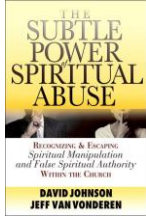


# Trusting God Again – Recovering from Spiritual Abuse – Dan Hitz

## Part Two of a Two Part Series

*The effects of spiritual abuse are very similar to the effects of sexual abuse – distrust, fear, lost hope, and inhibited development. Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse find themselves susceptible to strong church systems that seem to provide an ark of safety and protection, but they lack the discernment to understand why they continue to feel the familiar sense of control and manipulation. This article is the result of many years spent in a spiritually abusive church, walking through the aftermath, and receiving healing and hope through the power of Jesus Christ and safe members of the Body of Christ. Those who have been wounded through a spiritually abusive system can learn to trust and live as God intended. There are safe pastors and churches in the beautiful Body of Christ with whom they can thrive.*

*Last month's newsletter detailed the characteristics of spiritually abusive churches. This month's explains the process of recovery from spiritual abuse and the characteristics of healthy a church.*

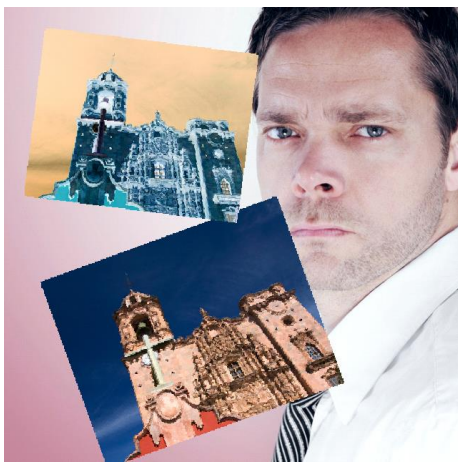


In their book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, David Johnson and Jeff VanVondervine (1991) define spiritual abuse as “the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment” (p.20). The website [www.spiritualabuse.com](http://www.spiritualabuse.com) states,

Spiritual abuse occurs when someone in a position of spiritual authority, the purpose of which is to ‘come underneath’ and serve, build, equip and make God’s people MORE free, misuses that authority placing themselves over God’s people to control, coerce or manipulate them for seemingly Godly purposes which are really their own.

Simply put, spiritual abuse is when church leaders get their own needs met by using God’s name to manipulate other people to do what they want them to do.

Many spiritual abuse survivors find it difficult to find a healthy church after leaving spiritually abusive systems. There are many good suggestions in the article, **Learning to Live Again. Finding a Spiritually Healthy Church.** ([http://www.spiritualabuse.com/?page\\_id=41](http://www.spiritualabuse.com/?page_id=41)). The article notes that **regaining trust probably takes longer than any other step toward recovery from spiritual**

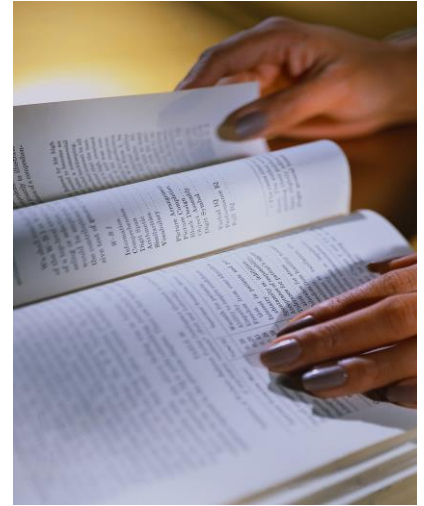


**abuse.** Survivors may be afraid of getting pulled back into another unhealthy system as they see healthy community and hear some of the same vocabulary they heard while in the abusive system. We also have to trust the same God who “let the abuse happen” to lead us into a healthy place. In time we realize that just as some in the Body of Christ wounded us, others in the Body are used to bring healing and strength. We also learn that God is good, and worthy of our trust.

Recovery from spiritual abuse is a process that takes time and effort. **Breaking the “don’t talk” rule is vital to recovery.** Although Christians should not share their story maliciously, it is important for survivors to find a safe pastor, a safe counselor, and

healthy Christian friends they can share their story with in the context of finding healing and support. Far from incurring God’s wrath, survivors will receive strength as they confront the lies, wounds, and strongholds created by the abuse. **It is important for spiritual abuse survivors to grieve their losses.** The price of leaving such a system is high. Many have lost years of emotional investment, friends, positions, and finances. Their security in God and others is shaken. Survivors may also have to grieve the false doctrines that have brought them security. Having the church system dictate God’s will for my life allowed me to escape the personal responsibility of having to discern God’s will for myself. Accepting personal responsibility for the direction of my life was a frightening prospect for

a man who grew up without learning basic life skills. A healthy spiritual system recognizes the needs of its members and seeks to strengthen them in the areas of lack. I have been blessed to have many in the Body who have walked with me – not for me. **Not everything taught in the spiritually abusive system was error.** It will take time for a survivor to reevaluate everything he/she has been taught and come to terms with the teachings he/she will have to dismiss as well as those that he/she will bring with him/her into his new community. This will include both Scriptural interpretations as well as cultural standards. A healthy Christian community will walk with a brother or sister while he/she sorts out truth from error. They will not condemn, but will properly challenge him/her to search the Scriptures to see if the things taught to him/her are true (Acts 17:11).



It is important for survivors to **recognize that good and bad characteristics can exist in the same system.** All is not lost. When people begin their journey out of an abusive system, most of their thoughts are focused on the harm that the system has inflicted upon them. They can easily identify many of the characteristics of the system that hurt them. As time goes on, it is important for them to begin to focus on the healthy things that they have learned from their experiences. As the Lord continues the rebuilding process, He can draw on all of the experiences that a person has had during their difficult years and use them for good (Romans 8:28). As I wrote in part one, I would not be in ministry today without the good training that I had while in the spiritually abusive system. The painful aspects of spiritual abuse have taught me how to minister more compassionately to those who have suffered other forms of abuse (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Twelve step programs encourage their participants to make a “fearless moral inventory”. This activity would be helpful for anyone recovering from spiritual abuse so that they can learn to identify not only the harmful effects they have suffered, but the benefits that they received from the abusive system.

**Survivors of spiritual abuse must recognize that they are capable of adding to the problem even if they are not in an “official” position of church leadership.** Abuse is often filtered down into the family. I had to recognize that my actions had spiritually abused others. Regardless of why we did what we did, we must take full responsibility for our own hurtful actions. Part of our healing journey includes the need to seek the Lord to help us recognize where our own actions have wounded others and to make amends when appropriate. I knew that my beliefs and character would be dismantled after I had left the system because I had been a part of that system and had done the same thing to others. After I left, I called a friend who was serving on a foreign mission field and apologized for the treatment I had given him concerning his calling after hearing the “official position” of the church leadership against his decision. Even though the abusive system declared that he would fail, he and his family continue to serve the Lord in a foreign land to this day. Most importantly, I have had to apologize to my wife who tried to point out the harmful effects of the system years before we left, and to my kids who were wounded by my own spiritually abusive actions. **The wounds go deep and God is still in the process of healing my family, but He is faithful. There is forgiveness for all who have sinned – including us.** Jeremiah 29:11 reads, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”



**We cannot be entirely free from our spiritual abuse experience until we forgive our abusers.**



see a fireman on the roof chopping a hole to release smoke from a devastating fire. I had been hurt and I was angry; however, I came to

realize that my bitterness was only hurting me. I knew that I had to forgive my former pastor. I wrote a letter thanking him for the benefits that he had given me throughout the years of my attendance. I had already discussed my disagreements with him on two separate occasions, but up to this point had not fully forgiven him. Forgiveness is a process. The Lord has ordained multiple seasons to help me walk in forgiveness. I had to be willing to fully take an account of what was to be forgiven. I had to be willing to walk through some painful memories and present them to the Lord. As I did, I was able to truly forgive.

**My healing has come through the Body of Christ.** The Lord provided a support system before I left the church. Some had been former members of the same church, and some I had met through my participation in the Living Waters program at Reconciliation Ministries. I was supported by friends living in California and New York – both sides of the country. I was

strengthened by safe people in the Body of Christ who live half way around the world as I participated in a Living Waters leadership training in the Philippines. Another season of my healing began when I attended a Christian, experiential men's retreat. I had vowed that I would *NEVER!!!* do a trust fall where I would fall backwards and trust that someone else would catch me. During that retreat they asked me to trust them to blindfold me and lead me on a walk. The only reason I said yes, is that a friend whom I trust deeply had attended the retreat months earlier and had highly recommended it to me. My fear and self protection came out in the form of sarcasm as they led me outside through some bushes and asked me to climb a ladder. I arrogantly did so muttering how I knew they wouldn't push me



off the thing because they were so worried about their own liability. It was then that I realized what they were going to ask me to do. I stiffened. They asked me to fall backwards and trust them to catch me. My past came flooding back and I was gripped with fear. My toes seemed to grab the rungs through my shoes. It took me many attempts to allow myself to fall backwards. When I finally did fall, I screamed as I imagined myself crashing to the ground in pain. Instead, I found myself falling into the arms of fellow brothers in the Body of Christ. **I wept as I realized how all my life those who were supposed to catch me did not, but these men who I barely knew proved themselves faithful to catch and support me.** It broke something in me. I sought out more healing prayer from others in the Body of Christ and can now feel safe, loved, and protected in the Body of Christ. Recently the Lord moved on my heart to spend an hour at a restaurant across the street from the church where I was abused and pray for them. Instead of resentment or anxiety, I felt peace. **The system had caused a lot of emotional pain for me and my family, but the Lord has brought me into a place of peace. It may still be a spiritually abusive system, but I am now free.**



## References and Resources

***The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse***, David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, MN, 1991. A workbook is also available.

***www.spiritualabuse.com*** – This website offers informative articles, resources, and forums on recovery from spiritual abuse.

***http://www.nacronline.com/video-workshops*** – This resource page for The National Association for Christian Recovery offers videos on recovery from spiritual abuse and other issues which may be viewed online for free or purchased on DVD.

***The Grace Awakening***, Charles R. Swindoll, Word Publishing, Dallas, TX, 1996.

## ***The Pre-Abuse Setup*** – Dan Hitz

---

*What makes one person more vulnerable to abusive situations than another?*

When emotionally healthy people check out a spiritually abusive church, they don't stay. They recognize the dysfunction. Healthy people put up boundaries which unhealthy people try to violate or outright reject.

However, **brokenness created in the “pre-abuse setup” produces a susceptibility to further abuse.** I

have a friend who says, “Home is where the outside matches the inside”. It is the reason why a woman who has grown up with an abusive alcoholic father and doesn't deal with her wounds can find herself married to

her second abusive alcoholic husband. The way her husband treated her while dating felt familiar to her “normal” feelings growing up. She may even feel uncomfortable around healthy men – she sees herself way below his level. Those wounded by abuse often fall prey to **“learned helplessness”**. Those abused when they actually were powerless to stop it continue to believe that they are helpless victims long after they actually have the resources to overcome.



Pre-abuse factors include **past physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or neglect**. The atmosphere is familiar, but surely a church must be a safe place. Those who **grow up in a dysfunctional family** without an appropriate mother or father figure may be used to – or addicted to – chaos. An abusive religious system offers structured chaos. The chaos is ordered around “Scriptural” issues which seem to be worth fighting for. Those who are **socially isolated** are susceptible because they are looking for an accepting community. His Chapel (Not the real name of the church.) was our family. We had many brothers and sisters who all believed as we did – who all suffered the same reproach for what we held dear. People outside the system were deemed unsafe so we stuck together. However, we found out later that our relationships were only as strong as our adherence to the system. Abusive systems play off of the members' guilt and shame. “No one else would accept me like these people if they knew what I struggled with.” I did find much forgiveness and confidentiality inside the system, but I also knew that implications could be made if I left. People with **poor life skills** lack the interpersonal boundaries and assertiveness necessary to stand strong against abuse. They also fear that they can't stand on their own. Learned helplessness leaves them vulnerable to the dictates of the system. Along with poor life skills comes **poor or no foundation for evaluation of appropriateness**. The system offers them so much of what they are looking for, but they lack the ability to perform a mental cost/benefit analysis. “Does the perceived benefit of staying in the system outweigh the emotional toll of performing to system specifications?” is a question that many are unable to adequately answer.