

## Another Kind of Abuse

*The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1991), 234 pp.

*Churches That Abuse* by Ronald M. Enroth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 227 pp.

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CONSIDERING THE LEVEL of popular attention recently focused on physical, sexual, even ritual abuse, the discovery of "spiritual abuse" should come as no surprise. And yet it does.

*The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* is a good starting point. It defines, analyzes, and provides a vocabulary for discussing spiritual abuse. While the arrangement of subject matter is confusing and the writing style verges at times on awkward, the analytical concepts and illustrations are breathtaking.

The authors, David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, are Senior Pastor and Pastor of Counseling, respectively, at the Church of the Open Door in Crystal, Minnesota. They write as Protestants to Protestants. Although no denominations are mentioned, they seem to be describing conventional evangelical congregations.

*Churches That Abuse* has a different focus. It examines in wearying detail sometimes bizarre, often cult-like groups. These churches are marked by

idiosyncratic practices such as "intimate dancing" and "silence discipline." Enroth recognizes that "the abusive practices described in these pages may appear to be far removed from the world of conventional churchgoers." But he maintains that such "tendencies toward abusive styles of leadership are more prevalent than most Christians realize" (205). Still, his focus on relatively small, extremist sects makes Enroth's book both less accessible and less illuminating than *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*.

What is spiritual abuse? It is the exploitation of one's spiritual position to control or dominate another. It is the "misuse of ecclesiastical power to control and manipulate the flock" (Enroth, 29). It occurs when the "needs" of the organization are given precedence over the needs of its members (Johnson, 32).

Since the concept of spiritual abuse is still relatively novel, I will devote the bulk of this review to describing the characteristics of spiritually abusive religious systems, then the results of spiritual abuse in the lives of members, then the possible responses to spiritual abuse, and finally I will comment briefly on spiritual abuse and Mormonism.

### CHARACTERISTICS

In a spiritually abusive system, "the most important thing is how things look" (Johnson, 31). Johnson and VanVonderen tell of a pastoral ministries course offered at a Bible college where a young pastor-to-be was taught the fol-

lowing: he should have his wife and children address him in public as “pastor”; if he was working on his car on a Saturday and needed to run to the parts store, he should change into his pastor’s clothes in order to maintain “pastoral dignity”; and he should route the church telephone to his home and answer it “First Christian Church” in order to create the impression that he was constantly at church. When sitting on the platform at church, he was taught, it is vital to wear proper socks and never cross your legs in such a way as to reveal the soles of your shoes. “Reveal your soul,” he was told, “never your soles.” Finally, “When you ascend the platform, remember—you are the voice of God. Sound like it” (131).

Another characteristic of a spiritually abusive system is that its leaders require the place of honor. “Unhealthy, authoritarian leadership encourages people to place their pastors on pedestals” (Enroth, 81). “It is our belief,” write Johnson and VanVonderen, “that the less secure a leader is, the more important titles will be to him or her” (134). Such leaders project the image of spirituality, require the recognition of people, and “point to themselves as the primary source of knowledge, direction, authority, and life” (Johnson, 136).

Not only will spiritually abusive leaders demand honor, claim Johnson and VanVonderen, they may actually insist that others deny reality in order to maintain their authority: “members have to deny any thought, opinion or feeling that is different than those of people in authority. Anything that has the potential to shame those in authority is ignored or denied.” In other words, “The system defines reality” (58).

Spiritually abusive leaders invoke their position to enforce their decisions. “Because I’m the pastor, that’s why!”

“Are you questioning my authority?” “Don’t be a troublemaker.” “Submit to your elder.” Such phrases are symptomatic of “false authority” (Johnson, 112). Johnson and VanVonderen identify two indicia of false authority: first, leaders take authority rather than receiving it from God. Second, their authority rests not on wisdom, discernment, or truth, but solely on their position or rank—they are to be obeyed because they are in charge.

Spiritually abusive systems encourage “misplaced loyalty”: loyalty to Jesus Christ is transformed into loyalty to a leader or a church. Conversely, “disloyalty to or disagreement with the leadership is equated with disobeying God. Questioning leaders is equal to questioning God. After all, the leader is the authority, and authority is always right” (Johnson, 76). Enroth asserts that abusive leaders “consciously foster an unhealthy form of dependency, spiritually and interpersonally, by focusing on themes of submission, loyalty, and obedience to those in authority” (103).

This misplaced loyalty is cultivated by three methods. First, “leadership projects a ‘we alone are right’ mentality, which permeates the system” (Johnson, 76). Second, leaders use “scare tactics” to bolster misplaced loyalty, perhaps telling departing members that “God is going to withdraw His Spirit from you and your family” or “God will destroy your business” (Johnson, 77). Finally, misplaced loyalty may be extracted through threats of public humiliation. “You can be ‘exposed’ for asking too many questions, for disobeying unspoken rules, or for disagreeing with authority. People are made public examples in order to send a message to those who remain” (Johnson, 78).

Spiritually abusive systems tend to be legalistic. Legalism focuses on

achieving righteousness through the performance of required behaviors and the avoidance of proscribed ones. Salvation is earned through human works. Johnson and VanVonderen warn against any spiritual system "in which the leaders or teachers add the performance of religious behaviors to the performance of Jesus on the cross as the means to find God's approval" (36). In such a system, love and acceptance must be earned by obeying rules.

Johnson and VanVonderen tell of a Christian conference in which the attendees were given formulas for achieving "a nice, packaged, orderly Christian life" (44). Those who successfully completed the course—mostly the naturally disciplined, strong-willed people—were permitted to attend an "advanced seminar." And the others? The speaker told the audience, "If you follow these principles and they don't work, call me and tell me about it. You need to know, though, that you'll be the first one for whom they didn't" (ibid.).

Legalism spawns a preoccupation with fault and blame. In the New Testament the purpose of confession is to receive forgiveness and cleansing; the spiritually abusive system demands confession "in order to know whom to shame—that is, whom to make feel so defective and humiliated that they won't act that way anymore" (Johnson, 58).

At the top of the legalistic system is the "Santa God": "You better watch out, you better not cry./ You better not pout, I'm telling you why./ Santa God is coming again" (Johnson, 43). Johnson and VanVonderen ask rhetorically, "how many churches teach that your place in heaven will be determined by how many good works you've done here on earth? How many teach that while your *salvation* is not dependent upon works,

your *position* close to or far from Him is dependent upon works?" (ibid.).

The structure of legalism is threatened by the grace-oriented Christian, since "living with Jesus as your only source of life and acceptance is a confrontation to those who seek God's approval on the basis of their own religious behavior" (Johnson, 37).

Abusive leaders favor legalism for a number of reasons: busy and apparently righteous adherents make them look good; a legalistic system allows them to examine others instead of themselves; and they gain a sense of validation from the good works of their followers (Johnson, 37). Of course, despite such self-interested motives, these leaders' demands are "cloaked in the language of being holy and helping others to live holy lives" (ibid.).

Another characteristic of a spiritually abusive system is deception, what Johnson and VanVonderen call "double-talk." Not to put too fine a point on it, false spiritual leaders lie in order to look good. Because they rarely say what they mean, followers may find it hard to trust them. People are told "they are not spiritual enough to understand teachings or decisions of the leaders. The leaders sound pious enough, even spiritual. But we are left with the vague sense that something is missing. They will give you the 'right' answer, but rarely will you get the 'real' answer. Everything has a double meaning" (Johnson, 126). In conversation, receiving a straight answer requires a precisely phrased question.

Manipulation is the life-blood of abusive systems. The most powerful of the manipulative techniques is enforced silence, or what Johnson and VanVonderen call the *can't-talk rule*: "If you speak about the problem out loud, *you are the problem*" (68). Those who speak

out may be accused of being unloving, unspiritual, or un-Christian (ibid.). Enroth cites a sect that, when confronted with its own wrong teachings, will "attack the character and life of the questioner by claiming that he has 'sin in his life.' Such terms as 'prideful,' 'independent spirit,' and 'rebellious' are used in answer to the inquirer" (117).

Scripture may even be invoked in the service of such abusive tactics. Thus, Hebrews 13:17, which counsels to "obey your leaders, and submit to them," is "stripped of its spirit and translated legalistically to mean, 'Don't think, don't discern, don't question, and don't notice problems.' If you do, you will be labeled as unsubmitive, unspiritual, and divisive" (Johnson, 171).

Another example is Matthew 18:21-22, where the Lord tells Peter he must forgive "up to seventy times seven." This verse may be turned against an abuse victim with the courage to speak up. Instead of addressing the problem, the leader makes the member the problem: "What's wrong with you that you can't forgive?" (Johnson, 100). Thus, "truth is suppressed in the name of spirituality" and "the code of silence is enforced with God's own Word" (Johnson, 94).

Another manipulative technique is the *unspoken rule* (Johnson, 56). Johnson and VanVonderen observe that no one would ever say out loud, "You know we must never disagree with the pastor on his sermons—and if you do you will never be trusted and never be allowed to minister in any capacity in this church" (67). This is because "examining [the statement] in the light of mature dialogue would instantly reveal how illogical, unhealthy and anti-Christian [it is]" (ibid.). Yet the rule is subtly enforced.

Another manipulative technique is

*coding*, the use of circuitous or euphemistic verbal formulations in order to avoid uncomfortable realities. Another is *triangulation* (they call it "triangling"), the use of intermediaries to deliver messages or directives in order to insulate the leader from the member's response (Johnson, 57).

Finally, spiritually abusive systems are secretive. "When you see people in a religious system being secretive—*watch out*. People don't hide what is appropriate, they hide what is inappropriate" (Johnson, 78). Johnson and VanVonderen report the following comment from a "wounded" Christian: "Quite a number of us wanted more information about how church finances were being spent. We wanted to know if more money could go into direct ministries, benevolences, things like that. When I asked some questions at an elders' meeting—boy did the room get icy. Later I was told to stop trying to create a faction in the church" (21). Why the secrecy? Two reasons: one is to protect the image of the organization. The leaders "become God's 'public relations' agents" (Johnson, 78). Another is the leadership's condescending view of the laity. They tell themselves, "People are not mature enough to handle truth" (ibid.).

Secretiveness fosters abhorrence of outside news media, whose attention undermines unquestioning loyalty to an abusive organization. "It is not without reason that leaders of abusive groups react so strongly and so defensively to any media criticism of their organizations" (Enroth, 162). Enroth writes, "Criticism, whether its source is Christian or secular, sincere or superficial, is always viewed by fringe churches as an 'attack'" (164).

Notwithstanding their advice for identifying abusive systems, Johnson

and VanVonderen warn against launching witch-hunts. They issue two warnings to those who see spiritual abuse around them. One is that no one is immune from acting or speaking in a way that spiritually abuses others (Johnson, 24). The other is that spiritual abuse must be distinguished from legitimate conduct that may displease another. They caution that it is not abusive for a leader with responsibility for a decision to choose contrary to your opinion; for a Christian (whether leader or not) to confront another Christian, in love, with wrongdoing; for a church board to release a minister for physical, mental, or spiritual problems; to respectfully disagree on doctrines or other issues, even in public; to be a strong leader; or to adopt certain standards of group conduct, such as dress codes (*ibid.*).

#### EFFECTS

What are the effects of a spiritually abusive system on the member? Johnson and VanVonderen identify and illustrate several "symptoms" they have observed in Christians suffering spiritual abuse.

The member may develop a distorted image of God, seeing God as never satisfied, vindictive, punishing, apathetic, powerless, or fickle (Johnson, 41-42).

Related to this misperception is a preoccupation with spiritual performance. It can take either of two equally disastrous courses. One is a tendency toward self-righteousness, judgmentalism, and perfectionism, expressed in a high need to control what people do and how things turn out. The other is shame, a sense of inferiority, a negative self-assessment, an indictment of one's personhood (Johnson, 44).

Another effect of spiritual abuse is

a rejection of grace. Again, this reaction may take one of two forms. The shamed member may conclude that he or she does not deserve to be treated gracefully by God. The self-righteous may feel that "others are lazy, or are taking advantage of God, or are getting off the hook too easily" (Johnson, 46).

Like victims of other forms of abuse, the spiritually abused member will often deny the abuse. Johnson and VanVonderen cite several reasons for this denial. Where spiritual abuse has become the norm, it is difficult to recognize. Admitting the abuse out loud "often feels like you're being disloyal to family, to church, even to God." Lastly, being trained that you are the problem if you notice a problem is a powerful incentive not to notice problems (Johnson, 49).

Members in an abusive system may tend toward irresponsibility, since "no amount of performance results in the promised prize of love, acceptance or rest" (Johnson, 47). Some may expend the minimum necessary effort to get by in church duties. Others have an opposite reaction, becoming hyper-responsible burden-bearers. Johnson and VanVonderen counsel that if you've been through this, "you wind up very tired, emotionally, physically and spiritually. This may show up in the form of lack of energy or motivation, impatience with the needs of others, depression, a sense of being trapped, or finding ways to escape" (Johnson, 48).

#### RESPONSES

Johnson and VanVonderen propose two responses to the spiritually abusive system: fight or flight. But how to decide? To assist the reader in this decision, they offer a list of questions, including the following:

Does grace have a chance in your church? They suggest this rule of thumb: "If the leadership is grace-full—even with a group of very legalistic sheep—grace has a chance . . . If, however, there is a bottleneck of power-posturing leaders at the top, who are performance-oriented, the chances of things changing are very slim" (Johnson, 215).

Are you supporting what you hate? Johnson and VanVonderen speculate that if all those contributing time, money, and energy to something they actually disagree with would stop, many unhealthy and abusive organizations would collapse (215).

Can you both stay and stay healthy? They analogize to a person holding onto the ship of his church with one hand and the pier of spiritual health and reality with the other. As the ship gradually pulls away, the member has to let it go (Johnson, 217).

Are you trying to help the system, even though you are exhausted? In a spiritually abusive system, permission to rest is never given, and cries for help are labeled unspiritual.

If you came for the first time today knowing what you now know, would you stay?

Those who opt to fight must expect resistance from both image-conscious leaders and performance-oriented members. Their task, assert Johnson and VanVonderen, is to keep telling the truth with the knowledge that they are serving God and opposing Satan (224-27). These authors cite Jesus himself as the prime example of one who attacked and exposed an abusive system:

It's important to remember four things about His confrontations. First, His confrontations landed on those who saw themselves as God's official spokespersons—the most religious,

the best performers. They gave money, attended church and had more Scripture memorized than anyone. They set the standard for everyone else. Second, Jesus broke the religious rules by confronting those in authority out loud. Third, He was treated as the problem because He said there was a problem. And fourth, crowds of broken people rushed to Him because His message offered hope and rest (Johnson, 36).

They conclude *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* with this prayer:

"God, please pay attention to how those who have given their lives to serve you are getting intimidated and abused. And even in the middle of that, authorize and empower them to keep telling the truth. And keep moving your hand over your people to bring healing and rest, in the name of Jesus" (232).

#### SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND MORMONISM

In certain fundamental ways, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* is a distinctly Protestant work. Johnson and VanVonderen's grace-oriented theology, while clearly taught in Mormon scripture and shared by an increasing segment of the Mormon community, is probably not accepted by most Latter-day Saints.

Also, Johnson and VanVonderen see the problem of choosing one's church merely as a matter of preference. No attention is given to the notion that a church might inspire a member's loyalty based upon uniquely compelling doctrine or divinely bestowed authority, or that one might be geographically tied to a particular church unit. Nor do they consider the possibility that deeply felt cultural and family influences might tie a member to a church for extra-religious reasons.

Finally, they do not recognize priesthood in the popular Mormon meaning of that term: authority to act for God.

Nevertheless, the core insights of their book echo truths revealed within Mormonism some 154 years ago. Speaking through the prophet in Liberty Jail, the Lord expressly warned that his priesthood is not a license to exercise "unrighteous dominion" (D&C 121:35-44). He warned against those whose "hearts are set so much upon the things of this world and [who] aspire to the honors of men" that they do not or will not learn that "the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven" and can be handled only upon righteous principles. He warned against using the priesthood "to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness . . ." And he warned that "it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion."

And when they do? The heavens withdraw, the Spirit is grieved, and "Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man." Hence, "no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned . . ."

If Johnson and VanVonderen's "spiritual abuse" does correspond to the "unrighteous dominion" of section 121, then the moment a Latter-day Saint uses authority to dominate a fellow member, to require the place of honor, to transfer loyalty from God to himself, to maintain a false image, to silence inconvenient questions, to threaten those who disagree, to attack those who notice problems, to enforce unspoken rules, to lie to followers, to insulate himself by triangulation, to compel by virtue of office, or to conceal what others have a right to know, *Amen to his priesthood*. It is forfeit in God's eyes. What remains is what they term "false authority": the power to direct people merely because you are in charge. Surely there is no more place for that within Mormonism than without.