

# When Faith Hurts: Recognising Spiritual Abuse – Part 1

## The Spark That Lit The Flame

One of the contentious sparks that finally lit the flame we now know as the [Reformation](#) was the idea that the common person didn't need priests to mediate between them and God. At the time, the Church (the catholic Church – still the only established Church in the West) taught that grace was dispensed through the sacraments, which could only be administered by ordained clergy. Access to God was mediated through the priesthood, creating a system where spiritual life was filtered through human hands.

John Wycliffe (c 1328-1384), often called the Morning Star of the Reformation, had become outraged by what he considered the moral and political corruption among the priesthood and the spiritual abuse of the laity – the ordinary members of the church. He believed that the priests had elevated themselves so far above the laity so as to create a false barrier between God and people.

*Protesting* against the commonly accepted practices of the time, he contended that:

– Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Believers don't need a priest to confess sins, access God's grace, or receive salvation. Christ alone is sufficient.

– The Bible is the final and highest authority in matters of faith and practice, over and above church tradition or clerical interpretation – **sola scriptura**. I've written about traditions elsewhere so you can read more about that [here](#).

*Sola scriptura* – Latin for 'Scripture alone' doesn't mean that

traditions or rituals lack value or don't play a meaningful role in the life of faith, it simply means they don't supersede or replace the authority of Scripture – and where they conflict with it, Scripture always takes precedence.

John Wycliffe was not the first to make such an assertion regarding the sufficiency of Jesus or the primacy of Scripture. More than a thousand years earlier, Paul the Apostle took the Galatian church to task over their departing of the faith for what he called *a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all*.

Paul [warned against doctrines](#) that add human effort or tradition to Christ's finished work, emphasising that true faith is rooted in grace, not in adherence to rituals or human-imposed standards (Galatians 3:5-6, Ephesians 2:8). *The work of Christ is sufficient*, he reminded the Galatians.

He would no doubt have agreed with John Wycliffe, who – over 1,300 years later – maintained that any system *prioritising performance over grace, claiming exclusive access to truth, or defining salvation as a list of correct beliefs rather than trust in Christ*, not only distorts the gospel but also sows the seeds for communities rife with spiritual abuse.

## **What Is Spiritual Abuse?**

Spiritual abuse is when a person or system uses God, Scripture, or religious authority to control, manipulate, shame, or harm others. It distorts faith into a tool of domination rather than love and freedom.

The tragedy of spiritual abuse is that it often masquerades as faithfulness, couched in biblical language. Words like *'truth'*, *'spiritual concern'*, or *'loving correction'* are often employed, with the catchphrase *truth spoken in love* used as a cover for conversations that contain cloaked judgment, spiritual superiority, or subtle control.

While this phrase – *truth spoken in love* – does come from the Bible, when Paul uses it, he is encouraging believers to grow in maturity, shown in the way they demonstrate love (Ephesians 4:15), not as it's often twisted to mean:

*"I'm telling you you're deceived... but in love."*

*"I'm about to say something that's actually quite harsh... but only because I'm loving."*

*"I'm cutting you off... because I love you."*

## **Spiritually Abusive Systems Replicate Themselves**

Spiritually abusive people harm other people. However, spiritually abusive *systems* don't just harm individuals – they also *replicate themselves*.

In environments where fear, control, and rigid doctrine are normalised as "*truth*," people begin to internalise those patterns, often believing they are acting faithfully.

Over time, they adopt the same language, the same tactics, the same narrow lens – not out of malice, but because the culture has shaped them to see spiritual pressure as love, and manipulation as discipleship.

In this way, spiritually abusive cultures inevitably produce spiritually abusive people, many of whom genuinely believe they're helping others when they are, in fact, passing on the very harm they once received.

Of course, it's important to recognise that not every disagreement or correction is abusive. Sometimes, truth really does need to be spoken in love – with humility, gentleness, and a genuine desire for someone's good.

The difference lies in the posture of the heart and the impact

of the words: is the goal to restore, or to control? To build up, or to tear down? To *win*, or to *win to Christ*?

## **The Cure For Spiritual Abuse**

And this leads us to the cure for spiritual abuse, which is, I believe, a Jesus-centric mindset. While sound theology matters – I’m the first to advocate for deep, serious, personal and corporate engagement with Scripture, a robust and living theology will spring from *understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus*, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of ‘theological beliefs’.

Like a concentric circle spreading outward, Jesus himself is the core from which every part of the Christian life flows. He is not just the centrepiece of our theology, but the source and shape of our entire faith – the origin of our love, the measure of our truth, the heartbeat of our worship. *He is our life*.

When Jesus is at the centre, everything else falls into place: doctrine aligns with grace, leadership reflects humility, spiritual communities become places that are safe, and mercy and judgment kiss one another.

But when something else takes the centre – a system, a doctrine, a leader, a fear – the circles become distorted, and what flows outward can easily become controlling or harmful.

Spiritual health begins not with getting all the answers right, but with keeping Jesus – who will lead us in all truth – at the core.

## **How Do I Know If I’m Being Spiritually Abusive?**

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. But underneath that often sits pride, fear, or a deeply ingrained belief that control equals faithfulness.

How can we tell the difference? How do we know if we've slipped from '*contending earnestly for the faith*' to controlling others in the name of faith, or defending doctrine at the cost of love?

### **1. We frame disagreement as deception.**

We view disagreement with someone over theology as them *leaving the faith, being deceived or falling away*. For us, unity might look like uniformity, yet they are not the same thing. The Bible speaks of a universal, visible and invisible Church that is wildly diverse in how its members look, think or worship. Yet, within all this difference, its people are deeply connected in love and purpose, through mutual respect and, as touched on above, through the core central faith in Jesus Christ.

Uniformity, on the other hand, silences diversity in the name of truth and is often about control and fear of difference or 'mess', preferring the idea of enforcing group-think at all costs.

### **2. We speak with absolutes, black and whites, and hyper-literals.**

We see the landscape of the Bible as black and white without nuance or the possibility of alternative interpretations to ours. Passages are applied absolutely and literally, often without consideration for context or in the light of grace.

People will try to say the Bible is black and white on every subject but it's not, not by half. There's plenty of grey, and bold, glorious colour too. There's space for openness and conversation and listening and learning and for seeing things

from different angles. While there are significant core doctrines that its not possible to differ on and still be called *Christian* (for example, the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus), there are plenty of second and third-tier theological positions that are fascinating to discuss, interesting to pull apart, and which definitely, absolutely do not define *whether someone is saved or not*. *Eschatology* – theology that deals with *the end times* – is one such topic.

### **3. We equate someone's worth or standing before God with their beliefs or behaviour**

We treat people differently, depending on whether their theology aligns with ours. Rather than seeing every person in the image of God, we may consciously or unconsciously categorise them as '*in*' or '*out*', '*friend*' or '*foe*', and, as is common in some closed conservative communities, kindness, closeness, or blessing may be withheld – *shunning* – from those who we deem to have gone astray. We view this withdrawing as a *sad but necessary discipline*.

### **4. We think we are always right.**

We may feel the need to constantly correct others, believing that our interpretation of Scripture isn't just valid but that it's the *only* valid one. When someone doesn't share our interpretation, we may consider them to be lacking understanding, spiritually shallow, or simply deceived, rather than considering that we could, in fact, be wrong.

Assuming our interpretation is the only valid one shuts down meaningful dialogue and puts us in the place of ultimate authority—where only God belongs. It leaves no room for learning, growth, or the Spirit's work in others. This mindset *turns faith into arrogance, not conviction*, and risks dividing the body of Christ over pride rather than truth.

# How Do I Know If A Spiritual Community Is Spiritually Abusive?

The signs and red flags of a spiritually abusive community are the same as those you'd see in an individual – only magnified and reinforced through groupthink, tradition, or fear. Over time, they become woven into [the fabric of the culture itself](#), forming an entrenched and often intractable environment that is difficult to shift or challenge.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is a **certainty over humility** that defines the culture. Opposing or dissenting views or doubts are discouraged and questioning the status quo is seen as disobedience.

There is **control disguised as care**. Spiritually abusive communities often blur or erase healthy boundaries, becoming overly involved in members' personal lives.

**Scripture is misused**, not only taken out of context, but applied selectively, as and when it suits the agenda of those in control. The Bible becomes less a story of redemption and more a tool for behaviour management. In these settings, Scripture is no longer a living word that points people to Jesus – it becomes *a system of proof-texts* used to maintain power.

In Spiritually abusive communities, **acceptance depends on total agreement or compliance**, with any wrestling with faith or theology discouraged, dismissed, or defined as rebellion, weakness, or a lack of spiritual maturity. Doubt isn't treated as part of the journey – it's treated as a threat to the group's stability. As a result, people learn to suppress questions, keep quiet about struggles, and conform outwardly just to stay connected.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is often a **hyper-focus on *behaving* rather than *becoming***. The church, in

reality, is a messy but vital gathering of flawed, sinning humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God – asking questions, voicing doubts, stumbling forward in faith. When behaviour modification becomes the primary marker of spiritual maturity, it produces only superficially ‘good’ people who learn to hide their deepest fears and darkest sins.

Yet the church must be the place where those hidden things can be brought into the light – not met with shame, but healed with grace, love, and truth that restores rather than condemns.

## **How Do I Know If I’m Being or Have Been Spiritually Abused?**

Whether in a community or relationship, the signs of spiritual abuse are often subtle.

You might feel confused, fearful, or disconnected from God – as though you need permission to be close to Him. You might suppress questions to stay accepted. You might feel like your worth depends on performance or belief alignment. You might experience distancing and withdrawal upon asking uncomfortable questions or sharing truly where you’re at.

These are warning signs. Spiritual abuse isn’t always overt – sometimes it whispers insidiously, hidden in invisible codes and unspoken expectations.

The spirit of the Reformation was that *Christ alone is sufficient* – the one mediator between God and humanity. We are made right with God through Jesus Christ, not through traditions, systems, sacramentally dispensed grace, or the mediation of others.

At its core, spiritual abuse distorts the relationship a person has with God. It inserts human authority where there should be direct access, making people feel as though they

need permission, mediation, or perfect obedience to be accepted by Him. Instead of creating space where people can personally draw close to God, spiritual abuse places leaders, systems, or expectations in the way – creating unnecessary barriers to genuine, intimate relationship with God and laying ‘burdens on people which are too heavy to bear’.

If this resonates with you – if you’ve felt the weight of silence, shame, or misplaced authority in the name of faith – know that healing is possible. In Part 2, I’ll explore what that looks like: how Christ heals what systems distort, and how to rebuild a faith rooted in freedom, not fear.

*“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” – 2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV*

## **What Should I Do If I’m In A Spiritually Abusive Community?**

*Leave.*

Systemic spiritual abuse is dangerous, deceptive, and, ultimately, destructive. These environments distort your view of God, damage your sense of self, and normalise control under the guise of faith. Even if you don’t feel personally harmed, staying means you risk becoming complicit – reinforcing harmful systems, silencing questions, and modelling that this version of “faith” is acceptable for the next generation.

You don’t have to stay in a place just because it calls itself ‘*the faith*’, ‘*the truth*’, or ‘*the way*’. There’s only one way, truth and life, and his name is Jesus. Leaving a toxic or spiritually abusive system is not leaving Jesus. *In fact, it may be the most faithful thing you can do.*

You might have doubts about taking such an extreme course of action and wonder, can a spiritually abusive system be *rehabilitated* or should it be *burnt to the ground*?

It depends. Reform is possible, but rare and unlikely. More often than not, if the roots are rotten, the system needs to die, not just be repainted.

When power is centralised and unquestionable, when protecting the institution matters more than healing the people, when spiritual control is baked deep into the DNA, *then it's time to light the match.*

**In Part 2, I'll explore what recovery from spiritual abuse looks like – how faith can heal, how trust can be slowly rebuilt, and what it takes to reimagine church through the lens of grace.**

I'll also touch on what it might mean for a healthy person to remain within a broken system, and the bare minimum that would need to be in place for that to be a wise choice moving forward. Look for 'When Faith Heals | Recovering From Spiritual Abuse – Part 2' coming soon.