

# Spiritual Abuse<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, people are not very familiar with the term “spiritual abuse”, but just as there is physical and emotional abuse, spiritual abuse is also very real. Unfortunately, spiritual abuse happens all too frequently in the church and among Christians today, and it can have devastating results upon victims such as distrust, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, ill health, disillusionment, break in relationships, and deep emotional wounds. Spiritual abuse hurts people, discredits the church, and brings dishonour to the ministry of the gospel. The Bible often talks about spiritual abuse among God’s people (e.g., Ezek 34:1-10; Zech 11:15-17; Matt 20:25; 23:1-33; Luke 22:24-27; and 1 Pet 5:3) and wants people to experience freedom and joy (e.g. Matt 9:36-38; 11:28-30; Gal 3:1-5; 5:1).

Theological students and church leaders need to be aware of the problem and recognize the characteristics or symptoms of spiritual abuse. It is also critical that our graduates (who will be future pastors and church leaders) are not perpetrators of spiritual abuse but have a mature self-image and sound biblical understanding of ministry. Those who perpetrate spiritual abuse often suffer from an inadequate self-image, insecurity, and low self-worth. They also have an unbiblical understanding of the gospel, leadership, and church ministry.

Definition: Spiritual abuse occurs when people in positions of power misuse their authority for selfish interests, personal goals, or for the advancement of their organization at the expense of the freedom, spiritual growth, and emotional wellbeing of others. The person in the position of power uses “spiritual” means and church power structures to control, manipulate, and restrict the freedom of others. Perpetrators of spiritual abuse tend to be authoritarian and legalistic, and any criticism is deemed to be a sign of disobedience to God.

Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse:

- 1) **Authoritarian Leadership:** the leader or church does not tolerate any dissent from members, and there is no freedom to question the decisions or the teachings of the leader
- 2) **Exclusive Allegiance:** the leader or church demands exclusive commitment from the members; people are not allowed to visit other churches or read unsanctioned material
- 3) **Total Control:** all aspects of the church’s ministry and/or members’ Christian lives are controlled by the leader; often there is an inordinate demand on the time and finances of members
- 4) **Exaltation of Leader(s):** the leader is regarded as having special status before God with unique insights into God’s will, or having special spiritual powers

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was produced by Eric Liddell Institute, Brisbane, in 2015.

- 5) **Suppress Criticism:** criticism is viewed as an attack on the authority of the leader or church and is not tolerated; any criticism is viewed as disobedience to God
  
- 6) **Culture of Fear and Shame:** members do not feel free to express what they really think or feel; those who are “weak” or do not behave according to the wishes of the leadership are publically shamed
  
- 7) **Unbalanced Teachings and Practices:** churches or leaders that abuse are often unbalanced in doctrine and practice; they major in minors or have some theological views or practices (which are peripheral to the Christian faith) that are disproportionately emphasized and cannot be questioned
  
- 8) **Lack of Transparency:** there is an atmosphere of secrecy and lack of accountability in the leadership from fear of being questioned and not accepted

If a number of these characteristics are present in a church or the leadership style of a pastor, it is likely that there is spiritual abuse of its members. Prayerfully consider, with others, what you may do to address the situation with wisdom, grace, and truth.