

Injustice

SPIRITUAL ABUSE:

MANIPULATION & EXPLOITATION IN THE NAME OF GOD

GARY PARSONS
garyparsons@justinternet.com.au

Few Christians are able to escape from the power of spiritual abuse. Graham Barker defines it as ‘the manipulation and/or exploitation of others by the misuse of spiritual privilege and power’. It has many forms and many faces, one of which is the getting of one person or group of people, to do something against their will, using their love and devotion to God and Jesus in some manipulative kind of way. Invariably though, spiritual abuse will involve a ripping away from an individual/s something incredibly precious in their walk with Jesus, leaving them hurt and wounded as a result.

Biblical Examples

Does the Bible talk about spiritual abuse? The earliest book of the Bible, the book of Job, is full of it. When Job was stripped of his house, family possessions and his physical health, and even the mutual support of his wife, his remaining three so-called friends spent all of their efforts in trying to find blame and shame to lay on him in regard to his relationship and walk with God. This book reveals clearly the source of spiritual abuse - from Satan through people, using the powerful tools of shame and blame. Job would have been quite ready to own blame that was rightfully his due, but none clearly existed.

Joseph and David both faced heavy spiritual abuse. Joseph’s abuse by his brothers continued on into Egypt, but God used it to save all Joseph’s family and continue the building of Israel. David’s abuse by Saul led to David claiming the kingdom and being crowned king as well! Not once did David ever speak poorly of Saul, always speaking of him as the ‘Lord’s anointed’, in spite of Saul’s ceaseless attempts to kill him. We find David even mourning him at his death (2 Samuel 1: 17-27), and putting to death the one who took Saul’s life (2 Samuel 1: 11-16).

My Own Story

In my own case, for example, I (together with my wife and son-in-law), was dismissed from a Christian organisation I had been involved with for 33 years, 27 of which were served from commendations received by Christian churches that supported both my wife and I in that work. No clear reasons were given for the dismissal, nor have they since, and no mediation of any sort was entered into prior to it. Although the Christian organisation was bound to follow clear guidelines it had set for itself some years previously, all of these were abandoned at this point of time. Personally speaking, I had given myself fully to work for Jesus in this particular setting, putting my heart, mind and soul into what I did. Having it then ripped away in one fell blow, has been for me the deepest and greatest hurt I have ever received from other human beings.

We were involved in building up a camp from nothing to a good viable site. It was a battle every inch of the way, but many people were involved, primitive conditions were overcome, permits were fought for and secured, buildings were erected, a lake was maintained, a farm was run, prayers were constantly made to God for help,

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answers were received, funds were slowly secured, leaders were trained, committee members were found, camps were held, people were won for the kingdom, and so much more! Faith, perseverance, patience, endurance, trust, continually praying and interceding, seeking God's Word and Way were the kinds of qualities we continually had to exercise. My role was that of Ministry Manager, and my wife's was Camp Manager, and a young family was raised in the middle of all this as well. This was not a job - nothing of the sort - it was a lifetime investment, and no-one then or since has been given any logical reason for these dismissal actions being taken.

A Wiped Out Past

One of the ugliest things about spiritual abuse is that it tries to wipe out your past. You may have served God 10, 20, 30 years or more, and served Him well. You were known, your work was known, and people may have come to know Christ through you or have been strengthened and built up in their faith. There was never any question or doubt about all these things - they were known to many. When spiritual abuse comes along, it attempts to jettison everything, not even just a part!

I have yet to meet a Christian person who goes to church, and with whom I have had opportunity to talk about issues like this, who has not in some way faced spiritual abuse of some sort in their lives.

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When I lost my position in my work after 33 years I tried to get a letter of recognition that simply recognised those years I had laboured and given for the gospel. It was not a request for a bright and rosy commendation - just recognition of what everyone knew to be true of my years of service to the Lord. There were several different bodies that could have given me this, but not one of them would issue a single word! Had they been asked before the "fall", they would gladly have given it, but now it was as if my record of service was wiped away! Had there been some clear and justifiable reason for all this, I would have welcomed it - but on that point silence alone reigned.

When Job's three friends talked with him, in spite of the impeccable life he had lived, not once did they commend him for even the tiniest part. All they could conjure up for him was shame and blame, because their theology told them he had to be guilty of something! This kind of pain cuts deep into the human spirit, and is full of torture and even savagery. The sword that plunged into Job's heart at the time of his "fall" was now plunged in again, and who could judge which was the more torturous? If the pain from spiritual abuse came from only one single wound, it might perhaps be manageable, but it has the potential to inflict is pain again and again, like a striking cobra, unless its power is broken once and for all.

When my attempts to get a letter of recognition failed, I saw 2 Corinthians 3: 1-3 in a new way, where it says "Do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody". I thought of the words and the letters we had received from campers and leaders whose lives had been changed by Jesus - saying thank you for what we had done, and expressing thanks to God for causing our paths to cross. I came to the Lord and it was as though I felt Him put His arms around me and hold me just like I was a little baby. Over and over He whispered deep into my spirit words of such love and comfort they overwhelmed me! The depth of the wound was no match for the depth of the Love of My Father - He

just poured in His oil and wine until I knew the knife could hurt me no more, no matter how deep the enemy may try to plunge it! Words cannot express the joy and delight that only Jesus can give, but I soon learned too that this was an ongoing thing. Daily I was going to need that balm to pour over me and saturate my soul and spirit with all His freshness and fullness!

Tom's Story

A man who was an elder in his church was shown by the church accountant some papers that clearly showed a misuse of church funds in a building project. The accountant had been asked to alter some of the figures before presenting them at a church AGM meeting that was due. His refusal resulted in his children being dismissed from the school (it was a church school), losing his position as church accountant and the whole family being disfellowshipped from the church. When the elder concerned objected to such harsh treatment being given, he was stood down as an elder but welcomed to continue in 'happy' fellowship in the church. His fellow elders were all blood-related and he was the only 'odd man out'. He was unable to continue, but after he left church members were warned not to speak to either him or the accountant, else they too would be cut off from the church similarly. It was also publicly stated in the church that the elder had been disfellowshipped for sowing discord instead of unity, and a letter was sent to other churches similarly, none of whom doubted what they had been told by the main body of elders. A Chartered Accountant, aware of all this, notified the Christian organisation that had loaned the money to the church for the project of what had happened, but never heard anything back from them. Later, it was discovered that the organisation had visited the church, spoken with the elders, and returned home satisfied that everything was in order, without ever speaking to the very ones who had contacted them in the first place! The church has made it clear to the elder concerned that he will only be welcome back into the

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church when he repents of what he has done. They will not say what he needs to repent of, but assure him that he does know, or that God will show him if he asks him. This church continues today seemingly thriving and seemingly well-reputed, with a good strong college attached to it. The fact that it hit the newspaper headlines as well as Channel 9's *A Current Affair* quite some time ago on another very adverse issue seems not to have affected it either.

What About God?

Has God ever been the recipient of spiritual abuse? Yes, indeed He has - the very first abuse ever! If ever anyone had reason to be upset by this event, God did!! There is not a lot of information in the Bible available about the background of the one named Satan, but we do know he was originally good, was also called Lucifer, and was given a very high position by God in the Universe, so high it would seem He was next to God Himself. At some point pride entered, and he said, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God... I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14: 13-14). God took a big risk when He put Lucifer in charge, and his betrayal by him is unequalled in its effects by any other event ever! Ever since that time, there has been a massive war taking place - the war of Good vs Evil, and mankind sits right in the middle of that great battlefield! So not only does God know all about spiritual abuse, so too does all mankind, smarting as much as ever under the weight and burden of it!

Surely Not Jesus As Well?

Has Jesus ever been a recipient? Yes He has! Betrayed by one of His disciples, denied three times by another, denied at least once by them all, and handed over by the religious leaders of the day to be crucified without a single piece of evidence against Him. In his anticipation of the full impact of the abuse that was still to come, in the Garden of Gethsemane his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground

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(Luke 22: 44) Medical science tells us that incredible trauma can do this to a person, and that death usually follows when it does. No doubt this would have been the case for Jesus, had it not been for an angel from heaven appearing and strengthening Him. Rejection (which is a part of spiritual abuse) cuts deeply into the human spirit, so when Jesus came to the cross itself, the rejection of not only men but finally of even God Himself (Matthew 27: 46), as He carried our sin, led him to commit His Precious spirit into the only safe place available - into the Hands of a Loving Heavenly Father (Luke 23: 46). We can learn much from the Lamb of God, Jesus on this, and on how to protect our spirit when the power of rejection in abuse reaches crescendo heights.

Our Response

I have yet to meet a Christian person who goes to church, and with whom I have had opportunity to talk about issues like this, who has not in some way faced spiritual abuse of some sort in their lives. Admittedly not as strong as some of the preceding examples, but certainly strong enough to have upset their spiritual equilibrium quite profoundly at some point in their lives

This must mean our response to spiritual abuse is critical. We can become really angry (not that anger of itself is wrong - God gets angry often!), but to the extent that there is a sinful lashing out with the tongue or even a physical lashing out towards another person that results in devastation of some sort either equal to or worse than the original abuse dished out.

We can also become sullen, withdrawn and bitter. This can flow on from the first, or the first can be bypassed and this one entered into immediately.

I believe it is right to oppose spiritual abuse, and to oppose it strongly, but not to allow ourselves to be ensnared by either of the above responses. I share this next segment, which is a mini-testimony, in the hope that it will shed some light on the response we make firstly to God, and help us move forward in a way that brings blessing.

The Choice: Beauty or the Beast?

My wife and I had Psalm 90:16 & 17 printed on our Wedding Program 32 years ago, to let our wedding guests know the promise we believed God had given us - that his favour and beauty would rest on us, that His splendour would fall on our children yet to be born, and that the work He wanted us to do would not only be clear, but become strongly established as well. Over 32 years all those promises have been marvellously fulfilled, but the one I want to emphasize here, is His beauty resting upon us. In Isaiah 61: 3, God promises to give a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of despair! He made it clear to me, that out of the biggest disaster of my life He was now replacing the ashes, the mourning and the despair with beauty, gladness and praise! Not only so, but He was planting a tree and calling it an oak of righteousness. What would I choose? I could choose Beauty or the Beast. "It's far more complicated than that!" I remember first arguing with the Lord, "It can't just be that simple!" Well, I soon discovered that I lost that argument with the Lord, so now each morning when I rise, I say to Him, "Today Lord, I choose beauty, so let your splendour be shown today, and let the ashes, the mourning and the despair be booted out, and let the beast be sent packing!"

Job let go of his ashes too, and God blessed the latter part of his life with double the blessings of his first part! That too has been our experience, but the choice is a daily one, and the warfare is a daily one, but we are so glad that we are on the winning side!