

Helpful Quotes from *Churches that Abuse* by Ronald Enroth

Compiled by Stephen Smith

“This book is about people who have been abused psychologically and spiritually in churches and other Christian organizations. Unlike physical abuse that often results in bruised bodies, spiritual and pastoral abuse leaves scars on the psyche and soul. It is inflicted by persons who are accorded respect and honor in our society by virtue of their role as religious leaders and models of spiritual authority. They base that authority on the Bible, the Word of God, and see themselves as shepherds with a sacred trust. But when they violate that trust, when they abuse their authority, and when they misuse ecclesiastical power to control and manipulate the flock, the results can be catastrophic. The perversion of power that we see in abusive churches disrupts and divides families, fosters an unhealthy dependence of members on the leadership, and creates, ultimately, spiritual confusion in the lives of the victims.” – p.29

“Abusive churches, past and present, are first and foremost characterized by strong, control-oriented leadership. These leaders use guilt, fear, and intimidation to manipulate members and keep them in line. Followers are led to think that there is no other church quite like theirs and that God has singled them out for special purposes. Other, more traditional evangelical churches are put down. Subjective experience is emphasized and dissent is discouraged. Many areas of members’ lives are subject to scrutiny. Rules and legalism abound. People who don’t follow the rules or who threaten exposure are often dealt with harshly. Excommunication is common. For those who leave, the road back to normalcy is difficult.” – p.31

“Once you’re out in the realm of experience, you can’t talk scripture anymore because there’s no scripture that’s relevant to something as wild and bizarre as this.” – p.40

“Double-bind” theory of mental dysfunction. Being told one thing and then what is done is totally the opposite. You try to redefine terms to apply to something that is not real. – p.42

Examples of sexual preoccupation; inappropriately explicit from the pulpit. – p.43

De-emphasis of Bible as standard for truth, focus on subjective experience and interpretation. Led to bizarre stuff, sexual preoccupation. – p.44

“Barnett increasingly relied on mystical and subjective religious experience to convince his followers that he was indeed in touch with God. He gradually, cleverly, and subtly prepared his audience for what would be considered outrageous pronouncements in more conventional evangelical churches.” – p.44

Occultic experiences. – p.45

Demonic, occult power; not just people going insane, becoming schizophrenic, or making it up. – p.46

An over-emphasis on experience began a drift away from the Bible. – p.47

“People need to be reminded not to put their confidence in a set of criteria put forth by a man who is simply relating his observations, but to place their confidence squarely on the Bible as the only infallible standard for judging truth.” – p.48

“The tragedy... goes back to a misplaced loyalty. People, thinking that they were placing their allegiance in the Word of God, were actually placing their allegiance in a man and his interpretation of the Word of God. That is crucial to understanding why people were so easily deceived. They *thought* that they were really obeying the Word of God.” – p.48

Focus on superiority and exclusiveness. P.48

“No checks and balances with the rest of God’s people, and no accountability to other men of God outside our own little circle.” – p.48

This is what happens when “spiritual experience dictates theology and then necessitates a re-interpretation of Scripture. Subjective experience takes care of the theological loopholes that the Bible seems not to address.” – p.48

Cult leaders say their people must “accept certain doctrines and practices if they could not be disproved from Scripture.” – p.48

“Commitment without careful reflection is fanaticism in action.” – p.49

Another problem “was the abdication of personal moral responsibility for sin, blaming it instead on the work of demons. There was a tendency to attribute any problem, interpersonal or otherwise, to demons... Common, natural emotions were more often than not attributed to demons.” – p.49

Attempt to justify a sensual theology by cloaking it in so-called ‘revelational teaching.’ – p.49

“Deviance neutralization or rationalization.” But Matt. 7:16 says ‘By their fruit you will recognize them.’ – p.49

“People have always struggled with the same needs – to be accepted by their friends and family, to find their way to God, and to make a contribution to their world... there have always been charismatic figures ready to take advantage of those most afraid and most hopeful.” – p.53

--

Shiloh community on Androscoggin River, in southern Maine. Frank Sandford: Charismatic ability to demand unswerving respect and obedience from followers; one man’s faith and authority; people of Shiloh pledged allegiance to a man to whom God spoke directly, despite clear evidences that this man’s version of reality was vastly different from the rest of the world’s. – p.55

“Shiloh’s error was not in denying the flesh, but doing so to satisfy the whims of a man more in love with power than with God.” – p.56

Sandford left seminary without a degree. – p.56

“Sandford sought a more immediate... almost mystical knowledge of God... Sandford believed that God spoke to him in a clear, quiet voice. This served two purposes. It gave Sandford necessary authority as the chosen spokesman for God, and it gave his important decisions holy sanctum.” – p.56

Sandford left his church and his denomination. Said not all Christians will be saved. New elite group. “It gave its members cosmic significance and assurance of salvation. There was no other choice for anyone desiring to be counted in the last remnant.” – p.57

Sandford said he was just following divine orders and was devoid of remorse, guilt, or even compassion. “To the day he died, Sandford refused to accept any blame or to show any sorrow for one thing that happened to the souls placed in his care.” – p.57

“The only teacher was Sandford and the only accepted interpretation of scripture was his.” – p.58

Foundations of Shiloh: Mystic revelations from God to Sandford; conviction of being set apart by God for some millennial purpose; absence of individual thought; unquestioned obedience at all times and in all things. – p.58

Shiloh lasted from 1895 to 1920, roughly 25 years. – p.58

“...their personal and family life was subject to Sandford’s authority... Parental authority was diminished as Sandford and his ministers made all final decisions.” – p.60

“Male-female relationships were strictly controlled to preserve propriety... No close friendships were allowed. No child admitted to having a best friend. The leaders encouraged people, even children, to reveal each other’s faults. In a world with few material possessions, the most minor flaws become the source of guilt and self-loathing.” – p.60

“The source of Sandford’s unquestioned authority was God. Interpreting God’s will was not left to chance since God spoke directly to Sandford. That God often spoke in verses from scripture helped validate the messages. Frank soon became the anointed messenger of God... Sandford made it very clear that his words were divinely inspired and members would no more question his word than they would question scripture. His words and decisions became synonymous with God’s.” – pp.60-61

[Wes tried to take on the role of Messiah as a prophet, priest, and king. Similar to Sandford and the Shiloh Community. - SAS]

“Obedience to Sandford’s will was non-negotiable and absolute... Any sign of willfulness or independence was destroyed.” – p .61

“For anyone to be disobedient to their superior was to disobey God himself. Outsiders often wondered how people fell in with Sandford’s plans so easily. They failed to understand how complete Sandford’s hold was over members; he held their very souls in his hand. People obeyed willingly.” – p.61

“One of the keys to enforcing his authority lay in his anger. Although his temper lived alongside a gentle humor, it was formidable when crossed.” – p.62

“Again and again Sandford told his flock to trust in his leadership. To question his authority was to bring disharmony to the group. Members accepted Frank’s reality as their own. If he had said that Theodore Roosevelt was the Antichrist, they would have believed it. The object of Frank’s authority was to break down individual will and self-identity.” – pp.62-63

“When the movement experiences opposition and criticism, their very elitism became a defense against the arrows of the Devil.” – p.64

“In 1901, Sandford closed Shiloh’s communion and worship services to all but full members.” – p.64

“Many families did dissolve, marriages broke up, and children abandoned Shiloh only to be disfellowshipped by their parents. There was no higher allegiance than to Sandford, for allegiance to him was allegiance to God.” – p.64

Sandford Quote [Spiritual Elitism]: “First you will be out of joint with the world, then out of joint with the professed Christian world, then out of joint with consecrated people, and then sanctified people, and then people that believe in Divine Healing, and then the Holy Ghost people you know, and THEN you will find a few other people who have gone on alone with God.” – p.64

“One of Sandford’s greatest weaknesses as a leader was his lack of compassion. He enjoyed the simple exercise of power and authority.” – p.64

“He seemed willfully ignorant of the pain his followers endured for his sake while living the good life himself.” – p.64

The people were “Metaphysically stoned.” – p.65

“Sandford interpreted any dissent as the work of Satan.” – p.65

“To break away from the group required more effort than to join.” – p.65

“The hypnotic spell began to break as soon as I dared decide that something was wrong with this man.” – p.66

“Staying was painful, but leaving was even more so. Members were told that to leave was to invite certain punishment and divine retribution.” – p.66

“Years of dependence did not make it easy for people to make their own decisions and fend for themselves.” – p.66

“Those questioning any aspect of the ministry were severely reprimanded and punished. Dissent became synonymous with demon possession.” – p.66

“More often than not, demonic possession was evident when a man simply thought for himself. Sandford said, ‘Think clearly as he may... he cannot get anything correct’... there is only one way out, the person has to submit or is sent away in disgrace.” – p.66

“Only the submissive and defenseless were accepted.” – p.67

“Sandford threatened reporters who mocked him, ‘before long [they] will meet the God of judgment.’” – p.67

“He ‘could not understand how we could have allowed the man to dominate us so.’” – p.70

“Sandford remained a leader of a small group of loyal followers, many of whom had endured through many hardships and tragedies... The Shiloh complex has long since disintegrated, but in a few homes Sandford is still revered as a prophet and man of God.” – p.71

p.72 – Summary of problems.

--

“Control-oriented leadership is at the core of all such churches. These spiritual power holders become strong role models, and their dogmatic teaching, bold confidence, and arrogant assertiveness become powerful forces of influence. They use their spiritual authority to intimidate the weak and those who consider leaving their flock.” – p.80

“Unhealthily, authoritarian leadership encourages people to place their pastors on pedestals.” – p.81

“The airing of the most intimate details of one’s life was seen as opening the way for God to take one deeper into the spiritual life... All participants were victimized because of their idealism and desire to more fully serve and love God.” – p.86

Spiritual thought-reform program. “In obedience to what they presumed was God’s will, they obeyed their shepherd without question.” – p.87

“A good shepherd leads rather than controls his flock.” – p.88

“Spiritually abusive groups routinely use guilt, fear, and intimidation as effective means for controlling their members. In my opinion, the leaders consciously foster an unhealthy form of dependency, spiritually and interpersonally, by focusing on themes of submission, loyalty, and obedience to those in authority. In all totalitarian environments, dependency is necessary for subjugation.” – p.103

“Authoritarian religious groups manipulate rewards, punishments, and experiences to systematically sever from members their past support systems, which include their own powers of independent and rational thinking, their ability to test, define, and evaluate, as well as their ability to freely interact with others about their experiences. These internal support systems are replaced with exterior support systems under the control of the leaders.” – Jeremy MacDonald (p.103)

“Manipulation and control expressed by not allowing dating (or marriage).” – p.103

“Traditional evangelical churches value and respect individual differences. For the most part, they encourage people to become unique persons in their own right, not mere photocopies of someone else. Authoritarianism, manipulative fringe groups, on the other hand, encourage clones and promote cookie-cutter life-styles.” – p.104

“Another effective control mechanism employed by abusive churches is fear; fear of not measuring up, fear of losing out with God if one leaves the group, and fear of spiritual failure.” – p.105

“As far as control is concerned, I believe two things are accomplished with [demonic] deliverance. First, the disciple feels a certain bond to the person confessed to, a pseudo parent whom he can respect as an authority and someone who cares about his personal interest. Secondly, at any future date, the overseer may drag out this dirty laundry to discredit the disciple or make him feel guilty.” – p.106

“Most abusive churches make use of some kind of reporting system or surveillance pattern to insure conformity with group norms.” – p.107

Physical exercise was denigrated as too “self-focused.” – p.112

“She was emotionally unstable, and didn’t even know how or what she felt, since she was so used to having someone else tell her that what she was feeling was wrong and of Satan.” – p.114

Boston Movement quote re: authority: “A disciple is one who obeys his disciple even if he doesn’t comprehend what he’s told. Because he wants to have a teachable heart, he will fully obey and be totally obedient even if what he’s asked to do is contrary to what he would normally do or think. To distrust the person God had put in his life is equal to distrusting God and his faith in God is shown by his faith in his disciple” – p.117

“The discipling hierarchy thus becomes a glorified informant network. As such, it is an effective means of control... Those being disciple were told what courses to take in school, what field to major in, what courses to enter, whom to date or not date, and even whom to marry or not marry.” – p.117

“If abusive churches are exclusive and special, it follows that they will be targets for persecution, or so their leaders seem to feel.” – p.118

The use of profanity breaks down religious training and makes someone more open to a leader’s influence. – p.123

“Sincerity does not guarantee that God will always honor your actions.” – p.127

“It was generally recognized that [the leader] had always had a dominating presence about him, even from youth.” – p.128

“Many of the rules and regulations were never actually spoken or articulated as a command. One simply knew from experience that something was a rule, and, if not adhered to, discipline resulted.” – p.130

“The term ‘revelational teaching’ as used in the group did not signify a special, dramatic, prophetic utterance, but had to do with accumulated spiritual knowledge and insight from the Bible that the leadership claimed to receive from the Holy Spirit, some of which was merely the pastor’s attempt to relate scripture to everyday life. For these folk, the meaning of scripture is not simply that which the intellect understands from reading, but is apprehended ultimately by revelation from the Holy Spirit. For example, when it was announced that women should not wear jeans, it came not as an isolated pronouncement, but was based on a continuing series of ‘revelational teachings’ that, layer upon layer, gradually readied the congregation for directives that might seem strange to outsiders.” – p.130

“Life became increasingly based on experience and not on the standards of scripture. Conscience became externalized and embodied in [the leader] and the other elders. At the same time, members were taught not to trust their feelings, intuition, and emotions, lest they find themselves ‘walking in the flesh.’” – p.130

“We stifled the voice of God within, mistaking common-sense reactions for the ‘rising up of the flesh.’... It was probably this very doctrine that disabled most of us from ever obeying the ‘gut feelings’ of apprehension within. Many times we stifled our own conscience in the desire to walk spiritually.” – p.130

“Fear, guilt, and intimidation all played a role in the disciplinary process. Obedience to the standard of the group was secured by the fear of divine judgment. For the most part, the internalized psychological and spiritual discipline applied by the group was enough to bring about the desired results.” – p.131

“Many... of these disciplinary measures took place in front of the entire body, because we regarded ourselves a family.” – p.132

“They have had a difficult time since leaving because they had been programmed to believe that to exit the group was to leave family. Members who had left previously were said to be ‘deceived and going to hell.’ The faithful who remained prayed that the defectors would suffer calamities to prove to them that they had been wrong.” – p.133

“It is foolish to think that you can remain objective in an abusive-church situation for any length of time without being subtly influenced. No one can consider themselves above the possibility of deception.” – p.133

“Life-style rigidity in abusive churches often manifests itself in a curiously reactive mode with regard to sexuality. Proscriptive measures reveal a sometimes bizarre preoccupation with sex that mental health professionals would no doubt conclude gives evidence of repression.” – p.135

“Conformity to prescribed standards is achieved, more so than in mainline churches, through peer pressure and pastoral directives.” – p.136

“In my research of abusive churches, I never cease to be amazed at the degree to which private and personal concerns are made public and brought to the attention of the congregation.” – p.137

“If life-style rigidity is a characteristic of most abusive churches, the role of subjective experience is equally crucial in understanding how such groups drift toward religious marginality.” – p.139

“She discovered that whereas she once loved God with open affection and awe, now she was scared and intimidated by him.” – p.140

“She felt that love become wholly conditioned upon her behavior. She was no longer heard unless she was presenting the party line, all else being considered evil and severely confronted as rebellion against the leadership and ultimately against God.” – p.140

“The ‘work’ was important, but individuals were not.” – p.141

“Unwarranted authority is attached to the contemporary spoken word, the *rhema*, going so far as to hold that it is equal to the written Word, the *logos*.” – p.143

“All too often the public revelation in the Bible is subordinated by the private revelations of the leadership... pointing not beyond themselves to Christ crucified and risen, but to the leadership’s own experience.” – p.143

“On the emotional or mental level, the... environment encourages spiritually and experientially oriented persons to allow phenomena to determine their faith instead of interpreting experience with reason in light of scripture.” – p.144

“When the mind and the values of knowledge and understanding are rejected, downplayed, and scorned as being ‘rebellious,’ the mind becomes subverted and the will is subdued into passivity, producing a dangerous phenomenon many refer to as ‘mind control.’” – p.144

“The potential and, in fact, recurrent result is a mass production of stymied personalities. Consideration and appraisal of the individual by authority is effected through the capricious, demanding, and judgmental eyes of condemnation rather than the eyes of compassion, understanding, and mercy. Motivation becomes fear-oriented, not love-oriented.” – p.144

“Faith is transformed from an adventure into a duty as concern for righteousness through holiness and blind adherence to prescribed behavioral codes begin to envelope the individual’s identity. Holy living becomes a pretext for a new legalism; keeping ‘the law’ tends to become an end in itself rather than a means of service to God.” – p.149

Internal resistance; sick to stomach; thought it was Satan’s resistance but actually was the Holy Spirit warning him against error and control. – p.149

“The whole persecution thing, as I see it, is just a self-fulfilling prophecy. You do a bunch of off-the-wall, bizarre, crazy things, and sure, people are going to come after you and ask, ‘Hey, what’s going on here?’ That’s not persecution – not as Jesus experienced it.” – p.150

“If you even challenged him on anything, you wouldn’t be challenging a human being; you’d be challenging the Holy Spirit because of his ‘apostolic authority.’” – p.150

“Discipline was often carried out in public – and involved ridicule and humiliation.” – p.152

A theology of control focusing on “attitudinal sins like jealousy, rebellion, willfulness, haughtiness, and idolatry.” – p.152

“No negative criticism of the community was tolerated, a distinguishing feature of most totalitarian groups.” – p.155

“If you are unhappy, you need to count your blessings, sacrifice, suffer or submit more. The resulting guilt, confusion, indecision, depression and low self-confidence become lifelong burdens one must bear in order to have hope of salvation.” – p.155

“Members of all abusive churches soon learn that the pastor or leader is beyond confrontation... All problems that befall the group are the fault of members who violate the infallible rules. Accordingly, members experience increased self-doubt, helplessness, and insecurity.” – p.156

Extended quote on “deviant” behavior, where “deviant” means someone who disagrees with the leadership: “Oftentimes the deviant is barraged with attempts to get him to admit that he is guilty of crimes that he does not see. If he says that he is doubting the leadership, he has sinned because you are never to doubt the leadership. If he has talked to someone else about his concerns, he has sinned because you are never to plant ‘seeds of doubt’ in others’ minds about the leadership and/or the sect. If, however, the deviant does not agree with the definitions of his behavior that is placed by the group, he is immediately considered ‘unrepentant’ and ‘unsubmissive.’” – p.156

“The ultimate form of discipline in authoritarian churches is excommunication or disfellowshipping, followed by strict avoidance procedures, or shunning.” – p.157

“The members were always striving to be submissive, always working to be humble, and always working to be acceptable in their leader’s eyes.” – p.158

“It was among the hurting and the unlearned that [the leader] exercised his most abusive spiritual authority.” – p.159

“[The leader] would come across in the morning as sympathetic, constructive, benign, and benevolent. But by afternoon, if something had gone wrong or had not been carried out exactly the way he had intended, it would result in severe anger and chastening.” – p.159

“Unwavering obedience to religious leadership and unquestioning loyalty to the group would be less easily achieved if analysis and feedback were available to members from outside. It is not without reason that leaders of abusive groups react so strongly and so defensively to any media criticism of their organizations.” – p.162

“When authoritarian churches are subjected to what they perceive to be negative press, they invariably interpret the results as the ‘work of Satan.’” – p.164

“Criticism, whether its source is Christian or secular, sincere or superficial, is always viewed by fringe churches as an ‘attack.’” – p.164

“Celebrations of Christmas and Easter, considered pagan customs, are forbidden. [His] teachings are to be accepted without question, no matter how twisted the scriptural basis. To question [the leader], a self-acknowledged ‘prophet of God,’ is to risk the charge of blasphemy.” – p.171

“They learned Hebrew and Greek for Bible study and a whole theological system interpreted according to [the leader’s] personal beliefs.” – p.171

“Not only is guilt a terrible burden, but there is a lack of trust toward anyone who is a religious authority figure.” – p.172

“Theology, doctrine, and works have been ends in themselves over the past years... Members, not God, were required to be faithful.” – p.173

“Leaving an abusive-church situation can be extremely difficult, calling into question every aspect of life members may have experienced for the period of time they were involved.” – p.174

“Leaving a restricted and abusive community involves what sociologists call the *desocialization* process whereby the individual loses identification with the past group and moves toward *resocialization*, or reintegration into the mainstream culture.” – p.174

“Many have described the aftermath of abusive-church involvement as comparable to that of rape victims, or the delayed stress syndrome experienced by war veterans. It is recovery from what might be called spiritual rape. You feel like something has been lost and you will never be the same again.” – p.174

“Victims need a safe and secure environment in which to vent their emotions. Such venting was often labeled as ‘sin’ in their previous environments, and it may take some time until they give themselves permission to allow these feelings to surface.” – p.175

“Victims ... have come out of an all-embracing religious environment where there are no grays, only blacks and whites. While members of authoritarian groups, they have had to put aside their old relational and coping styles and learn the ones acceptable to the group. Often these are antisocial and confrontational. And coming out of a context where they developed strong dependency needs, they are extremely suggestible and vulnerable to those whom they feel they can trust.” – p.175

“Having been in an environment that frequently includes spiritual manipulation, emphasis on experience, and focus on demons, victims of abusive churches may experience a lack of reality upon leaving the group.” – p.176

“Feelings of isolation can be devastating, especially for those who have walked out of abusive churches on their own without any support... Very few can understand what they have been through. As one woman describes it, ‘The complexity of the experience is so great that it is impossible to adequately communicate it to someone who has not gone through it.’ Vietnam veterans have expressed very similar feelings.” – p.176

“If the group from which they have defected was tightly structured, and the victims have cut off all previous ties to friends and family, they may come out into the real, cold world without any support systems whatsoever. Consequently, they may have great difficulty trusting those with whom they have no history.” – p.177

“It is possible, though difficult, to come through such an experience without a support system of any kind. However, victims who have not had the opportunity through a support system to sort through their varied emotions, thoughts, and spiritual confusion, may end up with deep, unresolved hurts. The development of a new social-support structure, therefore, is crucial.” – p.177

“[One woman writes:] The mental and spiritual hold that the group had on me was not broken until I personally renounced them and divorced myself from them. It took two and a half years to be ready to do that. When I did, I was able to see that they had gradually become my God and took the place of my relationship with him.” – pp.177-78

“Along with the need to recapture the past and rebuild relationships, the ex-member experiences a growing level of anger, frustration, and powerlessness. The vague anger associated with first leaving becomes more focused and intense. There may be strong desires for revenge along with guilt and self-condemnation for having such feelings. The frustration and powerlessness of knowing that one has been taken advantage of, and the awareness that there is little that can be done about it, are very difficult emotions to handle.” – pp.178-79

“Questioning one’s past experiences also becomes more acute. Victims begin to experience guilt over a variety of issues. How could I have let this happen to me? How could I have treated my parents that way? Have I really left the Lord? Am I in sin and committing blasphemy at this moment? How could I have let my children be so abused? What’s wrong with me? Was it really *all* wrong?” – p.179

“I have found that individuals often experience great embarrassment at being so ‘taken in’ by the leader of the group, and for acting so foolishly during their time of membership.” – p.180

“[One member said:] ‘If you leave without the leadership’s approval, condemnation and guilt are heaped upon you. My pastor told me he thought it was satanic for me to leave and he wondered

whether I could continue in my salvation experience.’ This kind of teaching was used as spiritual leverage to keep people in the church.” – p.181

“They twist scripture on God’s hatred of divorce and use it as a coercive technique to keep people from leaving their churches. Thus, ones who leave are taught that they have actually left God and sinned. What it really means is that the elders have usurped the loyalty and the devotion that is due Christ alone and refocused it on themselves.” – p.182

“The proof-text [in cults] for the idea of ‘marriage’ in relation to elders and leaders is found in Ephesians 5:22-6:9... Just as wives are to be in subjection to their husbands, so the church is to be in subjection to the elders. It seems that the elders are the physical manifestation of the authority of Christ.” – p.182

“In [cults], much emphasis is placed on ‘trusting God’s leading through others’ – the ‘others’ being those in leadership. In reality, this means surrendering one’s independence, obeying in all things, and submitting to the leaders... it amounts to subjugation of members to the leadership. Failure to comply with the authoritarian dictates of the group can result in ex-communication.” – pp.182-83

“As I have noted elsewhere in this book, excommunication is almost always accompanied by shunning behavior instituted by the leadership... One need not have psychological training to understand that such a procedure also operates as an effective control mechanism within a church. Those who are ‘boat-rockers,’ those who raise uncomfortable questions and who challenge the leadership in any way, are prevented from sharing their legitimate concerns and criticism with other members. Dissent is muffled, and disinformation can be ‘spiritualized’ or manipulated by the leadership.” – p.183

“Even while admitting how badly they have been treated by an abusive church, former members may vacillate between rejecting the past and defending the group they have left. In the latter instance, they may feel like they are betraying their old ‘spiritual family.’ Many times while talking with ex-members I have heard them speak positively about the close, interpersonal ties that they developed while in the group and how difficult it is to recreate that intimacy on the outside. Or they defend the worship style of the group.” – pp.183-84

“The best persons to reach out to church abuse victims are former victims.” – p.184

“The Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center in Albany, Ohio, is a unique, residential counseling facility that provides professional assistance to victims of spiritual abuse.” – p.184

“Even as victims begin to assimilate their abusive experiences and adjust to normal life, certain problems may persist, stemming from the programming they experienced while in the group... Healing may need to occur between victims, friends, and family, including spouses who were pitted against one another by the church leader, children who verbally abused their parents, and friends who were rejected when they expressed concern.” – p.185

“The idealism and zeal for God that initially drove these persons into abusive-church situations is now coupled with insights on distorted spirituality and human manipulation that is more than academic.” – p.185

“A central theme of this book is that spiritual abuse can take place in the context of doctrinally sound, Bible-preaching, fundamental, conservative Christianity. All that is needed for abuse is a pastor accountable to no one and therefore beyond confrontation.” – p.189

“She fell completely under [the pastor’s] influence. She felt she had been saved by [the pastor], and she began looking up to him as a father figure, one who could answer all of her questions about her new life.” – p.190

“She was never taught that there is diversity in the body of Christ, that differences of opinion are allowable and healthy, and that one can follow the Lord in a number of different contexts and different churches.” – p.190

“From the beginning, [the pastor] preached on submission to authority. He told his people that a pastor is responsible to speak for God and should not be questioned.” – p.190

“[The pastor’s] interpretation and practice of doctrine were not consistent with the scriptures. There was an extreme emphasis on attitudinal sins such as rebelliousness and pride, and an unhealthy dependence among the congregation on the pastor. There was a total lack of accountability to any elders on [the pastor’s] part, a defensiveness of his ministry that grew over time, and a strong attitude of superiority and exclusivity. ‘No one else teaches the *whole* counsel of God like this.’” – p.193

“It is my impression that abusive pastors often come from troubled backgrounds and are very insecure persons despite the ‘take charge’ image they may project. They are power-hungry people who crave visibility. Leaders who inflict spiritual violence often hide behind the smoke screen of authority to gain power.” – p.194

“Power is assumed, insensitive, dehumanizing, and ultimately destructive. Authority, on the other hand, is positive, and usually involves a conferred right within strictly controlled bounds.” – Cheryl Forbes

“An exercise of authority... should have nothing to do with coercion, violence, or manipulation. Yet in our zeal for God’s work we decide that if someone won’t recognize our authority, we will force him with our power.” – Cheryl Forbes (p.195)

“Ruler is the right term to describe the kind of people in authoritarian leadership roles who are a focus of this book. They are spiritual tyrants who take unholy pleasure in requiring obedience and subordination of their followers.” – p.196

“It is important to recognize that leadership depends on followership, and from a truly Christian perspective, that means cooperation with the leader rather than domination and control by the leader. The source of legitimate Christian leadership therefore lies in entrusted authority.” – p.196

“The spiritual autocrat, the religious dictator, attempts to compel subordination; the true Christian leader can legitimately only elicit followership.” – p.196

“Church leaders must be accountable both to God and to the congregations that they lead... Leaders are meant to be facilitators, not despots.” – p.196

“It is common practice for pastors in abusive churches to fail to distinguish between spiritual and worldly authority.” – p.196

“Occasionally, especially if they are young in age and inexperienced, they may say, ‘You must submit to me because God has placed me over you.’ Now while such words may be true, they are words that never fall from the lips of true leaders because the authority of true leaders springs from spiritual power. Such words prove the speaker’s unfitness for his task.” – John White and Ken Blue (p.196)

p.199 – George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* about totalitarianism.

“In order to survive the ordeal of withdrawing from an authoritarian church, you have to admit that you have been taken and forgive from the heart.” – p.200

“The membership of authoritarian churches is frequently comprised of young, spiritually immature Christians. This kind of church is successful because it is meeting basic human needs – the need to belong, the need to be affirmed, to be accepted, and to be part of a family. It is not unusual for the leaders to assume the role of surrogate parents.” – p.200

“Spiritually abusive churches usually are closer to biblical orthodoxy than they are to outright heresy. Yet, there is often a subtle distortion of biblical teaching.” – p.200

p.201 – Interpretation may even be correct, but application is twisted subtly, hard to put into words. Everything they say makes a good deal of sense.

“A key element of discernment is the recognition that potentially abusive churches foster an unhealthy form of dependency, spiritually and otherwise, by focusing on themes of submission and obedience to those in authority. They create the impression that people just aren’t going to find their way through life’s maze without a lot of firm directives from those at the top. They promote what MacDonald calls a form of ‘learned helplessness.’” – p.201

“The disquieting truth is that many Christians do indeed fall into the trap of authoritarianism because of an inclination toward the black-and-white mentality that abusive churches cater to. If you have the type of personality that is drawn toward groups that offer wraparound security and solutions to all your problems, you are vulnerable to spiritual abuse. If you value your spiritual autonomy, you must resist any teaching that brings into question Christ’s role as the sole mediator (go-between) between God and humankind. No Christian is ever called upon to give unquestioning obedience to anyone. Only Jesus Christ deserves disciples.” – p.201

p.202 – “Spiritual infantilism.”

Legalism: “Preoccupation with keeping Christian rules enhances guilt feelings in members, and it acts as an effective control mechanism for power abusers.” – p.202

p.202 – Isolationism and information control. “Beware of the church where outside speakers are consistently denied access to the pulpit, and where other Christian churches are regularly denounced, belittled, or ridiculed. Competing authority figures, whether from within or without the church walls, are rarely welcomed in abusive churches. No one can measure up to their exalted standards.”

“Authoritarian leaders are ecclesiastical loners. That is, they do not function well or willingly in the context of systematic checks and balances. They are fiercely independent and refuse to be part of a structure of accountability... they operate a one-man show. And God help the person who gets in the way or makes waves. Yes, sometimes they will point to a board of elders or its equivalent, but more likely than not, this turns out to be a faithful inner circle of clones that implicitly accepts all that the leader sets forth.” – p.202

Obsession with discipline or excommunication: “Abusive leaders are cold, almost cruel, in their treatment of people who leave... Almost without exception the leadership [makes] no attempt at reconciliation and no effort to heal the wounds inflicted.” – p.203

“A sure sign that a church is headed for the fringe is when family relationships are significantly disrupted and the leadership encourages the severing of ties with relatives outside of the group.” – p.203

“When a Christian is asked to sacrifice family relationships for church loyalty, it’s time to bail out.” – p.204

“In abusive-church situations, the ‘spiritual family’ often displaces the biological family, and church leaders assume the role of surrogate parents.” – p.204

“When an evangelical church institutes a surveillance system and encourages its members to keep close tabs on one another, it’s time to look for another church.” – p.204

“The warning lights should register when a mainstream Christian church begins to show signs of an unhealthy elitism.” – p.204

Pedestal paradigm and cults of personality: “It seems we have a need to create evangelical gurus, Christian celebrities, super-pastors in mega churches, and miscellaneous other ‘teachers’ and ‘experts’ that we place on pastoral pedestals. What is it about people, including evangelicals, that explains this apparent need for authority figures, the need to have someone cosign for our lives?” – p.204

“We want heroes! We want reassurance that someone knows what is going on in this mad world. We want a father or a mother to lean on. We want revolutionary folk heroes who will tell us what to do until the rapture. We massage the egos of these demagogues and canonize their every opinion. We accept without a whimper their rationalizations of their errors and deviations.” – David Gill (p.205)

“For people who come from dysfunctional families, or who have lacked structure in their lives, authoritarian churches are a haven, a womb of security. It is sometimes comforting to have others make decisions for you, tell you how to live, and tell you what to believe.” – p.206

“[The leader] has a very domineering personality and is extremely opinionated and dogmatic. He has a way of looking at the world that’s not quite real, and he’s also extremely intelligent.” – p.211

“[The leader] asserts that he runs a ‘prophetic ministry.’ He teaches a great deal on how believers are to relate to him as ‘The Lord’s servant’ who has been anointed by God.” – p.211

“You don’t have a relationship with [the leader] unless [he] dominates.” – p.212

“Leaders who are abusive usually develop their heavy-handed style over a period of time. Churches that abuse are the result of an ever-accelerating emphasis on the kinds of control mechanisms I have discussed in this book. People who have been in close contact over a period of years with some of the pastoral leaders we have discussed have told me that their ministry was more benign and subdued at the beginning.” – p.216

“People who abuse power are changed progressively as they do so. In abusing power they give themselves over to evil, untruth, self-blindness, and hardness without allowing themselves or anyone else to see what is happening. The longer the process continues, the harder repentance becomes. Church bosses must be spotted and rescued early, or they may never be rescued at all. They have caused inconceivable havoc among churches throughout history.” – White & Blue (p.217)

“Pastoral abuse can be spotted quite easily, at least in its advanced stages. Abusive religion substitutes human power for true freedom in Christ. Unquestioning obedience and blind loyalty are its hallmarks. Leaders who practice spiritual abuse exceed the bounds of legitimate authority and ‘lord it over the flock,’ often intruding into the personal lives of members. God’s will is something that *they* determine for you rather than something you individually seek to know. Abusive leaders are self-centered and adversarial rather than reconciling and restorative.” – p.217

“There is in us, especially in those whose intentions are of the purest, an excessive and destructive will to power which eludes even the most sincere and honest self-examination... To be looked upon as a savior leaves none of us indifferent.” – Paul Tournier (p.218)

“They look upon us as experts, God’s mouthpieces, the interpreters of his will – to begin with for ourselves, but very soon, before we realize it, for other people too, especially since they insist on requiring it of us. Very soon, too, we find ourselves thinking that when they follow our advice they are obeying God, and that when they resist us they are really resisting God.” – Paul Tournier, *The Violence Within* (p.218 – Enroth)

“While we probably cannot prevent individual power seekers from getting entangled in their own authoritarian excesses, we must remind all who will hear, including mainstream Christian leaders, that weaknesses and dependence on God’s strength are the hallmarks of true greatness.” – p.218

“The antithesis of the misuse of power is gentleness, which is best seen and understood within the framework of strength. Gentle leaders, pastors, or teachers do not force their insights and wisdom on the unlearned, nor flaunt their gifts before those in need. They are patient. They take time for those who are slow to understand. They are compassionate with the weak, and they share with those in need. Being a gentle pastor, shepherd, leader, or teacher is never a sign of being weak, but of possessing power clothed in compassion.” – Harold Bussell, *Unholy Devotion* (p.218 – Enroth)

“Power has a way of blinding the conscience so that those who spiritually and psychologically abuse others show little sign of remorse or repentance. They deny any guilt for what they have done to people. And they project their own weakness onto others.” – p.219

“If we are in positions of power over others and we fail to place controls on ourselves, we subtly and unknowingly start to control others. Power that elevates a leader beyond contradiction... will lead both the leader and the followers down a road marked by broken relationships, exploitation, and control. Power that tempers and checks itself and is wrapped in compassion is the pathway to gentleness, caring, and maturity.” – Harold Bussell, *Unholy Devotion* (p.219 – Enroth)

A recovering cult member says, “It’s still difficult for me to read my old Bible... I have to read a different translation. I can’t sing the same worship songs and I have difficulty going to church.” – p.220

“Wonders and the Word” essays about John Wimber and the Vineyard Movement. – p.220

“Abusive churches are not, for the most part, promoting rank heresy. But their human leaders seem ever willing to make pronouncements in the name of God, thus ‘mistaking what God is saying in Scripture for their own particular interpretation of scripture.’ This sets the stage for the possibility of outright heresy being introduced.” – p.220

Hallmarks of Abusive Churches

- 1.) Abusive churches misuse spiritual authority (authority and power)
- 2.) Abusive churches use fear, guilt, and threats (manipulation and control)
- 3.) Abusive churches see themselves as special (elitism and persecution)
- 4.) Abusive churches foster rigidity (lifestyle and experience)
- 5.) Abusive churches discourage questions (dissent and discipline)
- 6.) Abusive churches make leaving painful (exit and adjustment)