



AN ABUSIVE LEADER ISN'T WORTH FOLLOWING

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Abuse is defined by Webster as follows: “(vt) **1** to use wrongly; misuse (to abuse a privilege) **2** to hurt by treating badly; mistreat **3** to use insulting, coarse, or bad language about or to; revile...(n) **2** mistreatment; injury **3** a bad unjust, or corrupt custom or practice...**5** deception; and *abusive* (adj) as...”**2** coarse and insulting in language, scurrilous; harshly scolding.”

It may come as a surprise that “born again” spiritual leaders in Christ’s church can be abusive. We shutter at child abuse and wife abuse. Horrible sins, injustices, and crimes are committed on these two groups almost hourly across our nation. Abuse may be: (1) physical, (2) emotional, (3) social, (4) financial, (5) spiritual, and in other ways. It robs people of their dignity and sense of well-being.

In my 45-years of ministry I have seen numerous abusive actions by church leaders toward flock members. Some of these have been outright and glaring, some have been subtle and clandestine; all have had a negative effect on the spirituality of those who were the recipients of abuse; some were driven away from the church.

Many of these abuses came from honest but ignorant leaders who believed they were saving souls and the church. They stemmed from a perception of love that wasn’t biblical but carnal in nature.

Jesus spared no words in exposing and denouncing the abusive practices of the scribes and Pharisee toward their fellow-countrymen:

- “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Matthew 23:13).
- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15; cf. 23:16, 23, 25, 27, 29,).



The shepherds (leaders) in Jeremiah's day were abusing God's people: "For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely" (Jeremiah 6:13, 14; cf. 8:10, 11).

The apostle John called an abusive leader by name: "I wrote unto the church; but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doeth he receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, casteth them out of the church" (3 John 9, 10).

How Leaders May Abuse Followers

In some cases abuse is so subtle that it goes unnoticed and unchecked; like beauty it is in the eyes of the beholder; some cases of abuse are obvious and others are borderline. Christian leaders must stay as far away as possible from any practice that even hints of abuse. Here are some ways leaders may abuse followers:

1. By transposing God's grace into law keeping (Read the book of Galatians). This robs followers of their liberty, joy and freedom in Christ. This induces guilt which reduces following Christ to a checklist religion; creating doubt relative to pleasing God and even going to heaven.

2. By binding traditions and opinions as being equal to the commandments of Christ. Jesus rebuked this practice (cf. Mark 7:7, 9). There is nothing wrong with healthy practices that are expedient in doing God will, but when they become equal to a "Thus saith the Lord," it is an abuse of a leader's position and becomes manipulation.

3. By creating programs of work to carry out arbitrary goals that aren't tied to a "Thus saith the Lord," with threats of hell and accusations of unfaithfulness if followers don't participate. The program may be an okay expedient but to turn it into a test of faithfulness and fellowship is moving into the abuse zone.

4. By the practice of elitism in displays of authority and demands on followers. It is the "I'm the boss and you are the employees" attitude that exists in the world and leadership and followership. This is an abuse of servanthood and leading without the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:4-8).



5. By leading the church into a state of isolation from other congregations in the area or brotherhood. It is a championing of the “we are the only faithful church” rhetoric. This form of abusive leadership ignores that most of the churches mentioned in the New Testament had problems; yet, one congregation was not called upon to be isolated from all others. Every congregation has flaws; read Revelation chapters 1—3.

6. By perpetuating a “toxic faith” instead of one that is “small” and in need of growing into the fullness of Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:11-16). Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton wrote this sobering remark in their book *Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction*: “A religious addict is a person who uses faith to avoid reality and responsibility. Their intent is not to worship God, but to alter their perception of reality. They are driven by a perfectionism that causes them to attempt to earn favor with God through striving harder. Religion, not God, control their lives” (pp. 31-46, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1991). Leaders who try to mold followers into this mindset are abusive.

7. By refusing to allow study and open discussions of issues, doctrines and other challenges being faced by the church in the 21st century. A closed system that ignored major teachings in the Bible and threatens to punish those who don’t agree with “official” positions, is abuse. Truth has nothing to fear; it alone frees us (John 8:32, 36).

There are other ways a leader may abuse his followers. Thankfully, the ones discussed above may be exceptions but they seek to warn us as leaders to be careful relative to our influence and positions. To be a leader worthy of being followed, we will abstain from these and other abuses. Remembering, too, there is the other side of the coin: How members abuse leader.