations 899-907).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Hunt, *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst*, chap. 2 (locations 718-719), Kindle.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Cumella, "The Yeast of the Pharisees," 1-2; Hunt, *Spiritual Abuse: Religion at Its Worst*, chap. 2 (locations 711-718), Kindle.

leader or institution.<sup>114</sup>

Another sign of spiritual abuse is unspoken rules and according to Johnson and VanVonderen, is a powerful form of manipulation. Unspoken rules, if said aloud, would sound ridiculous; therefore, individuals do not speak them, which “keeps people quiet by labeling them as the problem if they notice and confront a problem.”<sup>115</sup> Fehlauer further describes the symptom of unspoken rules, calling it unquestioned authority.<sup>116</sup> Members understand that questioning the pastor comes with severe consequences and shunning. Questioning a pastor is the same as questioning the pastor’s “God-ordained” authority.<sup>117</sup> Thus, conformity is required, and objections are suppressed, which, according to Cumella, is also a form of ensnarement, creating confusion and self-doubt.<sup>118</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen explain the next sign as a lack of balance. When an individual is part of an environment that is spiritually abusive, they will also find “an unbalanced approach to living out the truth of the Christian life.”<sup>119</sup> According to them, extreme objectivism and extreme subjectivism are the two extremes evident in having a lack of balance. The authors point out that with extreme objectivism, a subjective experience, even though it may be valid, is overruled by objective truth.<sup>120</sup> Here the work of the Holy Spirit is either denied or questioned on a practical level rather than

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<sup>114</sup> Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2001), 40.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>118</sup> Cumella, “The Yeast of the Pharisees,” 2.

<sup>119</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 968-969), Kindle.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

considered on a theological level. They further explain that this imbalance creates a situation where education and intellect trump the work of the Holy Spirit or one's relationship with God.

The opposite of this is extreme subjectivism, where feelings and experience are used to decide what is true rather than looking to God's word.<sup>121</sup> While one may know truths from God's word, they are not relevant until the Lord speaks to the leader and imparts this truth or revelation to the leader, who then shares it. This imbalance therefore ultimately forces individuals to honor the leader's words instead of their own understanding of truth from the word of God, as well as their relationship with God. Fehlauer agrees with Johnson and VanVonderen, further noting that this imbalance causes an individual's relationship with God to be "abdicated for a relationship with man," resulting in the individual beginning to question their interaction and relationship with God.<sup>122</sup>

The next three signs take on the quality of a black hole, according to Johnson and VanVonderen, because like a black hole, it creates a sort of "spiritual magnet" that has the power to keep people in the abusive system.<sup>123</sup> Paranoia falls into this category and is the next sign of spiritual abuse. Forcing the idea that others outside of the system cannot understand what people inside the system understand creates paranoia. Outsiders are seen as not as intelligent or enlightened, therefore they are dangerous, evil or apostate, seeking

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., chap. 5 (location 981).

<sup>122</sup> Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 37.

<sup>123</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 1016-1018), Kindle.

to attack or weaken the church.<sup>124</sup> When anything is questioned in the system, then the blame is diverted to Satan or an evil attack, and people who are questioning anything or anyone in the system either fall in line or get shunned. People begin to believe that the church or organization is their only safe place.<sup>125</sup> Fehlaue supports this idea, showing that individuals face severe consequences for disagreeing or not following directives placed on them by leadership.<sup>126</sup> This process creates a lack of confidence and fear, making it difficult to break free from the abusive environment.<sup>127</sup>

Another sign of a spiritual black hole is called misplaced loyalty. Johnson and VanVonderen explain that this characteristic can have several aspects. The organization may require signed “loyalty statements,” in which they commit to not working in another ministry within the area of the organization for a period of time.<sup>128</sup> One example of a formal “loyalty” enforced on leadership was found at Mars Hills Church where the pastors were urged to sign non-disclosure agreements.<sup>129</sup> A second aspect includes examples in which loyalty to a specific church, system or leader is commanded over loyalty to Christ. The authority of the system and leader is placed on the same level as God’s, as their authority is “assumed or legislated.”<sup>130</sup> When an individual is not loyal or questions the leader or system, he or she is questioning or disobeying God.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Fehlaue, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 36.

<sup>127</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 1012-1029), Kindle.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., chap. 6 (location 1067).

<sup>129</sup> Welch, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Church,” 4.

<sup>130</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 1070-1073), Kindle.



The authors of *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* list three tactics used by leaders: “we alone are right,” scare tactics and humiliation. The idea that “we alone are right,” refers to the leaders of the system or the system itself. As long as members cohere to the system, then they are protected and in good standing with God.<sup>131</sup> Otherwise they will have “backslidden.” Another method used by abusive leaders is scare tactics, which not only are dire; they are actually a form of spiritual blackmail.<sup>132</sup> Fehlaue suggests this blackmail can range from a shunning process to being cast out.<sup>133</sup> Driscoll’s own words testify to the validity of the depths descended to when he said, “I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus (chuckle), and by God’s grace, it’ll be a mountain by the time we’re done.... You either get on the bus, or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options. But the bus ain’t gonna stop.”<sup>134</sup>

The final tactic is humiliation, where leaders publicly denounce people who they feel are insubordinate to the system, creating shame and fear.<sup>135</sup> These tools keep people in line or provide others an example of what can happen to them if they don’t fall in line with the system and its leaders.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Fehlaue, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 36, 100.

<sup>134</sup> Shawn Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis* (Temecula, CA: Geeky Christian, 2015), under “The Narcissistic Leader” (locations 234-237), Kindle. This quote originated in a sermon by Mark Driscoll in 2007 before he left Mars Hills church in Seattle, Washington. The audio file of the sermon is no longer available but the part of the sermon where the quote originates is found at the following link, [https://joyfulexiles.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/preaching-paul\\_edits1.mp3](https://joyfulexiles.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/preaching-paul_edits1.mp3).

<sup>135</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 1098-1108), Kindle.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

This aspect creates the next sign of spiritual abuse, an atmosphere of secrecy. Johnson and VanVonderen point out that people hide things when something questionable is going on.<sup>137</sup> They are concerned about how the church or they themselves are perceived by others. Such secrecy could be caused in several ways, such as a lack of performance, protection of God's image or poor financial integrity.<sup>138</sup> Another reason is a dismissive view of the laity and the view that they lack the capacity to comprehend the dynamics required of running the church.<sup>139</sup> Fehlauer also states that some pastors will use secrets to determine if another pastor or leader can be trusted. The pastor will share specific information with one individual and keep tabs to not only detect a threat but to use as a tool to manage the people in the environment.<sup>140</sup> In an environment with these types of symptoms, one finds wounded and weary people who question their sanity. This feeling of questioning oneself begins because you know the pastor told you one thing and then he does something completely different or tells someone else the opposite. These forms of secrecy are manipulative and can distort reality causing some to feel a bit crazy.

### *Common Characteristics of Abusive Leaders*

Spiritual abuse occurs mostly because of the pathology of a spiritual leader rather than for theological reasons, according to Cumella.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, it occurs across all faiths and denominations. Such spiritual leaders with unhealthy individual pathologies

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<sup>137</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 1098-1108), Kindle; Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 37.

<sup>138</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 1114-1115), Kindle.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 37.

<sup>141</sup> Cumella, "The Yeast of the Pharisees," 1.

take on specific qualities that can be twisted and distorted to the point they become abusive.<sup>142</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen concur but further note that spiritual abuse is a trap for both the abuser and the abusee. Both are trapped by thoughts and behaviors that are injurious and destructive, whether they realize it or not.<sup>143</sup> “Spiritual abuse... is rarely perpetrated with intent to maim,” Blue writes.<sup>144</sup> He further explains that this lack of strategic forethought is why it is different from other abuses.

Two common characteristics were noted by many authors. The first is insecurity. Blue describes these types of leaders as being haunted by inner struggles and feelings that question their meaning or purpose.<sup>145</sup> Many times spiritually abusive leaders have experienced wounds in their lives that create feelings of insecurity and calls into question their worth and value.<sup>146</sup> He further notes that this desire for affirmation and approval can lead to the use of power over others to neutralize the feelings of weakness the leader feels. Another main point from Blue is that church leadership is attractive to insecure leaders because of the role that a church leader is afforded, with a level of authority given to someone considered “the man or woman of God.”<sup>147</sup> A side benefit is the absence of being questioned or challenged because of this level of authority.<sup>148</sup> If a leader is

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 291-293), Kindle.

<sup>144</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 41-42), Kindle.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., chap. 7 (location 990).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., chap. 7 (location 999).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

extremely insecure and anxious about failing, he or she can become treacherous.<sup>149</sup>

In *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, Fehlaueer dedicates a whole chapter to this type of leader. He explains that this type of leader has been around for quite some time and uses Saul, the first King of Israel, as his example. Fehlaueer further describes these leaders as perilous in their insecurity, consumed when just a few people rebuff them and emboldened when there are countless others who have great fondness and acceptance of them.<sup>150</sup> He breaks down traits of insecure leaders citing the lust of approbation, cowardice, jealousy and being overly concerned with appearances.<sup>151</sup> By using the example of Saul's character and pathology of insecurity, Fehlaueer paints a clear picture of what comes with an insecure leader:

An insecure leader demands signs of inordinate loyalty--no matter what the cost may be to his followers. The lust of approbation demands constant recognition and validation from others to feel a sense of worth. Insecure leaders have a desperate need to be needed and a passion for the affirmation of man. Why? It is in the affirmation of others that they determine their personal value. Living for the approval of others is a sure sign of insecurity, and many times leads to spiritual abuse.<sup>152</sup>

Nelson points out that this is done to create a feeling of security and calm, thinking they are doing the right thing, not out of intent to cause harm.<sup>153</sup> Blue points out the old adage, "hurt people, hurt people."<sup>154</sup> Saul's woundedness took him so far he was willing to kill

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Fehlaueer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 58.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 60-71.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>153</sup> Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse*, under "The Insecure Leader" (locations 181-200), Kindle.

<sup>154</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1012-1013), Kindle.

his own son Jonathan.<sup>155</sup> The example of Saul is a rare example of how an insecure leader can become more focused on what is occurring outwardly than what is occurring inside of him or her.<sup>156</sup> Fehlaueer concludes that at some point the veil will be pulled away and the nature of one's heart will be revealed.

The second most common characteristic scholars address is narcissism. The narcissistic leader is valorous because he is besieged with passion to do something extraordinary for God.<sup>157</sup> In order for the leader to be successful, everyone must support their cause. Narcissistic leaders are like the insecure leader in that most of the time they have no intent to hurt others; they are just seeking to do the work of God.<sup>158</sup> They get so focused on their performance or doing something great for God that the self-imposed pressure pushes them to behave in a manner that is abusive. Carrying out their grandiose obsessed plan of greatness for God requires the cooperation of others.<sup>159</sup> When others don't cooperate the narcissistic leader will lash out because the person is thwarting what the narcissistic leader is trying to accomplish. So the goal is to try to do what is required to get the person to cooperate, and therefore their actions are not done with ill intent.

However, Blue points out that such leaders can be dangerous because they are perceived as righteous and pure individuals who are passionate about serving God. Along with this perception comes the narcissistic leader's desire to not only create a safe space

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<sup>155</sup> 1 Samuel 14.

<sup>156</sup> Fehlaueer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse*, 72.

<sup>157</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1033-1075), Kindle.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

around their ministry to do something grand for God but also adulation.<sup>160</sup> A fear of failing or not being important drives the narcissist to become so satiated in attaining their dreams, they do so at all costs.<sup>161</sup> This motivation flips the idea of leadership in a church upside down, explains Johnson and VanVonderen.<sup>162</sup> Pastors are called to ministry to be a servant to the people of God, but narcissists desire for people to serve them. Doing so will reward those who obey and failing to do so comes with some form of retribution.<sup>163</sup>

Christian leaders who are abusive can exhibit several different personality disorder traits such as narcissism, Borderline Personality Disorder or sociopathy, to name a few.<sup>164</sup> The insecure or narcissistic leaders are the most commonly addressed in literature.<sup>165</sup> The outcome of what occurs with unhealthy pathologies of abusive leaders is what Johnson and VanVonderen call devouring.<sup>166</sup> They explain, “Damaging consequences often come in very subtle packages.”<sup>167</sup> Further sharing:

For example, who among us doesn’t struggle from time to time with getting our sense of value from what we do or how we look? What makes this spiritually dangerous is that many of us have had it deeply ingrained that what makes us

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse*, under “The Narcissistic Leader” (locations 209, 219-220), Kindle.

<sup>162</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 16 (locations 2532-2537), Kindle.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Discussion with Mark Pfuetze, Covenant Theological Seminary professor of counseling, on June 5th, 2017.

<sup>165</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 933,1033), Kindle; Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 3 (location 308), Kindle; George Bloomer, *Authority Abusers: Toxic Leadership and It’s Effects in Homes, Churches, and Relationships*, rev. ed., (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2008), chap. 2 (locations 332-334), Kindle.

<sup>166</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 16 (locations 2539-2567), Kindle.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

“okay” is how well we perform whatever the prescribed “spiritual” behavior happens to be, and demand that others do the same.<sup>168</sup>

Most people struggle at some point with assigning self-worth based on actions, and in the church this idea of right standing or being good can drive one’s spiritual behavior. One’s value is placed in their performance rather than directing people to God.<sup>169</sup> This striving to do more and be more, since there is always more to do in the church, can leave one feeling hollow. The drive of an abusive leader tends to focus more on their authority, desires and need for admiration rather than shaping and preserving the people of God who serve under them.<sup>170</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen label this situation as devouring because rather than equipping people it slowly consumes people, leaving them with nothing left to give.

### *Methods of Abuse*

In *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Blue states that the reason abuse is difficult to respond to is because the nature of it is both subtle and paradoxical.<sup>171</sup> People are drawn to these leaders for many reasons. Blue reminds his readers that while the leaders are not deliberately abusive, they display good motives desiring to honor God. When these dynamics are present, it is difficult to implicate or find fault with the leader because their goals appear to be right.<sup>172</sup> Yet, this dual nature of an abusive system or leader can

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 892-893), Kindle.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., chap. 6 (location 909).

dehumanize people, says Blue, who says they, “can be cruel and abusive one moment and full of good humor and kindness the next.”<sup>173</sup> According to scholars, incongruity can come through several methods used by abusive leaders such as shaming and manipulation, which create feelings of fear, guilt, betrayal, hopelessness, etc.

Shame is found in abusive environments and also is used by abusive leaders. Blue points out that counselors need to distinguish between shame and guilt. Guilt is an emotion felt over a wrong action. Shame is believing one’s self to be incapable or lacking as a person.<sup>174</sup> He also points out that both the abuser and the abusee struggle with feelings of shame. However, he clarifies that abusers turn their attention from the need to be reprimanded for their own shameful feelings and divert those feelings into pointing out the defects in others, to subdue what they themselves are feeling.<sup>175</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen classify this as shame-based relationships and believe these types of relationships are the basis of what occurs within a spiritually abusive relationship.<sup>176</sup>

Several methods presented by Johnson and VanVonderen create feelings of shame. One method falls into a category they call “out-loud shaming,” described as “name-calling, belittling, put-downs, comparing one person to another or asking, ‘What’s wrong with you?’”<sup>177</sup> This strategy keeps people in line, encourages desired behaviors and renders the person being shamed as powerless.<sup>178</sup> This type of environment and

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., chap. 8 (location 1106).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., chap. 8 (location 1115).

<sup>176</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 753-754), Kindle.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (locations 766-769).



leader is manipulative, creates performance criteria, obscures reality, creates an idolatry of the leader and is preoccupied with fault and blame.<sup>179</sup>

At times leaders will combine methods such as shaming and manipulation. Johnson and VanVonderen provide three examples: coding, non-verbal body language and triangling.<sup>180</sup> Coding can be verbal or non-verbal. Verbal coding occurs when an individual says one thing and means something totally different, therefore sending a message meant for the recipient to decode what it actually means. For example, “Don’t you think it would be better this way?” means, “I want you to do it this way.”<sup>181</sup> Non-verbal body language or actions can be used to send the message. For example, “giving dirty looks, becoming loud or quiet, or leaving the room in a sullen or disconnected attitude.”<sup>182</sup> Finally, triangling means using another individual to deliver your message instead of delivering it yourself.<sup>183</sup>

### *What It Is Not*

Literature and scholars provide countless examples of spiritual abuse that occur from shame-based relationships and the characteristics of abusive leaders. However, it is just as important to distinguish what it is not, lest the meaning of what technically qualifies as spiritual abuse is lost. Blue points out that all human beings are fallen and all

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (locations 733-760).

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (locations 766-798).

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (locations 778-788).

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

churches and people are abusive to some degree.<sup>184</sup> Sometimes the encounter is just neglect, injuries to feelings or maltreatment. There is no perfect form of love in relationships. Therefore, counselors have to approach spiritual abuse by assessing the degree of what is occurring, not “majoring on the minors,” as he calls it.<sup>185</sup> While assessing the situation may not be easy, he says that one can recognize the difference if the proper steps are taken.<sup>186</sup> The first step he urges is the Matthew 18 model for conflict resolution. If further intervention is warranted then church discipline is needed. The most important thing to remember is that abuse happens on a continuum, and most of the time it is in the gray part of the continuum. He summarizes his thoughts, stating: “Some minor abuses we ought to overlook entirely; some we need to confront and forgive; others we must flee from.”<sup>187</sup>

### *Summary of Understanding Spiritual Abuse*

In reviewing the literature on spiritual abuse, countless stigmas had to be faced, especially given the delicate nature of the topic. The responses include fear, denial, avoidance, a strong desire to keep unity and peace, concern of damning implications from God if one speaks up, a belief and trust in the leader because he is “God’s anointed,” loyalty at all costs and the fear of retribution. These emotions and thoughts are so strong that the majority of the time people keep quiet; sometimes they leave the church for a period of time or for good.

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<sup>184</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (location 867), Kindle.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., chap. 6 (location 851).

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

The other difficulty in understanding spiritual abuse is that one can't just define it. People need to understand how it presents itself, what types of leaders do this sort of thing, the methods abusive leaders use and also what it is not. Spiritual abuse is a new term and the field of study ranges from zero to mild to severe, thus conjuring up multiple meanings. The general idea of abuse is that something is done improperly that causes harm. When the abuse is done from a position of power it has more of an impact. When a pastor is the person carrying out the abuse the nature becomes spiritual, thus the abuse becomes spiritual abuse.

Scholars share that spiritually abusive systems present via relationship dynamics such as power posturing, performance preoccupations, unspoken rules, lack of balance, paranoia, misplaced loyalty and secrecy. The two most common types of leaders who exhibit abusive behavior tend to be insecure or narcissistic. The majority of spiritual leaders do not intend to harm others and are many times unaware of how abusive their actions are. This is because the nature of spiritual abuse is subtle and paradoxical.

Finally, the methods of abuse can come in various shapes and sizes. The most common methods were shaming and manipulation to create fear, guilt, betrayal and hopelessness. What makes spiritual abuse such a delicate topic is that the leader desires to please God and thus is usually not deliberately abusive, making it difficult to assign fault. Yet their behavior dehumanizes the ones being abused. One must also be careful not to identify everything as spiritual abuse. The church is filled with humans who are not perfect and therefore simple neglect, mild injuries to feelings and maltreatment do not rise to the level of abuse. The word of God reveals how Jesus, the prophets and the

disciples responded to spiritually abusive leaders in their day. These examples will provide a biblical view of how to differentiate between true and false authority.

## **Theological Framework**

Several passages from the word of God provide a theological framework to address spiritual abuse. While most scholars agree that spiritual abuse started in the Garden of Eden with Satan deceiving Adam and Eve, this study begins by looking to the Son of God, Jesus, for its theological framework.<sup>188</sup> Blue, an early writer on spiritual abuse, suggests Jesus' own words and life should be the foundation of hope and instruction for the subject matter.<sup>189</sup> He suggests that this is the only "social evil" upon which Jesus ever developed a platform and the only "cultural issue he repeatedly exposed and opposed."<sup>190</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen concur that Jesus exposes the issue of spiritual abuse, especially in Matthew 23, but also confronts false spiritual leaders and leadership of the day, the Pharisees, specifically for a double life and double talk.<sup>191</sup>

While the study will rely on the example and words of Jesus for its theological position, it will also address other texts to lay the groundwork for redemptive-historical background. This theological framework will touch on false authority, the lording over aspect of leadership, obedience and opposing views, as well as what is true authority, servant leadership and a biblical response to spiritual abuse. G.G. Bloomer, pastor and

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<sup>188</sup> Cumella, "The Yeast of the Pharisees," 1.

<sup>189</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 97-110), Kindle.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 10 (locations 1747-1852), Kindle.

author of *Authority Abusers* urges that if Christians will build their lives on the word of God, they will be more than prepared to handle the struggles of life.<sup>192</sup> Bloomer further implores Christians to properly address what he calls “authority abuse,” explaining that they must understand what is straight so that they can recognize what is crooked.<sup>193</sup> Bloomer’s book aligns with the gospel of Matthew, written by Jesus’ disciple, in which informed believers are designated as wise. “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”<sup>194</sup>

### *False Authority*

The person of Jesus Christ, to whom Bloomer points as above all things, is also the starting point for Johnson and VanVonderen, as well as Blue. When Johnson and VanVonderen initially encountered the idea of spiritual abuse, they struggled with the concept and the term. In examining the word of God, they recognized “that Jesus himself collided with the problem head on.”<sup>195</sup> They also share how their foundation for the existence of spiritual abuse became visible when they identified two types of spiritual systems. One they describe as “under the reign of God,” which brings about freedom and life for the people in this system. The other system exists as a false spiritual system “under the rule of men,” which is performance-based and thus demanding and exhausting, leaving its members powerless.

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<sup>192</sup> Bloomer, *Authority Abusers*, chap. 2 (locations 182-185), Kindle.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Matthew 7:24.

<sup>195</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 331-332), Kindle.

Blue builds on the false spiritual system concept, stating that Jesus exposed leaders who used both false authority and false teaching. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”<sup>196</sup> This is one of the first warnings of Jesus in the New Testament, as he begins his challenge against the false teaching and false leaders whom in his day and time were called “Pharisees.” Blue explains that this false authority and teaching is dangerous. Dangerous he says, because they focus on “rules taught by men,” clarifying many of the Pharisees are men “who pose as Bible defenders are actually Bible breakers” and therefore direct people away from God rather than to God.<sup>197</sup> He further explains one can find these Pharisees today in preachers who urge that acceptance by God is based on individual merit and the preacher’s standards for merit.

## **Matthew 23**

Upon examining the gospels and specifically the book of Matthew, one reads of several encounters that Jesus had with the Pharisees and religious leaders at the time. However, it is not until Matthew 23 that Jesus delves into addressing false spiritual systems, false teaching and most specifically, false authority in full magnitude. D.A. Carson, research professor and New Testament scholar, says this chapter is “best perceived as the climax of the preceding confrontations” that Jesus had with the Pharisees.<sup>198</sup> It is important to note that Jesus was teaching the crowds to “expose” the

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<sup>196</sup> Matthew 7:15.

<sup>197</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 3 (locations 330-334), Kindle.

<sup>198</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), chap. 6 (locations 16423-16424), Kindle.

religious leaders.<sup>199</sup> New Testament scholar and Anglican cleric R.T. France says, “The true target of the whole discourse is the crowds and disciples who need to break free from the Pharisaic legalism.”<sup>200</sup> Other scholars agree with France. One example is Matthew Henry, Puritan minister and distinguished Bible commentator, who suggests that Jesus’ discourse was to help the people “rectify their mistakes” in regard to the scribes and Pharisees by exposing “their true colors.”<sup>201</sup>

Matthew 23:1-2 reads, “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.’”<sup>202</sup> France points out that the term “Moses’ seat” is figurative and is being utilized here to refer to individuals who were recognized as an authority and were “interpreting and applying the laws of Moses.”<sup>203</sup> He further points out that Jesus is not questioning the position of the religious leaders but how they exercised the authority from the position. Johnson and VanVonderen explain that people being abused are “living under leadership that legislates and demands obedience to their authority.”<sup>204</sup> They expound upon this false authority that Jesus exposes in Matthew 23:1 by making two points. First, the Pharisees took the authority that only God can give by

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<sup>199</sup> According to R.T. France, noted professor at London Bible College and Wycliffe Hall at Oxford.

<sup>200</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), chap. 4 (locations 5479-5480), Kindle.

<sup>201</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Complete)* (n.p., n.d.), under “Matthew 23,” accessed December 21, 2016, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/matthew/23.html>.

<sup>202</sup> Matthew 23:1-2.

<sup>203</sup> France, *Matthew*, chap. 4 (locations 5484-5485), Kindle.

<sup>204</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 9 (locations 1618-1619), Kindle.

“seating themselves in the chair of Moses.”<sup>205</sup> Only God had the authority to put someone in this position. Second, the basis for the authority was their “position” of Pharisee instead of an inner character that was “wise, discerning and true.”<sup>206</sup> Henry teaches that it is not new for men to be exalted to “Moses’ seat.” Henry further describes that when the vilest of men exalt themselves, they bring dishonor to the seat instead of honor.<sup>207</sup> Blue seems to align with France’s commentary, interpreting Jesus’ position as questioning not the position but how those in that position exercised authority from the position. Blue explains that the leaders used the authority derived from their position to provide the power with which they justified the abuse.<sup>208</sup>

Jesus’ main message to the crowds and disciples continues in verses 3-4 as he moves from what the scribes and Pharisees have done, “seated themselves in the seat of Moses,” to how one might best respond to the scribes and Pharisees, as well as the result of what the scribes and Pharisees do. In verses 3 and 4, Jesus says, “So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens that are hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”<sup>209</sup> Henry gets right to the point by saying that Jesus allows for their office, “do and observe,” but

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Henry, under “Matthew 23,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/matthew/23.html>.

<sup>208</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 225-226), Kindle.

<sup>209</sup> Matthew 23:3-4.



warns against their teaching, “not to imitate their hypocrisy and pride.”<sup>210</sup> Carson agrees with Henry, stating in verse 3 that Jesus “affirms their doctrine but condemns their practice.”<sup>211</sup>

Some scholars suggest that such an affirmation leaves many questions unanswered and possibly creates contradictions with previous teachings. Specifically, passages found in Matt 5:21-48; 15:3-14 and 16:6-12 show Jesus speaking to his disciples about the scribes and Pharisees and their teaching. France calls it surprising especially in Matthew 15:1-20, Jesus is attacking “scribal tradition” and in Matthew 23:4 Jesus “goes on to attack to their legal regulations.”<sup>212</sup> However, France clarifies this, explaining that the text in verse 3 should not be broken up but read as a complete statement with the weight on the second half and the first part of the verse “spoken with an ironical, tongue-in-cheek tone.”<sup>213</sup>

Carson, in his commentary on Matthew, draws on this idea presented by France, as well as New Testament professor and scholar, Joachim Jeremias in *New Testament Theology*. He urges that this is not a “concession to the leaders.”<sup>214</sup> He makes three important points. First, that verses 2-3 are spoken with irony or sarcasm, which is in harmony with and consistent with the passage. The verses also validate and undergird

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<sup>210</sup> Henry, under “Matthew 23,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/matthew/23.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (location 16516), Kindle.

<sup>212</sup> France, *Matthew*, chap. 4 (location 5488), Kindle.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (location 16543), Kindle; Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 210.

Jesus' hard teaching. Second, the verb used in verse 2 for "sit," *ekathisan*, lends weight to this position. He suggests that the NIV use of the gnomic aorist in the indicative mood influences how to interpret "sit" from verse 2, thus: the teachers of the law and the Pharisees *sat down* in Moses' Seat.<sup>215</sup> While rare, it seems to allow the aorist "its natural force" for the irony and sarcasm being used by Jesus in verses 2-3.

Carson's final point drawing out the irony idea is that the wording creates what he calls a neat chiasm:

A: v. 2— the leaders have taken on Moses' teaching authority— irony

B: v. 3a— do what they say— irony

B': v. 3b— do not do what they do— nonironical advice

A': v. 4— their teaching merely binds men— nonironical advice<sup>216</sup>

What is found in the first two statements is irony and with the next two statements being nonironical in reverse order. The nonironical statements present the pointlessness found in following the scribes and Pharisees. This idea of Jesus speaking sarcastically or tongue-in-cheek, along with the biting nature of his words, sets and follows the tone throughout the chapter of Matthew 23 and therefore cannot be overlooked, according to Carson. It is worth noting that Henry, Carson and France make it clear that in this text, Jesus' words are severe upon the religious leaders in a way not found elsewhere<sup>217</sup> and that he is warning the disciples and crowds in the "sharpest way possible."<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (location 16543), Kindle.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Henry, under "Matthew 23," <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/matthew/23.html>.

<sup>218</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (location 16564), Kindle.

Verses 4-7 follow, his criticism now more direct:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.<sup>219</sup>

In the book, *The Intention of Matthew 23*, David Garland, professor of New Testament studies and author, clarifies verse 4, describing how the scribes and Pharisees have created rules and laws so that the people would not transgress against God but have failed in helping the people learn how to honor God.<sup>220</sup> France says this failure is exactly what Jesus is castigating them for, because their teaching is the opposite of Jesus' gospel, as he states in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."<sup>221</sup>

In Matthew 23:5-7, Jesus exposes the actions and motives of the scribes and Pharisees, as geared primarily to gain recognition and praise.<sup>222</sup> Carson goes on to describe their desire for piety by quoting Jesus: "They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues."<sup>223</sup> One phrase that Carson spends some time on is "called rabbi by others," as found in verse 7. In verse 8 Jesus specifically and clearly

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<sup>219</sup> Matthew 23:4-7.

<sup>220</sup> David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill Academic Pub, 1979), 51.

<sup>221</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>222</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (locations 16573-16579), Kindle.

<sup>223</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (locations 16573-16579), Kindle; Matthew 23:6.

states, “but you are not to be called ‘rabbi.’”<sup>224</sup> A rabbi in the Hebrew means “my master” or “my teacher” and over time, Carson explains, the title became inflated. An essay by Moses Abelbach titled, “The Relations between Master and Disciple in the Talmudic Age,” describes the status of a rabbi in the Talmudic period was placed in higher esteem than the disciples own parents. Abelbach describes the rabbi with the term “master” saying “in terms of the respect and honor due to them, the master enjoyed precedence over the father.”<sup>225</sup> Carson paraphrases the description Abelbach provides in his article about the relationship between the rabbi and his disciple as “immense. The disciple had to obey him without question.”<sup>226</sup> While Carson says he does not go to this extreme in his own analysis, the description does bear some similarity in thought to other scholars’ research.<sup>227</sup>

The final point from Matthew 23 is that Jesus closes out the chapter with the seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees found in verses 13-36. These woes are “a strong condemnation,” according to Carson, who explains that Jesus has no ill motive, only his prophetic calling to pronounce judgment. France describes the woes in contrast to the blessing of the beatitudes found in Matthew 5. He says while the beatitudes teach us what pleases God, these woes describe what God hates and “pronounces judgment on those

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<sup>224</sup> Matthew 23:8.

<sup>225</sup> Moses Abelbach, “The Relations between Master and Disciple in the Talmudic Age,” in *Essays Presented to Chief Rabbi Brodie on his seventieth birthday* ed. H.J. Zimmels, J. Rabbinowitz and I. Finestein (London: Soncino, 1966– 1967, 1: 1– 24; Albright and Mann), 1.

<sup>226</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (location 16580), Kindle.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

who follow and teach it.”<sup>228</sup> Vernon McGee, pastor, teacher and lecturer best known for his *Thru the Bible* commentary series, speaks poignantly on what these verses describe:

This chapter concludes the clash between the Lord Jesus and the religious rulers. He...denounces the religious rulers in unmistakable terms. No words that ever fell from the lips of our Lord were more scathing. It is a merciless condemnation. If you read this chapter carefully, it will blanch your soul.<sup>229</sup>

This study will not address all the details of the seven woes, other than noting them as a condemnation and judgment on the scribes and Pharisees.

## Old Testament Texts

Another text addressed by Johnson and VanVonderen in *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* is Jeremiah 5-6. They claim this is an early instance of spiritual abuse because it emanates from a place of religious authority.<sup>230</sup> Jeremiah 5:30-31 says, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction. My people love to have it so.”<sup>231</sup> What is interesting about this passage is that God is speaking directly to the religious leaders through his prophet, Jeremiah, much like Jesus did in Matthew 23. Henry explains that the prophets were misleading the people and that the priests “ruled by their own means,” therefore they worked in collusion to strengthen the other leaders’ positions.<sup>232</sup> The second part of

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<sup>228</sup> France, *Matthew*, chap. 4 (location 5535), Kindle.

<sup>229</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Matthew-Romans*, Thru the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 4:119.

<sup>230</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 349-355), Kindle.

<sup>231</sup> Jeremiah 5:30-31.

<sup>232</sup> Henry, under “Jeremiah 5,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/jeremiah/5.html>.

verse 31 says, “My people love to have it so.” Henry further notes that the people were “well enough pleased to be so misled.”<sup>233</sup> Therefore, they were also complicit. Jeremiah 6:13-14 provides further evidence of what Johnson and VanVonderen call “spiritual neglect” that accompanies spiritual abuse.<sup>234</sup> “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”<sup>235</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen explain that in abusive systems, the real situation and people’s true needs are sacrificed or ignored when leaders counsel people with statements such as “Take it to God” or “Why don’t you pray about it?”<sup>236</sup>

Another text found in the Old Testament and pointed to by Diane Langberg, Christian psychologist who focuses on trauma recovery, in *Suffering and the Heart of God*, is Ezekiel 34:1-4:

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 363-365), Kindle.

<sup>235</sup> Jeremiah 6:13-14.

<sup>236</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 359-365), Kindle.

<sup>237</sup> Ezekiel 34:1-4.

Once again God is addressing the leaders of Israel so that they are “called to an account,” and the prophet is directed to declare, in verse 2, “thus says the Lord God.” Henry says it is a “high charge exhibited against them for their negligence ...insufficiency and treachery.”<sup>238</sup> Iain Duguid, Old Testament professor and author of *The NIV Application Commentary for Ezekiel*, expounds on a phrase in verse 4, “to rule...brutally,” saying it occurs in two other Old Testament locations, Exodus 1:13-14 and Leviticus 25:43,46.<sup>239</sup> In Exodus it refers to how the Hebrews were treated by the Egyptians as slaves and Leviticus stipulates, “It is forbidden to treat a fellow Israelite in this manner.” Therefore, Duguid says, the Lord through Ezekiel is condemning the leaders for doing what they were taught “to abhor and what the law of Moses expressly forbade.”<sup>240</sup> What is also interesting to note is that verse 4 is translated in the NASB as, “but with force and with severity you have dominated them.”<sup>241</sup> Langberg feels this episode is a clear example of leaders abusing “their God-given power” and instead using the people or the sheep to fortify their own needs.<sup>242</sup>

God often used prophets to speak to religious leaders directly, as did Jesus himself, to address their misuse of authority, either falsely or positionally. Johnson and VanVonderen touch on this false positional authority, pointing out the authority they

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<sup>238</sup> Henry, under “Ezekiel 34,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/ezekiel/34.html>.

<sup>239</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 350.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ezekiel 34:4 (NASB).

<sup>242</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 12 (locations 2845-2852), Kindle.

based their actions on was “based solely on the fact that they were in charge.”<sup>243</sup> The words of Blaise Pascal, famous French mathematician and Catholic theologian of the 1600s, come to mind. “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction.”<sup>244</sup> Jesus spoke ardently against this wrong use of authority by religious leaders, cautions Johnson and VanVonderen,<sup>245</sup> especially in warning the people and disciples, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”<sup>246</sup>

Blue in *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, spends most of his book on abuse of authority and how it relates to the word of God. He says that the key to addressing spiritual abuse is to expose false positional authority. After addressing that problem, the system must then shift to servant leadership modeled on the life of Christ and his disciples.<sup>247</sup>

### *Opposing Views*

The most common opposing view arises from two passages, the first being Hebrews 13:17. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”<sup>248</sup> An example of a literal interpretation of this verse is provided by Blue, who said he has heard pastors make the following statement to their members, “Because I am the pastor, you must follow.”

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<sup>243</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 9 (locations 1629-1631), Kindle.

<sup>244</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1660), 193, accessed December 18, 2017, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.pdf>.

<sup>245</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 9 (locations 1629-1631), Kindle.

<sup>246</sup> Matthew 7:15.

<sup>247</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 197, 230-245), Kindle.

<sup>248</sup> Hebrews 13:17.



Others have used their education as the basis for demanding people follow them saying, “Because I have a Ph.D., you have to take my words seriously.”<sup>249</sup> This view is not only shared by leaders but also, Johnson and VanVonderen point out, people many times obey “to avoid being shamed, to gain someone’s approval, or to keep their spiritual status or church position intact.”<sup>250</sup> Some discipleship programs teach what is not necessarily biblical when teaching about submission and obedience, claims Mary Alice Chrnalogar, international consultant of cult education.<sup>251</sup> She clarifies that in Hebrews 13:17, “submit doesn’t mean ‘just do it.’”<sup>252</sup>

The meaning of the words “submit” and “obey” found in Hebrews 13:17 is difficult to define. Henry at first seems to send a mixed message saying, “It is not an implicit obedience, or absolute submission, that is here required, but only so far as is agreeable to the mind and will of God revealed in his word; and yet it is truly obedience and submission, and that not only to God, but to the authority of the ministerial office.”<sup>253</sup> He clarifies what he means, but the explanation is lengthy. William L. Lane, New Testament theologian and professor of biblical studies, provides a technical explanation presenting the verse in its complete context. He says that verse 17 belongs in the text of verses 7-19, which is the second integrated paragraph of chapter 13, stating “vv. 7-9 and vv. 17-19 constitute the literary frame for the central unit of explanatory parenthesis in vv.

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<sup>249</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (location 197-199), Kindle.

<sup>250</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 905-906), Kindle.

<sup>251</sup> Chrnalogar, Mary Alice, *Twisted Scriptures*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), chap. 3 (locations 753-760), Kindle.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Henry, under “Hebrews 13,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/hebrews/13.html>.

10-16.”<sup>254</sup> Lane explains that the leaders being spoken of in verse 7 and verse 17 are meant to be complimentary and together strengthen the argument. The passage is arguing that the leaders who initially lead the people and brought them here are in unity with the current leaders. They are collaborative. The following verses explain the type of leaders the text is referring to, “those who spoke to you the word of God,”<sup>255</sup> and verse 8 refers to the eschatological salvation of Christ. He writes, “The formulation indicates that the leaders were a link in the chain of tradition that accounted for the reliable transmission of the message of salvation to the audience.”<sup>256</sup>

The teaching continues in verse 9a, “Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.”<sup>257</sup> Verses 10-16 then address the diverse and strange teachings referred to in verse 9. Lane notes that this text rebuts what was being taught by others in regards to confession, consecration, discipleship and the celebrative lifestyle that was obscuring the meaning of the word of God.<sup>258</sup> This thinking then leads into the text in question, verse 17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them.”<sup>259</sup> For Lane, the obedience found in verse 17 corresponds directly to the situation presented in verse 9-16, as well as the message of the salvation of Christ, spoken to them by their leaders, found respectively in verses 7-8. He says, “The unequivocal demand for obedience is relative to the importance of the

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<sup>254</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Zondervan, 2015), chap. 5 (location 13815), Kindle.

<sup>255</sup> Hebrews 13:7

<sup>256</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, chap. 5 (location 13843), Kindle.

<sup>257</sup> Hebrews 13:9a.

<sup>258</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, chap. 5 (location 14640), Kindle.

<sup>259</sup> Hebrews 13:17.

issue at stake and the peril of apostasy to which members of the community were exposed.”<sup>260</sup>

Lane’s analysis agrees with Henry; however, his technical argument provides greater clarity to this text. In his commentary for this text, New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright says that the shepherds, i.e. leaders, are positioned to watch over the sheep, “to lead, teach, instruct and warn,” and best carried them out in a pleasant manner. He also clarifies that their watch does not include, “to rule them like a dictator, nor to use them for their own advantage.”<sup>261</sup>

The second passage where one finds an opposing view is Psalms 105:15 where the writer attributes these words to God: “Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!”<sup>262</sup> Chrnaloger reports that some therefore believe that leaders should not be questioned, and all must be careful to not speak out against the leader.<sup>263</sup> She believes this is a false interpretation. Blue also addresses this verse, agreeing with Chrnaloger. He notes that leaders will claim this anointing which “implies a class system in the kingdom of God, where no such system exists.”<sup>264</sup> Scholars believe it was written by David and claim David wrote it as a hymn to recognize the work of God in history from Abraham to Moses.<sup>265</sup> Leslie C. Allen, Old Testament scholar, agrees with McGee, describing it as a call for the people to give praise as they look back to their historical origins. It

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<sup>260</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, chap. 5 (location 14668), Kindle.

<sup>261</sup> N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 177.

<sup>262</sup> Psalms 105:15.

<sup>263</sup> Chrnalogar, *Twisted Scriptures*, chap. 3 (location 478), Kindle.

<sup>264</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 212-213), Kindle.

<sup>265</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Joshua-Psalms*, Thru the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 2:829.

specifically recognizes the work of God in the midst of their ancestors, and verses 9-11 specifically focus on the time of Abraham to Jacob, when they were surrounded by pagans.<sup>266</sup> Verse 15 is the climax of the first section of this chapter, before the writer David continues to move through history from Joseph to Moses. At this point comes the verse in question, “Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!”<sup>267</sup> Allen and McGee both agree that David is speaking in reference to the kings and rulers from the period of time from Abraham to Jacob. Allen further expands this text is presenting “the providential intervention of God by word and deed within a framework of the patriarchs’ movements.”<sup>268</sup> So the message was to the kings of the time regarding the patriarchal period, from Abraham to Jacob.

Any interpretation of these two verses that would require leaders be given unbridled obedience and submission is often associated with Watchman Nee, who was a notable church leader in China during the twentieth century.<sup>269</sup> Nee taught that God makes us his “representatives plenipotentiary.”<sup>270</sup> Plenipotentiary is defined as, “a person, especially a diplomat, invested with the full power of independent action on behalf of their government.”<sup>271</sup> When questioned about the person who is in authority being wrong, his response is “if God dares to entrust His authority to men...then the obedient needs to

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<sup>266</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2002), 21:42.

<sup>267</sup> Psalms 105:15.

<sup>268</sup> Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 43.

<sup>269</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 214-217), Kindle; <http://www.watchmannee.org/life-ministry.html>, accessed December 2, 2017.

<sup>270</sup> Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Authority* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers), 1972, 70.

<sup>271</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3d. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1343.

obey.” He goes on to argue that those who reject his leaders reject God himself.<sup>272</sup> His basis for this comes from Luke 10:16 which says, “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”<sup>273</sup> This verse refers to the seventy-two people sent ahead of Jesus so that they could “prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus,” according to McGee in his commentary, *Thru the Bible*.<sup>274</sup> McGee also points out that the task was not permanent but rather for a time until Jesus came to the town. The task Jesus gave them is found in verse 9, “Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”<sup>275</sup> Henry aligns exactly, stating the seventy-two were ordered to do two things, to heal in the name of Jesus and to “publish the approach of the kingdom of God.”<sup>276</sup> Blue speaks out harshly regarding Nee’s position stating this interpretation creates false doctrines and a twisting of the word of God to defend a leader’s position of authority and “autocratic style of leadership.”<sup>277</sup>

In opposition to Nee’s beliefs is the biblical example of Paul, who stood up against a leader in the church in Galatians 2:11-14:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted

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<sup>272</sup> Nee, *Spiritual Authority*, 71.

<sup>273</sup> Luke 10:16.

<sup>274</sup> McGee, *Matthew-Romans*, 4:290.

<sup>275</sup> Luke 10:9.

<sup>276</sup> Henry, under “Luke 10,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/luke/10.html>.

<sup>277</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 228-240), Kindle.

hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”<sup>278</sup>

Paul illustrates that the truth always outranks an individual’s position since that truth is not rooted in a position but only in the word of God.<sup>279</sup> Blue also agrees with Michael Horton, professor of theology, in his book *Power Religion*, who says: “There is no such thing as ‘The Lord’s Anointed,’ preachers who are above the Word.... Any claim to divine authority for commands, expectations, “revelations,” or guidance that are not stated in the pages of Holy Scripture are marks of a spiritual tyrant and Pharisee.”<sup>280</sup> It is also important to note that Paul also demonstrates Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 18:15-18, which guides a believer’s approach to a brother or sister in Christ who is at fault.<sup>281</sup>

### *The Traditions of the Elders*

Another important point Blue touches on is the subject of the traditions of the elders. This concept is mentioned by the Pharisees and scribes to Jesus in Matthew 15:2, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”<sup>282</sup> Jesus responded by not answering their question but by exposing their failure, “And why do you break the

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<sup>278</sup> Galatians 2:11-14.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Charles W. Colson, J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, and Alister E. McGrath, *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?*, ed. by Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody Pub, 1992), 19.

<sup>281</sup> McGee, *Matthew-Romans*, 4:100.

<sup>282</sup> Matthew 15:2.

commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”<sup>283</sup> Blue notes that Jesus spoke bluntly, exposing how the Pharisees, who were supposed to be the Jewish leaders and defenders of the Torah, were the ones not keeping the commands or word of God.<sup>284</sup> Jesus then calls them “hypocrites” in verse 7 and quotes Isaiah saying, “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”<sup>285</sup> Blue points out that these “traditions of the elders” were how the elders of the Jewish faith interpreted, applied and taught the Hebrew scriptures and would be equivalent to our modern-day commentaries.<sup>286</sup> Jesus is pointing out that the word of God overrules the traditions of the elders, and when leaders focus on “growth statistics, tithing units, and workers in their programs,” they are focusing on a management system, which Jesus prophesied against.<sup>287</sup> Such “shepherds” as Ezekiel calls them in chapter 34, use the sheep to meet the needs of the shepherd rather than the shepherd meeting the needs of the sheep.<sup>288</sup> Jesus concludes in verse 14: “Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Matthew 15:3.

<sup>284</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 3 (location 324), Kindle.

<sup>285</sup> Matthew 15:7-9.

<sup>286</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 3 (location 336), Kindle.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3 (location 324).

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> Matthew 15:14.

### *True Authority*

In Bloomer's book, *Authority Abuse*, he argues that to find what is straight, people must first understand what was crooked. He further urges that to find a solid foundation, people must answer the question, "where does Godly authority come from?"<sup>290</sup> Bloomer said he heard a pastor explain that the answer to this question can be found "between Jesus and a Roman centurion who, though a Gentile, was a devout and God-fearing man."<sup>291</sup> The pastor was referring to the story in Matthew 8:5-7, where the centurion approaches Jesus in Capernaum and tells him he has a servant who is at home and is paralyzed. Jesus tells the centurion he will come to the servant who was ill. The centurion answers and says, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."<sup>292</sup> The text says that Jesus is amazed by his faith. Bloomer shows that the centurion recognized the power and authority of Jesus as sent from the Father.<sup>293</sup> McGee agrees that the centurion recognized that Jesus' authority included the power to heal physical illness.<sup>294</sup>

There are other examples that illustrate the idea of "authority." Matthew 7:28-29 says, "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his

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<sup>290</sup> Bloomer, *Authority Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 184-185), Kindle.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Matthew 8:8-9

<sup>293</sup> Bloomer, *Authority Abuser*, chap. 2 (locations 198-200), Kindle.

<sup>294</sup> McGee, *Matthew-Romans*, 4:48.



teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.”<sup>295</sup> And also, Matthew 21:23, “And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?””<sup>296</sup> Bloomer explains that the crowds and the Jewish leaders were taken aback because they had never experienced someone speaking truth on his own.<sup>297</sup> Jesus acknowledges what others have recognized when he says to his disciples in Matthew 28:18, “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’”<sup>298</sup>

Another verse quoted regularly that points to biblical authority is Romans 13:1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”<sup>299</sup> Chrnaloger points out that most biblical scholars agree that this passage is about civil government.<sup>300</sup> For example Douglas Moo, New Testament scholar, uses two examples to address verse 13 by stating Paul clearly is calling Christians to submit or be subject to the governing authorities. He argues that Paul’s choice of specific words of “governing authority,” is critical to the interpretation.<sup>301</sup> And secondly, he says that in verse 3, the Greek word for “rulers” is

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<sup>295</sup> Matthew 7:28-29.

<sup>296</sup> Matthew 21:23.

<sup>297</sup> Bloomer, *Authority Abusers*, chap. 2 (location 185), Kindle.

<sup>298</sup> Matthew 28:18.

<sup>299</sup> Romans 13:1.

<sup>300</sup> Chrnaloger, *Twisted Scriptures*, chap. 5 (locations 1589-1593), Kindle.

<sup>301</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), chap. 5 (locations 13898-13914), Kindle.

*archontes*, and thus the meaning is “the “authorities” in secular government.”<sup>302</sup> Other noted scholars who agree with Moo are Henry, McGee, and John Calvin, theologian, pastor and reformer.<sup>303</sup> What is important to note is Paul’s statement, “For there is no authority except from God.”<sup>304</sup> From this text it is clear authority only comes from God, and he grants authority to “governing authority” or rulers of a governing body. The other example of true biblical authority is found in Matthew 28:18 where Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>305</sup>

Blue makes it clear that when one’s claim to authority is based on position, title, degree or office, it is false authority.<sup>306</sup> He further argues that Jesus and Paul both make it clear that titles and positions are not automatically anointed spiritual authority. He states, “the only true authority in the kingdom of God comes through servant leadership.”<sup>307</sup> However, there is evidence already presented that God grants authority to the rulers and government authority in Romans 13:1. Johnson and VanVonderen claim that God does give authority.<sup>308</sup> They use Matthew 10:1 as an example, “And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 478.; Henry, under “Romans 13,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/romans/13.html>.; McGee, *Matthew-Romans*, 4:735-736.

<sup>304</sup> Romans 13:1.

<sup>305</sup> Matthew 28:18.

<sup>306</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (location 202), Kindle.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., chap. 1 (locations 114-115).

<sup>308</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 863-866), Kindle.

heal every disease and every affliction.”<sup>309</sup> However, the authors make it clear that when authority is given, whether in Romans 13:1 to “governing leaders” or in Matthew 10:1 to the “twelve disciples,” it was given by God or Jesus, and they are the only two who can give true biblical authority.<sup>310</sup> When one is placed in a spiritual position, as opposed to an elected or hired position, that person cannot expect *carte blanche* biblical authority.<sup>311</sup>

There is another example of Jesus both granting authority and addressing spiritual authority in Luke 10. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus appoints and sends out seventy-two people in pairs, and their assignment is found in verse 8-9, “Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”<sup>312</sup> The seventy-two leave, and when they return they report to Jesus and proclaim the power they had even over the demons. Jesus responds in verse 19 saying, “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.”<sup>313</sup> Jesus declares that he gave them authority and immediately gives them a warning in the next verse saying, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”<sup>314</sup>

While Johnson and VanVonderen acknowledge that both God and Jesus grant authority, it is critical to understand the type of authority given is for the purpose of

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<sup>309</sup> Matthew 10:1.

<sup>310</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 866-900), Kindle.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Matthew 10:8-9.

<sup>313</sup> Matthew 10:19.

<sup>314</sup> Matthew 10:20.

building up of the body of Christ, which may not always be “the agenda of the leadership.”<sup>315</sup> They further say that believers should follow the example of Peter and the apostles in Acts 5. The religious leaders had arrested Peter and the apostles, demanding they stop teaching in the name of Christ. In verse 29 Peter responds, “We must obey God rather than men.”<sup>316</sup> Therefore, Johnson and VanVonderen’s position is, “It is only appropriate to obey and submit to leadership when their authority is from God and their stance is consistent with His.”<sup>317</sup> Chrnaloger makes a distinction in regards to this position claiming that “authority is in the message – not the messenger.”<sup>318</sup> She refers back to Matthew 20, where the mother of two of his disciples, James and John, requests that they each sit at the side of Jesus in the kingdom. Jesus responds:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.<sup>319</sup>

For Chrnaloger, if one is a servant or a slave as Jesus describes, that person clearly has no positional authority over anyone.<sup>320</sup>

If Chrnaloger is correct and as slaves and servants one has no positional authority over another, then why did Jesus grant authority to the disciples? Blue proposes what

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<sup>315</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 866-870), Kindle.

<sup>316</sup> Acts 5:29.

<sup>317</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 903-905), Kindle.

<sup>318</sup> Chrnalogar, *Twisted Scriptures*, chap. 3 (location 673), Kindle.

<sup>319</sup> Matthew 20:25-28.

<sup>320</sup> Chrnalogar, *Twisted Scriptures*, chap. 3 (location 648), Kindle.

Jesus is endorsing is servant authority, which is a functional authority, or task related.<sup>321</sup> By referring to the passages presented earlier when Jesus gave authority to anyone, he immediately describes what they are to do with it: teach, heal, cast out demons or unclean spirits, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and proclaim the kingdom of God.<sup>322</sup> And as he is finishing his time here on earth, he summarizes their work once he is gone. It is called the Great Commission: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”<sup>323</sup> Each task is more functional than positional: make disciples, baptize and teach.

Could Blue be correct and the authority Jesus grants is a form of functional authority that comes from being a servant rather than positional authority? The definition of functional is “of or having a special activity, purpose, or task.”<sup>324</sup> The word “positional” is actually an adjective that means, “relating to or determined by position.”<sup>325</sup> Therefore, one needs to look further at the definition of “position,” which is defined as “a situation or set of circumstances, especially one that affects

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<sup>321</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 262-263), Kindle.

<sup>322</sup> Luke 10:8-9, 19; Matthew 10:1,7,8.

<sup>323</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>324</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 703.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 1364.

one's power to act” or “a person’s place or rank in relation to others.”<sup>326</sup> Blue points to the apostle Paul’s words in Philippians 2:5-7, describing the actions of Jesus:<sup>327</sup>

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>328</sup>

Blue shows that Jesus took upon himself the act of servant leadership, laying aside positional authority and that his followers need to do the same.<sup>329</sup>

### *Servant Leadership*

The main point for Blue’s argument in *Healing Spiritual Abuse* is that Jesus only sanctions servant leadership.<sup>330</sup> His basis for this position is the text mentioned above by Chrnaloger, Matthew 20:25-28. This passage comes directly after Jesus addresses the mother of James and John, who requests her sons sit next to Jesus in His kingdom. Jesus is speaking directly to the disciples to address her question and the idea of positions or “seats” and says:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 260-262), Kindle.

<sup>328</sup> Philippians 2:3-8

<sup>329</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 242-245), Kindle.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., chap. 2 (locations 229-243).

must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>331</sup>

According to Blue, Jesus is making it clear that it is not about a position or seat but about being a servant. He expands on this and says not only are leaders to be servants, but slaves. Blue also emphasizes that in this text Jesus makes it clear that “lording over” others is not a part of being a servant of Christ.<sup>332</sup> Blue then argues that Jesus describes the qualities a servant leader will possess, pointing to Luke 12:42: “And the Lord said, ‘Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?’”<sup>333</sup> Blue’s argument is that servant leaders do not need a title, exalted office, “seat of Moses” or to have special gifts or talents, but rather, they do need to be faithful and wise.<sup>334</sup> In order to be wise and faithful there are three aspects of servant leaders found in the New Testament to emulate: recognize the two types of wisdom, possess a clean conscience and assimilate to the example of Christ.

Bloomer agrees with Blue, especially regarding the concept of a servant’s wisdom.<sup>335</sup> He points to Jesus’ own words: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”<sup>336</sup> The writer of James in Chapter 3:13-18 recognizes two types of wisdom, earthly and

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<sup>331</sup> Matthew 20:25-28.

<sup>332</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 242-245), Kindle.

<sup>333</sup> Luke 12:42.

<sup>334</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 247-249), Kindle.

<sup>335</sup> Bloomer, *Authority Abusers*, chap. 2 (locations 178-180), Kindle.

<sup>336</sup> Matthew 7:24.

heavenly:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.<sup>337</sup>

This passage sets apart the two types of wisdom by providing descriptions of individuals who possess each type of wisdom. The passage describes that heavenly wisdom comes from above is exhibited in an individual's "good conduct" exemplified by "meekness," "pure," "peaceable," "gentle," "open to reason," "full of mercy and good fruits," "impartial" and "sincere." This results in a "harvest of righteousness." The other type of wisdom is earthly wisdom described as "bitter jealousy," "selfish ambition," "boastful," "false," "unspiritual" and "demonic." The result of earthly wisdom is "disorder and every vile practice." Henry in his commentary on this passage says that one can learn what type of wisdom one possesses by looking at the outcome. He also points out, "The conversation here does not refer only to words, but to the whole of men's practice."<sup>338</sup> Henry explains these two types of wisdom stand in opposition to one another. He describes heavenly wisdom by stating: "true wisdom is God's gift" and is the type of wisdom believers and servant leaders are called to sow.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> James 3:13-18.

<sup>338</sup> Henry, under "James 3," <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/james/3.html>.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.



Johnson and VanVonderen also agree with Blue regarding servant leaders being wise and faithful, further encouraging leaders' need to possess a clear conscience. They point to Paul's instruction to Timothy which states, in order to serve the church, a teacher needs to have a clean conscience and "a heart that is true and a faith that is real."<sup>340</sup> Here are Paul's words to Timothy, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion."<sup>341</sup> Henry, in his commentary on 1 Timothy, expounds on what this "clear conscience" might mean describing it as:

- "a faith unfeigned" – meaning real, genuine, honest, wholehearted, sincere, unforced<sup>342</sup>
- "love without dissimulation" – meaning without pretense, deceit, dishonesty, shaming, faking, posturing, guile.<sup>343</sup>
- "kept without offense"<sup>344</sup>

McGee shares that when faith and love are lived out as an active part of the pastor's life, in a manner that does not "in any way bring harm," it will manifest a clean conscience.<sup>345</sup>

The next aspect of being a wise and faithful servant leader is assimilating to the example of Christ. Blue says this occurs through "humble service" and points to Paul's

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<sup>340</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1236-1239), Kindle.

<sup>341</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-6.

<sup>342</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 1426.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>344</sup> Henry, under "1 Timothy 1," <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/1-timothy/1.html>.

<sup>345</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *The Epistles: First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Thru The Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1991), 26.

words to the leaders in Philippi:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>346</sup>

In this text Paul is showing how Christ is our example of a humble servant, who, regardless of “equality with God,” took the position of a servant even to the point of death. Blue and the apostle Paul are illustrating that Christ provided an example for leaders to follow and assimilate. The example is that of a servant who puts others’ interests and needs before their own.

In conclusion, Blue explains that a servant leader can improve one’s standing with others or find prominence in the kingdom of God, “through humble service.”<sup>347</sup> The work of St. Augustine speaks to this subject in *City of God*, “Two cities have been formed by two loves...in the one the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and subjects serve one another in love.”<sup>348</sup> A more current perspective from pastor Donald Bloesch states it this way: “The will to power exists within every person, but in the Christian it is converted into a will to serve.”<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (location 739), Kindle; Philippians 2:3-8.

<sup>347</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (location 739), Kindle.

<sup>348</sup> Saint Augustine, *St. Augustine of Hippo: The City of God*, ed. by Paul A. Boer Sr. (n.p.: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), book XIV, chap. 28 (locations 16465-16471), Kindle.

<sup>349</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Theological Notebook* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 1:43.

### *Biblical Response*

A biblical response begins with Matthew 7:24: if leaders listen to Jesus' words, they will be wise as one who builds his house on the rock, able to withstand the storms that come.<sup>350</sup> The idea of building the house on the rock was presented in the introduction of this section by Bloomer, suggesting that this allows one to know what is straight, meaning upright. How does one who is faithful and wise, as presented previously, do so in a way that humbly serves others in love? How does this play out in everyday life? Paul urges believers to walk in the Holy Spirit and “not gratify the desires of the flesh.”<sup>351</sup> He describes walking in the flesh as doing things based on personal will rather than surrendering those desires to the work of the Holy Spirit. He provides a list of the qualities that follow from both choices:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.<sup>352</sup>

James Bryan Smith, theology professor, explains a disposition in each individual can lead one to drift from God, to “rely on our own capacity to solve problems.”<sup>353</sup> However once individuals become Christians, they are no longer alone but a part of the body of Christ.

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<sup>350</sup> Henry, under “Matthew 7,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/matthew/7.html>.

<sup>351</sup> Galatians 5:1.

<sup>352</sup> Galatians 5:19-26.

<sup>353</sup> James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 74.

Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians that believers are formed into one body that has many parts. He recounts how all the parts of a physical body are critical to the function of the other parts. He applies this analogy to believers, writing, “You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it.”<sup>354</sup> Being a part of the body of Christ, each individual is not called to carry the burden or solve problems alone but to serve one another in love.

There are two other attributes of a biblical response that need to be revisited. The first is the matter of truth. Jesus spoke to the Jews who had believed him: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”<sup>355</sup> Paul, in 2 Timothy 3, warns of the corruptions one finds in the last days:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.<sup>356</sup>

Blue argues that one must distinguish the difference between a Godly leader and an abusive leader.<sup>357</sup> He also implores his readers, “Christ calls us to spiritual maturity. And this sometimes means resisting spiritual authorities, just as Christ did.”<sup>358</sup> Authors and

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<sup>354</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV).

<sup>355</sup> John 8:31-32.

<sup>356</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-8.

<sup>357</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 302-303), Kindle.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

pastors, Steven Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith*, join Blue in his position which they describe as authority that is “not well placed.” Arterburn and Felton clarify “not well placed” by explaining it is when people look to rules made by man rather than God; further stating that abusive leaders need to be exposed.<sup>359</sup> Urging that Christ did this in his day, as did Paul with Peter, they call believers to have the courage to follow in their steps. If a leader or system is wrong and abusive, then silent submission only allows the abuse to continue.<sup>360</sup>

The final attribute is unity in the body of Christ as found in Ephesians 4. “I ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>361</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen note that this command does not mean “pretending to get along or acting like we agree when we don’t.”<sup>362</sup> Further in the chapter Paul urges that believers work toward a full knowledge of Christ, becoming mature in the faith “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”<sup>363</sup> He calls believers to several actions critical to unity in the body:

- Verse 25 – “speak the truth with his neighbor.”

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<sup>359</sup> Stephen Arterburn, and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith: Experiencing Healing Over Painful Spiritual Abuse* (Colorado Springs, CO: Water Brook Press, 2001), chap. 3 (locations 980-984), Kindle.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3.

<sup>362</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1309-1310), Kindle.

<sup>363</sup> Ephesians 4:14.

- Verse 26 – “Be angry and do not sin.”
- Verse 27 – “give no opportunity to the devil.”
- Verse 29 – “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”
- Verse 30 – “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.”
- Verse 23 – “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.
- Verse 32 – “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”<sup>364</sup>

If Christians are going to be like Christ, Blue urges, success will be measured by how they “openly and honestly serve” others.<sup>365</sup> It is not based on how ambitious they are or what statistical measures they meet in regards to tithing, growth or programs.<sup>366</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen remind believers that the word of God can be used to bring grace, love and order or to place heavy burdens on people or to shame.<sup>367</sup> British author, theologian, Christian apologist and lecturer, C.S. Lewis reminds the church, “If the divine call does not make us better, it will make us very much worse. Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.”<sup>368</sup>

Another suggestion from Johnson and VanVonderen is the pattern laid out in Matthew 18:15-17. This form of church discipline applies when a brother has wronged

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<sup>364</sup> Ephesians 4:25-32.

<sup>365</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 773-775), Kindle.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3 (location 328).

<sup>367</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1370-1373), Kindle.

<sup>368</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958; repr. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2017), 36.

another. He is to go to him and tell him. They are Jesus own words. He follows this with: “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”<sup>369</sup> The purpose is reconciliation and protecting the body of Christ.<sup>370</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen caution that this tool can also be used as a weapon in the wrong hands.<sup>371</sup> They explain that some systems are so ingrained with abuse and wrong thinking that it is impossible to remain in them.<sup>372</sup> One may feel that seeking to honor Christ and the body in these situations seems either not realistic or biblical. Whatever way one choses to respond to what has occurred, the one thing that is essential is Christians must forgive.<sup>373</sup> This is an act of obedience to Christ’s words in Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”<sup>374</sup>

### *Summary of Theological Framework*

This theological framework for spiritual abuse points out that while spiritual abuse started in the Garden of Eden, one needs to look to Jesus first and foremost.

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<sup>369</sup> Matthew 18:16-17.

<sup>370</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1345-1346), Kindle.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 7 (location 1372), Kindle.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, under “Introduction to Part III” (location 2595-2602).

<sup>373</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (locations 920-921), Kindle.

<sup>374</sup> Matthew 6:14-15.

Scholars maintain that such abuse is the only social evil Jesus exposed repeatedly, especially in Matthew 23 by addressing the leaders directly. They also point out that Jesus also provided a foundation of hope and instruction. Given that the nature of spiritual abuse is delicate, subtle and paradoxical, one must understand truth clearly to see what is biblically sound and then what is crooked or incorrect. The key is to see the difference between the two types of spiritual systems, false authority and true authority.

False authority is also referred to in spiritual abuse circles as false positional authority. False positional authority is described as “under the rule of man” or performance-based, and therefore it is demanding, exhausting and leaves one feeling powerless. True authority rests “under the reign of God,” bringing freedom and life from a place of truth. Jesus takes direct aim in Matthew 23 where he states that the leaders had positioned themselves in the seat of Moses. He tells his disciples to follow what the leaders teach about the book of the Law but not their actions or practices. The prophet Jeremiah also exposed false authorities, saying that the leaders were ruling by their own means to strengthen their own position.<sup>375</sup> And in Ezekiel 34, the prophet condemns the leaders for basing their actions on their positional authority rather than their shepherding responsibility.<sup>376</sup>

Opposing texts that support this type of authority, such as Hebrews 13:17 and Psalms 105:15, as well as the concept of “touch not my anointed,” or the concept of “representative plenipotentiary,” meaning the person has full powers, often associated with the theology of Watchman Nee, were addressed. In each case the scholars pointed to

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<sup>375</sup> Jeremiah 5:30-31, 6:13-14.

<sup>376</sup> Ezekiel 34:1-4



context. For example, in Hebrews 13:17, the term “submit” does not mean “just do it.” In Psalms 105:15, David is pointing back to the Abrahamic period in reference to God speaking to the kings and rulers of other countries, not the everyday believer in the church. In the case of the theology of Nee’s, “representative plenipotentiary,” and “touch not my anointed,” scholars point to Galatians 2:11-14 where Paul teaches that truth outranks position because truth is not rooted in a position but in the word of God.

Another system that falls under the category of false abuse is the tradition of the elders, meaning the way things have always been done. Jesus taught that over time these traditions evolved to the point of not keeping to the word of God. Scholars point out that today this tendency manifests in management systems that focus on growth statistics, tithing and volunteerism, rather than the word of God and shepherding the sheep.

In addressing true authority systems, scholars identify true godly authority. The first example is from Matthew 8:5-7, where a centurion recognized that Jesus was under some form of authority as well as had authority, specifically to heal a physical illness. Other examples of people making statements about the authority of Jesus include Matthew 8:28-29 and Matthew 21:23. Jesus teaches in Matthew 28:18 that all authority in both heaven and earth was given to him. Scholars make it clear that all authority is granted by God, and also point to Romans 13:1 where it says “has been instituted by God,” which refers to civil governments. Some verses refer to Jesus giving authority to the disciples, such as Matthew 10:1. However, they make it clear that the authority given was not positional authority but rather functional in nature, to have power to cast out demons, heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God. Therefore, the only one who

holds positional authority throughout the kingdom of God and heaven is the Triune God. The leaders in the church are called to servant leadership only.

A servant leader is a person who is faithful and wise, as presented by Jesus in Luke 12:42. Three important aspects of servant leaders are: recognizing the two types of wisdom, possessing a clean conscience and assimilating to the example of Christ. The two types of wisdom are found in James 3:13-18, earthly and heavenly. Servant leaders display heavenly wisdom as well as the second aspect, possessing a clean conscience. Scholars point to Paul's words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:5-6, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion."<sup>377</sup> Therefore, scholars urge believers to learn to walk in the spirit of God, and not the flesh, since once you are a believer, you become a part of the body of Christ.

The final aspect of servant leadership is the idea of assimilating to the example of Christ. This is discussed in Philippians 2 where Paul addresses the humble servant, Christ, who took the position of a servant even to the point of death on the Cross. As believers and leaders, each person must choose how and why they serve. Bloesch says, "The will to power exists within every person, but in the Christian it is converted into a will to serve."<sup>378</sup>

The biblical response emphasized that to be faithful and wise, one must build his house on a rock, the very words of Christ found in Matthew 7:24. The Bible and the words of Christ illuminate the meaning of "straight" or "upright," as urged by Bloomer.

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<sup>377</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-6.

<sup>378</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Theological Notebook* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 1:43.

Also, Paul implores believers in Galatians 5:1 to walk in the Holy spirit rather than “the desires of the flesh.”<sup>379</sup> One cannot rely on their own efforts, but as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12:27, all believers are a part of the body of Christ and therefore should serve one another in love.

Scholars point out two additional attributes in regards to a biblical response: truth and unity. The first comes directly from Jesus who taught that if one abides in the word of God and its truth, the result will be freedom. It also helps to distinguish between a godly leader and an abusive leader, allowing one to speak truth from a pure heart into systems that are abusing. The final attribute of a biblical response is that of unity in the body of Christ. This means to “walk in a manner worthy of your calling,” as urged in Ephesians 4:1-3, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>380</sup>

Scholars point out that one’s calling can make that person better or it can make that person worse, since the word of God can either bring grace, love and order or it can be twisted to place heavy burdens on people or shame and manipulate them. When one has been wronged, he or she has the option of exercising church discipline as found in Matthew 18:15-17. However, scholars raise caution that abusive systems can sometimes be used as a weapon in the wrong hands. The ultimate biblical response is to forgive in obedience to God’s word.

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<sup>379</sup> Galatians 5:16.

<sup>380</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3.

## Finding a Place of Healing and Recovery

In order for the process of healing to begin, individuals must first acknowledge the pain they have experienced according to Anne Graham Lotz, speaker, author and daughter of Billy Graham. She further clarifies, “stop covering it up, rationalizing it, defending it, excusing it, ignoring it and just admit it.”<sup>381</sup> This can be quite difficult as individuals will have to unravel the abusive experience, shares Orłowski who is a teacher, speaker, author and researcher dedicated to helping people recover from spiritual abuse.<sup>382</sup> Lotz agrees that reliving the wounds is difficult; however, by taking the proper steps, a person can be led out of the miry pit of bitterness and pain to a place of grace and healing.<sup>383</sup> For the abused, this may be a daunting task and is not one that should be done alone. Orłowski urges the Christian community to recognize abuse and also walk with the abuser and abused through the grieving and healing process.<sup>384</sup> While the process is long and arduous, Bessel Van Der Kolk, respected psychiatrist, professor and author, urges “Silence about trauma also leads to death - the death of the soul.” Silence can also serve to reinforce the trauma of what one experienced.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Anne Graham Lotz, *Wounded by God's People: Discovering How God's Love Heals Our Hearts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), under “Introduction” (locations 163-164), Kindle.

<sup>382</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 9 (locations 2206-2211), Kindle.

<sup>383</sup> Anne Graham Lotz, “Anne Graham Lotz on Mars Hill: ‘It Might Have Been Better If They’d Had Millstones Tied Round Their Necks and Been Thrown into the Sea,’” *Christian Today*, November 18, 2014, accessed August 9, 2016, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/anne.graham.lotz.on.mars.hill.it.might.have.been.better.if.theyd.had.millstones.tied.round.their.necks.and.been.thrown.into.the.sea/43160.htm>; Lotz, *Wounded by God's People*, under “Introduction” (locations 171-181), Kindle.

<sup>384</sup> Dr. Barbara Orłowski, “Church Exiters, Ministering Restoration: Recovering Spiritual Harmony,” n.d., accessed December 21, 2016, <http://www.churchexiters.com>.

Van Der Kolk's writing aligns with William Shakespeare in the play *Macbeth*, who writes, "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o'er wrought heart and bids it break."<sup>386</sup> Brené Brown, behavioral researcher, speaker and author, writes that when a pattern is established people cannot "un-see it" or pretend it is unique to certain people or environments.<sup>387</sup> She says that once a pattern presents itself, one strives to give meaning and understanding to it because humans are a "meaning-making species."<sup>388</sup> To find meaning and useful language for the debris left after spiritual abuse, the focus moving forward will address three themes. These three themes repeatedly occur throughout the literature: coming to a place of awareness, understanding woundedness and discovering healing and restoration.

### *Coming to a Place of Awareness*

In regards to awareness, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung emphasizes the idea of helping people see a situation differently or through a different lens so they can gain a clearer understanding. Jung says, "It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension."<sup>389</sup> Sometimes an elephant is used to illustrate this idea. An individual is

<sup>385</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D., *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 2015), chap. 14 (location 4374), Kindle.

<sup>386</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Jesse M. Lander, (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2007), 235.

<sup>387</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), xii.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>389</sup> C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2d. ed., *Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 546.

blindfolded and lead up to an elephant and told to reach out and touch what is in front of them. If they touch the tail they may call it a rope, or the leg, they may not know. If you move them back from the elephant and take off the blindfold it is clear to them it is an elephant and that what they called a rope is actually the elephant's tail.

This is also addressed, in regards to understanding abuse, by current distinguished scholars in the field of emotional/mental health, Langberg and Van Der Kolk. Langberg explains that being able to see the situation differently is difficult in that people who have experienced abuse or suffering seek to act as if it did not happen or to put it out of their minds.<sup>390</sup> She says, "What seems too terrible to hold for long moments in the mind must be remembered and reflected upon. That which is unspeakable must be spoken. The indescribable must be described."<sup>391</sup> She believes this can seem quite paradoxical for the individual because they have to step back into the pain for healing to come. She explains this can feel incongruous because the very things one does not want to remember or speak of must be shared and given language in order for understanding and healing to come.

Van Der Kolk addresses more of the findings from neuroscience research. He says:

Since then neuroscience research has shown that we possess two distinct forms of self-awareness: one that keeps track of the self across time and one that registers the self in the present moment. The first, our autobiographical self, creates connections among experiences and assembles them into a coherent story. This system is rooted in language. Our narratives change with the telling, as our perspective changes and as we incorporate new input. The other system, moment-to-moment self-

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<sup>390</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 5 (locations 1057-1059), Kindle.

<sup>391</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 5 (locations 1059-1061), Kindle.

awareness, is based primarily in physical sensations, but if we feel safe and are not rushed, we can find words to communicate that experience as well. These two ways of knowing are localized in different parts of the brain that are largely disconnected from each other. Only the system devoted to self-awareness, which is based in the medial prefrontal cortex, can change the emotional brain... One system creates a story for public consumption, and if we tell that story often enough, we are likely to start believing that it contains the whole truth. But the other system registers a different truth: how we experience the situation deep inside. It is this second system that needs to be accessed, befriended, and reconciled.<sup>392</sup>

He further explains that when an individual experiences trauma, the communication between these two systems is damaged. In order for the sense of self to be able to “organize our memories into a coherent whole,” the connection between the two systems must be repaired.<sup>393</sup> He says finding language is essential to repair the connection.

### **What Holds People Back**

Bell Hooks, author and social activist, writes in her book, *All About Love*, that from the time people are born, language is a place of struggle, both before they learn it and after.<sup>394</sup> As an individual experiences new ground or experiences, finding words and language can be a challenge. This is true if you travel to a foreign country, or if you have an experience that is not normal or routine for you. One can struggle with how to understand it let alone describe it or give it words or language. This is a natural phenomenon. Graham Barker, professor and professional licensed counselor, also believes it is a struggle, especially for individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse,

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<sup>392</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, chap. 14 (locations 4450-4462), Kindle.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 14 (location 4672).

<sup>394</sup> Bell Hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Harper Paperbacks, 2001), chap. 1 (locations 238-557), Kindle.

because they share the common “unspoken rules” also found in other types of abuses.<sup>395</sup> These unspoken rules are: Don’t trust. Don’t think. Don’t talk. Don’t question.<sup>396</sup>

Don’t trust means that individuals are not to trust their own judgment or opinions that contradict the leader, because the leader is God’s “anointed.” This concept continues into the Don’t Think rule because if the leader is God’s “anointed,” any independent thinking is considered dissension. Under the Don’t Talk rule, members of a group are not allowed to talk to individuals outside the group or sometimes to people within the group. Barker describes that under the Don’t Question rule, individuals are not allowed to disagree with leaders, and if they do are met with humiliation and exclusion. Johnson and VanVonderen agree with Barker stating, “unspoken rules have an incredible amount of power,”<sup>397</sup> further explaining that unspoken rules cause the abused to “freeze up” the feelings, pain and emotions of the abuse causing them to silence their experience.<sup>398</sup>

Brown in her work *The Power of Vulnerability* counsels that people must look at the culture in which they live in order understand what they are up against.<sup>399</sup> Based on her research, America is a culture of deep scarcity, meaning “never enough...” and lets each person fill in the blank. For example, I am “never good enough, safe enough, certain enough, rich enough...” and regardless of how successful and stable one is, it is “never

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<sup>395</sup> Dr. Graham Barker, “The Insidious Harm of Spiritual Abuse,” *Alive Magazine*, accessed November 8, 2016. <http://www.ccaa.net.au/documents/SpiritualAbuse.pdf>.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 926), Kindle.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., chap. 5 (locations 953-960).

<sup>399</sup> Brene’ Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings of Authenticity, Connection, and Courage* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2012), Audible audiobook, chap. 2.



enough” therefore it presents as scarcity.<sup>400</sup> Brown also presents that many wake up in the morning and their first thought is, “I didn’t get enough sleep.” And, when they go to sleep, they think, “I didn’t get enough done today.” This idea of “never enough” follows people throughout the day.<sup>401</sup> She further explains that people will ask themselves, “are my contributions meaningful?” Therefore, she presents three aspects of a deep scarcity culture that manifests itself in our lives today. They are as follows:

1. It is a shame-prone culture, utilizing shame, bullying, politics, personal attacks, tear downs. This is how people are heard in this culture.
2. It is deeply rooted in comparisons, which is dangerous because comparison is the thief of happiness.
3. It is fractured by disengagement. If people enter the arena, they will be kicked around.<sup>402</sup>

Brown clarifies that scarcity cultures in America include family, work, clubs, neighborhoods, churches and schools. Van Der Kolk suggests in addition to this idea of deep scarcity presented by Brown, individuals learn to turn off what they are feeling when the places and people they naturally look to reject and shame them rather than keeping them safe and cared for.<sup>403</sup> So instead of speaking up when one has experienced spiritual abuse, their own shameful thoughts or fear of more rejection and shame keeps them quiet.

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., chap. 2, 4.

<sup>403</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 13 (location 39590), Kindle.

## **The Importance of Finding Words and Language**

Van Der Kolk writes that when people first enter therapy, they are faced with a limited language, especially when it comes to sharing painful experiences with someone else. People convince themselves that by keeping quiet they have power over their feelings and experience. However, he says that when people are able to name and give language to their experience, a different kind of control and power is found. He describes the transformation: “This is one of the most profound experiences we can have, and such resonance, in which hitherto unspoken words can be discovered, uttered, and received, is fundamental to healing the isolation of trauma—especially if other people in our lives have ignored or silenced us. Communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized.”<sup>404</sup>

Brown agrees with Van Der Kolk and acknowledges that defining things can create feelings of controversy and disagreement. However, she says that while this may seem difficult, it is not as risky as running from an experience. She implores that people “own their stories” and that if they can be courageous enough to enter the darkness of the pain, the light they can find will bring infinite power.<sup>405</sup>

## **The Reality of the Fall**

The word of God begins in Genesis describing a world that God created that was safe, in which people lived in harmonious relationship with God and each other.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (locations 4440-4442), Kindle.

<sup>405</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 6.

<sup>406</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Safe People: How to Find Relationships That Are Good for You and Avoid Those That Aren't* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009), 63.

Psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend in their book, *Safe People*, point out that this all changed when Adam and Eve sinned, and it changed the nature of relationships all together.<sup>407</sup> Cloud and Townsend note that the terms “Christian” and “church” do not automatically mean “safe.” People have difficulty believing this disconnect because they are taught that the church is safe. Cloud and Townsend explain that the church is made up of humans who are sinners. The harsh reality is that many in the church have experienced several kinds of relational sins such as control, manipulation, judgment, abuse, pride, condemnation and on and on.<sup>408</sup> While many believe the Bible teaches the church is safe, this is far from true. Cloud and Townsend explain this is not a biblical reality, stating one can find “both tremendous healing and potentially tremendous hurt.” They cite Jesus’ words:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.<sup>409</sup>

Henry describes another aspect of the Fall, the response of Adam and Eve after they ate the apple, writing that they “felt a disorder in their own spirits of which they had never before been conscious.”<sup>410</sup> He further clarifies this feeling as shame, which created

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>409</sup> Matthew 7:15-20.

<sup>410</sup> Henry, under “Genesis 3,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/genesis/3.html>.

the desire to hide. When people feel shame, they have a tendency to hide. Therefore, the Fall created unsafe relationships, and hiding became evidence of feeling shame.

### *Understanding Woundedness*

Dan Allender, Christian trauma therapist, explains that in order to understand woundedness one needs to know how the abuse occurred and the effect it had on the victim.<sup>411</sup> The majority of spiritual abuse examples presented in the literature are manifested through the use of two other forms of abuse, verbal and emotional. Langberg defines these two abuses below:

- Verbal abuse: name-calling, demeaning, humiliating and sneering are all abusive. It is using words or verbal power, to control, manipulate or intimidate.
- Emotional abuse: the systematic tearing down of another person by rejecting, ignoring, terrorizing, isolating or corrupting. It is the use of emotional power to control, manipulate or intimidate.<sup>412</sup>

Allender states, “Verbal abuse is a powerful and deep wound.”<sup>413</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen write that spiritual abuse is far reaching, and along with other abuses, it is just as wounding.<sup>414</sup> Wounds that were emotional, verbal and spiritual are described as a weakening, tearing down and harmful.<sup>415</sup>

Another aspect to address before moving on is brought up by Marich in her book, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*. She defines a wound as “an injury to a

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<sup>411</sup> Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, New ed., (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008), chap. 4 (location 1260), Kindle.

<sup>412</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 15 (locations 3733-3735), Kindle.

<sup>413</sup> Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, chap. 1 (location 670), Kindle.

<sup>414</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 338-339), Kindle.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, chaps. 1, 7 (locations, 268-272, 1375).

person’s feelings or reputation.”<sup>416</sup> The term “wound” comes from the Greek word τραῦμα, translated to English is “trauma.”<sup>417</sup> Marich says trauma is defined as, “any experience a person endures that leaves a life-threatening or life-altering impact.”<sup>418</sup> The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines it as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.”<sup>419</sup> Marich suggests that one needs to seek to resolve the wounds of trauma and abuse, for failure to do so could have devastating results.<sup>420</sup>

### **Trauma – Big ‘T’ and little ‘t’**

Marich says outright, “spiritual abuse is trauma” and provides three characteristics of trauma:

1. An external cause—Someone does it to you.
2. Violation—You are violated by an unwelcome intrusion.
3. Loss of control—It is unexpected and beyond your control.<sup>421</sup>

For years trauma was associated with PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, found primarily in individuals who had been in combat situations.<sup>422</sup> According to Langberg, it has been recognized that individuals can be shaped by trauma that does not fit the PTSD category because it was repetitive and chronic. Thus there was a discussion regarding a

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<sup>416</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 1994.

<sup>417</sup> William Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d. ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1013.

<sup>418</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 385-386), Kindle.

<sup>419</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 1843.

<sup>420</sup> Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 385-386), Kindle.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 382).

<sup>422</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 14 (locations 3388-3425), Kindle.

different diagnosis for this type of “sub-population of trauma survivors.”<sup>423</sup> She explains that current literature addresses what is termed “complex trauma,” chronic interpersonal trauma which does not classify as a form of PTSD.<sup>424</sup> She describes complex trauma as interpersonal, chronic, caused by humans, and because of the nature of the trauma, it leaves a “more severe and lasting reaction.”<sup>425</sup>

Elyssa Barbash, a psychologist who specializes in trauma and PTSD, explains there are two different types of trauma, small ‘t’ and large ‘T’ trauma.<sup>426</sup> She explains most people who hear the word trauma think of the Big T trauma associated with PTSD such as “war, combat, natural disasters, physical and sexual abuse, terrorism, and catastrophic accidents.”<sup>427</sup> While she calls these profound and debilitating events, she explains that individuals don’t have to experience this level of an event to experience what she calls small ‘t’ trauma. She describes small ‘t’ trauma as “events that exceed our capacity to cope and cause a disruption in emotional functioning. These distressing events are not inherently life or bodily-integrity threatening, but perhaps better described as ego-threatening due to the individual left feeling notable helplessness.”<sup>428</sup> Some examples of small ‘t’ trauma are infidelity, divorce, or a conflict with significant others, children, supervisor/boss or colleagues. Barbash explains that what is difficult with small

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Elyssa Barbash, “Different Types of Trauma: Small ‘t’ versus Large ‘T,’” *Psychology Today*, March 13, 2017, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/trauma-and-hope/201703/different-types-trauma-small-t-versus-large-t>.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

‘t’ trauma is that it is overlooked, thinking it is common. Many sufferers shame themselves for overreacting. She calls this “a form of avoidance.”<sup>429</sup> She says individuals with small ‘t’ trauma do not realize the impact of the events and therefore overlook the true impact it has on their emotional functioning. Spiritual abuse would fall into the category of small ‘t’ trauma in that it typically takes place with a boss or one who is in authority over you and others. It mostly effects ones’ “ego” or self-worth and value, disrupts an individually emotional, is not life threatening and is often avoided or not talked about. Barbash wraps up her article stating, “When trauma is on the table, avoidance does not work. Rather, ‘the best way out is through.’”<sup>430</sup>

### **The Past Can Play a Role**

Johnson and VanVonderen ask two important questions: Why do some people stay in abusive relationships? And, how do they get into them in the first place?<sup>431</sup> They say that people who become abused have previously been in unhealthy relationships where they have learned “unhealthy living skills,” which makes them more susceptible to the abuse they encounter. Blue agrees, saying they seem to be “unwittingly groomed” for the abusive relationship. He writes that something from their past, many times coming from their family of origin, “predisposes them to submit to a manipulative, controlling style of leadership.”<sup>432</sup> Blue shares that if an individual does not receive acceptance at

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 712-726), Kindle.

<sup>432</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 953-954), Kindle.

home then they will look to other people to provide it, and many times the church and abusive leaders are where they find it.<sup>433</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen call this learned powerlessness, saying that at some point in an individual's life their power has been taken from them.<sup>434</sup> The abusee was never taught how to stand up, be strong and adapt to people who are abusive. They describe how for some the powerlessness is a learned behavior that came from a "shame-based" relationship.<sup>435</sup> People being abused stay because they do not feel they have the power to leave or they feel trapped, sometimes due to financial reasons or fear of reputational harm or long-term investment in their career and friends.<sup>436</sup> These shame-based relationships result in extensive effects, such as ongoing threats to relational honesty, interference in spiritual growth and veneers used to avoid reality, truth and honesty.<sup>437</sup>

### **Themes Found with Wounds/Trauma**

Langberg writes of a new concept being discussed in the counseling circles, "meaning making." She says, "It is a spiritual concept that has to do with what gives meaning and purpose to a person's life."<sup>438</sup> Langberg says that it is critical to understand the impact abuse can have on an individual's sense of meaning and purpose. Van Der

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., chap. 7 (location 985).

<sup>434</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 738-739), Kindle.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (location 741).

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (location 727).

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (location 831).

<sup>438</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 6 (locations 1243-1245), Kindle.



Kolk says that trauma “acts like a foreign body” much like a splinter.<sup>439</sup> He says the response to the splinter/abuse is a greater problem than the splinter/abuse is by itself. Consequently, one’s response to abuse has the power to define one’s meaning.<sup>440</sup> Mark Pfuetze, assistant professor of applied theology and counseling, simplifies this concept by explaining that past experiences shape core beliefs, which then impact self-talk.<sup>441</sup> Therefore, responses to wounds from spiritual abuse must be addressed.

The most common wound addressed by scholars is shame. Brown says that shame is one of the most common human emotions.<sup>442</sup> She further writes, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging... When we experience shame, we feel disconnected and desperate for worthiness.”<sup>443</sup> Shame can be a verb or a noun. It is defined as:

- Noun: a loss of respect or esteem; dishonor; or a regrettable or unfortunate situation or action.
- Verb: (of a person, action, or situation) to make (someone) feel ashamed; or to bring shame to.<sup>444</sup>

Therefore, it is something that can be done to someone and also a position people can believe about themselves. Shame can consume people if they don’t address it through sharing and owning what happened.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 14 (location 4653), Kindle.

<sup>440</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 6 (location 1245), Kindle.

<sup>441</sup> Mark Pfuetze, “Relational Aspects of Counseling and Care” (lecture, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, January 8, 2018).

<sup>442</sup> Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 9-10.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 39,41.

<sup>444</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 1604.

In *Gifts of Imperfection*, Brown summarizes the work of Dr. Linda M. Hartling in her book *Shame and Humiliation: from Isolation to Relational Transformation*, saying: “in order to deal with shame, some of us move away by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets. Some of us move toward by seeking to appease and please. And, some of us move against by trying to gain power over others, by being aggressive, and by using shame to fight shame (like sending really mean e-mails).”<sup>446</sup> She then digs a bit deeper, explaining:

Most of us use all of these—at different times with different folks for different reasons. Yet all of these strategies move us away from our story. Shame is about fear, blame, and disconnection. Story is about worthiness and embracing the imperfections that bring us courage, compassion, and connection. If we want to live fully, without the constant fear of not being enough, we have to own our story. We also have to respond to shame in a way that doesn’t exacerbate our shame. One way to do that is to recognize when we’re in shame so we can react with intention. Shame is a full-contact emotion. Men and women with high levels of shame resilience know when shame is happening. The easiest way to know shame is to cultivate an awareness of our physical shame symptoms...I know that I’m struggling with shame when that warm wash of inadequacy comes over me, my heart races, my face feels hot, my mouth gets dry, my armpits tingle, and time slows down. It’s important to know our personal symptoms so we can get deliberate in our response to shame.<sup>447</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen state that shame rooted in spiritual abuse can come in the following forms: out-loud shaming, a focus on performance, manipulation, idolatry, a preoccupation with fault and blame, an obscured reality and unbalanced interrelatedness.<sup>448</sup> They further explain these are found within shame-based relationships and affect those involved in significant ways.

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<sup>445</sup> Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 40.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>448</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 4 (locations 752-814), Kindle.

In *The Wounded Heart*, Allender has a chapter devoted to contempt, another wound of spiritual abuse. It is best understood “in its operation,” and in most cases it is an internal dialogue but at times can be spoken aloud.<sup>449</sup> He gives an example of the words one would utter when they lose their car keys, ““How could you have been so stupid, you fool!” or even, “Why don’t you keep better control of your schedule, you idiot!”<sup>450</sup> He explains that people do this to diminish a possible potential to experience shame, whether it is inflicted by themselves or someone else. He also says, “Contempt is condemnation, an attack against the perceived cause of the shame.”<sup>451</sup> He assigns four categories, from very severe to moderately severe to mildly severe to least severe.<sup>452</sup> Examples provided in literature of spiritual abuse wounding would typically fall into the mildly and least severe and affecting more self-contempt than other other-centered contempt. The topic of contempt is not well understood and most think of self-contempt as a poor self-image.<sup>453</sup> One might ask why someone would respond with self-contempt. Allender writes, “Contempt serves us in at least four ways: it diminishes our shame, it deadens our longings, it makes us feel in control, and it distorts the real problem.”<sup>454</sup>

Other aspects of spiritual abuse include powerlessness, betrayal and ambivalence. Powerlessness was addressed previously. Betrayal is defined as “to be false or disloyal to,

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<sup>449</sup> Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, chap. 3 (locations 1077-1080), Kindle.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., chap. 3 (locations 1078-1080).

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., chap. 3 (location 1091).

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., chap. 3 (locations 1103-1115).

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., chap. 3 (location 1101).

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., chap. 3 (location 1168).

to divulge in a breach of confidence, to lead astray.”<sup>455</sup> Blue says that when betrayal comes from a person in a higher position, it “augments” the abuse.<sup>456</sup> Because it is a “violation of trust,” the person becomes the enemy.<sup>457</sup> The damage and pain can be so deep that people are moved beyond what they can comprehend.

Ambivalence is defined as “the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.”<sup>458</sup> In *The Body Keeps Score*, Van Der Kolk explains that people struggle sharing their experience because of a change in the function of the brain.<sup>459</sup> He writes the following:

Modern neuroscience solidly supports Freud’s notion that many of our conscious thoughts are complex rationalizations for the flood of instincts, reflexes, motives, and deep-seated memories that emanate from the unconscious. As we have seen, trauma interferes with the proper functioning of brain areas that manage and interpret experience.<sup>460</sup>

While the level of ambivalence often corresponds to the level of trauma, he says that without question people who have experienced trauma will have irrational thoughts.<sup>461</sup>

### *Discovering Healing and Restoration*

In speaking to those who believed in him, Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”<sup>462</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen add a counseling

<sup>455</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4d. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 174.

<sup>456</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (location 927), Kindle.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 49.

<sup>459</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 14 (location 4651), Kindle.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (locations 4655-4659).

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (location 4646).

perspective, explaining that for people who have been wounded by spiritual abuse, freedom will begin when the individual seeks help and admits honestly the struggles they are facing.<sup>463</sup> The word admit means, “to confess” or “to acknowledge” but also can mean “to enter a place.”<sup>464</sup> Van Der Kolk writes that most people are reluctant to revisit the abuse because painful memories will return. However, he says, when the painful memories are shared and reflected upon, “a new reality begins to take shape.”<sup>465</sup>

When an individual is ready to step into their abusive experience, healing must start within the context of safe people and safe places, say Cloud and Townsend, authors of *Safe People*. Once safe people and places have been identified, the next step is to find their voice. Van Der Kolk and Langberg both urge the importance and difficulty of this step, explaining that people with wounds from abuse are limited in finding words and language to describe their experience.<sup>466</sup> A key element in finding their voice is to ask for help in finding the right words to describe what has happened to them, suggests Cloud, Townsend, Johnson and VanVonderen.<sup>467</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen describe the next step as a restoration of their relationship with God by renewing their mind, as found in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and

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<sup>462</sup> John 8:32.

<sup>463</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1375-1376), Kindle.

<sup>464</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 21.

<sup>465</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 18 (location 5782), Kindle.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 14 (locations 4445-4450).

<sup>467</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Safe People*, 170; Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1375-1377), Kindle.

acceptable and perfect.”<sup>468</sup> The unhealthy language and thoughts from the abuse created distorted views that need to be replaced by truth that is good, acceptable and perfect.

Another step suggested by Johnson and VanVonderen, as well as other scholars such as Blue, is forgiveness. Blue points out that Jesus forgave the Pharisees, no matter how angry he was with them, and so can believers who have suffered spiritual abuse.<sup>469</sup> The next step is establishing healthy boundaries. Brown notes that many victims can employ compassion for themselves and others when they choose to set healthy boundaries and hold people accountable.<sup>470</sup> No one suggests that this will be easy. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Brown suggests “Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”<sup>471</sup> Van Der Kolk counsels that these processes allow people to be fully alive and present instead of being stuck in the past. He also shares that individuals who are able to put the abusive experience “into its proper place in the overall arc of one’s life” are better able to recover.<sup>472</sup>

## **Safe Spaces/Safe People**

Van Der Kolk notes that what makes recovery possible is finding a community that is a safe and responsive. He says finding this is an “enormous challenge” and critical

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<sup>468</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 908-914), Kindle; Romans 12:2.

<sup>469</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 140-141), Kindle.

<sup>470</sup> Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 17.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., under “Preface”, ix.

<sup>472</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 13 (location 4191), Kindle.

when expressing the pain of one's experience.<sup>473</sup> He explains, "In order to recover, mind, body, and brain need to be convinced that it is safe to let go. That happens only when you feel safe at a visceral level and allow yourself to connect that sense of safety with memories of past helplessness."<sup>474</sup> This freedom happens only in the context of trust with those who can bring calm as experiences are relived. He urges that recovery happens in the context of these physically and emotionally safe relationships and environments, including "safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and to bolster the courage to tolerate, face, and process the reality of what has happened."<sup>475</sup>

Cloud and Townsend dedicate an entire book to this topic called *Safe People*. They share that one must learn character discernment to be able to tell "the sheep from the goats," meaning who is good for you and who is not.<sup>476</sup> Cloud and Townsend share that safe people can be difficult to pick out because unsafe people can appear to be "winsome and promising" and problems in their character are difficult to spot.<sup>477</sup> They point out three types of unsafe people: abandoners, critics and irresponsibles. They describe them as "people who can start a relationship but can't finish it."<sup>478</sup> These are also people who prefer "shallow acquaintances," are prone to abandonment and fear closeness. The second descriptor of an unsafe person is the critic. These people assume

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (locations 4598-4603).

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., chap. 13 (locations 3945-3947).

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Cloud, *Safe People*, 11.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

the role of parent with everyone, and “are judgmental, speak the truth without love and have no room for grace or forgiveness.”<sup>479</sup> The final is irresponsibles, best described as “grown-up children” because they are not responsible for themselves or their actions and are noncommittal.<sup>480</sup>

It is important to note that the description of one of the unsafe people described above, the critic, often aligns with the actions of individuals who spiritually abuse.

Phrases associated with the critic are:

- More concerned with confronting errors than they are with making connections
- Tend to point the finger outside, rather than at themselves
- Deeply love truth and righteousness
- Don’t agree to others’ right to an opinion, a value or a decision
- Resist freedom instead of encouraging it.<sup>481</sup>

Unsafe people are said to be “destructive” because they are great at condemning and focusing on weaknesses. The authors share that unsafe people “confront us not to forgive us but to condemn and punish us...removing their love until we are appropriately chastened.”<sup>482</sup>

As pointed out earlier, Cloud and Townsend make it clear that one cannot assume that the church is a safe place with only safe people.<sup>483</sup> Therefore, they encourage that

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 23, 46, 51.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 160.



when it comes to the church people need to “square with life the way we find it,”<sup>484</sup> much like Jesus did with the Pharisees in Matthew 23. The authors note that safe people can be found both inside and outside of the church and encourage Christians to look for the proper qualities of a safe person. Most importantly, they point out that safe people are able to be empathetic, meaning they show a deep interest in what the person is going through. Additionally, a safe person will enter into another’s world and situation mentally and walk alongside of them through the pain without judgment.<sup>485</sup>

While safe people are important, safe spaces are just as important, and in the literature they are most commonly referred to as support groups. Cloud and Townsend call support groups an “extremely powerful tool,” explaining that there is a dynamic that is present allowing for spiritual and emotional growth not found in individual relationships.<sup>486</sup> Groups are stronger because one feels the support of an army to help fight the battle caused by the wounds of spiritual abuse. They also caution that while support groups are powerful, they need to have the proper structure and leaders who are trained to help people deal with abuse.<sup>487</sup> If the proper structure and leadership are not present, then groups can have the potential to recreate the pain one is already experiencing.

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

## Finding A Voice

Cloud and Townsend share that many times, once people find a safe place to share, they are not sure what to do with it.<sup>488</sup> They point out that finding their voice is a process, and the first step is asking for help. One should not take this step lightly because God places value and a premium on asking, as it is found “almost 800 times in the Bible,” they contend.<sup>489</sup> The New Testament book of James says, “You do not have, because you do not ask.”<sup>490</sup>

There are several reasons asking is important to the healing process. When an individual learns to ask for help they develop humility, begin to own their own needs and take initiative. They also learn to develop a grateful character and increase the odds that they will get something. As one is able to ask and experience the after effects of asking, Cloud and Townsend say, the individual becomes more open to the process.<sup>491</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen agree with Cloud and Townsend that individuals need to ask for help to find healing and break free from the abuse.<sup>492</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen further state that individuals need to reach the point where they recognize that what they experienced was spiritual abuse.<sup>493</sup> Individuals who have been abused “must be given the information and permission necessary to call what they’ve

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>490</sup> James 4:2c.

<sup>491</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Safe People*, 171-172.

<sup>492</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 17 (locations 2740-2741), Kindle.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

experienced ‘abuse.’<sup>494</sup> Brown agrees, “If we don’t define things, then we can’t even discuss it.”<sup>495</sup>

When it comes to finding a voice, Langberg shares that there is tension for both the individual who has been abused and the people who witnessed the abuse. She states that the “push-pull between the need to forget and the need to speak is the central dialectic of trauma.”<sup>496</sup> Individuals naturally want to respond by acting as if the event never happened and to put it out of their minds. She further notes that it is a sort of paradox because people must learn to give words to their experience in order to find healing from the wounds that occurred.<sup>497</sup> She explains that many times people struggle to find words to explain the event or how they feel about what took place.<sup>498</sup>

Van Der Kolk agrees with Langberg, saying that most people who enter therapy “almost immediately confront the limitations of language.”<sup>499</sup> He shared when he entered therapy he had the same experience, finding it difficult to both revisit his deep feelings and at the same time share them with someone else. In spite of how difficult it can be to share, Van Der Kolk says that therapists wholeheartedly believe that to bring resolution to trauma, one must learn to talk about it.<sup>500</sup> He states that this belief goes all the way

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, Audible audiobook, chap. 1.

<sup>496</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 1 (location 185), Kindle.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid., chap. 5 (location 1059).

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 14 (location 4444), Kindle.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (locations 4443-4458).

back to neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and his assistant, who shared the results when treating people with trauma. They wrote, the effects of the trauma:

Immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words.<sup>501</sup>

If words are too difficult to find, one does not have to do so alone. Van Der Kolk shares the story of how Helen Keller found words and language with the help of Anne Sullivan, her teacher.<sup>502</sup> Helen Keller, at nineteen months of age, was left deaf, blind and mute by a viral infection. Keller became an author, political activist and lecturer. Sullivan was able to help Helen find letters, words and then language, which eventually lead to her being able to “find herself.” Helen shares a story in *The Story of my Life* of finding words and language and the impact it had on her. She recalls, “Water! That word startled my soul, and it awoke, full of the spirit of the morning. . . Until that day my mind had been like a darkened chamber, waiting for words to enter and light the lamp, which is thought. I learned a great many words that day.”<sup>503</sup> Van Der Kolk explains that this process is what happens within a therapy relationship or support groups. One is able to find words where there were no words before and the ability to share deep pain and feelings with others.<sup>504</sup> Through finding language and words, people are able to change the narrative

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<sup>501</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Physical Mechanisms of Hysterical Phenomena,” in *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. Josef Breuer (New York: Basic Books, 1957), 6.

<sup>502</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 14 (location 4418), Kindle.

<sup>503</sup> Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Project Gutenberg, last updated February 4, 2013), 262, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2397/2397-h/2397-h.htm>.

<sup>504</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 14 (locations 4417-4479), Kindle.

through sharing, and it changes their perspective, allowing them new self-awareness.<sup>505</sup>

This reality of healing can occur when people find their voice and begin to own their story in an environment where they feel safe and not pressured. Van Der Kolk says that for people who have been silenced or disregarded, learning to communicate fully “is the opposite of being traumatized,” and core to what brings healing.<sup>506</sup>

### **Restoring the Relationship with God**

Authors VanVonderen, Dale Ryan and Juanita Ryan in their book, *Soul Repair*, write that the next step is restoring one’s relationship with God. They explain that a result of the spiritual abuse can be a distorted view of God.<sup>507</sup> They believe individuals are hard-wired to long for an intimate and loving relationship with God that brings security and comfort. However, when people experience spiritual abuse, this image and understanding of God can become distorted.<sup>508</sup> Blue confirms this, writing that what people have been taught about God becomes embedded in their conscience.<sup>509</sup> If abusers embed lies against true standing or service to God, the abusees will allow “their inner voice that pronounces judgment on our motives and actions,” to prevail even when it is

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> Jeff VanVonderen, Dale Ryan, and Juanita Ryan, *Soul Repair: Rebuilding Your Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), chap. 5 (locations 1011-1030), Kindle.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>509</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (locations 605-758), Kindle.

false.<sup>510</sup> The urging is that abusees must replace these distorted images, lies and thoughts about God and their relationship with him with truths from God's word.

Dale Ryan, associate professor of recovery ministries, shares a personal testimony of how one's view can become distorted from relationships that are spiritually abusive. He shares that the person he was in a relationship with was "quick to anger and slow to forgive."<sup>511</sup> He describes a striving to be found capable in the person's eyes led him to a place where he felt "weary of trying to be good enough, dedicated enough, strong enough, smart enough" or whatever he needed in order to please this man. He realized that in his striving, the person he was seeking to gain approval from had become an "impossible to please god." The person had become a small 'g' god in his life, because he had placed his performance requirements from this individual before God.<sup>512</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen expand on this example, explaining the "message of condemnation" one receives is not restricted by one's performance, actions or appearance.<sup>513</sup> In regards to the condemnation, they write:

It is directed toward and lands on us: 'You are the problem.' 'You are in the way.' 'Big boys don't cry.' 'Isn't that just like a girl.' 'You are stupid, fat, ugly, incompetent, lazy, worthless, selfish.' 'Shame on you!' This attacks the very core of our identity.<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> VanVonderen, *Soul Repair*, chap. 5 (locations 1072-1080), Kindle.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 18 (locations 2829-2832), Kindle.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

Blue suggests one can neutralize these forms of spiritual abuse by recognizing they are “completely accepted by God solely through life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>515</sup> By looking to the truth of God’s word and receiving the mercy and grace found in him alone, the abuser and abusive behavior will lose its power.<sup>516</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen agree and further suggest that one has to decide who they serve and are accountable to, especially in ministry. They give the example of the disciples in Acts 4:23-29, where the disciples refer to themselves as bond-servants of Christ first and foremost:

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ““Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.<sup>517</sup>

Johnson and VanVonderen write that these verses show the disciples’ faith that their approval comes from God alone, and not only that but, for believers, they have already attained it through Christ.<sup>518</sup> When they come to this place, they will know a peace that is

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<sup>515</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 8 (locations 1149-1152), Kindle.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 8 (locations 1105, 1149).

<sup>517</sup> Acts 4:23-29.

<sup>518</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 21 (locations 3256-3264), Kindle.

found when one is “freed from fears, shame, and resentments,” finding a place of calm and contentment in the love and grace of our heavenly Father.<sup>519</sup>

## **Forgiveness**

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”<sup>520</sup> Lotz points out in her book, *Wounded by God’s People*, that healing is required in order to heal and recover. One is not able to move forward when they are looking backward.<sup>521</sup> Blue joins Lotz stating that Jesus not only exemplified forgiveness but insisted that believers do so as well. He explains that while Jesus called out the Pharisees for their abuse, he was prepared to forgive them, quoting Matthew 23:37, which says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”<sup>522</sup> Next, Blue points out that Jesus forgave his abusers and thus insists that those who have been abused do so as well, quoting Matthew 6:14-15, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup>But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”<sup>523</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen also join Lotz and Blue further, saying, “our only

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<sup>519</sup> VanVonderen, *Soul Repair*, under “Introduction” (location 43), Kindle.

<sup>520</sup> Colossians 3:13 (NIV).

<sup>521</sup> Lotz, *Wounded by God’s People*, chap. 15 (location 2096), Kindle.

<sup>522</sup> Matthew 23:37.

<sup>523</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 6 (location 920), Kindle; Matthew 6:14-15 (NIV).



hope is in God's mercy."<sup>524</sup> It is not something a person can do on their own by meeting a specific measuring stick but only by recognizing the depth of pain and reaching out to the love of God to find true forgiveness for themselves and their abuser.

Lotz writes that often it's the last thing one wants to do, and some struggle to even know how to forgive in a way that moves them past the wounding.<sup>525</sup> If one dismisses the "healing remedy" that God provides, the injustices experienced can become "spiritually self-destructive," even worse than the initial wounds.<sup>526</sup> While Lotz has found that forgiveness is "the healing antidote" to her wounds, she doesn't stop there but moves forward "by doing something for the person who has hurt me."<sup>527</sup> Lotz summarizes the process and place she was able to eventually arrive at on her journey through healing:

I've learned that forgiveness is an intellectual choice I am commanded to make. If it were a feeling or an emotion, I couldn't obey the command since I can't necessarily control my emotions and feelings. It's a choice, pure and simple. If I only offered forgiveness to those who ask for it, or those who deserve it, or those I feel like forgiving, there are, to be honest, some people I would never forgive. But it's a decision that I make because I am commanded to forgive for one simple reason: God has forgiven me. As an act of grateful worship, I choose to forgive others. But then my decision to forgive needs to be followed with an act of love that's sacrificial in nature. I need to do something for the person I am forgiving — something that is costly. Something I would do for no other reason than it's my act of worship — worship of One who laid down His life for me as His own act of sacrificial, loving forgiveness.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 8 (locations 1516-1517), Kindle.

<sup>525</sup> Lotz, *Wounded by God's People*, chap. 15 (location 2115-2120), Kindle.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 15 (location 2095).

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 15 (locations 2116-2118).

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 15 (locations 2118-2126).

Lotz was determined not to allow “religious phonies” to destroy her heart or relationship with God.<sup>529</sup> For her it is a journey that “will last a lifetime.”<sup>530</sup> God has taught her forgiveness is “a way of life.”<sup>531</sup>

## Healthy Boundaries

Another step in finding healing and recovery is the ability to understand and set healthy boundaries. Without healthy boundaries one is open to the potential of not being able to say “no” or “that is not okay” when someone acts out inappropriately. Weak boundaries lead one to concede when someone is acting negligent or arduous.<sup>532</sup> Boundaries “tell us where we end, and others begin,” and help people to “keep good things in us and bad things out.”<sup>533</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen use the word “invisible barriers” and clarify that it “tells others where they stop and you start.”<sup>534</sup> For people who have been wounded or abused, Cloud and Townsend write that one can look at boundaries as “our spiritual and emotional ‘property lines.’”<sup>535</sup>

While physical boundaries are easy to recognize, such as a fence or locked door, relational and emotional boundaries are invisible. In the book *Boundaries*, the authors describe how the Bible, in Galatians 6:4-5, tells believers how to set boundaries by

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., under “Preface” (location 124).

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., chap. 15 (location 2436).

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., chap. 15 (location 2439).

<sup>532</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Safe People*, 73.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>534</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 3 (locations 642-643), Kindle.

<sup>535</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Safe People*, 72.

learning how to carry their own loads:<sup>536</sup> “Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load.”<sup>537</sup> They explain “we need to keep things that nurture us inside our fences and keep the things that harm us outside the fences.”<sup>538</sup>

Boundaries can take many forms, such as:

- Words – “no” or “no, that behavior is not okay. I will not participate in that.”
- Truth – know God’s truth and knowing the truth about yourself
- Geographical distance – Physically removing yourself from a situation
- Time – taking time off from a person or project
- Emotional distance – give yourself space relationally and emotionally to thaw out. This is a time for both individuals to find a place of calm, to individually work through the unhealthy thoughts and reactive emotional responses. This is required until both individuals show they are able to relate in a respectful, non-abusive manner toward one another. At this point you are safe to return to an ongoing relationship that is evident by a pattern of behavioral change.
- Other people – depending on others to help one set and keep boundaries and provide a different level of support to be accountable for their boundaries.
- Consequences – meaning if a boundary is crossed a consequence will happen, i.e. “if you don’t stop yelling at me,” I will leave until you get some treatment.<sup>539</sup>

Allender sheds light on how powerful and enabling boundaries can be, sharing that there are “appropriate lines” which separate people from another’s domain, further providing

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<sup>536</sup> Henry Cloud, and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 32.

<sup>537</sup> Galatians 6:4-5 (NIV).

<sup>538</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries*, 33.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-40.

them a sense of “uniqueness and independence,” allowing them to acknowledge their “finiteness” and that it is “a gift of mercy to my soul.”<sup>540</sup>

## Other Methods

There are two other methods presented by Van Der Kolk that people can use to find healing and recovery. These are for people who struggle to recall the details from the deep emotions, thoughts and feelings that plague people who have experienced abuse: EMDR and journaling.<sup>541</sup> EMDR stands for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing and is a tool used by a trained licensed therapist. It is described as, “A structured therapy that encourages the patient to briefly focus on the trauma memory while simultaneously experiencing bilateral stimulation (typically eye movements), which is associated with a reduction in the vividness and emotion associated with the trauma memories.”<sup>542</sup> While EMDR is not for everyone, Van Der Kolk provides examples of how effective this technique can be in *The Body Keeps Score*. He shares that not only is it quite simple, it “helped to make painful re-creations of trauma a thing of the past.”<sup>543</sup> Van Der Kolk further states that through writing, one is also able to access their thoughts and let those thoughts pour out on to the paper without the fear of the judgments

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<sup>540</sup> Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, chaps. 4, 10 (locations 1300, 2750), Kindle.

<sup>541</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chaps. 14, 15 (locations 4531, 4699), Kindle.

<sup>542</sup> Maxfield, Louise, Roger M. Solomon, and For Their Contributions to This Description. “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy.” <http://www.apa.org>. Accessed February 10, 2018. <http://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/eye-movement-reprocessing.aspx>.

<sup>543</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 15 (location 4708), Kindle.

and opinions of others. He reports that journaling resulted in greater understanding, a more optimistic attitude, better physical health and peace of mind.<sup>544</sup>

### *Summary of Discovering Healing and Restoration*

To find a place of healing and recovery, scholars agree that the process begins when people acknowledge what happened. While daunting, the reality is that they cannot un-see it or un-experience it. Failure leads to a death of the soul and reinforces the trauma. Healing starts with coming to a place of awareness. While difficult, because people tend to act like the abuse did not happen and put it out of their minds, as they gain awareness, they learn that they aren't seeing something different than they thought, but rather they are seeing the same events differently, from a new perspective. This shift feels incongruous because they must learn to share and give language to the very things they don't want to think of or speak about. From a neurological standpoint, human beings possess two distinct forms of self-awareness, and trauma causes the communication between these to breakdown. The two systems, autobiographical self and the moment-to-moment self-awareness, can be repaired, allowing individuals to create a coherent whole for their experience by better organizing their memories.

The literature also says one is held back by the unspoken rules of abuse: Don't trust. Don't think. Don't talk. Don't question. These types of rules cause a freezing up of the feelings, pain and emotions resulting in a silencing of one's experience. Another aspect is a culture of deep scarcity, where one constantly lives under the umbrella of "never enough..." and has three aspects: a shame-prone culture, deeply seated in

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (locations 4535-4545).

comparisons, fractured by disengagement. When beginning to address the abuse, language is limited. However, when an individual can name and give language to their abusive experience, transformation occurs as they experience the opposite of being traumatized. Another realization presented by scholars comes in looking at the reality of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Before this time man lived in harmonious relationships, but now the reality is that not all people or churches are automatically safe. Many within church walls have experienced different forms of control, manipulation, judgment, abuse, pride and condemnation.

The next step that the literature points to is to understand the woundedness that comes with spiritual abuse. The two main types of wounds found with spiritual abuse are verbal and emotional abuse. Scholars define these, stating that verbal abuse plays out by name-calling, demeaning, humiliating and sneering, or by using words or verbal power, to control, manipulate or intimidate. Emotional abuse is the systematic tearing down of another person by rejecting, ignoring, terrorizing, isolating, or corrupting, or using emotional power to control, manipulate or intimidate. One scholar describes these as deep and powerful wounds, adding that the word “wound” comes from the Greek word for trauma. Trauma is defined as a “deeply distressing or disturbing experience,” with a life-altering impact.

There are two types of trauma, Big ‘T’ trauma associated with PTSD, coming from catastrophic events, and small ‘t’ trauma, described as events occurring that exceed one’s coping levels, disrupts one emotionally, are ego-threatening, are not inherently life-threatening, but leave the people involved feeling helpless. Such events include infidelity, divorce, or a conflict with significant others, children, supervisor/boss or

colleagues. Since these things are quite common, they tend to be overlooked and avoided, and the only way to deal with the impact is to move through the pain and not around it.

Scholars also point out that for many in these situations, their past can play a role especially for people who are predisposed to experience abuse. Unhealthy relationships from their past, mostly from their family of origin, where they did not receive acceptance or learned powerlessness, because they regularly received messages of shame. This pattern leaves them feeling trapped, destroying their sense of meaning and purpose. These experiences connect directly to the wounds from spiritual abuse, with the most common being shame. Shame creates the feeling of being disconnected and desperate for worthiness. Other wounds were contempt, betrayal, powerlessness and ambivalence.

Once people become aware of spiritual abuse and the dynamics involved, they begin to understand their woundedness from the effects of the abuse, then they can discover healing and restoration. This process begins when one learns to speak the truth of their experience, confess and acknowledge what occurred, enter into their painful memory and then move beyond it. The first step is finding safe people and a safe place to share. Second, finding one's voice means asking for help and finding words where there were none. This step is followed by finding restoration in their relationship with God, recognizing they are completely acceptable by God in Christ. The next step is to find a place of forgiveness, which is described as a journey that lasts a lifetime and becomes a way of life. Healthy boundaries are another element which allows both parties to understand clearly where one ends and the other begins, drawing appropriate lines of independence. Some final methods suggested in literature if one is struggling to find words could be EMDR or writing/journaling. EMDR is a specific therapeutic technique

used to work through trauma. Both methods can assist individuals to access their thoughts about the abuse when other approaches failed.

## Conclusion

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”<sup>545</sup> This is not just a statement, but also a promise.<sup>546</sup> God’s word is full of truth and countless promises for his people, which are critical in the processing of healing spiritual abuse in the church. Knowledge and understanding are also important but are only effective if one is kind and gentle to themselves as they slog through their wounds seeking to discover their true self.<sup>547</sup> Langberg cautions that this work is delicate.<sup>548</sup> She shares, “As creatures we tend to reason from creation to the character of God, rather than from the character of God to creation.”<sup>549</sup> The subject matter is sacred, complex and at times beyond what one can comprehend.<sup>550</sup> However complex it may be, one can look to another promise from the word of God: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”<sup>551</sup>

Langberg says, “The first thing I learned early on in my life was that suffering is.”<sup>552</sup> For her it was learned at an early age due to the illness of her father. That lesson

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<sup>545</sup> Psalms 34:18.

<sup>546</sup> Lotz, *Wounded by God’s People*, under “Acknowledgements” (location 2465), Kindle.

<sup>547</sup> Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, xi.

<sup>548</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (location 828), Kindle.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 809).

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 858).

<sup>551</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>552</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (location 882), Kindle.



aligned with Jesus' words, "in this world you will have trouble."<sup>553</sup> Langberg shares other insights she learned over the years in regard to suffering: "it seems unreasonable, irrational, and unjust," and it "rarely makes a great deal of sense."<sup>554</sup> It was during her father's illness that Langberg came to understand that people respond to suffering with two different mindsets. The first mindset is to flee it because it creates discomfort, whether the suffering is personal or someone else's. The second mindset is to "sit with the suffering." Whether by being with someone who is ill or consoling someone who is crying, they care for others and may lose themselves in the suffering.<sup>555</sup> She concluded that suffering is universal and inevitable; however, as believers and leaders in the body of Christ, one's reaction cannot be passive. Believers are called into the battles found with suffering.<sup>556</sup>

Langberg's book, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, was written to address trauma and suffering. The book describes traumas created by different things such as tragedies, violence, torture or abuse. However, the majority of the trauma her book speaks to is born out of various types of abuse. One chapter specifically addresses abuse by leaders in the church. She states:

Needless to say, I have seen untold damage done to the body and name of Christ, often in the name of Christ. It is for the sake of that body and that wonderful name that I believe we need to wrestle with the issues of power and deception.<sup>557</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (locations 893-896), Kindle; John 16:33 (NIV).

<sup>554</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (locations 893-896), Kindle.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 932).

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (locations 912-952).

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 12 (locations 2843-2845), Kindle.

It is important not to minimize what individuals experience after abuse from a church leader. Blue provides the following description of suffering, sharing the following:

People who "survive" spiritual abuse often wander in a kind of limbo; they are confused, hurt and angry. Some victims of pastoral abuse blame themselves for their suffering, thinking that they must have deserved it. Others indulge in self-hate for foolishly submitting themselves and their families to such humiliation. Others focus their hatred on the abuser. They are soon crippled by bitterness and cut off from God's healing... when a person in high position violates our trust. The deep pain and damage suffered are unlike any other.<sup>558</sup>

Suffering that is associated with the wounds of individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse can be deeply wounding and devastating. Juanita and Dale Ryan work with individuals seeking recovery from spiritual abuse. They share, "Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who we are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God."<sup>559</sup> Langberg shares that when people experience abuse in any form, it can result in "overwhelming fear," "emotional darkness," "a crushing burden" or "your worst nightmare."<sup>560</sup> She reminds the reader that people were not created to carry the burden of suffering caused by abuse, but instead were intended to reflect the glory of God.<sup>561</sup>

Another insight from Langberg is the idea of entering in. As God begins to open eyes little by little, one can become stunned at "the radical difference between that which is seen and that which is unseen."<sup>562</sup> Humans are limited to experiences here on earth in

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<sup>558</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chaps. 1, 6 (locations 73-76, 927). Kindle.

<sup>559</sup> Juanita and Dale Ryan, *Recovering from Spiritual Abuse* (Downers Grove, IL.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>560</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chaps. 8, 9 (locations 2060-2064, 2195-2206), Kindle.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, chaps. 3, 8 (locations 546, 2060-2064).

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 988).

one's own world. However, God calls his people to follow him and to enter and commune with the things that are unseen, unknown.<sup>563</sup> What is meant by "entering in" is to not avoid it; to walk alongside someone who is suffering. This idea of following God and entering in elicits feelings of intense fear, anxiety, being overwhelmed or even appalled. And, while one struggles to enter in, God waits. Her insight comes from the Garden of Gethsemane story where Jesus, who knows his time to be crucified is upon him, beseeches God for strength and courage so that he may surrender his own will to that of God's.<sup>564</sup> While Jesus is struggling, he calls his disciples to pray with him, especially Peter, James and John, to whom he says, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death."<sup>565</sup> And then he asks them, "remain here and keep watch with Me."<sup>566</sup> Langberg shares that watching means one has to see up close individuals facing painful and tender wounds, and also the work of both sin and the enemy on the very souls of believers. This work is occurring in the church body, both locally and universally.

She admits that as humans one prefers the "anesthesia of sleep."<sup>567</sup> And understandably, she says, "it is a serious task. Watching means facing the deceitfulness of our own hearts, our lust for comfort and the approval of men."<sup>568</sup> As the body of Christ, all are called to enter in, "I therefore... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>564</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (locations 893-896), Kindle; Matthew 26:36-46.

<sup>565</sup> Matthew 26:38 (NASB).

<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

<sup>567</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (location 970), Kindle.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (location 980).

calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>569</sup> The believer is further urged to “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”<sup>570</sup> The disciples in Gethsemane succumbed to sleep.<sup>571</sup> Langberg urges that each person will face the question, “will I sleep or will I watch?”<sup>572</sup>

The promise, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds,” provides hope.<sup>573</sup> However, the walk one takes is delicate, complex and sacred as believers enter the processing of their suffering and pain. And while suffering happens it is confusing, uncomfortable, unreasonable and unjust. Whether one has experienced the suffering, witnessed it or recently become aware of it, each believer is called not only to understand the battle, but also to enter into it.<sup>574</sup>

As one who has done the difficult work of stepping into her wounds and learning to own her story, Brown conveys incredible insight. She says, “I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”<sup>575</sup> In seeking to find a fuller life, one will not reach a destination, she says, because they “never really arrive.”<sup>576</sup> However, believers will find there is no question as to

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<sup>569</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3.

<sup>570</sup> Galatians 6:2.

<sup>571</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (location 991), Kindle.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 981).

<sup>573</sup> Psalms 147:3.

<sup>574</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (locations 981-1035), Kindle.

<sup>575</sup> Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, xiv.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*

whether one is headed in the right direction. Brown writes that things like “courage, compassion and connection” are mandatory exercises.<sup>577</sup> She learned “the work of cultivating and letting go” led to a life that was more authentic, resilient, trusting, calm, and meaningful.<sup>578</sup> The work was “messy and deep.” The ‘aha’ moment happened in the midst of trudging through her wounds when she realized: “Oh, my God. I feel different. I feel joyful and real. I’m still afraid, but I also feel really brave. Something has changed—I can feel it in my bones.”<sup>579</sup> Life for her became more joyful and less anxious, and in setting new boundaries, she found less of a desire to need approval from others.<sup>580</sup>

It is a journey that one never walks alone for God is always with his people, guiding, prodding, holding and redeeming.<sup>581</sup> “In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them.”<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

<sup>581</sup> Lotz, *Wounded by God’s People*, under “Acknowledgments” (location 2429), Kindle.

<sup>582</sup> Isaiah 63:9 (NIV).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to explore how associate pastors experience restoration from spiritual abuse they have experienced from a lead pastor. Three areas of literature that inform the research include understanding spiritual abuse, building a theological framework for spiritual abuse and finding a place of healing and recovery.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What encounters do associate pastors experience with lead pastors that classify as spiritual abuse?
2. How do associate pastors become aware they have experienced spiritual abuse?
3. In what ways and to what extent do associate pastors experience healing and restoration?
4. In what ways and to what extent does theology help associate pastors toward restoration?

A qualitative study guided the research in order that insight and truth shed light into the spiritual abuse the churches and individuals faced. While spiritual abuse is a difficult and delicate subject, a respectful approach is critical and provides an honest look that included multiple perspectives and observations. This section will outline the qualitative study's methodology.

## Design of the Study

In *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, noted author Sharan B. Merriam provides the key design elements of qualitative research. Merriam describes why qualitative research is critical to the outcome stating, “the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s.”<sup>583</sup> The approach provides a greater amount of understanding “of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making and describe how people interpret what they experience.”<sup>584</sup>

Merriam presents four key design elements. The first characteristic is to focus on the process, understanding and meaning specifically from “the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s.”<sup>585</sup> This will provide a true perspective of the subject matter, spiritual abuse, as experienced and interpreted by the participants -- associate pastors. The second characteristic is that the primary instrument of the research is the researcher. While the researcher’s ability to clarify, expand and explore is an advantage, Merriam cautions researchers.<sup>586</sup> Since qualitative research emphasizes the human element, it also can lead to biases, but acknowledging and monitoring this human bias also limits it.<sup>587</sup>

The third characteristic is that the inductive process is useful for researchers in that they can glean observations from people on the ground, experiencing the subject

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<sup>583</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4d. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 14.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>587</sup> A. Peshkin, “In Area of Subjectivity-One’s Own,” *Educational Researcher* 17, no. 7 (1988): 18.

matter first hand, while building concepts and understanding of the subject matter. The fourth characteristic is that qualitative research gives rich description. Through the use of words and quotes that were gathered from the research, researchers are able to provide descriptive analysis to the subject matter conveying relevant insight. Using all four characteristics as the basis for approach will allow the researcher and the reader to focus more on meaning-making and providing the opportunity to better understand the phenomenon of the subject matter.<sup>588</sup>

### **Participant Sample Selection**

The criteria sampling was used to select participants for this qualitative study. The criteria included: associate pastors who served under a lead pastor in a Protestant or Reformed church, who experienced spiritual abuse from the lead pastor, who gained understanding about the abuse and who had begun the healing and recovering process. Because the study uniquely focused upon gaining insight into how the spiritually abused became aware of what took place, identified it and moved forward, this narrow scope was necessary. It was critical that the participants had these experiences and could speak about them.

The participants were limited to an evangelical Protestant or reformed tradition in order to maintain coherence of theological beliefs and convictions in regard to the nature of the church and the authority of a sovereign God. These beliefs, which shape the participants, are necessary to provide consistency regarding vocational commitment and calling. It is possible that the impact of these beliefs may play a role in how participants

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<sup>588</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 15-16.



responded to their individual experiences. Therefore, this criteria minimized this theological variable.

The researcher relied on pastors and professional counselors to identify participants who fit the criteria for the study. Once individuals were identified, the researcher contacted possible participants either by phone or email to obtain acceptance from the individual to participate in the study. Once the individual agreed to participate, a “Research Participant Consent Form” was presented for review. The purpose of the “Research Participant Consent Form” is to ensure a respectful relationship is established and a safe environment is provided for the research to take place.

### **Data Collection**

For data collection, the researcher interviewed six participants utilizing a semi-structured format. By employing interviews, the researcher was able to collect data that cannot be replicated. The interviews also allowed the researcher to gain insight into the participants’ perspective of the phenomenon being researched as described by Michael Quinn, an evaluation consultant with over forty years’ experience in evaluation use and practice.<sup>589</sup> Semi-structured interviews ask open-ended questions, allowing participants to “define the world in unique ways,”<sup>590</sup> especially in how they perceive their experience. In this structure the questions are more flexibly worded, with a mix of questions being either more structured or less structured and not limiting the interview to exact words or order

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<sup>589</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4d. ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 340-341.

<sup>590</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

of questioning, according to Merriam.<sup>591</sup> Semi-structured interviews allow for a friendly and open environment where the interviewee does not feel restricted by format. Such interviews invite transparency and give the interviewee the space to speak freely. The researcher can also be flexible, open to where the data leads the conversation and providing the opportunity for more informed data collection.

The researcher interviewed participants face to face at a pre-set time and place that provided a private, safe and secure location where the participants felt most comfortable sharing their experience. Before the interview, the participants were asked to reflect on the time when they experienced a contentious relationship with a lead pastor, recalling the impact it had on their life, any awareness or restoration that came from their experience and how theology played a role in their experience. The interview lasted approximately ninety minutes and was recorded digitally and was transcribed for data analysis. The researcher conducted five interviews over a four week time period, with a sixth conducted several weeks later and transcribed the interviews within a few days after the interviews were conducted. The researcher used the following for the interview protocol questions:

1. Tell me about your very painful conflict experience with a church pastor who was contentious?
  - a. Was it a one-time event? If not can you share other things that occurred?
2. What was your initial response to the leader's behavior?
  - a. Can you put into words your initial thoughts or interpretation of what was occurring at that time?
  - b. How did you feel?

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<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

- c. How did you think about it theologically?
3. When did you realize the relationship was seriously contentious and unusually unhealthy beyond your control?
  - a. How did it impact your relationship with God?
  - b. When you came to understand the relationship was unhealthy in what ways did your perspective change?
  - c. What played a role in helping you in identifying/recognizing what was going on?
4. How would you describe what the core problem was now?
  - a. How did you come to this conclusion?
  - b. What theological issues were you working with in coming to this conclusion?
5. How did you move towards health and healing after you identified the situation this way?
  - a. What other things played a role in helping you to move forward and heal from this contentious relationship?
  - b. What type of outcomes/results have you witnessed?
  - c. What changed in your self-awareness (or in how you talked to yourself and others about what was going on)?
  - d. What changed in how you thought about it theologically?
6. What type of resolution have you experienced?
  - a. What key things were vital to you to come to this point of resolution?
  - b. What kind of further restoration could you wish for?
7. How would you describe your theological reflections on it at this point?
  - a. How has your theology changed as a result of this experience?
  - b. How did your belief in God play a role in the healing process?

8. If someone were sitting before you going through a similar experience what kinds of advice would you give him or her for moving towards healing?

The researcher field-tested the interview protocol before data collection began.

The researcher used the test interview notes to document any questions that seemed difficult or confusing and any responses that yield an emotional response. This information was used to prepare for future data collection and analysis or to modify the questions that elicited emotional responses from the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

When approaching the data, the researcher utilized the constant comparative method to analyze the information collected. The constant comparative method seeks to gain the most insight possible. The key to this method is comparing and contrasting the data to find patterns and common threads. Merriam describes the process by explaining how the data is grouped by similar dimensions, the dimension is given a name and “then is given a category.”<sup>592</sup> This process happens over and over again, building patterns, which lead to building a theory from the data, with the goal being substantive theory. Merriam clarifies the value of the process, “A substantive theory has a specificity and hence usefulness to practice often lacking in theories that cover more global concerns.”<sup>593</sup>

In utilizing this approach, the researcher was able to take the information collected from the interviews, code the data and group it into patterns and categories. This method guided the researcher to discover each individual’s unique experience from their perspective and then compare it with other individual experiences, gleaning the

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<sup>592</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid.

overall process of restoration from spiritual abuse on their lives. As urged by Patton to “strive for depth of understanding,” the researcher sought to faithfully understand and communicate in a positive, respectful manner the environment and encounter of the phenomenon referred to as spiritual abuse.<sup>594</sup>

### **Research Position**

A critical aspect of a qualitative study is that the primary instrument data collection is the researcher. Merriam emphasizes the importance of researchers “explaining their biases, dispositions and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken.”<sup>595</sup> According to Joseph Maxwell, speaker and professor known for his expertise in the qualitative research method, this helps readers to better comprehend how the study could be influenced by the researcher’s values and expectations.<sup>596</sup> It also aids researchers as they identify these biases and dispositions.

The researcher of this study served as lay leader overseeing three different ministry areas, under the leadership of the lead pastor of a non-denominational Protestant church with approximately four hundred members. Prior to this, the researcher also earned a degree in business management and operated an electronics manufacturing company for over twelve years. While serving as a lay leader, the researcher experienced a form of spiritual abuse that was not recognized until several years later. The awareness came during a seminar provided by both professional counselors and a pastor at a

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<sup>594</sup> M. Q. Patton, “Quality in Qualitative Research: Methodological Principles and Recent Developments,” (lecture at the Division of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 1985), 1.

<sup>595</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 219.

<sup>596</sup> Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 3d. ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013), 108.

different Protestant church. This experience brought great understanding and awareness of the researcher's experience, creating a desire to understand this phenomenon better. Therefore, the aim of this study is to gain insight into this phenomenon in a way that can help leaders come to an honest understanding and become motivated to seek restoration where needed.

### **Study Limitations**

In conducting a qualitative study one is limited to resources, time and opportunity. For that reason, this qualitative study only focused on an evangelical Protestant and reformed church pool, and within that pool, six associate pastors were interviewed. It must be acknowledged that the data gathered from the research will not be useful for all encounters or individuals and therefore will not have universal application. Despite the limitations, there will be applicable information for not only those who have encountered spiritual abuse as a lay leader in the church but for all church participants and leaders who have observed such abuse. This study is also useful for those entering ministry.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This study was designed to explore how associate pastors experience restoration from spiritual abuse they have experienced from a lead pastor. The research questions that guided the study and interviews were:

1. What encounters do associate pastors experience with lead pastors that classify as spiritual abuse?
2. How do associate pastors become aware they have experienced spiritual abuse?
3. In what ways and to what extent do associate pastors experience healing and restoration?
4. In what ways and to what extent does theology help associate pastors toward restoration?

This chapter will introduce the participants and present their insights concerning the research questions provided above.

It is important to note that during the process the interviewer was careful not to use the following terms with the participants before or during the interview: abuse, spiritual abuse, trauma or wound. Instead the term “contentious experience” or “contentious relationship” was used. This safeguard ensured that the data was their own raw and authentic perspective. If a participant introduced one of the avoided words, then the interviewer would refer to the words they used. There was only one exception to this rule at the end of one of the interviews, which is clearly presented in the material below.

## **Introduction to Participants and Context**

The study included interviews with six individuals who served as associate pastors from three denominations within the Protestant evangelical church: Baptist, Methodist and Nazarene. The researcher sought associate pastors who not only had experienced a contentious relationship with a lead pastor they served under but who had also moved beyond the environment and experience. The six participants interviewed, as well as the churches and pastors they served under, were assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Due to the delicate nature of the study, information about participants will be limited. Of the six participants five were male and one was female.

The first participant interviewed was Mark. The church where Mark was serving during his contentious experience, Christ Community, averaged 6,000 members. He served there for seventeen and a half years, and during his tenure his positions included youth pastor and pastor of adult education. At the time he left he was the pastor of adult education reporting to the senior pastor. Before joining the staff of Christ Community, he served in four other churches with a combined total of twelve years in ministry. Mark was ordained prior to joining the staff of Christ Community. Mark has a double bachelor's degree and partial time completed in a master of counseling program. This was his last ministry position in a church.

Chris was the second participant interviewed. Chris encountered his contentious relationship during his first ministry position at The Rock. He served there for seven years as the student pastor, reporting directly to the lead pastor. The Rock had a church membership of approximately 2,200. The period of time Chris worked at The Rock was during the 1980s, when the church was experiencing incredible growth. He also shared



that prior to his taking the position the church went through seven youth pastors in an eight-year period. He was ordained at The Rock while serving as the youth pastor. Chris has a Bachelor of Science degree and has started a master's program but has not finished it. After his time at The Rock, he continued to serve as a youth pastor for thirteen years. He then served as an associate pastor for three years and then became a senior pastor. He has served as a senior pastor for the last thirteen years and remains in this role at present.

The third person interviewed, Eric, started serving as the part-time youth pastor at the People's Church, which quickly moved into a full-time position. It was his first step into full-time ministry and the church had a membership of approximately 600. Eric served under the lead pastor for thirteen years and was ordained into ministry while serving at the People's Church. It was at People's Church where Eric experienced a contentious relationship with the lead pastor. Since leaving the People's Church, Eric has continued serving as a youth pastor in two other churches for over twelve years. Eric started working toward a bachelor's degree but has yet to complete it.

Sue was the fourth participant and also the only woman interviewed. She served at Harmony Church as an associate pastor for twelve years. When she started working at Harmony Church, she served under the senior pastor for approximately five years. At this point the church hired an executive pastor who supervised all the other pastors at the church. Harmony Church had a membership of 6,000 at the time. Her contentious experience occurred while serving at Harmony Church under the executive pastor. Sue has earned a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Divinity. She was ordained by her denomination and served in other ministry opportunities for twelve years prior to serving

at Harmony Church. After Sue's experience at Harmony Church she left ministry to pursue a more administrative role outside of a church setting.

The fifth participant, Tom, had two contentious church experiences. Part of the reason he shared both was because it allowed him to share how processing through them lead him to a better place. The first place was Hope Church that had 1,400 members and was the first ministry position Tom held. His role was the college and single adults pastor where he served under the ministry of education director, who reported to the executive pastor. Tom's contentious experience occurred during encounters with the executive pastor. After leaving Hope Church, Tom went to the Church of Mt. Zion to serve as the young adults and college pastor for four years. When Tom arrived at Mt. Zion, he served under an interim pastor for nine months until they hired a new senior pastor. Tom experienced the contentious relationship with the senior pastor. Mt. Zion had approximately 900 members. After Tom left Mt. Zion he became the pastor of a small church in another town where he served for over nine years. Since that time he has served as a consultant for a company that assists in leadership development. Tom has a Bachelor of Arts in Bible and Sociology.

Peter was the final participant. His contentious experience occurred while serving at Grace Fellowship as the student pastor. This was his second ministry position after being in ministry for eighteen months. He reported directly to the senior pastor and served there for two years. Grace Fellowship at the time held a membership of approximately 800 members. Prior to serving at Grace Fellowship, he was ordained through his denomination. Peter holds a Bachelor of Science in Business Management. He has also taken seminary classes but has not completed the requirements for a master's

degree. After leaving Grace Fellowship he went on to serve for over ten years at two other churches in several different roles such as teaching pastor, elder, outreach and evangelism and youth pastor. Peter switched vocations and is now a consultant in the business industry. Prior to working at Grace Fellowship, Peter served at Harvest Fellowship as the student pastor for a period of eighteen months.

The opportunity to interview these participants provided insight into what one experiences in a contentious relationship. Before digging into the weeds of the interviews, the synopsis of two participants proved intriguing. The first is from Chris:

The core problem was a very successful pastor. To me success is our worst enemy usually. King David didn't mess up until he was a successful king. When you are a little shepherd boy, it's very easy to be "God I need you, God I need you." But when you get success you are king of the mountain, you know. Well this guy was. His success was being touted throughout our denomination. He was literally called "the golden child," had his own television ministry. I mean back in the day, he had a very impactful ministry in this city. He was "the minister" in our city, one of them anyway. So that's easy because everybody loves you and is slapping you on the back. You are winning all these accolades. He was one of the leaders of our convention, success after success after success. So that pretty soon, "I am the man." That seemed to permeate through some of his leadership style. And then he got bad advice from mega-church pastors throughout the country who took him under their wing and said if you are going to get to the level that we have gotten to, you are going to need to do these things. So, he started trying to make things happen instead of just letting the Lord continue to do the work. Because I do think the Lord used him. There are tons of people in this city today that are radically saved because he was an evangelistic speaker. And, they would tell you today that he was an impactful man in their lives. So he wasn't an evil man; he just made bad leadership decisions. And, out of that came a choice to think, "I have to be strong, heavy fisted," (as he pounds on table twice with a fist) that is how you got results, and it backfired on him. I think that was the mistake that was made.<sup>597</sup>

The second example is from the interview with Peter:

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<sup>597</sup> Two other participants Eric and Tom present their pastors were also successful and dynamic pastors sharing respectively: "He was evangelistic and brought excitement" and "Charismatic leader that I have been around since and thoroughly enjoy him. Great teacher; love to hear him preach."

Peter: You lose respect and once you lose respect it is really hard to get it back. I think that is what it was. You know everyone is flawed; everyone has challenges. But when you go to a certain point, it gets beyond just flawed behavior, and to the point of, “Can I trust this guy?” “Is he going to be rummaging around through my office?”

Interviewer: At this point, when he betrayed you and you witnessed his continued behavior with the other staff, did you start to give more validity to his actions than you had before? Where before you were more along the lines of trying to help with reconciling his actions with the other staff?

Peter: I don't think that the trust factor was an issue with the other people, because you have to always trust your pastor.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Peter: I think that we are all programmed to think that our leaders, our president, CEO's, pastor, parents, people that are in authority over us are right and that they have my best interest in mind. My mom has my best interest in mind. My manager, my boss, has my best interest and the company's best interest in mind. And you think the pastor's job is a shepherd. There is a great book that was written called “They Smell Like Sheep” about elders and pastors. At the end of the day they should smell like sheep; they should not be in their ivory tower having all the deacons do all the work. At the end of the day, they should be rubbing up against, holding up the sheep, caring for the sheep. I think that he wasn't great at that, but because I loved doing that, I got pretty good at it. But I think that when I saw what I saw, it just, it kind of trumped everything else. My good thoughts were about giving him a pass here, a pass there, and so I think you do that to the point where you realize, “I am giving him every benefit of the doubt.”

The contentious relationships were challenging for the participants both mentally and emotionally. With the direction provided from the research and interview questions, several themes and patterns emerged that provided both clarity and understanding.

## **Indicators of Spiritual Abuse**

During the interviews several indicators became apparent as the participants began to share their encounters with the lead pastor as each shifted into a state of contentiousness. The indicators ranged from strong, acute and personal to more of a general pattern for the relationship or environment. The strong, acute and personal indicators included shaming, jealousy, controlling/demanding, manipulation, monitoring and being performance-based. The indicators for the general patterns in the relationships and environment included being ignored or set aside, having an inner circle, targeting, expressing paranoia or mistrust/betrayal and being toxic.

### *Strong, Acute, and Personal Indicators*

The first and most prevalent indicator the participants shared was shaming. All participants shared that they had experienced some form of shaming. Mark said it came in the form of snide and sarcastic remarks spoken to him alone and to entire groups. Some of the time the shaming would be off-the-cuff, and at other times it would take place in meetings with other staff members or elders. He said that at times it would feel a bit jarring. It would come in a staff meeting discussing a successful project they had just wrapped up. Instead of celebrating the results and pointing out the success, the lead pastor would start saying, "Here are the ten things you did wrong." He would have no idea where it came from, saying the tone and words were condescending, so everyone could tell something more was going on. He felt attacked, he explained. Tom described the same type of actions taking place both individually and corporately. His described how the attitude in which the statements were made was snarky and inappropriate. He

shared that one time his pastor did it from the pulpit. They had a promotion Sunday to try to bring as many friends as possible, and the pastor called him out, as well as the members in his ministry group. The pastor started by bragging on the other groups who had been bringing in visitors for a promotion Sunday. He then moved the comments to call out the singles and young adults, stating that they must not have even tried. Tom said that while it might not seem like a big deal, “personally, it was the condescension, the shaming... you could feel the air go out of the room.” Tom further shared that people hated working there.

Chris’s experience aligns with both Mark and Tom’s experience. He explains that a lot of staff meetings went really poorly. He says that during this time the staff tried to be submissive while serving under a leader who was condescending and ostracizing. He says there was always a tension because the lead pastor had a dictatorial and autocratic leadership style, therefore the staff hated going to weekly staff meetings. During these weekly meetings, one piece of the agenda was focused on how to meet the growth vision of the church and get more people baptized and in the seats. He said:

The lead pastor had this chart, kind of like what we had in kindergarten or first grade, where all the staff names were listed on one side. Each meeting each person would go around the circle verbally sharing their visitation reports and numbers as the lead pastor would write them down. It was supposed to be a challenge, a competition...you would get stars every time you shared your faith and dots when someone got baptized. When we would hand him a sheet with our visitation reports he brought a big red magic marker like a first grade teacher, and he would grade you A-F on whether he thought you did a good enough job. And, then he would slide it across to where all the staff members see what grade he’d given you, as if he’s the judge.

It would go on week after week. He shared that it was one of those things that others could not believe happened unless they lived through it. “It was just totally

demoralizing.” Reflectively, Chris shared it was as if the staff members were just pawns in the game.

Other words heard during the interviews to describe the shaming were “berating, disrespectful, demeaning, belligerent, short, curt, uncivilized, labeled and abrasive.” Sue explained that for her it came in the form of “you should have” statements, such as “you should know better than this, you should just follow, you should, you should, you should...Being told ‘should’ on and on is really not very much fun.” Eric shared an experience from early in his ministry and marriage, when he and his wife were barely making it. His lead pastor called Eric into his office and confronted him over their tithing. The lead pastor brought out a copy of Eric and his wife’s tithing report and confronted Eric saying, “Is this all you have given to the church? This is embarrassing.” Eric conceded that there was no excuse for their lack of tithing, but the pastor never thought, “Wow this couple is just trying to make it.” Nor did he offer to help them to budget or understand finances better. The lead pastor just bawled him out. Peter commented that at times it can just be personality problems, and that some people, like his lead pastor, have personalities that can be abrasive. However, he said choosing to be abrasive is a character flaw, and realizing the difference was when his opinion changed.

As Mark continued to share his story, he explained that he figured out that part of the reason for the condescending comments was jealousy, another indicator of spiritual abuse. In the midst of all that was going on at the time, he did not recognize it. However, a moment came when they had just completed a project successfully and people had recognized his work in front of the pastor. Soon after that the snide remarks and

negativity toward his work began. In Eric's story, the jealousy was more blatant. He shared the following:

If he challenges his staff to go win a soul, to personally win someone to the Lord, you know the competition is on. If you came back and told him that you did, he would not go "great job." No, he would go out and win two people to the Lord and go, "Look what I did, I just lead two people to the Lord. You all just did one, I did two." And it was just this constant, I am going to burn brighter than you, I am going to fight, and I'm gonna be the toughest guy.

For Eric the longer he served under the pastor, the worse the jealousy got. He said after serving there for ten years, it became such a mess that people had begun to no longer take the pastor seriously. During one summer his youth ministry was really growing and they had baptized forty-six students, which for the size of their town and church was amazing. Eric got a call from one of the top youth leaders in the state who said, "Eric, you need to know the biggest churches in our denominations baptize about forty, and that is in the top 100 churches in the nation." He shared he was super excited and went to tell his lead pastor. He said, "I was thinking he would be super excited, but instead he sat me down and chewed me out. He said 'I was not thinking of the team, but I was trying to make a church within a church.'" Then the lead pastor told Eric he was only thinking of himself and was being selfish.

For Eric it didn't end there. One fall just after Eric's ministry team finished up a judgment house week, he threw a thank you celebration party to recognize his team for their hard work. He shared it was a great week, the team worked hard and well together, and a lot of lives were changed. He was sharing from the sound board area over a mic and said, "I just want to tell you again, everybody, this was you all, what a great job you did, what a great thing you all did, you all made this successful." Everyone is cheering



and thanking me, saying it was a group effort. Then my lead pastor, who is at the pulpit, grabs the mic and says, “Aaah Eric, you are so humble, you are just a Tom Sawyer.” And I laughed to try to play it off in front of all these people. He continued, “Aaah, you’re the guy that gets everybody to paint the fence, and then you take credit for it.” When he said that, “The entire crowd booed his comments, really loud. Well he just hated any of that kind of stuff if it took away from his limelight.” For Eric he came to the conclusion that he couldn’t win with this pastor. He could not tell him anything good that was going on because he would get mad. “We were dealing with major dysfunction.”

Controlling is another indicator described by both Peter and Chris as “my way or the highway.” Chris found it difficult to describe how intense the demands from the lead pastor were, sharing it felt as if he was trying to make his staff into some beast of burden to accomplish an objective. Sue’s executive pastor was similar. The executive pastor would say, “I just expect you to do whatever I tell you, whenever I tell you to do it.” Or, “I want what I want done, when I want it done. And I expect it to be followed.” At times this would be done by screaming at Sue. For Sue it reached the point where her prayers were even scrutinized. She was told how to start her prayers and what to include when she was giving the formal prayer during church services. Eric shared that his pastor loved to say, “I am just one tough pastor, you will do what I say or you will get out.” On multiple occasions, the lead pastor would call Eric to his office and question him about people he was having lunch with. One was a staff member, and the others were youth volunteers, a couple assisting him in the youth ministry. Here is his story about one of the instances:

He would come down to my office and say, “Hey, I don’t want you to go to lunch anymore with Blake Jones.” And I go, “Why, did I do something wrong?” And he said, “No, I just don’t like that you guys are hanging out all the time together. No more.” No explanation and then he goes, “Don’t tell Blake I said that.” Blake and I were going to lunch all the time. We kind of hung out; we were friends. And I go, “Okay.” And I had to just work it out. And he goes, “If I find out you told him, I am going to be mad at you.”

Peter, in his story, describes his pastor by stating he was a hard driving guy who was hard to work for. Upon reflecting, he said, “All of the sudden, you wake up one morning and you feel like you have been duct-taped to a certain way or mode of how you have to do things.” He said the pastor’s need to control the environment got so bad that he would create positions to insulate himself in order to have a place to point blame for what they were doing.

A story shared by Eric falls into the category of control and manipulation. Eric’s story presented as a combination of the two and is best described as positioning. Eric was placed in a position to observe the lead pastor fire another associate pastor. He explained what he witnessed in his first six months of being on staff. Eric’s story about the lead pastor is as follows:

He called me into his office and here I think I am in trouble and I look in and there is a deacon sitting in there. And he goes, “I need you to have a seat in my office here, and just sit here and don’t say anything.” And I thought man I am in trouble. And then he went and got another staff member, the education minister, and said, “Hey, I need you to come in here and we are going to have a meeting.” And the next thing I know the education minister was fired and had three months to find another place and I thought wow, I have never seen that before.

Eric realized later that he was there just to observe what took place. He also shared that he started to realize the lead pastor was a little bit paranoid and that, “his self-esteem was only fed on if he can be the toughest guy in the room and the man on top.” The

experience clearly left an impression on Eric as he shared that he had never seen or experienced anything like it.

The next indicator is somewhat attached to the previous indicator, control and it is manipulative. This manipulation is done with intent to control, so the purpose and goal is to gain control of something. The base word of manipulative is ‘manipulate.’ It is a verb defined as “control or influence (a person or situation) cleverly, unfairly or unscrupulously; to alter (data) or present (statistics) so as to mislead.”<sup>598</sup> Chris provides our first example by sharing that when he was hired, he was excited thinking the lead pastor valued him and recognized what he brought to the table. He was immediately set straight. The lead pastor sat him down and said: “Ok, you know you weren’t deserving of this position. The parents pretty much pushed you on me and you’re gonna drop out of school and you are going to bust your rear and you’re going to have to perform or you are going to be out of here.” At this point Chris knew exactly where he stood with the pastor. He said that he became a workaholic. He said they had good days and bad days, sharing that the lead pastor would be kind to his face one moment, then make the environment miserable. He added that the staff never felt valued, or a part of a team or ministry, only pawns being manipulated so that the pastor did well.

Peter shared the following example in regards to his lead pastor, “If you want to get from one point to another, he will take you around several different trees to get to where he wants you instead of just taking you directly there.” Not only was his lead pastor manipulative; the executive pastor was worse. He said that on several occasions a

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<sup>598</sup> Oxford University Press, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 1064.

member of the church would approach him in the hallway and question him about a decision the church staff and elders had made. He would ask where they heard it, and they would say Jeremy, the executive pastor, told me. The reality was the story had never actually happened. At one point he took the executive pastor to lunch and asked him about it. “I said, ‘Jeremy, why would you tell someone that we voted on that?’ And he said, ‘Well, sometimes it’s to help people through processes, and little white lies are helpful.’ And I said, ‘First of all there is no substitute for truth. Why did you not just tell them we are not going to discuss that, and we are not going to vote on it. Another option, is why don’t we do that, discuss it, vote on it, and then you can tell them the results, but to lie to them is unacceptable.’” Peter continued, explaining that regardless of their conversation and pointing out the problems lying created, Jeremy continued his behavior.

Sue and Eric had similar stories. For Eric the lead pastor actually fabricated a story that he had caught another associate pastor in a compromising position with an assistant. He insinuated that there was something going on between the two and they were being unfaithful to their spouses. The two adamantly denied it. Over time the associate pastor left, and it created a lot of problems. Eventually over a few years the truth came out revealing nothing ever happened between the associate pastor and the assistant. It was all made up to get the guy fired because the lead pastor did not like him.

The presence of indicators such as control and manipulation often led to the next indicator, monitoring. Tom describes an environment where the lead pastor was the driver and the executive pastor was the hammer. He detailed a system the executive pastor put into place to monitor their time. If someone was not in the office, they had to fill out a “time away slip.” They had very set hours and the executive pastor would make

sweeps through the office several times during the day to check who was out and if they had filled out a time away slip. “They monitored who we had coffee with, how long we were with them.” Tom said, “It was crazy.” Sue shared how her executive pastor would monitor her hospital visits, who she went to see, how long she was there. The micro-managing became difficult because the executive pastor wanted to review the criteria for how Sue picked people to serve in her ministry volunteer team, wanted to see who Sue picked before Sue invited them on her team, and reviewed all of her curriculum. Sue confessed it got to the point of being ridiculous and at times unethical. Sue shared she had been serving in this type of ministry for over thirty years.

With Peter it seemed to hit a different extreme. He shared that he was getting ready to leave on a two-week choir trip, so his wife came in on a Saturday to work on some administrative stuff. While they were in his office working, the pastor came in and questioned what they were doing there. Peter shared they were trying to get some stuff done before they left on the choir trip. Shortly after that, the pastor left his office. The next day, on a Sunday morning, Peter’s secretary came in and asked if Peter had left a manila envelope with a used printer ribbon in the trash. He told her no but then looked at the ribbon she was holding. Peter’s wife had used his secretary’s printer the day before. Overnight someone had come in, reviewed the typewriter ribbon and replaced the old ribbon with a new ribbon. He figured out that the pastor had done it.

The final strong, acute and personal indicator is creating a performance-based environment. Our two examples come from Tom and Chris. Tom describes his environment as having a corporate climate feel to it. He said:

It was numbers driven... there is definitely a currency in that world, and the currency is nickels and noses, facilities and people. So, there is definitely a currency. So, if you want to be relevant, if you want to have a measuring stick to see who is doing well, then that is what you shoot for. And so, whether it is something that is nature or nurture with these guys if they want to be the pastor of a sizeable congregation that is the way you do it.

His executive used what were called TAPS or “tactical action plans” that drove their jobs. At one point there was so much push back, they changed the name to MAPS or “ministry action plans.” The MAPS form would include current numbers and goals, which were used to identify the gap between the two. From that they had to come up with strategic plans to bridge the gap. Tom said that their jobs were driven by those forms. “Again, very numbers driven, very condescending.”

Chris noted that he felt his environment was driven by the denomination, explaining it was evangelism-driven, with the church’s success dictated by number of converts. The focus was more on the church numbers and offerings instead of making disciples. He shared they had quotas to meet, which included how many people they could get to join the church weekly and monthly, how many visits they made and how many they baptized. It was clearly implied to measure effectiveness, and therefore how long a pastor would last in his position. He asserted, “I am burdened for people to get saved, but this was crazy.” These types of pressures and expectations squashed the staff’s spirit, he concluded.

The participants shared some initial reactions at this phase of the interview to the previous indicators. Sue shared she felt demeaned and useless. For Mark his reaction was more raw emotion, hurt and wounded; then it moved to mad. Eric just wanted to make the pastor happy; he wanted to be on his good side and was fearful of not achieving that.

### *Indicators of the State of the Relationship and Environment*

The next set of indicators shifted from the acute form, which was more shrewd and shocking, to subtle proof regarding the reality of the relationship. Such proof included being ignored or set aside, maintaining an inner circle, targeting, giving into paranoia, exhibiting mistrust/betrayal and being toxic. In the interviews it became apparent that for some, their understanding of the nature of things began during their time in the environment and for others, their clarity came after they left the environment.

The first indicator of the state of the relationship and environment was being ignored or set aside. Mark describes he was just flat out ignored. He said that he was considered one of the idea generators of the staff. However, when he fell out of favor with the lead pastor, things changed. He would be in a meeting and present an idea, which would be met with criticism such as, “No, we are not going to do that.” Sue shared that at times people, both staff members and congregants, would say, “So what’s the deal? Does the executive pastor not like you?” Sue would respond by saying, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” They would respond, “Well she has talked to everybody else in the room but you today. You’re smiling and being cheerful and she is ignoring you.” Peter said of his lead pastor, “You always had the impression that he wasn’t listening to you.” Eric called it the silent treatment, explaining the normal routine with the lead pastor was “After you got a chewing out, he wouldn’t talk to you for three weeks.”

An environment that maintained an inner circle was the next indicator. While it is understandable that lead pastors have a group with a higher level of trust and confidence, it can become unhealthy when it is used for ulterior motives. The inner circle was

described as “the people that have the heartbeat of the church and pastor.” The reality is that pastors can come to depend on people in that roll. While it is not an official group, everyone is aware of that it exists and only a few people are typically in the inner circle. Once one was in the inner circle, each was acutely aware when the pastor decided someone was no longer a part of that “inner circle.” Mark shared that when this happened to him, he suddenly was like, “What is going on here?” and his rose-colored glasses were much more evident. Chris shared how he watched a long-time member get attacked not only by the lead pastor but also by the guys of the pastor’s inner circle. This happened when the member voiced disagreement at a formal church meeting. He said it was sad, and that the member lost all heart and has not been involved in the church since.

Eric was a little more forthcoming in sharing his experience of the inner circle. He describes his lead pastor’s inner circle saying:

He would have a circle of people that he would trust. Then he would always take one and kick them out of the circle, and he would make sure the person knew he was out of the circle. I can remember walking to my office, we had just done a rebuild of the church and knocked down the majority of the church and rebuilt it. I had a different office down in the other part of the building inside of a gym. I can remember always walking to my office thinking, “Man, I am so thankful I am on the inside of that circle.” I think, this is really bad thinking, it’s unhealthy that I am setting here trying to do ministry, but I am not feeling bad for the guy who is kicked out, I am just thinking of me.” You see, when I first started, he took me in and put me in the inner circle. He had me even sit in on some things that I had never sat in before. I thought, “man this is great, but it was really bad.”

Eric further shared that after he had been on staff for about nine or ten years that all changed. After one of the associate pastors left, he realized there was a new circle. Eric now found he was the next one kicked out of the inner circle because he refused to follow the orders of his lead pastor. The lead pastor told Eric and his wife to step away from their closest friends. He said, “I realized at this point something is not right here.”



The next indicator was targeting. Mark shared that it was a regular pattern at his church that occurred every year in the fall. It was seasonal and every year at that time “Someone’s head had to roll.” If someone confronted the pastor or went to him with a concern he did not like, it could end up being a tipping point, explained Mark. He shared that was exactly what happened to him. He went to the lead pastor about being concerned about some stuff the lead pastor’s son, who was an associate pastor, had done. He wanted to give him the heads up and warn him about how others were perceiving it. It did not go well, and for Mark it was a tipping point. It was all downhill from there. “We called it getting a target put on your back, and when that happens there is no getting it off. And it’s just your time to go.” Mark shared once he realized the target was there, he left on his own, saying “I didn’t want to go out in a body bag.”

Sue shared that she was somewhat unaware of the idea of targeting. However, two different people made comments about how she had been targeted by the executive pastor. One shared how regardless of how the executive pastor was treated, targets stayed on their backs. The other comment came after she had left. She ran into a staff member who said, “Unfortunately when you left, I was the next target, and I lived with it as long as I could.” Peter shared:

When your ministry position becomes tentative, you become pensive and paranoia can even sneak in. I think people discount paranoia. I think there is a lot of that. And you get a lot of these young staff people who all of the sudden realize, “Wow, my senior guy is not really happy with me. Man, he might fire me, maybe not only might, but he will.” If you get a target on your back you might as well just update your resume and go.

Exhibiting paranoia was the next indicator. Tom shared that his lead pastor’s paranoia came from past experiences. He called it a paranoia of kingdom building,

recounting how at one point a previous music minister had built a “mini kingdom” and lead people to “not follow the pastor’s leadership.” Soon after this occurred, the youth pastor left and was overseeing another church in town that was doing really well. He explained this created a sort of paranoia where the current staff always felt that they were constantly under the guy’s thumb. In Eric’s story, he began to realize his lead pastor was paranoid because when he would see Eric talking to someone in the hallway or out to lunch with someone, he would immediately call him into his office and question him.

Eric recalled those interrogations, where the lead pastor asked:

“So what were you saying about me to her?” and I go, “Saying what to who about you?” and he goes, “You were talking to Mariah, and you were motioning to me as I was walking away.” And I was like, “No Paul, (the lead pastor) I was talking to her about her husband dipping.” And he goes, “No, no you were talking about me.” And I go, “I promise I wasn’t.” So about a month later I went to eat at the diner across the street from the church with a couple who were youth workers. Now Paul lived next door to the church, and the next thing I know I come back from lunch and Paul is in my office, in the dark. He is just sitting in my office waiting for me to come back from lunch. First, there are no windows in my office because my office is inside a gym, and it scared me when I walked in, and I go, “What are you doing?” (said enthusiastically) and he said, (with a serious tone) “Do you want to tell me what you are doing eating lunch with Abi and Greg?” and I said, “Just eating with Abi and Greg; just talking about their son Max.” And he said, “Well did you all talk about me?” and I go, “Paul, I need you to know that your name never came up; I don’t talk to them about you.” And he said, “Yeah, ya did, what did you talk about?” and I was like, “Dude, I can’t live like this.”

Eric described it as “this paranoid mess.”

Peter shared that he believed his lead pastor’s paranoia came from the fact the he couldn’t keep a staff, that guys rarely stayed longer than a year. He believes paranoia is the greatest challenge for lead pastors today. He says they are paranoid about what the church thinks, they are worried if there is a group out to get them and they fear some people will like another staff guy better than they like them. This feels like a threat to the

lead pastor. Then when the lead pastor realized the board he answered to knew he couldn't keep a staff, the paranoia got worse. Another lead pastor he worked with was even more paranoid. He believed it was an insecurity issue and that there was a possibility the guy was bi-polar. However, he admits that part of the other lead pastor's paranoia was because he had been burned at a previous church. He believes the paranoia and insecurity led to behaviors such as being controlling and manipulative.

Another indicator of the state of one's relationship is creating betrayal or mistrust. Sue shared an experience with the lead pastor when she felt betrayed. There was a member of Sue's ministry group who felt called to become a deacon. Sue approached the lead pastor to ask him about it and he said, "I think that is great, I think we should do this, tell them to start the process." After the process had begun, the executive pastor confronted her for doing things on her own and not getting approval of the lead pastor. Sue shared with the executive pastor her conversation with the lead pastor, which led to a formal meeting. During the formal meeting, the lead pastor denied the conversation. Then when Sue told him the time, place and specific words of the conversation, the lead pastor said, "That may have happened, but I don't remember it." The whole event was discounted and the process to become a deacon was stopped.

Peter experienced betrayal both from the lead pastor and an executive pastor. The betrayal from the lead pastor was shared earlier in the section on monitoring when the pastor reviewed the typewriter ribbon from Peter's secretary's typewriter. Not only was it a form of monitoring; Peter felt extremely betrayed by the lead pastor's mistrust of him. This action led Peter to feel as if he could not trust in his pastor and that led to his leaving. In regards to the executive pastor, he was the kind of person who would keep

things from others, do things behind their backs and say others were doing things they were not. Overall for him it also felt like mistrust and betrayal.

The final indicator to the state of things is being toxic. For Mark he did not realize the environment had turned toxic, as well as his relationship with the lead pastor, until it was too late. He described that after he left he was visiting with other pastors who left before he did, and as they shared their experience, it began to be more clear. They shared how their relationship with the lead pastor had soured. What they described, he realized, was some of the same things he had experienced. He shared what he had learned from talking to the other pastor who also left:

But as I stepped away there was such freedom from the stress, the fear of the unknown. I had control of my life and not somebody else. When you relinquish that to somebody else they have power over you. And by not submitting to a boss, it can get bad. It's just when the boss doesn't have your best interest in mind, then it becomes a toxic relationship. I began to see it as a toxic relationship in that I allowed somebody to basically control my life, and that's not where I need to be.

Peter's realization came after he left the toxic environment as well, stating, "I didn't have to put up with a nut job senior pastor who seemed to not be able to sabotage my ministry or take the joy out of it." Tom said, "What happens in those toxic environments is that either you care so much that you sacrifice yourself or you stop caring." For him, he stopped caring and eventually left ministry altogether. Tom also shared that he did not believe "by any stretch of the imagination" that pastors set out to create toxic environments. Rather, it's a very insular position, and they just don't know any other way to do it.

Some more initial reactions at this phase of the interviews produced a different level of acknowledgement. At this point Chris shared that he felt underappreciated and

that he started to get angry, “I was angry at what was happening to people through all of it.” He was realizing that it not only impacted him and the staff members but also the church members. Peter shared that for him, he initially wanted to help the pastor by seeking to repair his relationships with other pastors. He explained the pastor didn’t mean to say what he said, or the pastor did not have any ill intent. He thought doing this would help the church overall, and “initially I think they appreciated that, even the lead pastor.” He said, “I don’t think he ever had anyone who was strong enough to point out what was happening.” However, over time it just got to be too much. The demeaning language the lead pastor used with people, as well as his anger issues, became quite a challenge. With all that they never knew when he was about to explode.

For Tom it was quite different. He shared it was legitimate sorrow, like something had died. Reflectively he admitted he was mourning his vision of what he thought the church was, as well as being a pastor. He said, “Now I would argue that it needed to, but it was hard.” He acknowledged:

So, there was some sorrow in there and there was a lot of shame of: “I can’t do this, I am not good at this job and I might not even be that great of a Christian if I am not motivated by the same things that these guys are motivated by.” And it is hard for me to turn off my mind even if my body is not physically at the office. So, there was always this sense of “I am supposed to be doing something, what is someone expecting me to do?” “Are they happy with what I am doing?” So there is always that, and it was hard to be present, even with the things I should be enjoying. It probably was a fear in that I needed people’s approval.

He remembered the words of his education pastor at the first place he served during his first week who said to him, “This is as bad as it’s going to get.” What he meant was that this is going to be really bad, but it won’t get any worse in ministry than what you are experiencing here.

### *Summary of Indicators of Spiritual Abuse*

The testimonies from the participants provided quite a range of information for strong, acute and personal indicators of spiritual abuse and then moved to indicators describing the state of the relationships and environment. Before digging into the following information, two testimonies set the stage. The first was from Chris, who believed a core problem in contentious relationships was a very successful pastor. He presented that success can become the enemy. When one is just beginning ministry, the view is much different. He directs people to look at the life of King David. In the beginning pastors are clear of their need of God. But, as they become successful, that perspective begins to grow dim. At this point in his description he shared that he believed contentious leaders are not evil, but they begin to make bad leadership decisions as the pressure of success mounts.

Peter spoke second and shared that when contentiousness happened, the leader lost respect and it was hard to get it back. He emphasized that everyone is flawed and has challenges. For a leader it was exacerbated by having a supervisory role over other leaders, and many times it went beyond flawed behavior. He shared that Christians are programmed to trust their leaders and think they are right, being in positions of authority. However, when Peter saw the things this pastor was doing it “trumped everything else.”

At this point the study returned to the first research question. The study sought to understand what encounters associate pastors experience with lead pastors that classify as spiritual abuse? The first type of indicators -- the strong, acute and personal indicators -- included shaming, jealousy, being controlling/demanding, manipulative, monitoring and being performance-based. Shaming came in many forms that took place both individually

and corporately. The examples of shaming were snide and sarcastic remarks, condemnations, being snarky or inappropriate, berating, showing disrespect, demeaning, being belligerent, short, curt, uncivilized, labeling and being abrasive. Some pastors even would call other pastors and their ministry groups out from the pulpit. This was done to Eric when his pastor mocked him and called him a “Tom Sawyer,” and another time calling Eric “embarrassing” by pointing out his lack of giving when he was newly married.

As the examples rolled on, jealousy, control and manipulation surfaced. At one point when Eric’s youth ministry got recognized by the state convention for forty-six baptisms in one summer, the lead pastor’s response was not one of excitement or joy. Instead he told Eric he was being selfish and said Eric “was not thinking of the team but was trying to make a church within a church.” It became clear from examples from Peter, Chris, Sue and Eric that control was also an indicator. Control was not only prevalent but the lead pastors were outspoken with it, making comments such as:

- “It’s my way or the highway.”
- “I just expect you to do whatever I tell you, whenever I tell you to do it.”
- “I want what I want done when I want it done.”
- “I am just one tough pastor; you will do what I say or you will get out.”

This control led to manipulation where Eric’s lead pastor would tell him who he could have lunch with or even have as friends, a clear example of trying to gain control. Other examples were given by both Peter and Sue where their lead pastors were caught in lies

to achieve their agendas. Peter's executive pastor justified his lies saying, "Well, sometimes it helps people through processes, and the little white lies are helpful."

The next two indicators in the category of strong, acute and personal were monitoring and being performance-based. One way Tom's executive pastor monitored the staff was to have stringent time schedules with people filing "time away slips" if they left the office for any reason. With Sue her executive pastor monitored her schedule, the amount of time she spent on hospital visits, who she allowed on her ministry teams and the curriculum being used. Peter went to a different level altogether when his lead pastor actually took the ribbon out of his secretary's typewriter and read it while no one was there. His goal was to find out what Peter and his wife were working on during a Saturday afternoon at the office.

When it came to creating performance-based environments, Tom's executive pastor utilized ministry action plans to identify the gap between actual numbers and goals and create strategic plans. Tom shared that their jobs were driven by the forms, saying it was "very numbers driven; very condescending." Chris shared he felt as if the denominational structure drove the performance game. He said the lead pastor was more focused on the scorecard of church numbers, offering numbers, how many people joined and how many visits were made during the week and month. Each person had a quota that drove performance. Chris called these actions demoralizing and shared that they felt like pawns in the game. Other participants shared their initial reactions to these types of indicators. Sue felt demeaned and useless, while Mark experienced more raw emotions and woundedness that eventually led to being mad. Eric said he just wanted to make the pastor happy and was afraid he would fail.



The final section focused on indicators to the state of the relationship and environment which were ignoring/setting aside, maintaining the inner circle, targeting, exhibiting paranoia, creating betrayal/mistrust and being toxic. When it came to being ignored or set aside, Eric described that when the pastor would get mad at him he would not speak to him, but for Mark and Sue, they were just flat out ignored. The inner circle was described by the participants as the lead pastor and two or three of his closest confidants. The pastor would spend a lot of time with these confidants, and they would assist him in the task at hand. The participants described that at times one was in the circle, and then one would get moved out of the circle. They also shared once a person was removed from the circle, “you know it.” The participants were aware of the inner circle and who was in it. Mark described the next indicator as targeting, saying that when someone got on the wrong side of the lead pastor, things would hit a tipping point and go downhill quickly. “They called it getting a target on your back, and that meant it was your turn to go,” which in his environment happened every fall.

In the final set of indicators exhibiting paranoia was up next. Two participants shared that their lead pastor had previous bad experiences at churches they had served at with the church leadership structure. Therefore, they brought the bad memories and wounds with them. Another common factor was the lead pastor accusing associate pastors who had successful ministry areas of “kingdom building” or building a church within a church rather than rejoicing in their successful ministries. For Eric it was regular visits to the lead pastor’s office to be questioned about his conversations with others and being told who he could go to lunch with or have friendships with. Paranoia was followed by creating betrayal and mistrust. Sue recounted how her lead pastor played dumb when

the executive pastor was questioning her about assisting a congregant to become a deacon. Sue had already discussed it with the lead pastor, but he said he did not recall the conversation, and it created a very uncomfortable situation. Peter shared how his pastor would keep things from him, do things behind his back, or tell others that people were doing or saying things they were not. For Tom the toxic environment presented two choices. An associate pastor could sacrifice the job or learn to not care. Mark said he learned it was toxic when he realized that he had allowed his lead pastor to control his life and that was not a healthy place to be.

These indicators led to more initial reactions from the participants. For Chris he felt underappreciated and realized the overall effect on countless others, which led to anger. Peter initially wanted to help the lead pastor when he stepped out of line by trying to restore his relationships with other staff members. However, over time the lead pastor's anger issue became a problem. For Tom it was sorrow, a mourning caused by the revelation that full-time church ministry was not at all what he dreamed it would be.

### **Points of Awareness**

As the interviews continued, the participants began to share realizations, recognizing and describing some insights about their experiences. These insights or points of awareness included descriptions such as honesty and calling out, the recognition of high staff turnover, the health effects they witnessed, shunning and false authority. The next step after looking at these specific points of awareness was to turn to the participants' own thoughts and perspectives. This allowed the study to gain snapshots into the participants' awareness and understanding of their contentious experiences.

The first point of awareness was honesty and calling out. This was a moment of truth for the participants as they allowed themselves to be honest with their lead pastor about something that was occurring, to expose lies or to share truth. For some it was simply being honest and for others it was a form of mild calling out. Mark shared that there was a point where the pastor was having some family issues with his son, who was on staff. The son had been carrying out some questionable behaviors. Mark, being in the inner circle, was concerned. Out of his care for his pastor and family, Mark decided to approach the lead pastor. "I became pretty outspoken about the nepotism and that's probably one of the things that got me in trouble, because I voiced an opinion and it wasn't the opinion of the pastor," he said slowly and pensively. It was clear as Mark shared that it was a difficult memory to recall. This same level of emotion and difficulty in sharing occurred as the others shared their moments of honesty or calling out.

In Peter's story the calling out came when he and the pastor were in a morning meeting with just the two of them. The lead pastor's level of giving Peter "grief" had reached an all-time high and Peter responded by saying, "You know what, when you get your attitude right, why don't you just come into my office and you can talk to me there, but I am leaving." And he got up and left. Tom's calling out came in a staff meeting in front of the other staff members. It was right after the pastor had shamed him and his ministry area on a promotion Sunday for low representation. Tom shared:

So, in the next staff meeting I knew I had to say something, and I was terrified. I am not a confrontational person at all. I want people to like me, and I don't want to feel any disharmony. But finally, I had to say, "Jerry you can't say that. I have got these people who have friends who are getting married and are leaving the group. And I am just trying to hold this thing together. I am just trying to get them here, and you are calling them out from the pulpit. It's embarrassing." And he said, "But it's true." And I said, "But it doesn't matter if it's true."

He continued his story...

So, we had this moment, and I thought, “Well I am screwed now, I should go pack.” Then he walked by my office after that meeting and said, “Hey, I appreciate what you shared in staff meeting. I think we need to be able to have those conversations. Do you want to go to lunch?”

Tom shared he was shocked and that he never realized that people could have conversations like that. Through the experience he said he learned a ton. He also shared that this is where things started to turn for him. Thus, for some, the calling out and honesty was the beginning of the downfall, and for others, things begin to improve.

For Sue and Eric, their honesty and calling out presented as a sense of freedom and permission they had not experienced prior to this event. Sue shared that the conflict with the executive pastor had climaxed, and the executive pastor was tasked to fix the problem by the lead pastor. So the executive pastor approached Sue to ask what she thought the problem was, to which Sue responded with, “I don’t trust you.” She named off some things the executive had told the lead pastor. What the executive pastor told the lead pastor was completely inaccurate. For example, “Sue would or wouldn’t do something,” and I said, “You know those aren’t right, and I just don’t trust you.” For Eric, after experiencing the lead pastor becoming more controlling over the years, he began to gain his own confidence. The confidence came as he realized the pastor’s stipulations for who he could eat with, talk to or be friends were completely inappropriate. One day he was talking to the pastor about a couple in the church, and Eric was sharing that he and his wife had reached out to the couple. At the time the couple was going through a huge marital issue. The pastor said, “NO, we are not going to be

friends with them.” and Eric said, “You can’t tell me that.” At that point he knew the pastor no longer had control over him.

The next point of awareness was the acknowledgement that their church had high staff turnover. As Mark shared earlier, it was just part of the regular order of things in that it took place every fall. It came up with each participant, and it was clear the lead or executive pastor could not keep a staff. In one story a new music guy stayed for only four months; in another the lead pastor was known as the “staff-killing pastor,” and one lead pastor was confronted by the denominational leadership due to the high level of staff turnover. All were consistent in their message that the high level of turnover was due to the pastor’s unhealthy leadership style and a toxic environment. Peter shared that he believed the high level of turnover at his church was the leading cause of his pastor’s paranoia.

Two of the participants shared that the unhealthy environment had effects on people’s health, which was the next point of awareness. They acknowledged it wasn’t the leading cause of the health issues. The odds were high that the health issue was already present and would have occurred. However, the stress from the environment exacerbated it. Tom shared:

Before I got there, there was a guy on staff who had alopecia because of the stress from the job and even lost his hair. What hair he got back came back white. Another guy after I left who had been a volunteer at the church loved missions, and so they brought him on to be the missions guy. Well with the stress level of having to produce, he had a heart attack. Now obviously he wasn’t healthy either.

For Chris it caused a major health problem that ended up being “immune system things.”

He said the doctors told his wife twice during this time that he was dying. He was not

sure if it was completely the stress from the environment that brought it on but mentioned it happened at the point where his experience was most stressful.

The next point of awareness was shunning. As a few participants shared this point of awareness everyone could sense the pain associated when one is shunned. Eric shared that after he left the church he couldn't get away from the drama. The education minister who was a part of his lead pastor's inner circle actually wrote a letter to the leadership of the denomination smearing Eric and another previous staff member's name. For Mark what was so difficult was that his connection was with the people who attended there, not the pastor or anything like that. He shared:

We grieved for two years, because we had lost all our friends. And there's a shunning that happens when a staff member leaves. No one knows exactly what to say and so they don't say anything. There are a few of our friends we are still close to that were a part of our Bible study or maybe some involved in leadership. I am still close with some of the elders as well. There's a camaraderie in that you got the shunning too. But it all comes afterwards. Like staff members I was really close to, as soon as I let it be known that I was leaving, they turned on me immediately, because if you start paling up with a person who had left, then you get the target put on your back, so it just moves from one person to the other.

Mark admitted this was a common understanding of the culture within the church.

Chris witnessed a shunning within the first few years of being on staff. It happened to a congregant who was a strong leader of the church. The event occurred during a business meeting when the leader took a position that was contrary to the pastor. Immediately following the meeting, the individual went from being a strong leader to a "rebellious spirit." Chris shared that this individual wasn't a rebellious spirit; he just had his own viewpoint. He explained the man was personally attacked by the lead pastor and some key leaders, basically the inner circle. As a result this man rarely goes to church

now. Here is some insight from Chris's perspective as he wrestles through what took place:

Seeing what was happening on both sides, seeing spiritual authority abusing its office, seeing other people ostracized and then labeled because they didn't support the pastor -- it's just the flesh. It is just ugly no matter what, and in that moment it was as ugly as it could get. And you just see the damage of relationships. People who were pulled apart, who had been once been very close and had walked together.

He said that this leader who was labeled a rebellious spirit had lost all heart and value of the church. Chris confessed he almost followed this same path.

The final point of awareness was false authority. As the participants shared their stories in regards to false authority, there was evidence to a level of enabling that comes to the forefront of false authority. One also finds in the stories a level of acknowledgement that this was wrong. Eric said a couple of things happened while he was still on staff that he said, "to this day should not have happened." The lead pastor talked the church into changing the bylaws to allow him full power and authority. Eric shared that only a few people had a problem with this because most members do not actually read the bylaws. The few people who had a problem with the change shared their opposition with the pastor and refused to be a part of the change, so they left. The other members supported the change stating, "We don't mind changing our bylaws to give you full authority as long as you're our pastor." Eric shared it was scary.

Chris's testimony was not a specific example but more a summary concerning the nature of things when false authority is present. He shared, "A lot of things were being done in the name of God that I don't think necessarily had God's hand on it at all." He explained that when one becomes too focused on the success and growth of the church,

the leaders can be swayed by the trappings of the flesh. “The leaders begin to trust in their own efforts by using natural techniques verses walking in the Spirit. “There is a way you can grow a church without God,” admitted Chris, and he continued:

What I was watching wasn't theologically sound or what God designed for spiritual authority for leadership in the church. It was what I saw as fleshly leadership, not spiritual leadership. So, it created an even bigger divide because it is hard to respect. It's different if it's just a different opinion in regards to the color of the carpet, for example. Because that is just preference. But, when it deals with what God had designed, then it is no longer living within God's design. I do not mean to be hyper-spiritual, but it creates real turmoil for a spiritual leader.

For Chris this was his biggest struggle because he could not yield his spirit to remain where this false authority was so prevalent.

After the participants articulated the activities of their contentious experience, the interviews shifted to their own thoughts and perceptions of the experience. The participants were asked to share their initial interpretation of what was happening at the time. Eric shared how initially he was unable to interpret it, especially at a younger age. He kept trying to figure out if this was what full time ministry was, if this was just what people expect. He shared, “I was young and dumb, and I wasn't seeing it as something wrong.” As he begin to see what other youth pastors experienced with their lead pastor, seeing that their experiences were quite different from his own experience, he realized his experience was not normal. He shared, “I started seeing that there was dysfunction here, and it isn't right for a person, especially a lead pastor who relishes thoughts of ‘I am the toughest guy in the room.’” He not only relished it but loved saying, “I am just one tough pastor; you will do what I say or you will get out.” For Eric he realized it was very unhealthy.



Mark's initial interpretation was that the environment and relationship with the lead pastor was toxic and that he "needed to get away from it for my own health and sanity." For Sue she was left feeling that she wasn't good enough and wasn't appreciated. She shared her initial reaction when she experienced this type of behavior as, "What did I do wrong? How am I at fault for this? And what can I do to fix it? That's just sort of a personal pattern in thinking, if someone is upset, then I must have done something." So she internalized it. Tom and Chris both struggled with the question, taking a long pause to consider the answer. After Tom's long pause he said, "I don't know; that's a good question," appearing confused. Then he explained that probably he initially went from anger to apathy, "which was my self-preservation mode." Chris's answer, after his long pause, was "I don't know if I really have an answer to that question." For him it had been over twenty-five years, and he felt that over time people repress things and forget about them so they can move on. He only remembered during that time having a burden for the church and its people.

Peter initially interpreted the situation differently than the others. He said, "I think my initial reaction was to help him, because to help him would be to help the church." He felt the lead pastor did not realize the effects of his actions. Peter aimed to reconcile any relationship issues by saying, "He didn't really mean that when he said it that way."

The next question the participants faced was how they interpreted and identified their experience now. For some participants, the answer was clear. Mark responded by saying it was a toxic relationship and environment because he had allowed someone to control his life. Tentatively he also shared, "abusive, because of the things that were said and done." Chris also called it abuse: "A lot of the damage that happened still really

impacts who I am as a pastor today. By seeing what I have seen, it is abuse of spiritual authority in my opinion. All of us were praying as a staff that he would just step down because it would be less traumatic for everyone.”

Sue, Tom and Peter seemed to struggle more with how they interpreted it or what to call it. Sue initially said, “A lack of respect and behaviors that fall from that. Demeaning, ignoring, disrespectful.” She then shared a time when she discussed it with a friend who was a professional therapist who asked Sue, “If you were in a relationship, if this was a husband or a parent, I would ask you, ‘what’s their drug of choice?’” and without a second thought I said, “power.”” Sue said this friend further explained that the relationship was very much an abusive relationship. Tom said he wasn’t sure if he could call it abusive, but it would be close because of the effects it had on him and the people around him. He landed on ignorance explaining:

I think ignorance of how to lead. Because I have said it to you and I have said it since, none of these guys went into it saying, “This is the kind of culture I want to create. I want to have high staff turnover and a place where people hate coming to work, where they don’t like me.” None of them would say that in seminary. So, I think the ignorance of knowing how to lead themselves well and then how to lead a group of people well.

Peter shared he could only come up with distrust and betrayal, but struggled calling it abuse because the term seemed too strong. He said maybe it was lost confidence and then admitted he didn’t know what to call it. At this point the participant was provided with a definition of spiritual abuse without the label and asked if this applied to his experience.

Below is the transcript of the interview:

Interviewer: So I am going to read something to you. It’s a description. So the question is, “Would you say this applies to your contentious experience -- when a leader with spiritual authority uses their position and authority to manipulate, control or dominate?”

Peter: Great definition, yeah. And in my contentious experience, that's what I had when I left. And with James he didn't invent that, he perfected it.

Interviewer: So that is actually a definition of a term that is not common.

Peter: I am curious what it would be.

Interviewer: It's called spiritual abuse.

Peter: Oh yeah, there is a lot of that; that is a great definition.

Peter continued to ponder this new revelation admitting, "There is a lot of spiritual abuse. No doubt about it...it's a pretty nasty business and it's prevalent."

Eric's response is more unique than that of the other participants. He immediately said, "spiritual abuse." So the next question for Eric was how he came to identify it as spiritual abuse. Eric shared that a friend of his wife's, who had grown up going to their church, quit attending that church. This friend shared with him and his wife that she could not continue to watch the abusive actions of the lead pastor. Eric continued his story:

She told me and my wife, "Well you know Paul is a spiritual abuser." And I said, "What?" with a shocked tone and expression. She goes, "He abuses people by using the word of God, and he spiritually beats people down. Again he is the best spiritual person of the church, and he is going to make sure he is going to win that battle every time." And I am thinking, "I have never seen that." She goes, "Here's a book; read this book," and so we started reading the book. In every chapter there was one thing that was spelling out this guy, that I would think, this was written about Paul. I was sitting there surprised. I had never really thought about it until someone pointed it out to me and showed me some literature on spiritual abuse. And as I read it, it was just like a light came on. That I was sitting there realizing, "This guy is using the word of God not in a way that God meant to be used for and is doing it to feed his own ego."

Eric shared that as he and his wife read the book and discussed it, they began to understand the true problem they were facing. He began to realize that his lead pastor

would never learn. He explained that this new understanding brought a lot of relief because “it helped us see that he can’t get out of his own way for anything. He has a bad habit of making these stupid mistakes, and he doesn’t realize he is hurting himself.” He said when the lead pastor would do something, he and his wife would look at each other and say, “spiritual abuse, here we go.” He wrapped up his story noting, “As we read it, it was one thing we really relied on for understanding. It was so eye-opening. But to tell you the truth, I had never heard of spiritual abuse until that lady came up and said, ‘You need to read this book.’” The book was, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* by Johnson and VanVonderen.

### *Summary of Points of Awareness*

This section of the research focused on how the participants gained awareness and identified what was going on in their contentious experiences. The points of awareness shared during the interviews included honesty and calling out, the recognition of high staff turnover, the health effects they witnessed, shunning and false authority. The first point of awareness provided examples from the participants they called a moment of truth. It was a point in time when they allowed themselves to be honest with their lead or executive pastor either exposing lies, sharing deep concerns or taking a position of opposition. During this portion of the interviews, as the participants shared their moment of truth event, there were different emotions displayed that ranged from tentative to spirited. Most of the moments of truth interactions occurred one-on-one, but for Tom it was in a staff meeting. For most the moment of truth was met with a strong downward spiral of the relationship that led to them leaving. For two their situation improved, a bit.

The next point of awareness was high staff turnover. Mark shared that this was just the regular order of things as it happened yearly in the fall. Another shared that the lead pastor was known as a “staff-killing pastor.” However, high staff turnover was present in all the participants’ environments.

The next group of points of awareness started with effects on health. One participant, Chris, actually experienced the health effects himself. It affected his immune system, caused major health problems and his wife was told by doctors twice that he was dying. For Tom he witnessed other staff members experience health issues such as a heart attack and alopecia. Both admit that the health issues would have probably still occurred but believed the stress of the situation did not help.

Shunning came next and its effect was a very personal one. Mark shared they lost the majority of their friends because they were mostly people from church and that his family grieved the loss for two years. Chris shared that when a church leader had a different opinion than the pastor on a major church decision, he was immediately labeled a “rebellious spirit” and he is still affected by it more than twenty years later.

The final point of awareness is false authority. With this point of awareness, the participants seemed to begin drawing conclusions about the flawed state of the environment. Chris shared that “things were being done in the name of God that I don’t think necessarily had God’s hand on it at all.” And Eric shared that the lead pastor proposed changing the bylaws of the church to give the lead pastor full authority, and the majority of the people agreed, voting for the change.

At this time the points of awareness moved to a few questions the participants addressed in regards to how they initially interpreted their experience and then how they

interpret and identify it now. Mark said it was toxic, Eric called it unhealthy and Sue questioned if she had done something wrong. Chris and Tom both struggled to answer the question, admitting it was a good question but they didn't really have an answer.

The next question regarded how they interpret and identify their experience now. Half of the participants were clear, while the other half still struggled a bit with their interpretation. Mark immediately called it toxic and abusive. He explained this was for two reasons: because he had allowed someone to control his life and because of the nature of the things that were said and done. Chris called it abuse as well, stating it was an "abuse of spiritual authority." Sue, Tom and Peter seemed to toil through their answers. Sue settle on lack of respect, then shared a conversation she had with a friend who was a professional therapist which led her to realize it was abusive because of a need for power. Tom shared he was not sure if it was abusive as "that seemed strong" and settled on "ignorance of knowing how to lead themselves well." Peter did not know what to call it. Eric was very clear and immediately responded with spiritual abuse. He then recalled how a woman who left the church gave him a book on spiritual abuse. After reading the book and seeing his lead pastor throughout the chapters, it became clear for him what he was dealing with. Before the lady had handed Eric the book, he had never heard the term spiritual abuse or known anything about it.

### **Antidotes for Spiritual Abuse**

In shifting from indicators of spiritual abuse through the points of awareness the participants grew to a place of understanding and awareness on some level. There were two participants who spoke about coming to a place of resolution. For Mark it came after

leaving the environment, explaining he came to a place of resolution where his continuous experience no longer brought him pain. He admitted he still struggles when he sees people he knows going through it, but a big piece of his resolution came from realizing, “that it is not my problem; it is his problem.” Eric shared that while he was still in the environment, he came to a place of resolution individually. After reading the book, it brought a level of relief and changed his emotional response to the lead pastor. He explained that at one point the lead pastor called him in and began to turn the heat up on Eric about a going away event they had for a youth intern. During the meeting Eric said he finally stood up to the lead pastor sharing:

He didn’t know what to do with himself that night, but I had finally just had enough. I finally snapped back during George’s going away party. I went down to his office, and I let him have it. And he didn’t hit me back; he just sat there; he didn’t have anything he could say. He was shocked...I know for a fact that happened because then he turned up the heat on me... But that’s where it changed.

Eric shared at this point the lead pastor no longer had power over him.

It is interesting to note that when one participant was asked about healing and restoration, his response was quite different from the others. He responded, “I don’t know if pastors, me included, ever really heal from these things.” When asked about restoration, he responded with the following:

Restoration, that’s a good question, I have never even thought about it, I don’t know that it is even important to me. It’s kind of like what I said before, either I am all in or I am not interested. Once I have made that decision to leave, it’s water under the bridge to me. I am done, and I couldn’t care less.

Peter also didn’t reach out for help to move forward, but said, “No, I pretty much did it all on my own with the Lord.” Peter was the only participant who did not look to others to work through his contentious experience, struggled with what to call it or didn’t

seem to know if healing and restoration is possible. At the end of the interview, Peter appeared very reflective and quietly said, “I don’t think I have healed from any of that and it may be because I am not mature enough.” When asked if he had been able to get beyond what had happened he responded, “Oh yeah, you always do but that doesn’t mean you get over it.”

However, the other participants found different levels of resolution, and they shared some antidotes for spiritual abuse that aided them in finding healing and restoration. The antidotes included support of family and friends, a support group, mentor, working in a healthy environment and forgiveness.

Support of family and friends was the first antidote to spiritual abuse. Mark shared it was the only thing that kept him sane, and it “was the shining star in all of the yuck that was going on.” Chris shared that he had a supportive wife who was there along the way constantly keeping him encouraged. Tom and Eric mentioned their wives throughout, commenting how they could not have made it through it without them. Sue, Chris and Eric shared that their friends were a support for them which was “priceless” as they wrestled through what was taking place.

One of the participants shared that in addition to his family and friends, he could not have made it without his two support groups. He said that at the height of his environment being contentious, and trying to survive, the staff created an internal support group. He shared how it helped each of them get through the chaos. Then he shared that he had a network of youth pastors that served as a sort of support group/network. “I was kind of their freak show. They loved hanging out with me; they loved hearing all the stories,” he shared. For Chris it became therapeutic to get it out, and if he had gone



through it alone, he would have lost his mind. He also urged that one has to be careful to trust the people who are supportive because “it can bite you if too much stuff gets out.”

The next antidote for spiritual abuse was to find a mentor. Chris shared this was a practical step but important, since the mentor “modeled for him what ministry should look like.” He further explained that it restored his faith in ministry. Eric’s story was similar to Chris’s, saying his mentor continually “fed into him the proper view of ministry.” Both Chris and Eric’s mentors were the lead pastors of the church they went to work for immediately after their contentious experience and were well aware of their experiences. Chris shared without his mentor the result would have been a cancer that continued to grow. Eric shared that he asked the new lead pastor, “Is this going to turn into a situation where later on you’re driving with a hammer,” and the new lead pastor said, “I have a responsibility as a pastor to have my integrity at the highest level.” Eric finished saying, “I have never had a pastor I have worked for like him, but he was from the outside, and that is what I needed.”

In the previous chapter Chris and Eric alluded to the next antidote, which was getting to experience ministry in a healthy environment. Chris stated:

If I had not had that healthy environment, it would have been a lot more trauma. I had the privilege of going into a healthy environment, being able to experience it so the cancer was removed, and I got to be in remission, if I can use those terms without minimizing it. I hope you haven’t experienced cancer in your life; I don’t want to make a trite comparison. There is a spiritual cancer that comes from these kinds of traumatic moments.

In Tom’s story, he left his contentious experiences and took a position as the only pastor of a small church in another town. Before taking the position, the previous pastor of the church had been a bit toxic to even the church members and in a business meeting called

people evil. So in a sense, he said, it was a good fit for him and the members to heal together and work through what had happened. He shared that after a few years he learned he had created a different culture in this church that was much different than the previous ones he had worked in, one that wasn't toxic, but loving and fun instead.

The final antidote to spiritual abuse was forgiveness. Forgiveness was necessary, explained Chris, but took a while because he struggled with the impact the abuse had on so many people's lives. Eric shared God made it clear to him that it would be difficult for his new ministry to grow until he healed things with the people from his old church. While it was not easy for him and his wife, they wrote letters to the lead pastor and a few staff members. In the letters he wrote, "I just want you to know, if I have hurt your feelings in any way, I am sorry." For Eric it was not about how the others would respond to his letters but was the need for him to move on and find forgiveness. Mark advised that forgiving helps to "get on down the road, because there is going to be anger and there is going to be hurt. It will only hurt you, it's not going to hurt him." He explained the forgiveness is really about one's freedom with God.

### *Summary of Antidotes to Spiritual Abuse*

The focus of this section of the study was to understand what ways and to what extent did associate pastors experience healing and restoration. The section began by sharing how two participants came to a place of restoration. Mark's resolution came after he was no longer in the environment and he realized "that it is not my problem; it is his problem." While in the midst of the contentious experience, Eric was able to come to a place of resolution. His came when the lead pastor was drilling him, and he finally

snapped back. He said, “I let him have it. And he didn’t hit me back, he just sat there, he didn’t have anything he could say. He was shocked.”

Next, several antidotes for spiritual abuse were presented which included: support of family and friends, support groups, mentor, experiencing ministry in a healthy environment and forgiveness. All the participants maintained that family and friends providing support was priceless. One participant shared it was what kept him sane. For Chris the support extended into support groups. One support group was with the staff members where the contentious environment was taking place as they leaned on one another to get through. The other support group was a group of youth pastors who were a safe place to share, as well as therapeutic.

Eric and Chris both had mentors who were important models for what ministry should look like. In both situations the lead pastors in the churches they served after their contentious experience were their mentors. Chris stated that without his mentor, the cancer he felt he carried would have continued to grow and instead he felt as if he went into remission. Both Chris and Eric continued to the next antidote, which was being able to experience ministry in a healthy environment. This is also the same place where their mentors were their lead pastors. It is important to point out that Chris and Eric are also the only two participants who are currently in formal church ministry positions. It is interesting to note that Tom also found restoration by being able to serve in a healthy ministry environment. However, for Tom he became a lead and only pastor of a small church in a different town. He shared how he and the members who also had an abusive pastor grew and healed together.

The final antidote was forgiveness. Chris shared forgiveness is necessary. Mark advised that it helps to “get on down the road, because there is going to be anger and there is going to be hurt. It will only hurt you, it’s not going to hurt him.” It also brings one freedom with God, he said. With Eric, God made it clear to him for his ministry to move forward he needed to reach out and apologize for any hurt feelings he may have caused. However, he said he was not looking for a response from his lead pastor or anyone else; it was just about his need to move on and find forgiveness.

### **Insights from the Lord and Others**

With the last research question, the goal was to understand how theology and the Lord played a role during the contentious period. As the participants began to share, it became clear that insights from the Lord and others determined much within the healing process. The insights included reviewing one’s calling, time in the word, personal theology and reading.

Four participants shared that in the midst of their contentious experience, there was a period where they began to question and review their call to ministry. Chris shared that when it all happened, it didn’t impact his relationship with God other than it deepened it. During this point of the interview Chris explained how wrestling through what was happening and almost quitting resulted in a reaffirming of his calling and self-awareness:

I had to really seek out my calling, to better understand that calling. I almost wanted to run from that calling. But it never impacted me like, “God I hate you because you let this happen.” Some people may go there, but that has never even entered my mind...I think it reaffirmed who I was all along. That is why the conflict was there, reaffirming what I believed was scriptural about the ministry,

leadership and shepherding. Seeing those things being abused and neglected, in a different style that seemed more manipulative and fleshly leadership than spiritual leadership at the time -- it just reinforced this is the right way. Now again, I almost quit in all the middle of that, but seeing it all the way through with the outcome, it reinforced that this can be the Lord's church. It can be as simple as shepherding and letting people experience a vision without having to make it happen. And that was freeing for me. And that is why the ministry just exploded for me since then. Because I wasn't trying to make things happen. I wasn't trying to please a quota. I was just trying to please my Lord, and it was just incredible.

For Peter he recognized that his experience was all a part of God's plan and not so much about what is going on at the moment. He shared further that there are biblical examples where God will start a person in one direction and once they are there will move them to someplace else. Therefore, Peter realized it was part of God's plan all along.

Mark and Eric were the other two participants who wrestled with their calling.

Mark explained that when it happened it felt like there was a big elephant in the room and a person would begin asking, "What are you going to do" over and over again. He said it was hard, and he questioned God, asking:

You have me on this path, where is this path leading? And so, God gives you just enough view of the path along the way to keep you on it, but not enough that you kind of settle in and get comfortable. And I was comfortable. It was a great gig. I was making great money, had a salary, didn't have to worry about any of those kind of things and insurance and all that. And then go straight into pulling yourself up by your boot straps... It was during a trip to Africa that I had one of those "aha moments" when I really discovered God's call on my life. I recognized all of those things that happened beforehand were all preparation for the things that I am doing now.

Eric shared that for him it was a two-fold process. The first part was looking back to his original call to ministry, why God had called him and holding onto that. "As you are holding on to your calling, let God's word feed into your heart." The second part was finding out what he loved about ministry and learning to do it without fear. He shared that at first it was crippling because, "I wasn't fearing the Lord, I was fearing a man." He

realized this was crippling, and he needed to totally reprogram himself after everything happened.

The next insight was an individual quiet time or time in God's word. Sue, Peter and Mark shared this discipline had always been a part of their regular routine, and their contentious experience did not change anything. However, Mark shared that the book of Psalms became an integral part for him, as he would use it to "pray it back to God." Tom shared that his personal time with God and in the word was only strengthened and solidified during this time. Chris pointed out that it was important to seek God for fortitude so that he could walk through it well and not respond in his own strength. He cited the promise of God in Philippians 1:6, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion." Chris also urged that one cannot do ministry alone, claiming, "I don't want to discount the work God does...all these things play into the master plan...only he can get you through this stuff."

Another insight the participants shared was how the contentious experience impacted their personal theology. Chris and Sue's responses were similar, explaining it didn't change it but deepened their faith and trust in God. Both explained that they more deeply were trusting what they believed and learning to apply it. With Tom, it was a deepening of his understanding of supporting those in authority over him whether he agreed with them or not. For Sue the idea that "the church isn't God, it isn't Jesus, it isn't the spirit, it is just a bunch of people hopefully trying to do the best they can with what they have got." This doctrine played out in learning how to live out Jesus' words in Luke 10:27: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>599</sup> She learned to accept and love people regardless of what they had done. She also shared this struggle was probably her biggest roadblock, especially in learning how to pray for her executive pastor.

Mark shared he learned to have a real simple theology from Jesus’ own words and actions, love God and each other, just as Sue had shared. He said, “All the other stuff is going to take care of itself, and I think that too many times churches and pastors get too caught up in proving how smart they are, how important they are, by taking something that Jesus said that was really simple and making it something that is more difficult for people.” He learned to look at how Jesus did ministry and met the needs of the people. Jesus met their needs whether it was physical, mental or spiritual. The other thing that impacted Mark was he no longer takes a denominational label, and he is more focused on grace, not legalism. The legalism is something that he will always struggle with because it is a hard barrier to cross, but he said he is more patient with people of different lifestyles, cultures and religions.

Another participant, Eric, struggled because he began to see God the same way he saw his pastor. He shared:

There wasn’t any grace; there was no grace. You could even hear it in my speaking to the teenagers. We didn’t preach grace; we preached a lot of evangelism, hell, fire and brimstone. And maybe a little bit of arrogance. My wife was like, “Eric, you are starting to turn into Paul in how you treat people and how you talk to people. You’re mad when they leave, or when they are not at church, or they don’t make that the priority over their family or you’re paranoid, stop being this way.” I couldn’t sleep at night because I was worried that Paul was mad at me. I was worried that I wasn’t doing things right. I was just out of control. I

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<sup>599</sup> Luke 10:27.

was struggling just to keep control of who I was because I kept on thinking like him. And I was sitting there trying to hang on and stay at the church...I was probably more damaged when I left that church than I realized. It took me about a year to deprogram from the way I ran and did things.

Eric shared he had to return to the theology he had before he took the position with the contentious pastor. He explained prior to this he had always been a person of grace and understanding. What he learned more than anything else is to allow himself to treat the people he works with and for with grace. Also, he looks at their situations and seeks to make them better. He said, "I want them to find success in the ministry God has called them to."

The final story on personal theology comes from Tom. Tom reveals that his personal theology was the biggest change and what he was most thankful for. He shared that early on he took a step back and began asking his biggest question, which was, "Why are we doing what we are doing? Why are we doing this?" He said that growing up and until this point, he had never stopped and wrestled with the question. He shared that his education pastor led a group of guys through the book, *Desiring God*, and he started to realize his focus was in the wrong place:

I am reading this and at the same time, I was asking the question, "Why are we doing what we are doing?" What the author was saying is what I am thinking. All of these things that we are pushing to do: get numbers, get people attending, get people to love, all should be an overflow of what is going on inside of people. People who are so enamored with the Lord, that giving happens, telling happens, evangelism, missions, they happen because of this white-hot love that they have for the Lord. So, for me I am like, this is where we should focus our ministry, is stoking those fires, get the people white hot in love with the Lord. And then let the other things be the overflow. This is what really began to shape my theology. Theologically I began to see that there were a lot of attempts to manufacture fruit, and as long as it looked good, then we would pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves that it was good. And again, I would say that's why that job at the top is so insular. In order for him to feel like he was achieving his goals, there needed to be growth and needed to be more people; there needed to be giving and there



needed to be building. Even if he thought that the way to do it was to stoke a white-hot affection for the Lord, he didn't have time to wait for that.

Tom continued to share his experience by explaining this concept began to take shape at the next church he worked at. It was here that the "Acts 29 stuff really started to happen." Another thing that helped Tom during this phase was to journal. By writing about what he agreed with and didn't agree with, or why he didn't agree with it, he learned a great deal. For Tom it solidified his view of the sovereignty of God and answered his question, "Why are we doing this?"

The final insight four of the participants shared was gaining insight from reading. Eric did not give specific examples; he only shared his mentor would give him books to read that they would discuss that helped him get back on the right path. Sue would read books on the Sabbath and rest which helped with self-care and better prepared her for ministering to others. Mark shared three books that he believed God used as tools to speak to him. *The Dream Giver* by Bruce Wilkinson, *Don't Waste Your Life* by John Piper and *Seizing Your Divine Moment* by Erwin McManus. Mark shared that in McManus's book he read the story of a guy struggling to decide between two different churches. As the months go by, a pastor said to the guy struggling to make a decision, "Just do something; you are sidelined right now. Do you think you are big enough to screw up the sovereignty of God?" Immediately after reading this book, it became clear for Mark what God was calling him to do. Chris shared his mentor had him read two of Charles Swindoll's books *Elijah* and *Joseph*. He was able to learn a great deal from both books especially that "God is going to stretch you, grow you and develop you." He

further admitted it was foundational for who he was as a person and in his character during this time of his life.

### *Summary of Insights from the Lord and Others*

The last section took a look at how theology played a role in moving associate pastors forward toward restoration by looking at four insights from the Lord and others. They were reviewing one's calling, time in the word, personal theology and reading. As the participants shared reviewing and wrestling through their calling to ministry, it allowed them to get back to the way God had originally moved in their lives. It brought them back to "center," meaning back to the word of God, allowing them to see what is right and true and move them to the next phase of ministry. It was also apparent that their understanding of their calling was not only strengthened but also more fortified. In regards to time with God, a few testified that it remained the same. Others shared it strengthened, solidified and deepened their understanding of God. Chris also shared Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion," urging that people cannot do ministry on their own, claiming, "I don't want to discount the work God does...all these things play into the master plan...only he can get you through this stuff."

Another insight was how their experiences impacted their personal theology. While the participants' theologies were affected in regards to different subject matter, for some the wrestling took longer than for others. Chris was most affected, learning to support those in authority whether he agreed with what they were doing or not. Sue learned first-hand how to love, accept and pray for people regardless of what they have

done. Mark narrowed down his personal theology to the words and example of Christ: love God and love others. He learned it was not about a denomination and legalism but only grace with all people regardless of their lifestyle, culture or religion. Eric struggled because he realized he began to see God the same way his lead pastor did, which was a lot of hell, fire and brimstone, legalism, arrogance and no grace. He had to return to the theology he had believed before working with this pastor, focused on grace and understanding. Tom revealed that the experience gave him the opportunity to wrestle with the big theological question of “Why we do what we do?” By wrestling through, journaling and reflecting on God’s word he came to a new understanding of the sovereignty of God. He was also able to experience the reality of the Acts 29 concept as it began to play out within his own ministry team.<sup>600</sup>

The final insight was reading other sources than the Bible. A story was shared from Tom about the impact of the book *Desiring God* upon his theological wrestling. Mark and Chris also shared specific examples. Mark shared that the three books he read were critical in helping him to move forward. He believed that God used them to speak to him and lead him to his next ministry opportunity. He learned to not allow his experience to “sideline” his ministry and to not think he was big enough to “screw up the sovereignty of God.” Chris read two books suggested by his mentor about two Old Testament giants Elijah and Joseph. He learned that “God will stretch, grow and develop us.” For Chris it was foundational for who he became as a person.

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<sup>600</sup> The Book of Acts has 28 chapters. Acts 29 is called the “next chapter” in the history of the church with the idea of following the example of the original church described in Acts.

### *Other Observations*

There were a few other observations worth noting. One participant mentioned that after he left, the church started giving severance packages. The severance packages included being put on legal notice or asked to sign a gag order. They were told, “You say anything, your severance package is gone.” Another participant shared that it almost felt like narcissism, saying, “When these guys start having ultimate power, it corrupts them ultimately. I see these guys are untouchable, that they just allow power to take over in such a way they can’t even see it for themselves or what it does to people.”

The other observation was there were numerous times when the participants struggled with a lack of words and would talk around the subject, not specifically to it, when the nature of the content seemed to become more emotional for them. Here is a word for word example: “Mostly what he said and kind of the way he acted, and he would just, he was always, if he came in right now you would know he was here, he was always bouncing off the walls, this high energy guy, it’s interesting as I think about it.” For some of the participants, like Tom and Chris, after taking a long pause or struggling to find words to vocalize their experience would ultimately say, “I don’t know” or “I don’t know what to call it.” One could sense the struggle, pain and confusion the contentious experience had on these individuals.

### **The Participants’ Advice**

The final question for the participants was, “If someone were sitting before you now going through a similar experience, what would be the advice you would give him or her?” Here are their responses.

Mark: My counsel would be to get out as quickly as you can because once the target is on your back, it's all over. You might as well give it up because there is no getting that target off. Forgive and get on down the road, because there is going to be anger, there is going to be hurt. If you don't forgive, it's only going hurt you; it's not going to hurt him.

Sue: My first question would be to ask them, "What does it serve you to stay? What are you getting out of it?" And then listen through whether their response was financial security or "This is what I need to do." I would ask "Is this similar to anything else in your faith life; are there other situations that have failed? The way you are feeling right now? How did you survive that?" I would ask, "Is there any reason that you have to stay where you are? Do you need to be in this position for something that is feeding you?" Which implies, think about getting out. You can't stay some place that you are being poisoned. It's not good for you, but I don't know what it means for you to not do this. I don't know what it's going to take for that to be like, "Ok I am leaving." If I am talking to a married person, if I am talking to a person raising children... I would say get out now before it kills you... Don't shut out the people that are important to you. Find or engage with those people that are supportive for you right now. Find a place where you can just unload, and get this stuff out of your gut. But don't isolate, if that means one person, if that means one journal, don't isolate, or you will ruminate and that is the word that fits. That chewing the cud of that experience -- I would fall into a well of questioning, "Could I have" or "Should I have." Whether those people that are important to you are the people in the church or not, just don't isolate.

Peter: My advice would be to move on. Especially if it affects you; everyone is different, and that is why you have to ask the questions. You have to weigh your call and ask if what you are called to do, you are being allowed to do. And based on that whether you should stay or not. There is no substitute for honesty. If you've got a challenge with someone, work through it. Understand that the church is imperfect, because it is here on earth. If you can't deal with it and you can't deal with the guy, move on. If you can deal with it and accept the fact that he is flawed and that he has challenges and problems, hang in there. Just do all you can do. If you feel like your senior pastor is prohibiting you from being all that God dreamed you could be and that he called you to do in this ministry, you need to find another guy. Because you will won't be happy and you are not going to be fulfilled in your ministry if you're being dragged down by your senior pastor. And that could happen. It manifests itself in so many different ways... If you are not doing what God has called you to do, you are not going to be happy.

Eric: I would definitely tell them, be careful who you talk to, because sometimes those sheep are the ones that will go and make it worse on you. I would tell them to start praying about if the Lord is using this to move them. In fact, this actually happened to me. Last February the youth pastor who came to the church after I left goes, "Hey man, I think you and I are a lot alike in ministry, and I need to

know if you ever experienced this with Paul.” And I just laughed and said, “I have been waiting for you to come see me.” And he goes, “I don’t feel like I am supposed to leave, I don’t feel like I am supposed to go.” And I go, “Well that’s because you love the place, you love the kids and stuff like that.” I told him, “You just need to pray and see if the Lord is leading you another way, because I am telling you bud, you do not want to stay long living in that type of situation.” And a few months ago, the Lord took him to another church. I just try to give them advice, to anyone in that situation, I tell them, “You are not wrong for thinking that way. There is something wrong. There is something that the lead pastor needs to deal with in his own personal life.” And I try to encourage them the best I can. They also have to be willing to accept that it’s a bad situation. I think not everyone is willing to say, “I am in this job, and I don’t want to stay in my job if it’s a bad situation.” Until they say that and are willing to answer it, it is hard to give a lot of advice to them.

Tom: Get out; there is no being a martyr. There is no heroism in that, and you don’t get extra points or glory because you suffered when you shouldn’t have. If you suffer for the name, that’s fine and it can feel like that. And if and when you do get out, know it’s okay. God still loves you. If you want to work at another church, great. I think there are things to ask yourself. A self-examination of where you are, and what you are feeling, but don’t let it ruin you. It was a struggle because there were days I didn’t eat and I didn’t sleep well. My internal world was kind of a mess. So, I think that there would be some specific questions you would need to ask yourself. There is no heroism to stay. Processing through it is beneficial, because it could be that they are misinterpreting things or they don’t realize it.

Chris: Wow, that’s a crazy great question, and I think it’s so unique. However, I believe there is a context to it. The same way we understand scripture and everything else, but there are also universal principles. So, I think one, be anchored in Ephesians 6:12, “Our battle is not with flesh and blood,” because you feel it. You feel like it is, it feels like there is this personal conflict, and it is really personal; but we have to see it’s deeper than that. It is a spiritual attack. I have always believed you are not there to serve your employer, you are there to serve the Lord and do your work as unto the Lord. I always keep that in mind: “unto the Lord.” Do what God has called you to do, and do it with all of your heart. Do your best to honor the authority over you, even when you disagree with them, because God will honor that. If you can’t honor that authority, pray for God to release you from ministry or that position. But, you make sure that it’s not you who is doing the releasing, it’s God that is releasing. I am thankful I didn’t do what I wanted because we all want to release from pain, but sometimes pain is what makes us. I am a much more effective pastor today because of that experience than if I would have had easy street, easy street, easy street. And so I have tried to be encouraging guys with that. Don’t miss the beauty of the fire, the refining fire that you go through even though it’s painful and it hurts and nobody

would want it. God's placed you there, I believe that, and if he has placed you there, he knows what he is doing. Just like Joseph ended up in prison when he did the right thing with Potiphar's wife. Just embrace it and learn like Paul had to learn. Be content until God gives you something different or better. He usually does.

### **Summary of Findings**

The information presented in this chapter sought answers regarding how an associate pastor can find healing and restoration after experiencing spiritual abuse by a lead pastor. The four research questions which guided the interviews provided thoughts and perspectives from associate pastors sharing from their own experiences of a contentious relationship from a lead pastor. The interview process, together with the information presented by the participants, provided a wealth of information leading to several conclusions. The first conclusion is that spiritual abuse did occur and was committed by the lead pastor. This is supported by the information presented in the literature review. There were a few notable findings worth mentioning. First, five of the six associate pastors described their lead pastor who was abusive as either "dynamic" or "successful." Secondly, the abuse from the lead pastor occurred in a variety of settings. The settings included private one-on-one interactions, in a group meeting, as well as corporately, in staff meetings, congregational business meetings or from the pulpit. The effects of the abuse were personal and far reaching.

The next conclusion was that gaining awareness is a critical step for the associate pastor or one who has experienced abuse to move on to a healthier reality. As the associate pastor began to recognize the behavior and engagement with the lead pastor was not only inappropriate but wrong, a new world of options became available. This

new understanding also allowed them to become more decisive about how to respond and engage with their lead pastor. The interviews provide two windows into the participants' perspective on their contentious experience. Describing and giving words and language to the initial interpretation was more difficult for the participants. After the participants had time to really consider and step back from their experience they were able to gain insight, find words, language and understanding to describe what they had experienced. They were also able to make informed decisions. In each case they chose to leave the abusive environment.

The final conclusion was that healing and restoration are possible. In fact, awareness played a key part in the healing process. The main avenue for people to gain insight, understanding, find words and process is through the existence of safe people and places for the abused individual to share and work through their experiences. The other critical piece of healing for the associate pastors was to review their call to ministry and a realignment of their concept of God. The most notable piece of healing and recovery was that the more work an individual did, the more healing and recovery were found. The experiences and results were different for each participant. For some the abuse fell on the mild to medium scale of the spectrum of abuse presented in the literature review. A few participants found the abuse more severe.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

This study was designed to explore how associate pastors experience restoration from spiritual abuse they have experienced from a lead pastor. The research questions that guided the study and interviews were:

1. What encounters do associate pastors experience with lead pastors that classify as spiritual abuse?
2. How do associate pastors become aware they have experienced spiritual abuse?
3. In what ways and to what extent do associate pastors experience healing and restoration?
4. In what ways and to what extent does theology help associate pastors toward restoration?

This chapter brings together the information from the literature review and interviews to gain insight, take a comprehensive look at the reality many associate pastors face, begin to draw conclusions and make recommendations for moving forward.

### **Summary of Study and Findings**

This study began by presenting the problem of spiritual abuse carried out by a lead pastor toward his associate pastors. The results of that abuse can be devastating and long lasting. While the church and believers are hesitant to broach the topic, it will not go away on its own. Many remain completely silent. Writer for *Relevant* magazine, Dayna

Drum says, “We allow it to sit alongside of us like regular members in the pews and ignore it.”<sup>601</sup> As followers of Christ, if we continue to remain quiet and hesitant about naming the reality of spiritual abuse, allowing this incessant problem to live among us, then in the words of psychiatrist Carl Jung, “What we resist, persists.”<sup>602</sup> It will not go away.

The word of God addresses the behavior of spiritually abusive pastors through the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus and his disciples. God’s word is clear that abusive behavior by religious leaders is wrong. The author of Proverb 24 urges us to give “careful consideration” when we witness something that is broken down or when one is not taking proper care of what God has given them. The same is true of abuse in the church, and therefore we need to give it the consideration it deserves. Proverbs 24:30-32 says,

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.<sup>603</sup>

Spiritual abuse leaves a trail of ruins for leaders to examine and learn from. By pulling back the weeds and examining the wounds, there is great wisdom from the ones who have gone before and found not only healing but also a path forward. As the researcher, I sought to find instruction, answers to what I have seen and experienced myself. Nothing

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<sup>601</sup> Dayna Drum, “It’s Time to Address Spiritual Abuse in the Church,” *Relevant*, October 27, 2014, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/its-time-address-spiritual-abuse-church>.

<sup>602</sup> Leon F. Seltzer, “You Only Get More of What You Resist—Why?” *Psychology Today*, June 15, 2016, accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201606/you-only-get-more-what-you-resist-why>. This quote is attributed to Carl Jung and was originally quoted as, “what you resist not only persists, but will grow in size.” It is quoted regularly but no one identifies where the actual quote in his works is found. It is generally abbreviated to “what you resist, persists.”

<sup>603</sup> Proverbs 24:30-32.

about this subject is simple. Spiritual abuse is a loaded word. It is a strong word that can conjure up thoughts and feelings that can be unpleasant. However, spiritual abuse will remain with us until we decide to broach the subject and have the conversation.

Therefore, in seeking to have the conversation, this study reviewed relevant literature that examined the subject of spiritual abuse in the following three areas: understanding spiritual abuse, constructing a theological framework and finding healing and recovery. This literature review showed that part of the struggle to understand spiritual abuse is the stigmas present when pastors share their experience of abuse. The stigmas are real and lead to denial, avoidance, desire to preserve unity and peace, fear of damning from God, belief the leader is “God’s anointed,” struggles with loyalty and a fear of retribution. As a result, people either keep quiet or abandon their job and church altogether. The word “abuse” simply means “using or treating something in an improper way and the result is harm.”<sup>604</sup> However, when perpetrated from a position of power by a pastor or religious leader, the nature becomes spiritual and thus, spiritual abuse.

The literature presents the most common pathologies found in abusive pastors are insecurity or narcissism. The literature also shows that the majority of these pastors not only do not intend to harm but many times have no idea how abusive their actions are. Scholars point out that the nature of spiritual abuse is both subtle and paradoxical. And, the abuser and the abused are somewhat trapped by what is occurring. It is subtle because there are several assumptions that serve as the basis of a relationship with a lead pastor. It is assumed that a lead pastor is God’s representative and therefore looking out for the best interest of those under his care. People tend to believe the church is a safe place and

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<sup>604</sup> Shawn Nelson, *Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis* (Temecula, CA: Geeky Christian, 2015), under “What is Spiritual Abuse” (locations 73-78), Kindle.

so are its' leaders. Therefore, lead pastors are granted a level of trust and when they address others it is assumed it comes from a pure heart. When a pastor uses this assumption for their own interest it crosses a devious line and can become crafty, which in and of itself is paradoxical. The abuse often starts out in mild and delicate ways and then escalates to more obvious and outward indications.

The most common methods of spiritual abuse are shaming and manipulation, which create fear, guilt, betrayal and hopelessness. This type of behavior dehumanizes individuals who have been abused. There are certain actions that do not rise to the level of abuse, which can include simple neglect, mild injuries to one's feelings and maltreatment that occur with no malice. It would be best to be cautious and not label everything as spiritual abuse. However, the research revealed much that rose to the level of abuse and beyond.

The literature review also establishes a theological framework to understand what the Bible says in regard to spiritual abuse. Scholars argue that abusive leaders are the only social evil that Jesus repeatedly exposed and his most harsh admonishment comes in Matthew 23. Early writers of spiritual abuse, David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, point out that Jesus speaks to the people about how the Pharisees "place themselves on the seat of Moses" and use it as a means to carry out behavior and actions that we would identify as abusive.<sup>605</sup> This is considered "lording over," demanding obedience to rules that are

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<sup>605</sup> David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (1991; repr. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), chap. 9 (locations 1618-1619), Kindle; Matthew 23:2.

excessive and exhaustive.<sup>606</sup> The prophets Elijah and Jeremiah agreed with Jesus, pointing out leaders who ruled to strengthen their position used force, usually with severity.<sup>607</sup> This false positional authority contrasts with true biblical authority. God and Jesus are the only two who hold true biblical “positional” authority. Jesus taught that God granted him this authority in Matthew 28:18: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>608</sup> While there are examples of Jesus giving authority to the disciples and others, it is not a positional authority but a task-oriented authority over unclean spirits, to heal disease and illness and to preach the word of God. The type of leadership God ordains is servant leadership.

Servant leaders recognize the two types of wisdom: possessing a clean conscience and assimilating to the example of Christ. James 3:13-18 urges that servant leaders will seek to display heavenly wisdom rather than earthly wisdom. Paul teaches servant leaders to possess a clean conscience. He says in 1 Timothy 1:5-6 that leadership is carried out with “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”<sup>609</sup> The final aspect of servant leadership is to assimilate to the example of Christ. Paul points out in Philippians 2:3-8 that Jesus exemplifies a humble servant even to the point of death on the cross. Pastor Donald Bloesch points out, “The will to power exists within every person, but in the Christian it is converted into a will to serve.”<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience*, 5d. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), chap. 2 (locations 242-245), Kindle; Matthew 20:25.

<sup>607</sup> Jeremiah 5:30-31, 6:13-14; Ezekiel 34:1-4.

<sup>608</sup> Matthew 28:18.

<sup>609</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-6.

<sup>610</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Theological Notebook* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 1:43.

A biblical response to spiritual abuse is to hold fast to the word of God and his prophets, Jesus and the apostles, our foundation and rock from which to minister. A wise and faithful servant leader must walk in the guidance of the Holy Spirit rather than “the desires of the flesh.”<sup>611</sup> This wisdom promotes unity within the body of Christ as Christians are called to in 1 Corinthians 12:27 and Ephesians 4. Unity can happen if we learn to abide in the truth of God’s word, which brings freedom: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”<sup>612</sup> Truth brings us to a place of forgiving others their trespasses as we seek to love others as Christ first loved us.

The final aspect of spiritual abuse addresses how individuals come to a place of healing and recovery. There are things that can hold people back from finding healing and recovery. The first are the unspoken rules found in all abuses: don’t trust, don’t think, don’t talk, don’t question. We cannot underestimate the power these rules possess for one who has been abused. Another thing that holds people back is the culture of deep scarcity, the feeling that one is never enough. The list of feelings is long: Never good enough, wise enough, spiritual enough, obedient enough, strong enough, leading one to question and doubt one’s abilities. We begin to think the blame lies within ourselves.

People who have experienced abusive behavior from a religious leader often consider themselves the cause of the abuse or the problem. While evidence does not support this, clarification of their experience can help resolve this belief. Therefore, it is important that these individuals recognize their experience as spiritual abuse by

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<sup>611</sup> Galatians 5:16.

<sup>612</sup> John 8:31-32.

identifying and naming what occurred and then asking for help. As one endeavors to work through this process, they begin to understand woundedness and that abuse occurs both verbally and emotionally. The most common forms of verbal and emotional abuse found in spiritual abuse are shaming, contempt, powerlessness, betrayal and ambivalence. As people begin to recognize this behavior as abuse and understand the nature of these issues in their contentious experience, the healing can begin.

It is also important for these individuals to ask for help and find a safe place with safe people. In a safe environment, people can find their voice and language to share their stories, leading to support, comfort, love and validation of their experiences and feelings.

The next step in healing and recovery is restoration with God and forgiveness. Restoration comes as healthy boundaries create appropriate domain lines, so people can “tell where we end, and others begin” and helping people “keep good things inside of the fence and bad things out.”<sup>613</sup> As one seeks healing and recovery, the word of God brings a promise of hope, especially in Psalms 147: 3: “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”<sup>614</sup>

It is important to note that while the literature review touched on aspects of spiritual abuse, the researcher came across no specific book that addressed spiritual abuse between a lead pastor and the pastors who reported to him. Therefore, the second part of the research uncovered firsthand evidence of what occurred between associate pastors and their lead pastor.

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<sup>613</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Safe People: How to Find Relationships That Are Good for You and Avoid Those That Aren't* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009), 72.

<sup>614</sup> Psalms 147:3.

Through the interview process, the study pulled together six associate pastors' firsthand experiences of a contentious relationship with a lead pastor. The interviews highlighted two types of indicators of a contentious relationship or environment, points of awareness, antidotes for healing and recovery, and insights from the Lord; as well as a few others that brought restoration. The first type of indicator included actions that were strong, acute and personal. The methodologies included shaming, jealousy, control, manipulation, monitoring and performance requirements. As the contentious nature of the relationship intensified, this indicator moved to a different level, pointing to the state of the relationship and environment. Examples included ignoring/setting aside, the presence of an unhealthy inner circle, targeting, paranoia, betrayal/mistrust and toxic. The participants reported their initial reactions to these types of activities and behaviors were feeling demoralized, wounded, underappreciated, a desire to make the pastor happy, a fear of failing, a drive to restore relationships within the environment and sorrow.

The points of clarity presented as moments of honesty and calling out, the acknowledgement of high staff turnover, individual health effects, shunning and addressing false authority. As the participants shared these points of clarity, it moved them to moments of truth and realization of the inappropriate nature of the environment and relationship. This part of the interview process revealed a range of emotions from tentative and cautious to brave and spirited as they recalled these experiences. The participants spoke about how they initially interpreted what was happening at the time. They recalled toxic contexts, unhealthy boundaries, questions of personal responsibility and two participants admitted they did not know how to interpret it at the time. The participants next addressed how they interpreted and identified their experiences. Half of



the participants labeled their experiences as “abuse,” “abusive,” “toxic” and “spiritual abuse.” Two of the participants struggled with assigning a title to their experience, admitting it might be akin to abuse, but felt uncomfortable labeling it as abuse and settled for “lack of respect” and “ignorance of how to lead well.” One participant admitted he didn’t know what to call the situation.

The antidotes that brought healing and recovery included support of family and friends, support groups, mentors, healthy ministry environments and forgiveness. These were critical in helping the participants process what occurred during and after their contentious experiences. For the two participants who are still in ministry, the presence of a mentor in a healthy ministry environment was critical to them finding healing and recovery. The final antidote that brought the participants a sense of freedom was forgiveness for what took place, forgiving both themselves and any individuals involved in the abusive experience.

The participants also shared insights from the Lord and others that brought restoration. These insights included reviewing one’s calling, time in the word, personal theology and reading. As the participants shared, the interview brought them back to what one called “center” or a place where they found truth and meaning from the word of God by examining what God says is right and true. The participants commonly stated that the opportunity to dig into the word of God deepened their calling and personal theology in a way that moved them forward in their lives and relationships. They all said they believed that what happened, while difficult and life altering, was a part of God’s plan. Another key insight was the words of other Christian authors that brought greater

revelations about ministry and key Old Testament personalities who also experienced great struggles.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The literature review allowed us to enter the world of spiritual abuse by gaining insight into all the facets, faces and discombobulation from a professional perspective. This aspect provided meaning for the reader and also started to address the “how” and “why” questions that were surfacing. This process differs from the information gained during the interviews in that the interviews were real life stories that addressed the participant’s firsthand experience. These firsthand experiences addressed the “facts of the case,” whereas the literature review went beyond the facts and addressed the overall data. The interviews validated the data from the literature and made the concept of spiritual abuse more real. This occurred as I witnessed the participants wrestle through their memories of abuse and struggle to find words to share their experience or took long pauses to process. For me the interviews provided gravity to the importance of recognizing not only the reality of spiritual abuse but also the wounds and pain associated with it as well. It truly is a mystery why we allow this type of behavior to go unchecked.

As I compared the facts from the interviews with the data from the literature review, the idea that spiritual abuse continues in the church today was verified. The following conclusions arose from the research: validation of spiritual abuse, assessing the spiritual abuse, reconciling the spiritual abuse and biblical answers. First, the data provided in the literature review was confirmed by the participants’ testimonies validating the existence of spiritual abuse. Next, as the participants testified to

contentious experience, they gained the ability to recognize their encounters as inappropriate. This allowed the participants to shift their response from confusion and hurt to assessing the experience and admitting there was a problem. By recognizing the experience as inappropriate and wrong, the associate pastors were able to begin the process of reconciling the spiritual abuse. This began by finding words and language that appropriately labeled what they experienced, leading to an honest acknowledgement and eventually forgiveness and healing. Finally, finding biblical answers helped to provide the associate pastor with a true understanding of God's will for all leaders of the church, that of a servant who is faithful and wise.

### *Validation of Spiritual Abuse*

In the literature, one of the examples presented by scholars was stigmas that prevent individuals from speaking up about the abuse. The individuals not only remained silent about what they had experienced, but they remained in the abusive situation or created a facade, remaining loyal out of fear. It was interesting to see how this played out within the participants' environments. Some participants shared the existence of an "inner circle," described as "people who have the heartbeat of the pastor." At times this inner circle became unhealthy and a tool the pastor used as a buffer to manipulate the environment. At this point the people in the inner circle were described as fiercely loyal to the pastor. The participants described initially that they wanted to be a part of the inner circle, because they recognized it as a safe place. In Eric's story, it became apparent people did whatever the pastor asked in order to stay in the inner circle. The fear of being kicked out and the ramifications that followed kept them loyal. Eric remembered thinking, "Man, I am so thankful I am on the inside of that circle." However both Eric

and Mark explained that when they got kicked out of the circle, they knew their days were numbered. With the use of an “inner circle,” the pastor created fear, loyalty and silencing.

Fear of retribution and damning implications were other stigmas from the literature review that seemed hard to believe at first. Mark, Peter and Sue all shared that everyone was aware that they were always at risk. They said that if a person got on the wrong side of the pastor, they would end up with a “target on their back.” This meant the relationship with the pastor was going to get worse, and soon the associate pastor would be sent packing. So Mark shared, “Once it gets on your back you cannot get it off, so you leave...because you don’t want to go out in a body bag.” Regarding the idea of damning implications, Jamie Marich, licensed professional counselor who specializes in trauma and abuse, addressed this as the fear that God would look down on them, displeased by their actions.<sup>615</sup> This aspect of damning implications was addressed later in the findings in the healing and recovery section, as participants addressed restoring their relationship with God.

Marc Dupont, counselor and author of *Toxic Churches*, said that the idea of damning implications could play out as a fear of being viewed as critical or divisive by other pastors and members in the church.<sup>616</sup> This type of fear presented by Dupont played out for the participants in the form of “shunning.” The shunning presented in two forms. For Mark it took place after he left the church. He described that once he left his position,

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<sup>615</sup> Jamie Marich, *Understanding and Treating Spiritual Abuse* (McLean, VA: NetCE, 2015), chap. 2 (locations 280-281), Kindle.

<sup>616</sup> Marc Dupont, *Toxic Churches: Restoration from Spiritual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2004), 29.

he was not welcomed in the church anymore and lost all his friends. Chris did not personally experience shunning but watched it happen to someone else. The person was a leader in the church who presented an opinion that was different from the pastor's at a business meeting. This leader was immediately labeled a "rebellious spirit" and was personally attacked by the pastor and the leaders who were a part of the pastor's "inner circle." The pain was intense for both Mark and Chris as they shared these experiences. Chris shared that seeing this person "ostracized" and the damage it had to relationships within the church "is just ugly no matter what, and in that moment it was as ugly as it could get." As the participants shared their stories and the fears present, I recognized just how devastating it can be, as well as why people would avoid addressing it.

Other topics from the literature review validated by the interviews were signs, methods and types of abusers. Some of these signs and methods of abuse clearly aligned with the indicators of abuse presented by the participants. These included performance preoccupations, paranoia, shaming, manipulation, betrayal, jealousy, insecurity and narcissism. Other signs and methods that aligned but were labeled differently are as follows:

<u>Literature Review/Scholars</u>	<u>Interviews/Participants</u>
Power posturing	Control
Unspoken rules	Ignoring/Setting aside
Misplaced loyalty	Honesty/Calling out
Secrecy	Controlling

"Power posturing" and "secrecy" refer to the activities of the abuser. These two aligned with "control" and "controlling." The presence of unspoken rules and misplaced loyalty

are very similar. Fehlauer described unspoken rules as “unquestioned authority.” When an individual approaches the pastor with a concern or questions any actions, it is met with a backlash of consequences and shunning. In regards to misplaced loyalty, it can occur in the pastor’s mind if an individual is not loyal to the leadership of the pastor or questions him in any way. The participants described being honest about a situation in the church that involved the pastor or calling out the pastor for behavior that was inappropriate and the result was startling. For Mark it resulted in being completely ignored and cast out of the inner circle, leading to a “target” being placed on his back. For Eric, he was either ignored for weeks on end or berated and mocked in front of other associate pastors. One occurrence was in front of a large group of church members from the pulpit.

While it is important to validate that what literature calls spiritual abuse was actually what the participants were experiencing, it was not the main focus of the study and research. However, it is important because the research cannot address the participants’ interpretations and perceptions unless the content is established. Looking at the participants’ stories paints the best picture of what occurred in these contentious, abusive experiences. Here are some of their comments that speak to the signs, methods and stigmas mentioned above:

- “But personally, it was the condescension, the shaming... you could feel the air go out of the room.”
- “I am just one tough pastor, you will do what I say or you will get out.”
- “In staff meetings we would hand him a sheet with our visitation reports. He brought a big red magic marker like a first grade teacher and he would grade you A-F on whether he thought you did a good enough job. And, then he would slide it across to where all the staff members see what grade he’s given you, as if he’s the judge. It was one of those things that you could not believe it happens unless you are living through it. It was just totally demoralizing.”

- “It was right after a big youth event we have every year and we were having a party to celebrate the event, the fact that people got saved and to thank the people who helped out. So I said, ‘I just want to tell you again, everybody, this was you all, what a great job you did, what a great thing you all did, you all made this successful.’ Everyone is cheering and thanking me, saying it was a group effort. Then my lead pastor who is at the pulpit, grabs the mic and says, ‘Aw, Eric, you are so humble, you are just a Tom Sawyer.’ And I laughed to try to play it off in front of all these people. He continued, ‘Aw, you’re the guy that gets everybody to paint the fence and then you take credit for it.’ When he said that, the entire crowd booed his comments, really loud. Well, he hated any of that kind of stuff if it took away from his limelight.”
- “All of the sudden, you wake up one morning and you feel like you have been duct taped to a certain way or mode of how you have to do things.”
- “It was numbers driven...there is definitely a currency in that world, and the currency is nickels and noses, right, facilities and people. So, there is definitely a currency. So, if you want to be relevant, if you want to have a measuring stick to see who is doing well then that is what you shoot for. And so, whether it is something that is nature or nurture with these guys if they want to be the pastor of a sizeable congregation that is the way you do it. If you are going to make a living at this, then this is the way you do it. Again, very numbers driven, very condescending.”
- “He would come down to my office and say, ‘Hey, I don’t want you to go to lunch anymore with Blake Jones.’ And I go, ‘Why, did I do something wrong?’ and he said, ‘No I just don’t like that you guys are hanging out all the time together. No more.’ No explanation and then goes, ‘Don’t tell Blake I said that.’ Blake and I were going to lunch all the time. We kind of hung out; we were friends. And I go, ‘Okay.’ And I had to just had to work it out. And he goes, ‘If I find out you told him, I am going to be mad at you.’”
- “Ok, you know you weren’t deserving of this position, the parents pretty much pushed you on me and you’re gonna drop out of school and you are going to bust your rear and you’re going to have to perform or you are going to be out of here.”
- “He would literally say to me, ‘It’s my way or the highway.’”
- “I just expect you to do whatever I tell you, whenever I tell you to do it.”
- “I come back from lunch and Paul is in my office. He is just sitting in my office waiting for me to come back from lunch. First, there are no windows in my office because my office is inside a gym, and it scared me when I walked in, and I go, ‘What are you doing?’ (Said enthusiastically) and he said, (with a serious tone) ‘Do you want to tell me what you are doing eating lunch with

Abi and Greg?’ and I said, ‘Just eating with Abi and Greg; just talking about their son Max.’ and he said, ‘Well did you all talk about me?’ and I go, ‘Paul, I need you to know that your name never came up; I don’t talk to them about you.’ And he said, ‘Yeah, ya did, what did you talk about?’ and I was like, ‘Dude I can’t live like this.’ It was a paranoid mess.”

The participants’ stories were informative and necessary to hear before stepping into the impact of those experiences.

As one establishes that spiritual abuse has occurred, the critical piece becomes the impact of that abuse on the individual. The participants who were interviewed described the initial impact of the abuse as “demoralizing,” “demeaning,” “legitimate sorrow,” “toxic,” “woundedness,” “abusive,” “traumatic” and “dehumanizing.” These terms cannot be minimized because the effects can be far reaching. Anne Graham Lotz, speaker and author, shares in *Wounded by God’s People* that, for her, forgiving those who wounded her has become “a way of life...that will last a lifetime.”<sup>617</sup> For people who experience spiritual abuse, the fears are real, the wounds are real and the struggle is real. Learning to communicate these fears, wounds and struggles is the core to what brings healing, according to psychiatrist, Bessel Van Der Kolk. He said, “Communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized.”<sup>618</sup> This idea of communication and finding healing leads to the main focus of the research.

The main focus of the study was to understand how associate pastors who had experienced spiritual abuse came to a place of healing and recovery, as well as what was required for them to find restoration. The next two findings address this question by

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<sup>617</sup> Anne Graham Lotz, *Wounded by God’s People: Discovering How God’s Love Heals Our Hearts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), under “Acknowledgments” (locations 2436-2440), Kindle.

<sup>618</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D., *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 2015), chap. 14 (locations 4440-4442), Kindle.



presenting the participants' assessment of spiritual abuse and how they achieved reconciliation.

### *Assessing the Spiritual Abuse*

The second finding from the study arose as the participants continued their stories, sharing insights they naturally came to during their contentious experiences. It was moments of truth that I classified as points of awareness. The participants began the process of assessing their experiences with the lead pastor. One of the points of awareness came in the form of honesty or calling out. The participants described interactions with the lead pastor where they were honestly sharing concerns or calling out something that was not appropriate. Here are a few examples:

- “I became pretty outspoken about the nepotism, and that’s probably one of the things that got me in trouble -- because I voiced an opinion, and it wasn’t the opinion of the pastor.”
- “You know what, when you get your attitude right why don’t you just come into my office, and you can talk to me there, but I am leaving.”
- “So, in the next staff meeting I knew I had to say something and I was terrified. I am not a confrontational person at all. I want people to like me and I don’t want to feel any disharmony. But finally, I had to say, ‘Jerry you can’t say that, I have got these people who have friends who are getting married and are leaving the group. And I am just trying to hold this thing together. I am just trying to get them here and you are calling them out from the pulpit. It’s embarrassing.’ And he said, ‘But it’s true.’ And I said, ‘But it doesn’t matter if it’s true.’”

These important moments took courage. In the past, the participants had kept quiet out of fear from repercussions, but by standing up for what was right and speaking truth, the participants initiated the process of taking back the power they had freely given up to the lead pastor. Eric shared that confidence came as he realized the pastor’s stipulations for whom he could eat with, talk to or be friends with were completely inappropriate. One

day Eric said he was talking to the pastor about a couple in the church, and Eric was sharing that he and his wife had reached out to the couple. The couple was going through marital problems. The pastor said, “No, we are not going to be friends with them,” and Eric said, “You can’t tell me that.” Eric believed that was the point the pastor knew he no longer had control over him.

There were other points of awareness, such as recognizing the damage and inappropriateness that comes with shunning, the acknowledgement of high staff turnover as an indication of a problem, witnessing serious health effects both personally and with other staff members and recognition of false authority. As each participant shared these points of awareness, it was the beginning of recognizing and admitting there was a problem, and for some, standing up to the problem. When a few participants touched on the topic of false authority, the level of assessment stepped up a bit because it addressed the nature of church leadership. It was an admittance of something being done inappropriately in the name of God. Chris shared:

A lot of things were being done in the name of God that I don’t think necessarily had God’s hand on it at all. The leaders begin to trust in their own efforts by using natural techniques versus walking in the Spirit. There is a way you can grow a church without God...What I was watching wasn’t theologically sound, or what God designed for spiritual authority for leadership in the church. It was what I saw as fleshly leadership, not spiritual leadership. So, it created an even bigger divide because it is hard to respect. It’s different if it’s just a different opinion in regards to the color of the carpet, for example. Because that is just preference. But, when it deals with what God had designed then it is no longer living within Gods design. I do not mean to be hyper-spiritual, but it creates real turmoil for a spiritual leader.

Eric’s example was more specific. He shared how the lead pastor pushed to change the bylaws so that he would be granted unchecked power and authority. Eric said the other

members supported the change stating, “We don’t mind changing our bylaws to give you full authority, as long as you’re our pastor.” To Eric, this statement was scary.

### *Reconciling the Spiritual Abuse*

As each interview progressed, the language and words changed from “disrespectful,” “short,” “curt,” “abrasive” to “shaming,” “shunning,” “demoralizing,” “abusive,” “dehumanizing” and “traumatic.” It was also interesting to watch the participants process the experience, at times taking long pauses as they recalled memories or speaking slowly and tentatively. It was evident the memories were emotionally difficult to recall and share. In the literature review, the scholars talk about the importance of finding words and language to describe one’s experience of abuse. Christian psychologist Diane Langberg describes how necessary this process is for healing. “What seems too terrible to hold for long moments in the mind must be remembered and reflected upon. That which is unspeakable must be spoken. The indescribable must be described.”<sup>619</sup> She explains it as a paradox in that it feels incongruous to share and give words and language to the things they do not want to remember much less speak about. Van Der Kolk agrees with Langberg, describing how language is essential to repair the connection. He gives the following explanation:

Neuroscience research has shown that we possess two distinct forms of self-awareness: one that keeps track of the self across time and one that registers the self in the present moment. The first, our autobiographical self, creates connections among experiences and assembles them into a coherent story. This system is rooted in language. Our narratives change with the telling, as our perspective changes and as we incorporate new input. The other system, moment-to-moment self-awareness, is based

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<sup>619</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), chap. 5 (locations 1057-1061), Kindle.

primarily in physical sensations, but if we feel safe and are not rushed, we can find words to communicate that experience as well. These two ways of knowing are localized in different parts of the brain that are largely disconnected from each other. Only the system devoted to self-awareness, which is based in the medial prefrontal cortex, can change the emotional brain... One system creates a story for public consumption, and if we tell that story often enough, we are likely to start believing that it contains the whole truth. But the other system registers a different truth: how we experience the situation deep inside. It is this second system that needs to be accessed, befriended and reconciled.<sup>620</sup>

By doing this one is able to “organize our memories into a coherent whole.”<sup>621</sup> I agree with both Langberg and Van Der Kolk and believe the data will bear this out as we move forward. The next finding was that the participants found healing and recovery as they processed assessing and owning their stories.

The participants were next asked to share their interpretations of their experience at different points in time. The first question the participants were asked was how did they interpret what was occurring at the time. The responses were insightful.

Eric: Initially he was unable to interpret it, especially at a younger age. He kept trying to figure out if this was what full time ministry was, if this was just what people expect. He shared, “I was young and dumb, and I wasn’t seeing it as something wrong.” As he began to see what other youth pastors experienced with their lead pastors, and that it was quite different from his own experience, he realized his experience was not normal. He shared, “I started seeing that there was dysfunction here, and it isn’t right for a person, especially a lead pastor, who relishes thoughts of “I am the toughest guy in the room.” And not only relished it but loved saying, “I am just one tough pastor, you will do what I say or you will get out.” For Eric he realized it was very unhealthy.

Mark: His initial interpretation was that the environment and relationship with the lead pastor was toxic and that he “needed to get away from it for my own health and sanity.”

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<sup>620</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, chap. 14 (locations 4450-4462), Kindle.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 14 (location 4672).

Sue: She was left feeling that she wasn't good enough and wasn't appreciated. She shared that her initial reaction when she experienced this type of behavior was, "What did I do wrong? How am I at fault for this? And, what can I do to fix it? That's just sort of a personal pattern in thinking, if someone is upset then I must have done something." So she internalized it.

Tom and Chris both struggled with the question, taking a long pause to consider the answer:

Tom: After a long pause said, "I don't know that's a good question." Then he explained that he initially went from anger to apathy saying, "which was my self-preservation mode."

Chris: After a long pause shared, "I don't know if I really have an answer to that question." For him it had been over twenty-five years, and he felt that over time he repressed things, he forgot about them so he could move on. He only remembered during that time having a burden for the church and its people.

In the literature Van Der Kolk says that when people first enter therapy, they are faced with limited language, especially if the experience they are sharing was something painful that happened with someone else. He explains that people convince themselves that by keeping quiet, they have a sort of power over their feelings and experience. However when they are able to name things and give language to the experience, they can find a different kind of power and control over it. He speaks to the transformation, saying, "This is one of the most profound experiences we can have, and such resonance, in which hitherto unspoken words can be discovered, uttered, and received, is fundamental to healing the isolation of trauma—especially if other people in our lives have ignored or silenced us."<sup>622</sup> Brene Brown, behavioral researcher and speaker, also speaks to the transformation one can find by what she called "owning their stories." By being courageous enough to enter the darkness of their experience they can find a light,

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<sup>622</sup> Ibid., chap. 14 (locations 4440-4442).

which will bring them infinite power.<sup>623</sup> Van Der Kolk and Brown's concepts appeared to be playing out as the interviews went on.

The next question the participants were asked was how they interpret and identify their contentious experience now. Below are their responses:

Mark: It was a toxic relationship and environment because he had allowed someone to control his life. Tentatively he also shared, "abusive," because of the things that were said and done."

Chris: Called it abuse, saying, "A lot of the damage that happened still really impacts who I am as a pastor today. By seeing what I have seen, it is abuse of spiritual authority in my opinion."

Sue, Tom and Peter struggled more with how they interpreted their experience or what to call it.

Sue: Initially said, "a lack of respect and behaviors that fall from that. Demeaning, ignoring, disrespectful." She shared a time when she discussed it with a professional therapist who asked, "If you were in a relationship, if this was a husband or a parent, I would ask, 'what's their drug of choice?' and without a second I said, 'power.'" Sue said this friend further explained that the relationship was very much an abusive relationship.

Tom: He wasn't sure if he could call it abusive, but it would be close because of the effects it had on him and the people around him. He landed on ignorance explaining, "I think ignorance of how to lead. Because I have said it to you, and I have said it since -- none of these guys went into it saying, "This is the kind of culture I want to create. I want to have high staff turnover and a place where people hate coming to work, where they don't like me." No one would say that in seminary. So, I think the ignorance of knowing how to lead themselves well and then how to lead a group of people well."

Peter: Shared he could only come up with distrust and betrayal, but struggled calling it abuse because it seemed too strong. He said, maybe just lost confidence and then admitted he didn't know what to call it.

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<sup>623</sup> Brene' Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 6.

At this point in the interview I decided to share with Peter the definition of spiritual abuse, without telling him the term I was describing, to see how he would respond.

Interviewer: I am going to read something to you. It's a description. So, the question is, would you say this applies to your contentious experience? "When a leader with spiritual authority uses their position and authority to manipulate, control or dominate."

Peter: Great definition, yeah. And in my contentious experience, that's what I had when I left. And with James he didn't invent that, he perfected it. (answered quickly, while shaking head affirmatively.)

Interviewer: So that is actually a definition of a term that is not common language.<sup>624</sup>

Peter: I am curious what it would be.

Interviewer: It's called spiritual abuse.

Peter: Oh yeah, there is a lot of that. That is a great definition.

Peter continued to ponder this new revelation admitting, "There is a lot of spiritual abuse. No doubt about it...it's a pretty nasty business and it's prevalent."

I realize that this information might be redundant as it was presented before. However, as we conclude the findings of the research, it is important to revisit the point so that we can see the transformation that can occur as an individual assesses what is occurring or has occurred. The assessing brought about an awareness that led to finding words and language that brought understanding as they found their voice and shared their stories. As the participants began to share their stories and find their voice, the healing naturally began.

The importance of finding one's voice also came out in the literature review, especially in the story of Helen Keller when she discovered the word "water." Keller's

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<sup>624</sup> Common language means words used in regular conversation.

story is quite different from the story shared previously. Keller, author and lecturer, shares the impact of words and language by saying, “Water!” She writes, “That word startled my soul, and it awoke, full of the spirit of the morning. . . . Until that day my mind had been like a darkened chamber, waiting for words to enter and light the lamp, which is thought. I learned a great many words that day.”<sup>625</sup> A big part of Keller’s story was that her teacher, Anne Sullivan, helped her to find words and language, and by doing so she was able to “find herself.” Van Der Kolk emphasized that in finding language and words, people can change the narrative. By doing so, they are able to change their perspective, leading them to find new self-awareness from their abusive experiences.

Other aspects of the healing process were addressed in both the literature review and interviews. One example was heavily tied to finding words, language and one’s voice. The literature calls it “safe places and safe people,” and the participants called it the support of family, friends and support groups. Van Der Kolk states that in order to recover the details of what occurred in the abusive situation, the brain has to be convinced it is safe to let it out, and this only happens when an individual feels safe at a visceral level.<sup>626</sup> Another important point shared by psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend is that people need to learn character discernment to be able to tell “the sheep from the goats,” meaning who is good for you and who is not.<sup>627</sup> The reason this is needed is because too many people assume the church is a safe place with only safe

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<sup>625</sup> Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Project Gutenberg, last updated February 4, 2013), 262, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2397/2397-h/2397-h.htm>.

<sup>626</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, chap. 13 (locations 3945-3947), Kindle.

<sup>627</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Safe People*, 11.



people when the reality is that this is not always true and we must acknowledge that.<sup>628</sup>

These safe places or support groups, mentors and the support of family and friends, are an “extremely powerful tool.”<sup>629</sup> Cloud and Townsend explain it as a dynamic tool allowing for spiritual and emotional growth not found in individual relationships. Also, the support one feels is like an army present to help fight the battle.<sup>630</sup> The interviews validated this information, as several of these points were present in the participants’ testimony. Chris shared that one of his support groups was very therapeutic saying, “I was kind of their freak show; they loved hanging out with me, they loved hearing all the stories.” Chris also shared that if he would have had to go through it on his own, he would have lost his mind but also emphasized that people have to be able to trust the people they are sharing with or it can “bite you if too much stuff gets out.”

The next area in which the interviews validated the literature review was what the literature describes as restoring one’s relationship with God. Dale Ryan, associate professor of recovery ministries, notes that people don’t realize the distortions that can happen from the abuse. In sharing his own experience, Ryan describes striving to be found capable in his leader’s eyes and becoming “weary of trying to be good enough, dedicated enough, strong enough, smart enough.”<sup>631</sup> Ryan further confesses that this leader became a small ‘g’ god in his life because he placed more emphasis on pleasing

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<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 160

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., 167

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> Jeff VanVonderen, Dale Ryan, and Juanita Ryan, *Soul Repair: Rebuilding Your Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), chap. 6 (locations 1076-1077), Kindle.

him rather than pleasing God.<sup>632</sup> This dynamic was present in the interview with Eric, as he shared he began to see his pastor the same way he saw God. He said:

There wasn't any grace; there was no grace. You could even hear it in my speaking to the teenagers. We didn't preach grace; we preached a lot of evangelism, hell, fire and brimstone. And maybe a little bit of arrogance. My wife was like, "Eric, you are starting to turn into Paul in how you treat people and how you talk to people. You're mad when they leave or when they are not at church or they don't make that the priority over their family or you're paranoid, stop being this way."

Another reason it is important to find restoration in one's relationship with God came from Johnson and VanVonderen. They urge that individuals receive "messages of condemnation" directed toward their performance, action or appearance. They share:

It is directed toward and lands on us: "You are the problem." "You are in the way." "Big boys don't cry." "Isn't that just like a girl." "You are stupid, fat, ugly, incompetent, lazy, worthless, selfish." "Shame on you!" This attacks the very core of our identity.<sup>633</sup>

Ken Blue, pastor and early writer on spiritual abuse, agrees and suggests these feelings and thoughts need to be neutralized by recognizing one is "completely accepted by God solely through life, death, and resurrection of Jesus."<sup>634</sup> I agree with Blue when he explained that as people look to the word of God, they find mercy and grace through the truth found in God's word and the abusive behavior loses its power.<sup>635</sup>

All the participants substantiated this process as they shared insights from God and others that aided their healing and recovery. The insights that restored their

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<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

<sup>633</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 18 (locations 2822-2824), Kindle.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid., chap. 8 (locations 1149-1151), Kindle.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

relationship with God were fivefold: being able to minister in a healthy environment, reviewing one's calling, time in the word, a deepening of their theology and reading. A few related stories from the participants:

Chris: If I had not had that healthy environment, it would have been a lot more trauma. I had the privilege of going into a healthy environment, being able to experience it. So the cancer was removed, and I got to be in remission. If I could use those terms without minimizing it. I hope you haven't experienced cancer in your life; I don't want to make a trite comparison. There is a spiritual cancer that comes from these kinds of traumatic moments . . . I had to really seek out my calling, to better understand that calling. I almost wanted to run from that calling. But it never impacted me like "God, I hate you because you let this happen." Some people may go there, but that has never even entered my mind. . . I think it reaffirmed who I was all along. . .reaffirming what I believed was scriptural about the ministry, leadership and shepherding. Seeing those things being abused and neglected, in a different style that seemed to be more manipulative and fleshly leadership than spiritual leadership at the time. It just reinforced what is the right way. Now again, I almost quit in all the middle of that, but seeing it all the way through with the outcome, it reinforced that this can be the Lord's church. It can be as simple as shepherding and letting people experience a vision without having to make it happen. And that was freeing for me. And that is why the ministry exploded for me since then. Because I wasn't trying to make things happen. I wasn't trying to please a quota. I was just trying to please my Lord and it was incredible.

Tom: I am reading this at the same time I was asking the question, "Why are we doing what we are doing?" What the author was saying is what I am thinking. All of these things that we are pushing to do: get numbers, get people attending, get people to love, all should be an overflow of what is going on inside of people. People who are so enamored with the Lord, that giving happens, telling happens, evangelism and missions happen because of this white-hot love that they have for the Lord. So, for me, I am like, this is where we should focus our ministry, is stoking those fires, get the people white hot in love with the Lord. And then let the other things be the overflow. This is what really began to shape my theology. Theologically I began to see there were a lot of attempts to manufacture fruit, and as long as it looked good, then we would pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves that it was good. And again, I would say it's why that job at the top is so insular. In order for him to feel like he was achieving his goals, there needed to be growth and needed to be more people; there needed to be giving, and there needed to be building. Even if he thought that the way

to do it was to stoke a white-hot affection for the Lord, he didn't have time to wait for that.

The other participants shared that the process of seeking God in their quiet times, reviewing their calling and reading books from other believers brought truth and affirmation to their lives and relationship with God. Progressive healing and restoration was foundational to who they are today, further developing their character.

The participants shared that forgiveness was also necessary, and I would agree. One participant said that forgiveness helps you “get on down the road, because there is going to be anger and there is going to be hurt. It will only hurt you, it's not going to hurt him.” He shared that forgiveness brought him freedom with God and others. The literature review also addressed the topic of forgiveness directing our attention to the words in Colossians 3:13, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”<sup>636</sup> Jesus himself also insisted on it in Matthew 6:14-15, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”<sup>637</sup> While this may not be easy at first, it is not optional if one wants to move forward in life as well as in their relationship with God. Lotz spoke most poignantly when she shared the impact of healing for her. She said she was determined that she was not going to allow “religious phonies” to destroy her heart and relationship with God.<sup>638</sup> God had taught her that forgiving is a not only a part

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<sup>636</sup> Colossians 3:13.

<sup>637</sup> Matthew 6:14-15.

<sup>638</sup> Lotz, *Wounded by God's People*, under “Preface” (locations 124-126), Kindle.

of her journey but it “will last a lifetime.”<sup>639</sup> This step cannot be passed over lightly, as it is clear that the freedom, restoration and character development resulting from forgiveness and healing are endless. These characteristics carry on through their next steps and experiences and follow them the rest of their lives.

### *Biblical Answers*

The final finding came from the theological framework section of the literature review. It would be careless when addressing spiritual abuse to not address the findings from God’s word, especially when the individuals carrying out the abuse do so from the auspices of overseeing and pastoring the people of God. The biggest finding in the area of theological framework was identifying the difference between false positional authority and true authority. False positional authority is described by Johnson and VanVonderen as “under the rule of men” and takes place when individuals position themselves with a level of authority that is not granted to them by God.<sup>640</sup> It is described as demanding, exhausting, performance-based and leaving one powerless. Jesus in Matthew 23 confronts it when he exposes the Pharisees’ actions. New Testament scholar R.T. France points out that Jesus is not questioning the position of the religious leaders but how they exercised authority over others from that position.<sup>641</sup> In Matthew 23:3-4 Jesus says, “So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid., under “Acknowledgments” (location 2440).

<sup>640</sup> David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 331-332), Kindle.

<sup>641</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), chap. 4 (locations 5484-5485), Kindle.

not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”<sup>642</sup> Jesus condemned the Pharisees’ actions. D.A. Carson, research professor and New Testament scholar, notes in verse 3 that Jesus “affirms their doctrine but condemns their practice.”<sup>643</sup>

The actions and practices speak to the motivation of the religious leaders which Jesus specifically addresses in verses 5-7. Jesus said they were motivated by the desire to gain recognition and praise: “They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”<sup>644</sup> Carson calls this a desire for piety.<sup>645</sup> Two passages from the Old Testament speak directly to this idea of using a position to gain power and authority, as well as recognition, praise and position in society. The first is Jeremiah 6:13-14: “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”<sup>646</sup> And the second comes as the Lord told his prophet to say the following in Ezekiel 34:1-4:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat,

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<sup>642</sup> Matthew 23:3-4.

<sup>643</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), chap. 6 (location 16516), Kindle.

<sup>644</sup> Matthew 23:5-7.

<sup>645</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, chap. 6 (locations 16573-16579), Kindle.

<sup>646</sup> Jeremiah 6:13-14.

you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.<sup>647</sup>

Now that we know what is wrong or crooked, false positional authority, we can identify what is right or correct when it comes to true or biblical authority.

The literature review reveals that the Bible clearly shows that the people of Jesus' time recognized that Jesus exhibited authority by what he said, in healing illness and casting out demons. Jesus also declared in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."<sup>648</sup> Also addressed is a form of positional authority recognized in Romans 13:1. It says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."<sup>649</sup> So believers are to be "subject" to the governing authorities. Two additional points need to be acknowledged from this verse. One is that all authority comes from God. Secondly, God instituted the authority that exists. Jesus and governing authorities are the two presented by scripture as biblical examples of true authority sanctioned by God.

Before moving on, there is an important piece in scripture that needs to be attended to, and that is the mention of "authority" by Jesus in Matthew 10:1, "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast

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<sup>647</sup> Ezekiel 34:1-4.

<sup>648</sup> Matthew 28:18.

<sup>649</sup> Romans 13:1.

them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.”<sup>650</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen argue that this is a clear sign that God does grant authority as “spiritual authority.” However, they are clear this example is not a *carte blanche* authority, and it can only be given by God or Jesus. They also clarify that this authority is specifically task-oriented, in that the disciples are granted authority over “unclean spirits,” to cast them out of a person, as well as authority to heal disease and afflictions. They were to carry out these tasks and share the message of the kingdom of God as they went. The other text that speaks to this task is Matthew 28:18-20, in which Jesus says to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”<sup>651</sup> The authority, connected to their commissioning, is also task-related. Blue proposes that Jesus is endorsing functional authority, meaning task-related, and in no way is it positional authority.<sup>652</sup> In fact when the mother of the sons of Zebedee requested Jesus place James and John in a seated position next to him in the kingdom of God, Jesus did not grant her request. He said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.<sup>653</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Matthew 10:1.

<sup>651</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>652</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 2 (locations 260-262), Kindle.

<sup>653</sup> Matthew 20:25-28.



Mary Alice Chrnalogar, author of *Twisted Scriptures*, agrees with Blue that Jesus does not grant positional authority to anyone. She states if one is a servant or a slave as Jesus describes, that person clearly has no positional authority over anyone.<sup>654</sup>

The literature also addressed two passages that are used to support opposing views to the idea that true biblical authority is only a functional authority and not positional authority. The passages are Hebrews 13:17 and Psalms 105:15. These verses are used as stand-alone verses to support the idea of pastors having positional authority from which to carry out their actions. However, it is clear from the context that this is not the point or intent of the verse. As discussed in the literature review, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright writes that leaders are positioned to watch over the sheep, “to lead, teach, instruct, and warn,” tasks best carried out in a pleasant manner.<sup>655</sup> He also clarifies that their watch does not allow them “to rule them like a dictator, nor to use them for their own advantage.”<sup>656</sup>

This idea of watching over the sheep leads to the final point from the theological framework, servant leadership. Jesus says in Luke 12:42, “And the Lord said, ‘Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?’”<sup>657</sup> Blue clarifies that this parable speaks to the idea of a servant leader who does not need a title, exalted office, or “seat of Moses,”

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<sup>654</sup> Chrnalogar, Mary Alice, *Twisted Scriptures*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), chap. 3 (locations 635-637), Kindle.

<sup>655</sup> N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 177.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid.

<sup>657</sup> Luke 12:42.

but they only need to be faithful and wise.<sup>658</sup> The final view of servant leadership comes from the apostle Paul. The first example is when he is speaking to a leader of the church, Timothy. He is explaining to Timothy that to serve the church, a teacher needs to have a clean conscience and “a heart that is true and a faith that is real.”<sup>659</sup> The other example is Paul speaking to the leaders of the church in Philippi, he says:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.<sup>660</sup>

Blue explains that “through humble service” one will find prominence in the kingdom of God,” not by exuding control over others.<sup>661</sup>

It is clear the type of leader God calls to lead his church is an individual with a servant’s heart. Failure to lead in this way leaves people wounded and scarred. It is a choice as pointed out earlier by Bloesch, “The will to power exists within every person, but in the Christian it is converted into a will to serve.”<sup>662</sup> Leaders in the church can convert their position to do one of two things: serve others or gain position and power over others. Biblically it is clear, we are called to positions that are granted functional authority over tasks, teaching...not a false positional authority used to “lord over” others

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<sup>658</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 1 (locations 101-105), Kindle.

<sup>659</sup> Johnson and VanVonderen, *Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 7 (locations 1236-1239), Kindle.

<sup>660</sup> Philippians 2:3-4.

<sup>661</sup> Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, chap. 5 (location 739), Kindle.

<sup>662</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Theological Notebook* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 1:43.

on one's staff or in their path. Believers and leaders are called to abide in the word of God and its truth in John 8:31-32, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."<sup>663</sup> Finally, those who are called to ministry are told to maintain unity in the body of Christ in Ephesians 4:1-3 which says, "I ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."<sup>664</sup>

### **Key and Significant Findings**

The findings presented above synthesized the information from the literature review with the interviews, drawing some general conclusions. Beyond the general findings, there are two other types of findings; key and significant findings. These findings draw more specific conclusions and answers about the problem of spiritual abuse in church leadership. They also provide an increased understanding and awareness regarding the coping strategies that were effective or ineffective for the associate pastors who participated. This information can facilitate moving the conversation forward, as well as provide a jumping off point for other associate pastors with similar experiences.

#### *Key Findings*

The first key finding is that these contentious experiences left the associate pastors wounded, betrayed, defeated, hurt, demeaned, disillusioned and for some,

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<sup>663</sup> John 8:31-32.

<sup>664</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3.

hopeless. In some instances, the shaming and manipulative behavior from the lead pastor was more severe than in others. The impact of the abuse was revealed both personally and corporately and was far reaching. Most of the experiences took place more than eight years ago and it was clear the individuals were still learning from that experience. As the associate pastors were being interviewed, one could see the struggle and sense the pain as the memories came flooding back. The contentious relationships the associate pastors shared during the interview aligned with the definition of spiritual abuse shared in chapter one: “when a leader with spiritual authority uses their position and authority to manipulate, control and dominate.”

The next key finding is that the awareness of the participants varied. One participant was clear; he immediately called it “spiritual abuse.” Four other participants settled somewhere in the middle. Some participants were more aware than others. Two of the four called the relationship “abusive,” “abuse” or “toxic.” The other two mentioned abuse but were more comfortable softening their terms, calling it “lack of respect” and “ignorance or not knowing how to lead.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, one participant had no idea what to call his experience. However, when a description was provided, he agreed that it completely described what had transpired. Upon being told the definition was of spiritual abuse, he agreed and even said, “it was prevalent.” While their interpretations varied, it was clear the more awareness they gained, the more empowered they became.

It became clear from the antidotes presented that healing and restoration is possible. This is the final key finding. Evidence of both healing and restoration was witnessed in different degrees and in different ways. However, what stood out the most

was that it is very important for people who have experienced some form of spiritual abuse to not go through it alone. The support of family, friends, support groups and mentors was critical for one to experience healing and restoration. Another important discovery was that the level of healing and restoration appeared to be comparable to the level of individual work the person had done, as well as the number of people they reached out to in processing their experiences and the degree to which the individual was able to speak about their experience and give language to what had occurred. For each associate pastor, the way forward required active work, time and attention rather than passive avoidance.

### *Significant Findings*

There are four significant findings from the data that need to be acknowledged. The first significant finding is the data from the person who had experienced the most healing, recovery and restoration, Eric. During Eric's interview he was very clear, concise and settled as he shared what occurred between him and his lead pastor. When he was asked how he interpreted and identified his experience now, without hesitation he said, "spiritual abuse." There were other things that stood out about Eric's experience. He had the most stories and the most descriptive and complete stories. His experience also fell on the more severe side of the abuse spectrum as described in chapter two. Eric started his story by explaining that his contentious experience occurred in his first full time ministry position and that he was "young and dumb." Within the first week of ministry a couple of key things occurred with the lead pastor. He was called into a meeting with two other associate pastors to observe another associate pastor getting fired, without being told ahead of time what was about to happen. Then he was brought into the

lead pastor's inner circle, which he recognized was a place of safety if you could remain there. The indicators of spiritual abuse were evident early as the domineering, controlling and manipulative qualities displayed by the pastor marked his initial positioning with Eric.

Other indicators were present throughout the thirteen years Eric worked with the lead pastor, including shaming, jealousy and paranoia. These are a few he shared:

- Eric came in from lunch and the pastor was sitting in his office, in the dark, and questioned him about whom he was having lunch with, what their conversations were about, and what did they say about the lead pastor?
- The lead pastor told him with whom he could be friends. At one point he told Eric and his wife to step away from their closest friends, a couple who were members of the church. Eric told the lead pastor he couldn't do that. At this point Eric was kicked out of the inner circle and ignored for three weeks.
- The lead pastor regularly said, "I am just one tough pastor, you will do what I say or you will get out."
- The lead pastor created a story about another associate pastor being unfaithful at work and a year later the truth came out that the lead pastor made up the story.
- Shaming
  - The lead pastor called Eric out in a corporate setting, calling him a "Tom Sawyer" in front of approximately 100 members of the church. The tone and comment of the lead pastor was met with booing from the church members.
  - The lead pastor called Eric "embarrassing" within his first year of ministry because Eric and his wife's giving to the church was so low.
  - When the youth ministry Eric was leading was prospering, leading forty-six young people to the Lord one summer, the lead pastor accused Eric of "building a church within a church" and said that Eric was being selfish.

The effects were deeply wounding as the shaming became not only personal but was done in a way that appeared purposeful.

For Eric the tide began to change around his tenth year of being in this environment. His wife pointed out that he was beginning to act like the lead pastor. Initially, Eric denied it, then he realized some of his reactions with others were very similar to the lead pastor's. He began to recognize the environment was unhealthy and dysfunctional. One day, a lady who left the church gave Eric and his wife a book telling him that the lead pastor was abusive and he needed to read the book. The book was *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. The book gave Eric and his wife an awareness about the lead pastor and the tactics the lead pastor used to respond and manage the associate pastoral staff. Eric began to become more aware of what was right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, standing up to the pastor when he demanded compliance. He shared at one point the lead pastor realized he no longer had control over him.

Eric's new awareness and understanding of the abusive nature of the lead pastor led him to leave this church and start over in a new church setting. This move allowed Eric to dig into the healing part of his experience. The new position and church brought a lead pastor who mentored him and taught him how healthy ministries operated. Along with the support of family and friends, Eric found the space to review his call to ministry and recognize the unhealthy responses he developed from being in the abusive environment. He shared that "I wasn't fearing the Lord, I was fearing a man," and he began to see God the way he saw his lead pastor. Eric shared that this revelation felt crippling and that "It took me about a year to deprogram from the way I ran and did things." Eric made an active choice to work through his abusive experience, never

stopping until he got to the other side, to a place of peace. Eric found words and meaning for his experience and shared his struggles with his mentor, friends and family. He also shared that God made it clear that in order for him to move forward in ministry, he needed to reach out and apologize for any wrong actions or responses on his part. Regardless of what kind of response he would receive from the lead pastor and associate pastors he reached out to, Eric knew that it was critical for him to move on and find forgiveness. Currently, Eric is making himself available to others who are going through the same experience, helping them get to a better place. Eric clearly gained more healing than the other participants, but he was also the individual who did the most work to find healing and restoration.

Quite opposite from the first significant finding is the second significant finding. One associate pastor presented a lot of data but did not present any evidence of a deeper level of processing other than what occurred on the surface. This participant, Peter, struggled the most with the identification, awareness, healing and recovery of his contentious experience. He struggled with how to interpret what was going on and did not have terms or names to identify the experience. Peter also responded to conflicts the lead pastor created with other staff members by trying to reconcile what the lead pastor had said and done. He shared that he tried to make things right between the lead pastor and the people he offended because he felt it would help the church overall. What was interesting with Peter is that he had very descriptive words at times to describe the lead pastor and his actions. He said he thought the lead pastor might be “bi-polar” and called him a “nut job.” Peter shared that after he left the position, the pastor could no longer “sabotage my ministry.” However, when asked how he interpreted or identified the



experience he said he could only come up with “distrust” and “betrayal.” He struggled with calling it abuse because it seemed too strong a word, so “maybe lost confidence.” When a definition was given to Peter without including the term, he immediately agreed that this described his experience completely. The term was spiritual abuse, and when the term was shared, he said it was not only what he experienced but a great definition. It was “a pretty nasty business and prevalent.”

Regarding the impact the abuse had on his theology or relationship with God, Peter said his experience was all a part of God’s plan and not so much about what was going on in the moment. Peter also shared that he didn’t know if healing was possible stating, “I don’t know if pastors, me included, ever really heal from these things.” When asked about restoration he responded with the following:

Restoration, that’s a good question, I have never even thought about it, I don’t know that it is even important to me. It’s kind of like what I said before, either I am all in or I am not interested. Once I have made that decision to leave, its water under the bridge to me. I am done, and I couldn’t care less.

Peter also didn’t reach out for help to move forward, but said, “No, I pretty much did it all on my own with the Lord.” Peter was the only participant who did not look to others to work through his contentious experience, struggle with what to call it or seem to know if healing and restoration is possible. He appeared settled that it was a part of life. He was also the one who did the least amount of work processing his experience. He did admit that while one can get beyond what happened by changing jobs or careers, regarding moving beyond the contentious experience, “you always do, but that doesn’t mean you get over it.” The data from Peter’s interview revealed that Peter appeared the least affected and did the least amount of work. However, Peter used a lot of trite phrases as he drew conclusions and struggled with finding language and a voice, therefore it is

hard to assess the true impact of the abuse Peter experienced. His story aligned with the others regarding the abusive behavior he experienced with his lead pastor but diverged from the others when the interview moved to his understanding of the experience, healing and restoration and how he processed his experience.

The third significant finding is that only two of the associate pastors interviewed are still in ministry today. These two are Eric and Chris, who seemed to have experienced the greatest level of healing. What is significant is that immediately following their abusive experience, they both moved to a new church where things changed drastically. The lead pastor was aware of the abusive experience they were coming from and stepped in to become a mentor. As a mentor, he helped them work through their experiences and provided a healthy ministry environment for them to experience a healthy biblical model of church ministry and leadership. Chris shared that without the mentor in his life, the experience would have been a cancer that would continue to grow. Eric was a little unsure at first and even asked his new lead pastor and mentor if he was at some point going to “bring the hammer down.” His mentor responded to him, “No, I have a responsibility as a pastor to have my integrity at the highest level.” It was apparent for both Eric and Chris that having a mentor and being able to work in a healthy ministry environment created a different result from the other participants. They both love still being in ministry.

The final finding with significance comes from the information gathered from the demographic questionnaire. Four out of the six associate pastors interviewed had their contentious experience with a lead pastor within their first or second ministry position and within three years of entering ministry. For a young pastor or a person in a new

career, at times both, the contentious experience left them disillusioned, lost, hopeless or tainted. Chris shared:

I thought if this is what ministry is I am done and was thinking about getting out of ministry... That was my first ministry experience... then I thought if this is what ministry is then I didn't sign up for this and it's not what I think ministry should be, so I am done.

Eric's experience was a bit different because, in his words, upon entering ministry he was "young and dumb." He just accepted his lead pastor's approach as "how things should be done," and saw him as a mentor to emulate. This is part of his testimony as he began to realize the ministry model was inappropriate:

I always wanted to preach like him, be like him, and as we went on I was like, 'I am turning into him, but I don't want to be him.' I remember one time when I thought just like him on how to deal with a family that wasn't coming anymore. I was just going to chew them out and tell them they better get back to church and I was like I don't want to think that way. And so I don't know. I just felt like it was furthest away from the way Jesus wanted us to do ministry. And it took me being thirteen years there, it took me probably eight or nine of those years to realize something is not right here. Because he took me in, put me in the inner circle and had me even sit in on some things that I had never sat in before and I thought, man this is great but it was really bad. I started seeing God the same way I saw my pastor. There wasn't any grace, there was no grace, and so I saw, and you could even hear it in my speaking to the teenagers. We didn't preach grace; we preached a lot of evangelism, hell, fire, and brimstone. And maybe a little bit of arrogance.

Both Chris and Eric remain in ministry today. However, the other four are no longer in ministerial positions in a church.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

### *Acknowledgement of Spiritual Abuse*

Spiritual abuse is real, and it leaves individuals with serious personal wounds and struggles, affecting their relationships with others as well as God. This wounding becomes more detrimental when the abuse is perpetrated on an associate pastor by a lead

pastor. It is more detrimental because the associate pastor believes that this is what he is called to do as a career and sees the lead pastor as a mentor and guide. He has invested his time and money for years to be educated to serve as a pastor, and it is the primary means with which he provides for himself and his family. The associate pastors begin to question all that is going on around them, as well as their calling, purpose in life and at times, their own value. The majority of the time, the abuse happens early in the associate pastor's career, when they do not have the ability to recognize this type of behavior as abnormal, and also not acceptable or biblical. The travesty is that the church, other pastors, leaders and members of the church continue to turn a blind eye, failing to see what is right in front of them. As a result associate pastors end up leaving ministry, struggle to find self-worth, have student loan debt and young families and have to find a new career. Only two of the six associate pastors interviewed still work in a church setting.

As leaders and believers of the body of Christ, we can no longer let this happen. If we do, we enable the abuse and become a part of the problem. We all have a part to play. We first have to acknowledge spiritual abuse is real and prevalent throughout the evangelical community. A part of our duty and calling as brothers and sisters in Christ is to consider and learn what we have read, seen and heard. Steven Lambert, author of the book *Charismatic Captivation*, asserts, "to readily identify the signs and symptoms of authoritarian abuse is absolutely essential."<sup>665</sup> And I would agree, because we cannot "un-see" or "undo" what we have witnessed and learned through this research.

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<sup>665</sup> Lambert, Steven, "The Signs of Spiritual Abuse," [charismatic-captivation.com](http://www.charismatic-captivation.com), November 15, 2008, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.charismatic-captivation.com/the-signs-of-spiritual-abuse/>.

This acknowledgment has to begin with the leaders of our denominations, academia and pastors. It also needs to be addressed from the pulpit. Associate pastors who have experienced abuse need to be lifted up and supported. They need to be taught that abusive behavior is not acceptable and then guided to find healing and recovery. The pastors who carry out the abuse need to be held accountable and guided to get help as well. These pastors are just as trapped by what is happening as the associate pastor who has been abused, if not more so.

### *Proactive Due Diligence*

Secondly, as individuals are preparing to go into ministry, it is vital to have an academic requirement for the individual to go through an emotional evaluation. The emotional evaluation needs to address family of origin issues and personal pathology issues. A personal profile needs to be developed for each individual seeking to become a pastor. The personal profile could be used as a tool to gauge how much of their past issues and pathologies have been dealt with, and discover strengths, weaknesses and struggles. It can measure one's emotional awareness and help to create goals for finding and maintaining emotional health moving forward. The individual needs to be placed with a counselor to address any issues they may have that pertain to their emotional health for no less than one year. Some seminaries have started the process of developing these types of programs. However, more work needs to be done in this area.

The topic of spiritual abuse should be a part of a class curriculum required in a seminary degree program. Whether it is a pastoral leadership class or pastoral counseling, it needs to be voiced in the formal teaching environment. Addressing the topic at the

academic level not only starts the conversation but also recognizes that spiritual abuse is an issue we all need to take note of and discuss. One never knows what type of environment they will find themselves in once they leave seminary. People need to know not only that it is an issue, but how to recognize it, respond to it and where they can go for help if it is needed.

### *Preventive Support*

Finally, the denomination's general assembly needs to consider training their advisory delegates to begin addressing these issues within the church. If this is not an option, the development of a forum or team that specializes in helping pastors and churches struggling with the issue of spiritual abuse would help move the problem forward. If this is not feasible, the general assembly could identify a team of consultants or spiritual directors specifically trained to work with pastors to address the issue of spiritual abuse once it becomes a problem. Pastors need to know there is a place they can reach out to and discuss the issue of spiritual abuse without the fear of further spiritual abuse, denial, or the minimizing of the abuse. It would also be a place where they can either be given direction on how to deal with the abuse or guided to someone who can.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

While the research of the study and the data it presented addresses the issue of spiritual abuse by a lead pastor toward an associate pastor, there are other areas the research did not address. These deserve the same level of attention. The first place to start would be to address what drives a pastor to become abusive. What personality types are

present with these pastors who carry out spiritual abuse? And what is required for abusive pastors to change their behavior? Evidence has shown they are just as trapped in their behavior, and many times are unaware of the damage they are causing.

Another area of research is a comparison of leadership dynamics in the secular business world with leadership dynamics in the church. Are they different? And if so, why and how? Should they be different? Is it possible that there is something to learn from the difference? I believe there is, even if the church is not to be lead in the same way as a business.

It was mentioned earlier that some churches have put together classes and programs available for people who have experienced spiritual abuse. It would be interesting to research the different programs to find what the most effective and common methodologies employ. By examining these programs, it is quite possible to create curriculum and a standard program that could be used throughout the church or denominations to begin paving a way to gain understanding and healing in regards to spiritual abuse.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the research of this dissertation, two concepts resonated and haunted me. The first concept is Jung's idea that what we resist, persists. It is such a clear and simple concept to grasp. However the grip of avoidance, denial and turning a blind eye is so unbelievably strong that we as a church body have allowed it to take hold of us in regards to the reality of what is actually taking place. People remain silent, and specifically for this study, associate pastors continue to be spiritually abused. Because of

the silence and the resisting, thousands of lives have been hurt and wounded to degrees we cannot imagine. The effects are far reaching and for some, healing is never found and restoration is never reached.

The second concept was the idea of “entering in.” Langberg touches on this heavily in her book, *Suffering and the Heart of God*. Langberg asserts that suffering exists.<sup>666</sup> Jesus also told us this in John 16:33 when he says, “in this world you will have trouble.”<sup>667</sup> Langberg shared that suffering “seems unreasonable, irrational, and unjust,” and it “rarely makes a great deal of sense.”<sup>668</sup> She further notes that our first reaction to the discomfort of suffering is to flee. However, the reality of suffering is both universal and inevitable, and as believers in Christ, one’s reaction cannot be passive.<sup>669</sup> Is this what Paul means in Galatians 6:2 when he says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ”?<sup>670</sup> I believe it is. However, we are also faced with the reality that since God created man and woman, one of the greatest acts of love he did was to give us choice. I pray we choose wisely.

I believe that together we must find a path forward. We need to empower and create a space for people to have a voice. Jesus did this for us when he died on the cross. But what he did right before he died on the cross was teach us a powerful lesson through his disciples. Jesus asked the disciples to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. It

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<sup>666</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (location 882), Kindle.

<sup>667</sup> John 16:33 (NIV).

<sup>668</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (locations 893-896), Kindle.

<sup>669</sup> Ibid., chap. 4 (locations 912-952).

<sup>670</sup> Galatians 6:2.



is considered one of the greatest hours of despair for Jesus. He reached out to the disciples asking them to come and pray with him. He told his disciples in Matthew 26:38, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.”<sup>671</sup> Langberg teaches that Jesus called his disciples to enter the Garden of Gethsemane with him, to enter his struggle with him at one of his darkest hours and to watch and pray with him.<sup>672</sup> We know that while the disciples did follow Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane, they failed to remain with him in the midst of his suffering. They failed to remain as he was suffering and praying, and failed to enter into his suffering. Instead they succumbed to sleep. In regards to spiritual abuse, I would suggest that a fair amount of believers have done the same thing, choosing to sleep.

However, this is not the end of the story. God brought us redemption, and in the end the disciples entered into the suffering of Christ as they dedicated their lives to sharing the message of the kingdom of God even unto death. You too have the opportunity to change your course, choosing to awaken and open your eyes when you witness the suffering of one who has experienced spiritual abuse. According to Langberg, in order to find a path forward through suffering and abuse, one must enter in. She says the question we must ask ourselves is, will we sleep or will we enter?<sup>673</sup>

My prayer for this study is that the reader, from the words of philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, “Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for

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<sup>671</sup> Matthew 26:38.

<sup>672</sup> Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, chap. 4 (location 997), Kindle.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 (location 981).

granted...but to weigh and consider.”<sup>674</sup> May you carefully weigh and consider what was presented. May you consider the testimonies of the participants who were interviewed and as urged by the writer of Proverbs 24:30-32:

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.<sup>675</sup>

Consider the ruins left behind from the souls that have been abused and receive instruction from them, gain wisdom and begin to pay attention so that you would choose to no longer let spiritual abuse sit beside you in the pews or dance around the ring, “supposing” when the secret of spiritual abuse is before you. As leaders of the church, in seeking to honor God, may you be eager to walk in a manner worthy of the calling, striving for peace and unity as urged by Paul in Ephesians 4:

I therefore...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>676</sup>

And finally, I pray that you would choose to enter in.

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<sup>674</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Essays of Francis Bacon* (Overland Park, KS: Digireads Publishing, 2004), Of Studies (locations 2127-2130), Kindle.

<sup>675</sup> Proverbs 24:30-32.

<sup>676</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3.



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