

When Faith Heals: Recovering From Spiritual Abuse – Part 2

"We are wounded in community and we are healed in community. No way around it. Healing might not come from the community where the wounding took place, but community is needed for healing nonetheless." | Rich Villodas

A Quick Recap About Spiritual Abuse

In [my last article](#), I talked a bit about spiritual abuse, the harm it causes to both individuals and communities, and how, in a corporate context, it not only replicates itself but often becomes deeply embedded in the culture and DNA of a community.

I talked about some of the signs to look for, and, most importantly, why it's so important to prevent. At its core, spiritual abuse distorts the relationship a person has with God, inserting human authority into a space that Jesus alone occupies, creating systems of control and coercion in the name of faith.

Recognising tendencies of spiritual abuse in ourselves is an important part of self-reflection. We are all human, given to pride, self-righteousness, misplaced zealousness, and fear. Most people who perpetuate spiritual abuse don't *think* they're being abusive. They believe they're protecting truth, upholding righteousness, or caring for souls.

In a corporate context, as the saying goes, *power corrupts absolutely, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Of course, we don't have to hold formal positions of power to act in spiritually abusive ways. But the deeper we step into places of influence or leadership, the greater the tendency becomes to start manifesting those behaviours.

Group-think, particularly in cultures where difference is viewed as harmful or disloyal, can be a powerful force of control, building and perpetuating unhealthy cultures.

Many harmful systems were built by people who thought they were doing the right thing – but fruit matters more than intent. The ends do not ever justify the means.

I left my readers with a sobering proposition – that remaining in a spiritually abusive system, even with good intentions, often means helping to sustain it. I contended that it is rare and unlikely such systems can be rehabilitated. And that if you find yourself in one, the most faithful thing you can do is probably leave.

However, I want to dig a little deeper into the possibility of reform, although rare and unlikely, and what that might look like in a corporate context. It might be that you haven't experienced spiritual abuse personally, but recognise that your church is showing signs of spiritually abusive behaviour and you believe that correction is still possible.

I also want to look at how its possible to recover from spiritual abuse, how Christ heals what systems distort, and how to rebuild a faith rooted in freedom, not fear.

Forming A Goodness Culture

In his book '[A Church Called Tov](#)', Scot McKnight, together with daughter, Laura Barringer, explores abuses in the church and notes that churches of all shapes and sizes are susceptible to abuses of power. No matter our good intentions and motivations, we are, corporately, not immune to these dangers.

McKnight and Barringer explore the concept of *Tov*, which means *good*, in Hebrew. They propose a map for healing and restoration for churches who are truly repentant of their toxic cultures and who acknowledge that urgent adjustment and

reorientation are needed.

For anyone who finds themselves in this situation and wishes to reform the current culture, this is a highly recommended read, offering not just warning signs of spiritual abuse but active ways to combat and eradicate it, and how to build a *culture of goodness*.

However, a word of warning – which I touched on briefly in my last article. Cultures are curious things, tending to take on a life of their own. Shifting a culture requires committed leadership and often takes years of consistent, focused effort. It involves intentional communication, reinforcement of new values, and modelling of changed behaviours. In organisational contexts – like a church – culture change can take at least 7 to ten years. Staying to pursue change is therefore not something to take lightly.

Before you consider staying to help bring change, you need to be certain of two things:

1. There is genuine, ongoing repentance from leadership, and
2. There is a clear, consistent roadmap in place to guide the transformation.

If both these things are not evident, you should leave.

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Spiritual abuse damages the relationship between God and a person, replacing the authority of Jesus in our hearts with systems of control and measures of expectation.

Instead of resting in His grace, trusting in the salvation gifted to us through his sacrifice, we start striving to meet human standards. Instead of hearing his voice – *he who is the bishop and shepherd of our soul* (1 Peter 2:25), we begin

listening to and fearing the voices of those who claim to speak for Him.

But Jesus never called us to that. He calls us to himself, to *follow him* – and he promises rest, not performance; love, not fear; freedom, not coercion.

Recovering from spiritual abuse is possible and it involves a return to the gospel itself – *to the good news proclaimed in Jesus*, which we received at the first (Revelation 2:4).

1. Centre Your Faith In Jesus

You have stepped into the grand narrative that God is enacting on behalf of the world. *You have received* that great gift of forgiveness and you have been promised *restoration and renewal*. You can *be confident* that the good work that God has begun in you, He will complete.

Centre your faith in the work that God, in Jesus, has done and will continue to do in you. Hebrews 11 assures us that faith is not about what we ‘know’ but confidence and trust in God and belief that His promises are sure.

Remind yourself that you are *loved by God*, not because of what you’ve done, but because of who He is. You are secure in His love because of the blood of the Saviour. Salvation is a gift of grace – freely given, never earned – so that no one may boast (Galatians 1:6-7, Romans 1:16, Romans 8:38-39).

Sin no longer has any command over us – not that we don’t still struggle but because *we are no longer slaves*. Before Christ, we had no power to resist. Now, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can choose to walk in freedom. And if we do sin? If we confess, he is faithful and *will forgive us*. *We have nothing to fear*.

Rest in this truth: you are a *dearly loved son or daughter of our Father in Heaven*. God cares for you, and He cares about

you (Romans 5:8, 1 John 4:10, 1 John 3:1, Psalm 103:13-14).

2. Open Your Heart To The Deep Work Of The Holy Spirit

Jesus promised his followers that he wouldn't leave them as orphans, but that he would send his Spirit to be with them forever. The helper or comforter would lead them in all truth (John 16:13), and it is the specific work of the Holy Spirit to heal, renew, and recreate us (Isaiah 61:1. Titus 3:5, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 5:22-23).

Where spiritual abuse has left wounds, the Holy Spirit brings restoration. Where lies have taken root, the Holy Spirit can guide us in truth. Where trust has been broken, the Holy Spirit gently rebuilds it – not in an instant, but over time, as we learn to walk in step with the Spirit again.

Where the Spirit of the Lord there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17) – freedom to know God personally, freedom to become more like Jesus, with God's help, and freedom to walk lightly in the unforced rhythms of grace.

God promises all needful help from above to answer the needs of His servants and strengthen them on the way of pilgrimage to the Kingdom of His glory (Alfred Norris).

3. Commit To Relearning The Meaning Of Discipleship

The Kingdom of God upturns our expectations, showing itself to be a kingdom where living means dying, love means sacrifice, leading looks like servanthood, and God's power is made perfect in our weakness.

Jesus tells us that if we are to follow him, we are to lay down our life and take up our cross. In God's kingdom, the first will be last, the lost are found, and grace is never earned – only received.

Discipleship – from the Greek word *mathētēs*, meaning “learner” or “student” – refers to the process of following and becoming

like a teacher, particularly Jesus. It is a principle-centered, character-based “inside out” approach to developing our authentic self in Christ.

In the ancient Jewish world, being a disciple wasn’t just about absorbing information – it was about **becoming like your teacher** in belief, behaviour, and way of life.

Discipleship is *a long obedience in the same direction* (Eugene Peterson),

- Walking closely with Jesus.
- Letting his life reshape yours.
- Learning to love well, forgive quickly, serve humbly, and trust deeply.

4. Find Healing In Healthy Community

This might be the hardest step of all for those who have experienced spiritual abuse and who have been deeply wounded in community. The fear of stepping back into these spaces is very real and the desire to protect yourself from more pain is completely understandable.

However, as Christians, we are not just brought into relationship with God, through Jesus, we become part of *the body of Christ*, members together *in the family of God*. “*The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God’s people and see an authentic painting of Christ’s love and holiness. The local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.*” – Jonathan Leeman

When a church holds Jesus at the centre, where there’s space and grace for questions, doubts, and struggles, when people are valued for who they are and not what they do, when corporate discipleship looks like transformation and not

control, and where difference is embraced, not erased, a church becomes a safe, healthy, and healing community where we can grow deeper in our spiritual walk and encourage others to do the same.

Reconnection isn't about going back to what hurt you – it's about finding a community that helps you become whole again.

A healthy church isn't perfect – but it is focused on *growing together into the full measure of Christ*, with Jesus at the centre and love at the core.

Here's some suggestions on how to step back in these spaces, with wisdom and discernment:

1. Give yourself permission to *go slow*. It's perfectly ok to be a visitor, to sit, watch, and listen without committing.

2. Look for the *fruit of the Spirit* as well as solid Bible teaching. While sound theology is important, it's not the only marker of good spiritual health. In fact, the benchmark that Jesus himself left was that '*all people will know you are my disciples by the way you love one another*'.

3. Look for *consistency* – not just how things appear on Sunday, but how people live and relate through the week. Are relationships genuine? Do people live what they preach when nobody's looking?

4. Bring *the real you*, hurts and all. A church worth trusting will meet you where you're at and will have people well equipped to walk with you through your hesitation, hurts, and distrust.

5. Finally (but not exhaustively), and most importantly, *trust God*. Recognise that your way of viewing church has been damaged – even warped – by past experiences. Ask for His grace to be upon you, and for your pain not to cloud your discernment.

Let Him gently re-teach you what community was always meant to be: not a place of fear or control, but a home for healing, truth, and love.

You don't have to rush. Just keep walking with Him, and He'll show you what's safe, what's real, and what's worth trusting again.

God of grace,
You see every bruise left by the places that should have brought healing.
You know the weight of the confusion, the ache of disillusionment,
and the fear of being hurt again.

Thank You for leading me out of what was false –
not just in teaching, but in tone, in posture, in spirit.
Thank You for not letting control have the final word.

Give me courage to hope again.
Give me eyes to see what is good and true and safe.
Protect me from both cynicism and naïveté,
teach me how to trust wisely.

Heal what was twisted in Your name.
Restore what was lost in Your presence.
And if You lead me back into community,
let it be one that reflects Your gentleness,
Your freedom,
and Your unfailing love.

Amen.

For anyone dealing with or recovering from Spiritual Abuse, either personally or corporately, I would highly recommend the following: “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Peter Scazzero, “A Long Discipleship In The Same Direction” by Eugene Peterson, “A Church Called Tov” by Scott McKnight and

Lauren Barringer, "The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognising and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church" by David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, and "Discipleship" DVD series by Christianity Explored.