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Spiritual abuse : when the system becomes the persecutor

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

SPIRITUAL ABUSE:
WHEN THE SYSTEM BECOMES THE
PERSECUTOR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

GARY R. VEENHUIZEN

PORTLAND, OREGON

DECEMBER, 2011

**DISSERTATION
ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE**

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DATE: NOVEMBER 2, 2011

TITLE:

**SPIRITUAL ABUSE:
WHEN THE SYSTEM BECOMES THE PERSECUTOR**

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FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY IN
LEADERSHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION DEGREE**

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
ABSTRACT.....	x
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Current Resources	
Definitions of Spiritual Abuse	
Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse	
Causes of Spiritual Abuse	
Purpose	
Organizational Context	
Summary Statement	
2. A FOUNDATION OF RELATIONAL THEOLOGY.....	19
Definitions	
The Call to Relationship	
Relation-ship and Community	
Connectedness and Character	
Love	
Interdependence and Self	
Relationship to Creation	
3. SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN THE SCRIPTURES.....	40
Old Testament Archetypes	

The Law Builds a Platform for Abusers	
The Law and Abuse	
New Testament Archetypes	
The Religious Authorities	
Early NT Church Case Study	
4. SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY.....	67
Abuse in Religious Constructs	
Major Heresies of the Past	
Traits of Abuse in Heresies	
Some Observations about Institutional Systems	
The Reformation Story	
A Closer Look at an Abusive System	
The System Becomes the Persecutor	
5. THE PATHWAY TO ABUSE.....	94
Sources of Abuse	
Short Survey OF Frank W. Sanford’s Life	
Covenant Relationship vs. Abusive Relationships	
6. SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	120
Created for Community	
Principles of Relationship	
Covenant	
Grace	
Empowerment	

Intimacy

Bringing Both Ends Together

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....138

PREFACE

I have been asked many times by my friends and acquaintances what I intend to do with this degree. I know what they mean, of course. What career change will occur now that this is over? Well, I have some thoughts on what may happen. Several offers to use this accumulated information for the Kingdom have surfaced. But the fact is, “doing,” “being,” and “becoming” has been happening all along. This process has provoked several rabbit trails of thought over these last eight years. In sharing, listening and interacting in my own relational world, much of what I have been processing has been foisted onto my unsuspecting friends.

Others, simply asking about the topic, have responded with their own stories of abusive relationships in churches. It gives me pause to wonder how, or if, these organizations we so closely attach ourselves to, could be structured or designed to eliminate the painful experiences perpetrated *on* Jesus’ sheep. Then I remember—these painful experiences are more often perpetrated *by* Jesus’ sheep. Actually, we are all broken and in need of restoration in our relationships with God, ourselves, others and creation. That is what living each day is ultimately about.

Of those who told stories of their own experiences, several offered their permission to include their stories in this work. Those offers are deeply appreciated. It was not possible to do so, however, since many examples of abuse were not necessary for this paper. I do want to acknowledge their offer and state that they are exactly why this topic is so relevant. Broken, abused people are a pandemic reality.

My deepest thanks for encouragement toward completing this effort belong to some good friends: Dr. Bill Vermillion, my mentor, along with Charlie Ryan, Bill Winkenbach, Bob Ward and Jeff Rasch, who when I met with them regularly they asked

(with a friendly push) how I was progressing. These gentlemen, successful in their own careers and personal accomplishments, were able to model differentiation and while keeping me accountable to them and my own goals. Thanks guys!

My wife Kathy of thirty-eight years and my four children, Jennifer, Melissa, Julie Ann and Scott are also owed a huge debt of gratitude. They gently urged me to “get with it” even though other activities of life called for my immediate attention. Thank you, my family; you are truly my richest treasure and joy in this life.

Now all glory to God, who is able to keep you from falling away and will bring you with great joy into his glorious presence without a single fault. All glory to him who alone is God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are his before all time, and in the present, and beyond all time! Amen. Jude 1:24-25 -NLT

Gary Veenhuizen
September 6, 2011

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE 1: Types of Commitment in Family Relationships.....115

ABSTRACT

Title: RECOGNIZING SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN A CHURCH SYSTEM

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Spiritual abuse is an extremely subtle issue in its early stages. Often one doesn't recognize when they are a subject of abuse, or how they have been influenced in ways that are controlling and involve manipulation of behavior and thought. It should be understood that all institutional systems are vulnerable to manipulation by leadership, tradition or culture of the system or organization. I am proposing that it is possible that a system itself can be an abuser, inflicting spiritual control and manipulation on the organization, the leadership and members for future generations.

I want to examine the earmarks of unhealthy leadership style, authoritarian behavior or tradition methodology that may incubate and contribute to an environment that could spawn the type of abuse to which I refer. There are many types of abuse, of course. When individuals or people groups allow themselves to be manipulated they are subject to control by others. Often, the subject is not even aware of the manipulation at first because it is usually balanced and legitimized with meeting some real or perceived need the subject may have.

However, even these "needs" may be guilt instilled within the subject by the perpetrator. For example, the leader may preach that certain activities may be sin and

even the gateway to hell unless these activities are avoided. If the subject avoids the activity, they are accepted and held up as examples of piety but if they partake of the offending activity, they are shunned. Most people have a need for community acceptance and in this environment they believe they are loved if they meet certain conditions.

This paper will focus on abuse that occurs in mainstream religious groups and institutions. I will identify factors more ambiguous than the obviously irrational David Koreshes and Jim Joneses of the world. There are seemingly ordinary leaders who use their positions for inappropriate control. Traditions also exist that have evolved over time to become unhealthy systems that add implicitly or even explicitly to Jesus' message. I will examine one of these systems from its historical beginnings to present day as a case study.

The extent and scope of spiritual abuse is not known. It will be imperative to define what is meant by "Spiritual Abuse" and the potential level of destruction that may be experienced by the abused. In order to do so, several questions must be answered. How and when is spiritual abuse manifest? What are the warning signs? How does an abusive and persecutory system present itself? What happens to leaders and followers who experience such abuse? Is there an early warning system, or even clues for alerting potential victims? Can one arm him/herself to avoid being seduced by institutional systems into codependency? These types of questions can be summarized in three overarching questions:

What are the signs of institutional systemic abuse?

Is it possible for a church system to become an abusive persecutor?

What are some principles to guide an institutional system to return from or prevent abuse?

In order to address the problem of spiritual abuse, I will propose a set of principles based on a covenant model. This covenant is designed to provide organizational guidance for leaders to move away from systemic abuse toward a healthy covenant relationship model that inspires renewal and growth.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction of the problem. This chapter will examine definitions of spiritual abuse and related terms, relate an interview, present systemic abuse in context with historical data, include a synopsis of the basic development of that system along with the organizational structure and demographics. Some of the relevant symbolism used in the system that contributes to the issue will also be identified.

In Chapter 2, I have constructed a Foundation of Relational Theology. There, I will describe God's call to relationship, including a definition of sin, the deception that predicated humanity's need for reconciliation to God. I will also explore the concept of relationships and community and how individual character plays a role in the context of community. We will see how love, the greatest of all virtues, informs and motivates behavior in community.

In Chapter 3, I will explore Biblical accounts, which will show evidence of manipulation and/or control by Biblical figures, the systems they represented, and how healthy or unhealthy leadership dealt with those individuals and situations. I will also include claims of Biblical principles for promoting healthy spiritual systems, which include areas of accountability, empowering organizational structures, and Biblical Spiritual Formation.

In Chapter 4, I explore materials from Christian History and Thought which show historical perspective, accounts of manipulation and control by religious leaders and systems of the past. I will then seek to point out the resulting destruction of individuals and religious communities by those leaders and the *systems* driving them. Appropriate resources will also be cited which support the thesis and definition of spiritually abusive systems and their victims. The examples will also show how a system might deteriorate from healthy tradition to a system where key “signs” become apparent indicating potential abuse.

In Chapter 5, I will investigate more closely the sample institution from Chapter 4, looking to answer the questions of how the activity and behavior of the perpetrators are abusive. I have tried to search for possible sources of that abusive behavior in their early personal history, as available, and identify the emotional issues that may lead to the toxic behavior of the leaders and subsequently, the system. There is a section here that explores the various roles of those persons in a toxic faith system.

In Chapter 6, I will present materials, which synthesize the researched material, re-state the historical pathway toward abuse, identify the signs that lead to abuse and present a solution from scriptural principles to help individuals become aware of potential unhealthy control in their spiritual communities. This will be a descriptive process model which may be adapted in principle to various church systems. This “model for renewal” will be intended for use primarily in Western culture as the assumptions and proposals will be based on typical cultural understanding and expectations. Foreign, ancient and eastern societies have cultures laden with authoritarian and tribal type structures and therefore will not be able to relate to this proposition.

This concluding chapter will include a statement of the original thesis and summarize the preceding chapters. I will have shown how Christian historical research in this area contributes to my thought processes and conclusions. Theological support will be evident in my conclusions, since they must be grounded in scripture. While an in-depth study and application of current systems theory and studies of congregational, emotional and organizational systems might be interesting, I will be using only general principles in describing unhealthy manipulative systems as well as healthy empowering structures.

I will be able to defend my proposals and conclusions based on the evidence that I have gathered, which I believe are realistic and objective in nature and will yield achievable results.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I just don’t have it anymore,” he said, as I sat across from him at Sawbucks sipping on a tall house coffee. “I’ve lost my passion! I don’t even want to go to church there anymore. I am not being fed and I can’t have fun with the kids. Can you believe we sometimes have to sing out of the hymnbooks in our primary grade classes?” Doug usually has a playful personality but today he was really discouraged. I watched him stir his Tazo as if he hoped it might tease the tea leaves into giving him some direction.

For several years, Doug and his wife Renee have been good friends of ours. He has the “unfortunate” reputation of being creative in a church that discourages innovation beyond what the leadership initiates or allows. Lay people and clergy simply are actors in a preset formulaic system that was established at the beginning of the 20th century; anyone who tries to innovate or create there is labeled as a troublemaker. I know the organizational system well, having been a part of the laity for many years. I knew my boundaries and pushed gently while there, but Doug was not one to acquiesce.

“What can I do?” he asked. “Renee sees what is going on but she doesn’t want to leave. The kids have friends and don’t want to leave them.”

“Whoa! Slow down a bit and let’s talk this through,” I replied. “First of all, tell me a little about Sunday School, and what’s this about hymn books?”

“Well, that’s only part of the story. I have been taking my guitar and leading the kids in fun Christian songs. We clap our hands, stand up and sit down and they love it.”

“What’s wrong with that” I asked, “and who is complaining?”

“The department leaders have made some comments about the fact that it is just a little too wild for their liking and that is not how it is done, so I just can’t do it their way anymore.” He paused to take a breath. “It’s just a lot of things. That’s only one.”

“Okay, share one more scenario with me,” I probed, trying to establish some sort of rationale in my mind for his anger. “You know the band that Renee and I are part of?” I nodded. “There is no place for us to use it to minister at church.” I must have given him an incredulous look; although with knowing the system, I should not have been surprised. “Are you sure? What about ‘Young People’s Meetings’ on Friday night? You could lead Worship time.”

“Do you know, we were practicing and an old lady walked by outside, went to the minister and complained so now we can’t even practice at the church.”

“So you feel like there is no place for you to use your gifts in ministry at that church?”

“Nope, there is no way. I even question my calling to music ministry now.”

This is only one story illustrating one family’s experience encompassing one topic, that of the role and style of music in this church. However, Doug’s story was not a wrestling match about music style. Most churches have this struggle at one time or another. His is a story symbolizing control and the system that promotes and protects it. It also illustrates how individuals may identify with an institution to such a level that they become addicted to the system and its manipulative demands to the point of being unable to differentiate one’s own gifting or calling. This we will call Spiritual Abuse.

In the last thirty years, a large body of work has been written in the area of spiritual abuse and how legalism and other characteristics of abuse contribute to that

subject. Much of it of course, has to do with cults and victims trying to exit from them. Therefore, it will not be necessary to plow ground that has already been worked. Known cults will not be addressed in this paper. It is hoped however, that this project will engage evangelical organizations of any size to consider and assess their vulnerability to, as well as enablement of, abusive activity. Definitions of abuse and other terms used in this paper will be introduced below.

Chapter 1 will introduce the reader to overarching concepts, definitions and causes of spiritual abuse and related terms. I will show my purpose for choosing this topic, put the issue in context with organizational structures, relate the development of the System, demographics and the symbolism used in the system that I believe contribute to the issue at hand.

This research intends to challenge present day churches and Christian organizations that may have dysfunctional systems, which contribute to, or even spawn, a pattern of often implicit expectations that eventuate in spiritual abuse. It is this author's opinion that these expectations may serve to trade grace for works, joy for legalism, community accountability for authoritarianism, and Holy Spirit leading for the subjective agendas of leaders.

I propose that the result of such systems is that victims are held captive by a persecutorial system that demands unquestioning compliance and obedience to its legacy, heritage or doctrine. As this statement is unpacked and definitions are offered we will see the impact and extent of this surrogate for grace. In later chapters, I will show how these sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit expectations and co-dependent dynamics

serve to supplant and militate against the primary message of scripture—that of God’s eternal efforts to offer a grace-full, father/child relationship and covenant to all believers.

I will further propose that a religious enterprise, institution or unit may be comprised of several parts:¹

1. The organization; the legal entity with its structure of authority and leaders, board of elders or similar apparatus.
2. The system; here meaning the accepted understanding of doctrine, interpretation of, and the implicit roles each participant plays with regard to the accepted handling and interpretation of scriptures and the practice of such.
3. The mission; the stated reason or purpose for existence.
4. The community; those members, adherents or believers in the system who identify with and accept the above as well as casual attendees. The motivation for belonging may be, and is likely a result of an individual’s identity needs that may eventuate in religious addiction (see footnote).² This proposition will be discussed later in Chapter 5.

MOTIVATION

My own personal journey motivates a search for answers to issues and problems that I observed and experienced over a 40 year span. Since leaving one organization in 1992, several examples of individual and corporate abuse have surfaced which have

¹ These categories are the author’s own divisions.

² Stephen Arterburn, and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction*. (Nashville: Oliver-Nelson, 1991), 31. Arterburn and Felton develop this concept of religious addiction in their book, *Toxic Faith*. “Toxic faith is a destructive and dangerous relationship with a religion that allows the religion, not the relationship with God, to control a person’s life.” Hence they refer to this this concept as “religious addiction.”

served to pose serious questions. I have had many conversations with individuals about their own personal experiences in an environment which discouraged or discounted personal spiritual growth unless they retained certain approved characteristics.

Others³ reported leadership abuses such as authoritarian control, encouraged isolation from non-adherent family members, autocratic direction about personal activities and isolation from other Christians outside the institution.

Happily, there were also examples of personal journeys exhibiting growth in differentiation.⁴ These were people who, when faced with the choice of compliance or the risk of individuation, chose to leave and take the responsibility for their own spiritual destinies upon themselves. These are applauded for their ability to take a risk and initiate a search for truth.⁵

Questions to be explored in this study will include the following:

1. What is spiritual abuse?
2. What is religious addiction?
3. How does the doctrinal point of view or interpretations of scripture of an organizational system contribute to practice (orthopraxis) in that faith

³ “Others” refers to the author drawing from personal interviews with members and ex-members of the group from which he withdrew in 1992. There have been several contacts outside this group who echoed similar experiences in their spiritual communities. Though almost none were aware of the concept of spiritual abuse, they all expressed that they felt wronged by the behavior of the leadership of the community to which they belonged.

⁴ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 163. A further exploration of this term, “differentiation” will be offered in Chapter 2. We will use Friedman’s idea of “well-defined self” to express our meaning in this context.

⁵ “Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right 1844,” 129. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm (accessed June 11, 2011). This is where Marx’s “opium of the people” (masses) comment bears relevance. In context he states, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” We will see how religion, as opposed to relationship, becomes an expression of a heartless and soulless system purveying its demands on humanity with rewards of addiction much like a drug.

community? Might the theology itself be a symptomatic or perpetrator of abuse? (I proposed above that doctrine is a part of the system.)

4. How does the emotional health of leadership and an individual's identity issues (self-differentiation) impact a system?
5. When do organizational ideals and standards become onerous or abusive to the church community and enslave them to its system?
6. When do the vaunted methodology and ideals of the system cross the line and become spiritually abusive?

Current Resources

The last thirty years have given rise to several ministries and counseling services that specialize specifically in the area of spiritual abuse and recovery for victims.

- Ronald M. Enroth, Ph.D. Sociology professor at Westmont College, Social Science Editor, *Christian Scholar's Review*, and Adjunct Faculty Member for Fuller Theological Seminary. Expert witness in court cases involving modern cults, appearances on various TV programs and radio broadcasts, and worldwide seminar leader on new religious movements. Dr. Enroth has written at least nine books and numerous articles on the topic of cults, abusive church systems and new religions.⁶
- Jeff VanVonderen: A highly sought after speaker and consultant both nationally and internationally. For over 25 years, individuals, families, and organizations have benefited from his skills and understanding in the areas of addiction, family systems, and recovery. He is the author of five books. Several magazines and journals have featured VanVonderen's work, and he has been featured guest on radio and television shows across the country. Jeff's services as an expert witness in cases involving various abuse issues have been utilized in Minnesota, Alabama, Wyoming, Washington, and Hawaii.⁷

⁶ www.westmont.edu/_academics/pages/departments/sociology_anthropology/enroth.html (accessed April 20, 2011).

⁷ www.jeffvanvonderen.com/ (accessed April 20, 2011).

- Ken Blue, Ph.D.: Ken Blue is a senior consultant with the San Diego Consulting Group and a popular conference speaker who has spent the last 25 years helping people dramatically improve their lives. Sought after around the world, Dr. Blue has given his presentations on Servant Leadership, Destined for Success, Conflict Resolution, Authority to Heal, and Foundations in Grace in Europe, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Blue is an expert in the areas of personal and organizational effectiveness. He also serves as an advisor to founders, owners and top executives in large corporations and closely held family businesses. The author of several books that have been translated into over twenty languages, Blue's published works include *Authority to Heal*, *Church Discipline That Heals*, and *Healing Spiritual Abuse*.⁸
- Henry Cloud, Ph.D.: Henry Cloud is a clinical psychologist with an extensive background in both inpatient and outpatient treatment programs, and has a private practice in Newport Beach, CA. He is a specialist on such topics as adult psychotherapy, biblical models of personality functioning and character growth, and spiritual issues of psychopathology. He also does extensive organizational consulting and speaking. A best-selling author, Cloud has been a guest on "Focus on the Family" with Dr. James Dobson, CBN's "700" Club, Trinity Broadcasting Network, Fox News Network, as well as many other television and radio broadcasts.⁹
- John Townsend, Ph.D.: John Townsend is a clinical psychologist and marriage, family and child therapist. He has an extensive background in both inpatient and outpatient treatment programs, and has a private practice in Newport Beach, California. Townsend is a specialist on such topics as biblical models of personality and character growth, and spiritual issues of psychopathology. A best-selling author, he has been a guest on "Focus on the Family" with Dr. James Dobson, CBN's "700" Club, Trinity Broadcasting Network, as well as many other television and radio broadcasts.¹⁰

Chapter 2 will construct a Foundation for Relational Theology which can be used to establish a basis for our scriptural arguments. Looking ahead, in Chapter 3 I will survey a variety of scriptural resources which show and confront abuse in legalistic Judaism and in the early church. These will be examined for evidence of manipulation

⁸ www.kenblueministries.com/ (accessed April 20, 2011).

⁹ www.cloudtownsend.com/ (accessed April 20, 2011).

¹⁰ www.cloudtownsend.com/ (accessed April 20, 2011).

and/or control by Biblical figures, the systems they represented, and how healthy or unhealthy leadership dealt with those individuals and situations. I will also include claims of Biblical principles for promoting healthy spiritual systems, which include areas of accountability, empowering organizational structures, and Biblical Spiritual Formation.¹¹

Various efforts by the Church to expose and fight heresy in order to maintain and control orthodoxy over the past two millennia will be examined in Chapter 4. Exploration of heresy is valuable in that we can observe, with relative clarity, some of the more overt characteristics of abuse. It may be that the theological positions taken by the heretic(s) in practice become abusive to the faith and relationships of the adherents and therefore instructive to the examination of spiritual abuse within large and popular evangelical institutions today.

However, we will see that *systems* of orthodoxy are perhaps more dangerous because the symptoms and practice of abuse are so subtle as to be nearly unrecognizable to all but the most discerning. Unfortunately, the more discerning ones are often those who have experienced spiritual abuse and have either left their faith or learned to differentiate¹² into interdependent selves. An additional group would be those who continue to languish within abusive systems. It is to those people this paper endeavors to

¹¹ Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992), 6. May writes, "*Spiritual formation* is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavors as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction (*italics added*)."

¹² Jack O. Balswick, and Judith K. Balswick. *Family, The: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*. 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 18. "Differentiation: the process of maintaining a separate identity while simultaneously remaining connected in relationship, belonging, and unity."

appeal with practical insight and a pathway out of what may be for them religious addiction¹³ and toxic faith.

Definitions of Spiritual Abuse

Included below are several authors' definitions to show the various categories in which abuse can occur. Authors, Johnson and VanVonderen, use a broad view definition of Spiritual Abuse initially in their book *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, which provides a place to start:

Spiritual abuse is 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.¹⁴

In this context it can be understood that spiritual empowerment refers to the ability of an individual to be a self, maintain selfhood and achieve inter-dependence in relationships, sometimes called differentiation.

Not all leadership mistakes can or should be charged to the intentional abuse account. Unintentional misguidance by leaders occurs everywhere. Even parents make mistakes in child rearing. However, because it can be a short step from misunderstanding to abuse, it is imperative for all leaders to self-evaluate as well as appraise the system they represent so they can avoid contributing to someone else's spiritual decline.

¹³ Arterburn, 77. "Like every other addiction, the practice of religion becomes central to every other aspect of life. All relationships evolve from the religion. The religious addiction becomes tied to these people who support the addiction. The addict depends on the rituals and the others who go through these rituals. The dependency on the religious practice and its members removes the need for a dependency on God. The religion and those who practice it become the central power for the addict who no longer is in touch with God." The result is that the *religious addiction replaces relationship*, a direct affront to God's invitation to direct relationship with Him, as we will see in Chapter two.

¹⁴ David Johnson and Jeffrey VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1991), 20.

Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse

Watchman Fellowship is an independent Christian research and apologetics ministry founded by David Henke in 1979. He writes;

Spiritual abuse is the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help. Sometimes abuse arises out of a doctrinal position. At other times it occurs because of legitimate personal needs of a leader that are being met by illegitimate means. Spiritually abusive religious systems are sometimes described as legalistic, mind controlling, religiously addictive, and authoritarian.¹⁵

Henke goes on to list five characteristics of an abusive system:

1. Authoritarian. The leader may claim authority and demand obedience by virtue of position. *Followers may be told that God will bless their submission even if the leadership is wrong. It is not their place to judge or correct the leadership - God will see to that.*
2. Image Consciousness. *Because the truth about the abusive religious system would be quickly rejected if recognized, outsiders are shown only a positive image of the group.*
3. Suppresses Criticism. *The system cannot allow questions, dissent, or open discussions about issues. The person who dissents becomes the problem rather than the issue he raised.*
4. Perfectionism. Failure is not an option because God demands holiness. Performance, or works, is necessary to achieve His favor. *In abusive religions all blessings come through performance of spiritual requirements.*
5. Unbalanced. There is uniqueness to the abusive system that suggests a special status with God no one else has. Adherence to its distinctives is required for total acceptance into the group.¹⁶

These characteristics listed above are some that we will highlight in this paper and show how they are abusive with regard to God's covenant of relationship with humanity.

¹⁵ David Henke, "The Watchman Expositor: Spiritual Abuse Profile." *The Watchman Expositor*, <http://www.watchman.org/profile/abusepro.htm> (accessed April 20, 2011). *Italics added.*

¹⁶ Ibid.

A detailed exploration of scripture and a foundation of Relational Theology will be established in Chapter 2.

While it is important to define what spiritual abuse is, it is also important to list what it is not. Again, from Johnson and VanVonderen, we learn that:

- It is not abusive when a spiritual leader, who has the responsibility to make final decisions, uses his/her best judgment and chooses to go against your opinion. It is abusive, however, if someone's opposing view is used to devalue a person's spirituality.
- It is not abusive when a Christian (whether or not they are a leader) confronts another Christian because of sin, wrongdoing or even honest mistakes that must be corrected. The objective, of course, is not to shame or discredit, but to heal, save and restore.
- Likewise, it is not abusive when a person in ministry or leadership is asked to step down from their position because of emotional, physical, mental or spiritual problems. The goal, however, must be on helping the individual to receive help, so as to eventually return to their office or position if that is the best action.
- It is not spiritually abusive or inappropriate to disagree, whether on doctrines or other issues, even in public. Keep in mind, though, that it is always crucial to maintain respect and never to belittle or attack.
- It is not abusive to hold certain standards of group conduct (like style of dress). It becomes abusive when others are spiritually degraded or shamed because they do not maintain the same convictions.
- A strong leader is not automatically abusive because he or she is strong and decisive.¹⁷

One of the characteristics of group dynamics in an abusive system is that of secrecy. Similar to that in a dysfunctional family, explains Johnson and VanVonderen, "the difference between an abusive and non-abusive system is that while hurtful behaviors might happen in both, it is not permissible to talk about problems, hurts and

¹⁷ Johnson and VanVonderen, 24.

abuses in the abusive system. Hence, there is no healing and restoration after the wound has occurred, and the victim is made to feel at fault for questioning or pointing out the problem.¹⁸

While the definitions and characteristics of spiritual abuse listed above are instructive and helpful for framing the discussion at hand, these are the views of others. There is, in my view, an area not yet fully explored with regard to spiritual abuse that ought to be scrutinized. That is the topic for this dissertation. I intend to articulate the definition of spiritual abuse, how it impacts faith and relationships, our conclusions on the topic in view of this paper and offer a possible remedy to institutions driven by *abusive religious institutional systems*.

Causes of Spiritual Abuse

Ronald Enroth in *Churches That Abuse* identifies five categories which he believes are causes of spiritual abuse.

1. **Authority and Power** - abusive groups misuse and distort the concept of spiritual authority. Abuse arises when leaders of a group arrogate to themselves power and authority that lacks the dynamics of open accountability and the capacity to question or challenge decisions made by leaders. The shift entails moving from general respect for an office bearer to one where members loyally submit without any right to dissent.
2. **Manipulation and Control** - abusive groups are characterized by social dynamics where fear, guilt, and threats are routinely used to produce unquestioning obedience, group conformity, and stringent tests of loyalty to the leaders are demonstrated before the group. Biblical concepts of the leader-disciple relationship tend to develop into a hierarchy where the leader's decisions control and usurp the disciple's right or capacity to make choices on spiritual matters or even in daily routines of what form of employment, form of diet and clothing are permitted.

¹⁸ Ibid., 32.

3. **Elitism and Persecution** - abusive groups depict themselves as unique and have a strong organizational tendency to be separate from other bodies and institutions. The social dynamism of the group involves being independent or separate, with diminishing possibilities for internal correction and reflection. Outside criticism and evaluation is dismissed as the disruptive efforts of evil people seeking to hinder or thwart.
4. **Life-style and Experience** - abusive groups foster rigidity in behavior and in belief that requires unswerving conformity to the group's ideals and social mores.
5. **Dissent and Discipline** - abusive groups tend to suppress any kind of internal challenges and dissent concerning decisions made by leaders. Acts of discipline may involve emotional and physical humiliation, physical violence or deprivation, acute and intense acts of punishment for dissent and disobedience (underlining added).¹⁹

These are only a sampling of the types of spiritual abuse extant in evangelical institutional systems. The balance of this paper will reveal others and we will show how individuals and their identity issues conspire to shape the toxic traits that become what we are calling spiritual abuse.

Purpose

It is the purpose of this paper to examine how many, or perhaps all of these causes of spiritual abuse, may appear in the specific institutional cultures we will examine. Further, we will step back to the organizational *system* and observe how these characteristics serve to define present day mission, attitudes, behavioral “standards,” ministry models, successes and failures.

Just as vital to the purpose and motivation of this paper, and critique of these institutions, is the underlying objective and commitment to make this effort a redemptive

¹⁹ Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*.

one. There is no desire to destroy or malign any organization. As in most evangelical denominations, much good has been accomplished and many persons have been helped in their own personal spiritual formation and that of their families. Rather, the goal of this study is that those who call these types of organizations “home” will no longer allow their leaders to *control* their spiritual journey; and that such individuals would be challenged to take responsibility for their own spiritual health and future. The issue addressed here is one primarily confined to examining the *system* itself with the questions posed above.

Because religious addiction typically keeps individuals dependent on the religious system, and prevents differentiation and maturity, the situation may necessitate his or her leaving and finding self-understanding and differentiation within a more healthy system or even outside of a system. Further complicating the ability for one to leave an abusive system is the fact that institutional leadership who display abusive characteristics often exhibits a commitment to their founders and current adherents to perpetuate the existing system of legacies, history and doctrines as a higher value than that of relevance and ministry to the present culture. They then manipulate the followers by incorporating that commitment into the doctrine or cultural standards of the group resulting in additions to the message of Jesus.

Another major trait of the system I hope one will leave is that of belonging (identity). Adherents see this type of system as a familial relationship to which they identify; one which Bandy calls a declining church system.

The declining church system is all about ‘belonging.’ It seeks to recruit and initiate people into a group membership parallel to a ‘family’ identity. It seeks to preserve a heritage and concentrates on passing that heritage on to children and youth. It draws people toward the unity of a central control for church life, so that

the intensity of one's 'belonging' matches the degree to which one holds power. It seeks to supervise those who do ministry, so that it never inadvertently contradicts the ethos, heritage, or identity of the group. *This is a system in which . . . preserving the system is more important than addressing public needs.* (Italics added)²⁰

The danger here is that members can become emotionally fused; losing any objectivity and judgment they may have had, setting themselves up for abuse by the system and the leaders of that system. A healthy church system could help bring healing and maturity to the individual.

The opening story is one in which a couple has become so emotionally invested in their system they can't imagine any other options but to stay and continue to be abused. Their sense of acceptance, affirmation and well-being comes from being associated with the system. They are incapable or unwilling to differentiate from it because the system provides for and fills their identity needs. Taking a closer look at that system in particular is germane for the purpose of discovering how and why a system develops into one that cultivates relational abuse.

Organizational Context

Founded in the early 1900's, the organization in our opening story was establishing its methodology during the Fundamentalist's heyday.²¹ Wanting to take a pious stand to insure the visual holiness of their workers, like other organizations, they mandated modest dress (long dresses with sleeves and long hair) for women, while short hair, suits and hats were the accepted costume for men who expected to meet ministry

²⁰ Ibid., 105.

²¹ *Apostolic Faith Church; Historical Account*. Portland: 2005, Available from <http://www.apostolicfaith.org/Library/Index/Historical.aspx>. 37 (accessed January 14, 2011).

approval. In the early days of this faith tradition, marriage was even discouraged because the Lord was sure to return soon and “getting one’s eyes on other things” was sinful. Reports say that several newly married couples were expected to repent with a trip to the altar.²²

There is not, nor has there ever been any membership in this organization.²³ The organization’s Board of Trustees is self-perpetuating and may add new members who are then ratified by the attenders at the annual convention. Therefore, accountability is only to the board itself and not to those who attend the church. Attendees have virtually nothing to say about how things are done.²⁴

This critique is not intended to be a specific indictment on this form of organizational structure. However, combined with other elements of the system, such as restrictions on who may serve, it may function as an unchangeable structure, impervious and resistant to interested adherents who may wish to assist in an evolutionary and maturing process.

Generally a lower to middle class demographic, this church culture is one of self-honored heritage and tradition. Visual and behavioral standards equate to one’s piety and God’s acceptance. Implicitly understood is the “fact” that there is no other organization known with as much truth (light) or blessing of God. Well-known and accepted evangelists like Billy Graham would not be good enough to take the pulpit for a service.

Returning now to our story:

²² Mildred C. Myers, Private Conversation with Author, 1976. Mrs. Myers recalled that she and her husband, Frank, were expected to seek repentance for their “getting their eyes off of God” and His soon return by being married.

²³ *Apostolic Faith Church; Historical Account*, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

“Why don’t you explore some other churches?” I asked Doug. “With your gift of music and desire to be involved in ministry, there are many places that would jump at the chance to have you.” Doug responded, “We have taken some Sundays and visited a couple of churches, but I don’t know. They just don’t believe like we do,” Doug replied. “Do you mean they don’t have the same doctrine you are familiar with?” I asked. “Yeah, I guess that’s it, and Renee won’t go someplace that doesn’t believe like she does, I think she’s afraid.”

There is no consideration by this couple that perhaps their belief system might deserve some questioning. They’ve not given any thought to the possibility of whether, if, or how their faith might be toxic to their spiritual health. The only option for them, as they see it, is to participate in an identical belief system with the option of certain selected freedoms. Were they to “start their own church,” they would replicate everything exactly—with the exception of style of music.

Since this narrative may be repeated in well-recognized organizations, it is assumed that some unsuspecting Christians might wake up one day to realize they have been manipulated and controlled through spiritual systems. In this case study, however, what we see is a system that appears to maintain control over its community by tying eternal salvation to performance and prescribed standards, and ingraining certain theological expectations in each generation through doctrine within a system that perpetuates legalism and spiritual abuse.

We will look at these characteristics of abuse in detail in Chapter 5, exploring why they are abusive and discuss how a leader’s early personality issues contribute to the development of abusive relationship traits.

I am now ready to propose a summary statement:

Summary Statement

An institutional system may become an abusive persecutor and enslave future generations to its demands through doctrinal distinctives venerated overtly because of “unique” origins, and covertly a result of identity issues of its founders.

The area of dysfunctional church systems within the evangelical model provides a topic not widely researched. I believe there are many systems that border on abusive but stay under the radar screen because they are accepted as evangelical and appear to be safe. Independent congregations (those with little or no denominational oversight) may be the most susceptible to this danger because of a typical lack of accountability and the fact that charismatic leaders often found independent congregations.²⁵

Case studies are used in this paper to show how the system, a set of doctrines and the implementation of them, can cause spiritual abuse to the follower. It is my contention that identity issues of the adherent set these individuals up for abuse by virtue of their need to belong and need for acceptance.

All church organizations, denominations and Christian small groups are subject to this potentially damaging issue. They are all comprised of humanity and as long as this is the case, there will be an inherent danger for leadership to proscribe expectations explicit or implicit that result in legalism and eventuate in spiritual abuse.

²⁵ Arterburn, 167. These leaders often are allowed to run things autocratically and over time the system often deteriorates into an abusive one. “Power often corrupts persons. When organizations are developed with little or no accountability for the leader, there is tremendous potential for the leader to fall into corruption.” Arterburn states, “When ministers practice absolute authority over a group of people, everyone loses, especially God. This is always the case when religion serves a person instead of a person serving God. The only hope for everyone involved is for the leader who claims to be God’s special officer to be forced into accountability or dethroned to protect other victims.”

CHAPTER 2

A FOUNDATION OF RELATIONAL THEOLOGY

In this chapter I intend to construct and establish a theology with which we can evaluate behavior alleged to be abusive, and as will be seen, clearly contrary to the covenant of relationship delineated in scripture.¹ A survey of the Biblical record tells the story of Creation, the fall of humankind and God's plan to restore communion and relationship between the two. I will describe God's call to relationship, including a definition of sin, the deception that predicated humanity's need for reconciliation to God. I will also explore the concept of relationships and community and how individual character plays a role in the context of community. We will see how love, the greatest of all virtues, informs and motivates behavior in community.

I will further show how interdependence, spiritual gifts and the fruit of the Spirit synthesize to form a differentiated community system engaged in the process of becoming mature, spiritually healthy, rightly related individuals.

Finally, having seen how relationship with God, ourselves and others should function, I will explore how right relationship with creation is also relevant.

Definitions

Some terms introduced here include:

¹ Balswick and Balswick, 22. "The central point of covenant is that it is an unconditional commitment, demonstrated supremely by God to the creation."

- *Differentiate*: “the capacity of (one) to define his/her own life’s goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures.”² Furthermore, “differentiation achieves the Godly purpose of interdependence and cooperative interaction between people.”³
- *Covenant*: a loving, unconditional, non-contractual commitment by God to his creation in which benefits and blessings of the covenant are activated by the response of those with whom God covenants.⁴

The Call to Relationship

*Thus, when asked what is the source of my life,
I can answer that I am born in love,
and the call to love God with all my heart is a call
to enter into passionate, loving communion.*⁵

The call to relationship, so beautifully described by Jeff Imbach above, is the call of a loving God who “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16 NKJV). Humanity was created in the *Imago Dei*, (image of God). The Genesis story records that God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26 NKJV),⁶

² Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. 1st ed., (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 27.

³ Balswick and Balswick, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁵ Jeff Imbach, *The River Within: Loving God, Living Passionately*, (Colorado Springs: Navpress Publishing Group, 1998), 71.

David Fleming writes;

God freely created us so that we might know, love, and serve him in this life and be happy with him forever. God's purpose in creating us is to draw forth from us a response of love and service here on earth, so that we may attain our goal of everlasting happiness with him in heaven.⁷

“Since we were created in God's image and likeness, we too are relational beings.”⁸ Man and woman, through a voluntary act of sin⁹ were “alienated from the life of God.”¹⁰

Shortly after the fateful event in the Biblical story of creation, when Adam and his wife Eve “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, (they) hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8 NKJV). Perfect, pure relationship with God was broken. The first created family was alienated from the Creator through the act of sin when they chose to enhance their identity (believing the serpent's proposal that they would become like God by eating the fruit of the tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil) and disobey God.¹¹

I now turn to Wynkoop's definition of sin and offer her further explanation to show the relational consequences for this paper, “a voluntary transgression of a known

⁶ “So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.” Genesis 2:20, NKJV.

⁷ David Fleming, *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading*. 2nd ed., (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 23.

⁸ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 28.

⁹ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love*, (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1972), 104.

¹⁰ John Wesley, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A. M.* Vol. 6, (General Books LLC, 2010), 67-68.

¹¹ Genesis 3:1-7, NKJV. Verse 6: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

law of God.”¹² This statement defines sin as a legal term but it is also “a relational term . . . Sin is love, but love gone astray . . . Sin is perverted love . . . The very nature of sin is love’s perversion which makes the self the object of its own dedication.”¹³ “Sin is a rupture of fellowship with God.”¹⁴ Wynkoop states, “Sin is basically self-separation from God, not in measurable distance but in moral unlikeness and spiritual alienation.”¹⁵ Sin is destructive. Because of deep love for His creation, He sent His Son to pay the penalty for the sin that separated Him from His creation and to restore the Father’s relationship with them (John 3:16-17 NKJV).

These citations give us a broad enough foundation to establish that sin is anathema to everything God intended for His creation and creation’s destiny. Therefore, dis-covering the behavior of abuse (which we will suggest is sinful behavior) toward His creation by any power, authority or structure, militates against God’s designed plan to restore creation to Himself through covenant relationship (see footnote for definition of covenant as used here).¹⁶ Further, the abusive behavior I am addressing violates the very tenets of relationship, as I will show.

¹² Wynkoop, 149 ff.

¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶ Balswick and Balswick, 22. “The central point of covenant is that it is an *unconditional commitment*, demonstrated supremely by God to the creation” (*italics added*). But though this covenant is offered by God with His unconditional love and commitment, “. . . God desires and even commands a response.” In this sense it is conditional. “Although the covenant itself is not conditional, the benefits or blessings are determined by the response. Both Noah and Abraham are given a choice to respond. If they are to benefit from the covenant, they need to make a freely determined response of obedience. Although the continuation of God’s love is not conditioned on their response, the blessings of the covenant are conditional,” 23.

Relation-ship and Community

*Your most basic need in life is for relationship.*¹⁷

One of the teachers of religious law was listening to Jesus teach one day. He asked Jesus which, of all the commandments, was the most important.¹⁸

Jesus replied, ‘The most important commandment is this: “Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” The second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than these’ (Mark 12:29-31).

Boa explains, “Because God is a relational being, the two great commandments of loving him and expressing this love for him by loving others are also intensely relational. We were created for fellowship and intimacy not only with God but also with each other.”¹⁹

Stanley Grenz adds, “We exist in order to experience the glorious fellowship God intends for us to enjoy. We were created for community.”²⁰

The New Testament refers to this community as a body. The metaphor invokes the idea of a physical form of the body with Christ as the head and we, the community, as the various parts.

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27).

¹⁷ Henry Cloud, and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 37.

¹⁸ It is important to note the difference between covenant and commandment here. A covenant, as described in the previous section is an unconditional promise that includes expectations of response in order to invoke the blessings promised. Commandments are specific injunctions to obedience in specific matters.

¹⁹ Boa, 28.

²⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 71.

Les L. Steele, author of *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian*

Formation provides helpful commentary:²¹

Paul emphasizes the role of the body of Christ, or faith community, in Christian formation. Paul's key thought on the body of Christ . . . is that the members of the body are there to build each other up and, by so doing, to build up the body. We contribute to one another's development by using whatever talents or gifts we have to strengthen the body of Christ so that we all aspire to the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4). Christian spiritual formation occurs as we interact with a faith community. We cannot mature in our faith apart from fellow believers."²²

The body metaphor is also used by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans.

Here he adds the concept of spiritual gifts which are given to each member by the Holy Spirit for the benefit of the whole body.

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them (Romans 12:3-6 NKJV).

The phrase, "individually members" gives us pause so we may reflect on the tension implied here. "This relational dynamic sharpens our individual differentiation"²³ showing us that the healthy model described by the author of Romans is one of interdependence.

Steele continues with his description of how the Holy Spirit works in concert with us and the community producing healthy interdependence:

The Holy Spirit cooperates in the process by giving us gifts to use for the development of the faith community. Notice again the interaction necessary for Christian formation. It is a triadic relationship among the individual, the Holy Spirit, and the faith community. Gifts are not given just for self-edification but for

²¹ As noted above, relationship with God by responding to his covenant brings blessings promised by that covenant. Building mature, interdependent relationships with others in the body of Christ also brings blessings and the community becomes "the expression of God's promise" through the responsive obedience to God's covenant offer. (Quotation is from an email communication from Dr. Larry Shelton.)

²² Les L. Steele, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 41.

²³ Frank Green, "Charis Foundation," <http://charisfoundation.com/>. From an email conversation.

the edification of the body. If gifts are given for the body, then each individual must be connected to the body in order to receive the benefits of the gift. In like manner, the body cannot receive the gifts of the Spirit without the involvement of each Christian.²⁴

It may be understood that these gifts are the outward work of the Spirit and “concern divine empowerment for ministry and service.”²⁵ Detailed exploration of these gifts of the Spirit is not within the purview of this paper but a listing of the gifts of the Spirit and a brief comment on how they function in community is shown below.

Connectedness and Character

In the Gospel of John, the apostle uses an illustration of relationship that describes Christ as a vine. The Father (God) is the vine dresser, or farmer, and the community is the branches of the vine. Christ’s words, as recorded by John, state that if the branches stay attached to Him, the true vine, they will bear much fruit (John 15).

We get some further insight about the term “fruit” in a letter to the Galatian church from its founder/farmer/father, Paul. He lists these as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23 NKJV). Here, the fruit of the Spirit may be understood to be the “inward work of the Spirit” borne out through one’s character²⁶ which is the “basis for how we do relationship.”²⁷

²⁴ Steele, 41. “... the Holy Spirit does, however, work for the individual by cooperating in producing spiritual fruit. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, each element of which is a quality of personal character. The evidence of the Holy Spirit operating in our lives is the presence of these qualities.” 42.

²⁵ Boa, 299.

²⁶ Ibid., 299-300.

²⁷ Green, from an email communication.

Steele writes; “Character is our basic orientation toward life.”²⁸ How we think, reason, believe, will and act as a whole shows the character we have formed. “Character forms as we respond to the vision of the Christian gospel and interact with the Christian community. It is defined by our vision, which empowers action that, in turn, also forms our character.”²⁹

We must also be cautious about others who would try to define us and our character instead of our relationship with God. Boa reminds us, “It is only natural to shape our self-image by the attitudes and opinions of our parents, our peer groups, and our society. None of us are immune to the distorting effects of performance-based acceptance, and we can falsely conclude that we are worthless or that we must try to earn God’s acceptance. Only when we define ourselves by the truths of the Word (what God says about us) . . . can we discover our deepest identity.”³⁰

Love

July 7, 1967 was the release date for one of The Beatles more popular recordings, *All You Need is Love*. The lyrics say in part;

Love, Love, Love, Love . . .
 Love, Love, Love, Love . . .
 There’s nothing you can make that can’t be made.
 Nothing you can save that can’t be saved.
 Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time. It’s easy.³¹

²⁸ Steele, 42.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Boa, 35.

³¹ Beatles, The. *1967-1970 (Blue) Remastered*. (Apple Records, 2010).

The word *love*, used by John Lennon and Paul McCartney is difficult to identify fully as the English language uses the same word whether for affection or attraction, holy or unholy, colloquial or familial.³² St. Paul, however, draws our attention to the word love and puts the highest priority and value on it.

The Greek word used in the thirteenth chapter of the first letter to the church at Corinth is *αγαπε* (*agape*).³³ This word is one of four different Greek expressions of the English word love: “It is a quality of a person . . . a principle by which one orders life—or by which life is ordered.”³⁴ Mildred Wynkoop, in her book, *A Theology of Love*, expands this definition with these comments:

Out of it (*agape*) all the relationships of life derive their character. It is not a new, infused ability but a personal orientation reaching first to God and then, by necessity, to all other persons and all things in life. It is called Christian love. It is not first of all an emotion but a deliberate policy whereby the relations sustained with other persons are kept in balance by one’s deliberate orientation to God and his own self-respect—in the right sense, self-love.³⁵

In his fine work, *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, Thomas Jay Oord expands and deepens our understanding of love in the NT.³⁶

³² Wynkoop, 32-3.

³³ 1 Corinthians 13, NKJV.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, Kindle Edition, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010), 52. Though Oord sources Wynkoop in his work, he expands on her understanding of *agape*’ in the following citation: “An adequate theology of love should affirm the various forms that God’s love takes. Not only should contemporary Christians embrace *agape*, *eros*, and *philia* as legitimate forms of love for creatures to express, but they should also accept the biblical witness that God expresses these forms of love. Rather than one-dimensional, God’s love is full-orbed.” He describes how, for example, *agape*’ includes the content of desire that we see in *eros* and explains how *agape*’ actually includes facets of each form of the Greek words for love.

Whatever Christians may have done to others or themselves, theirs is the only faith in which God and love are the same. If love is the center of the biblical witness and the core of Christian experience, it should be the primary criterion for theology. Love should be the orienting concern and continual focus for speaking systematically about theology. We should discard ideas or theories that undermine love.³⁷

Interdependence and Self

Being rightly related to God and others, we can create and care for relationships that will mature us and those with whom we are in community, while maintaining self-identity. Steele suggests, “Being created in the image of the triune (the three interdependent personages, Father, Son, Holy Spirit) God implies that we are created to be in interdependent relationships.”³⁸ Boa agrees with Steele and furthers his thought,

As a communion of three persons, God is a relational being. He originates a personal relationship with us, and our high and holy calling is to respond to his loving initiatives. By loving God completely, we discover who and whose we are as we come to see ourselves as God sees us. In this way, we become secure enough to become others-centered rather than self-centered, and this enables us to become givers rather than grabbers.³⁹

This orientation, first to God, then ourselves, and then others, gives us a model for relationships that both allow for individuation and community. This is interdependence,⁴⁰ or being mutually dependent.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁸ Steele, 113.

³⁹ Boa, 25.

⁴⁰ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1st ed., (New York: Free Press, 1990), 49. Covey, adds to this idea of independence, interdependence and maturing: “Interdependence is a . . . mature, more advanced concept. If I am physically interdependent, I am self-reliant and capable, but I also realize that you and I working together can accomplish far more than even at my best, I could accomplish alone. If I am emotionally interdependent, I derive a great sense of worth within myself, but I also recognize the need for love, for giving, and for receiving love from others. If I am intellectually interdependent, I realize that I need the best thinking of other people to join with my own.”

⁴¹ *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* (1989), 740.

As will be shown in this paper, examining abusive systems seems to reveal several categories or levels of victims. Arterburn and Felton delineate these “roles” in their book, *Toxic Faith*, of which portions will be cited in Chapter 5.⁴² Here, the intention is to draw an awareness and “distinction between the narcissistic self, which is unconnected, and the well-differentiated self, which is the key to integrity.”⁴³ Further, there is often a “confusion of self with selfishness. The tension between self and togetherness (community) is universal.”⁴⁴

In Chapter 4 and the case study included there, it will be noted that issues of integrity, lack of morality and self-differentiation of leadership and followership characterize the abusive system in question. Edwin H. Friedman expands on this issue:

Well-defined self in a leader—what I call self-differentiation—is not only critical to effective leadership, it is precisely the leadership characteristic that is most likely to promote the kind of community that preserves the self of its members. Lack of morality . . . has to do with invasiveness, not with strength, with lack of integrity, not with power.⁴⁵

With that as a foundation, we can unpack the rationale in the following quotation for a healthy community. This is one that builds up the whole, allows the exercise of spiritual gifts and “offers persons a place to develop their identities and to discover what they have to offer.”⁴⁶

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body

⁴² Arterburn, 191-241.

⁴³ Friedman, 25.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁶ Steele, 113.

of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.⁴⁷

The gifts given to the community, used by and for the community are found in those Spirit empowered individuals who lead, influence and encourage the other members. The intention is for the whole body to be healthy, growing and full of love. The bold type text above gives a hint of how an individual might be vulnerable to spiritual abuse as a result of his or her own identity or differentiation issues.

We may rightly conclude from references above that *dependencies* are those expectations that demand nurture and sustenance from others; in a word, immaturity.⁴⁸ When a relationship is dependent, undifferentiated and immature, an individual whose identity is undefined or misshapen is at risk of being “tossed and blown about,” influenced and “tricked by lies.”⁴⁹

Stephen Covey explains: “If I were physically dependent—paralyzed or disabled or limited in some physical way—I would need you to help me. If I were emotionally dependent, my sense of worth and security would come from your opinion of me. If you

⁴⁷ Ephesians 4:11-16, Bold type added.

⁴⁸ Covey, 49.

⁴⁹ Friedman, 27.

didn't like me, it could be devastating. If I were intellectually dependent, I would count on you to do my thinking for me, to think through the issues and problems of my life."⁵⁰

In cases exemplified in future sections (Chapter 3 and 4) of this paper, we see a distortion of the kind of love described by Paul to the church at Corinth. The reference to “childish things” and the way children think and reason is clear, reinforcing the implication of immaturity stated above in the Ephesians passage. St. Paul states in the passage here the proper use of spiritual gifts in the context of love.

If I could **speak all the languages of earth** and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the **gift of prophecy**, and if I **understood all of God's secret plans** and possessed all knowledge, and if I had **such faith that I could move mountains**, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not **jealous** or **boastful** or **proud** or **rude**. It does not **demand its own way**. It is **not irritable**, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Prophecy and **speaking in unknown languages** and **special knowledge** will become useless. But love will last forever! Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Covey, 49.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 13, Bold type added.

Some of these traits in bold type above are specifically referenced in other places of this paper and are intended to show from scripture some traits and gifts leaders cite to prove their calling and authority. The apostle Paul reduces the importance of all of these gifts to temporary value in favor of the eternal values of faith, hope and love.

On the other hand, the characteristics listed above as the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, are those, according to Paul, that should be evident *in all members and leaders* of a spiritual community. If those who are leaders and those who are followers respect each other's self, and strive for these traits, healthy personal relationship results.⁵²

Wynkoop describes how this might look in practice.

Personal relationship becomes a reality when two selves . . . open themselves to each other, respect the moral autonomy of each other, honor the personal integrity of each other, esteem each other as they esteem themselves, share themselves with each other without demanding mindless capitulation from each other, and then respond to each other in the profound awareness of mutual intercommunication. In this encounter which defines fellowship, the integrity of each is maintained and enhanced without the surrender of anything essential to selfhood.⁵³

This may rightly be referred to as preservation of the person, a “high view of personhood that is part of the Christian view of persons” and shows that in an environment of community interdependence, extravagant, free exercise of the gifts and fruit of the Spirit are a check against the potential for abuse of others.⁵⁴

Another aspect of the benefits of a healthy community and maturing relationships are described in this portion of a letter from St. Paul to the ancient church at Philippi, in

⁵² Steele, 42.

⁵³ Wynkoop, 169.

⁵⁴ Steele, 57. A concept from the book; *Preserving the Person: A Look at the Human Sciences*, by C. Stephen Evans.

Asia Minor. The questions posed are somewhat rhetorical in that he intends to remind these members that encouragement, fellowship, comfort and compassion are all qualities of a relational theology in action.

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out **only** for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.⁵⁵

Paul cautions against selfishness and pride; allows for maintaining a self (your own interests) while not ignoring the needs of others. This is the love for self and others Paul expresses to the εκκλησια (the “called out ones,” or community of believers) at Corinth.

We should rightly observe and conclude at this point, that the characteristics of well-differentiated leaders and followers are ideally maturing in and exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, as listed in Galatians 5. These leaders and followers are also in relationship with each other in a manner exemplifying faith, hope and love, pointed out by the passage in 1 Corinthians 13, but not using spiritual gifts exclusively as proof or validation of relationship with God or evidence of blessing or authority.

As my conclusions in this chapter and Chapter 6 will show, the best deterrent against abuse of others is being rightly related to God, ourselves, others and creation, and the liberal exercise and employment of the gifts available to us from the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁵ Philippians 2:1-4, Bold type added.

Relationship and Creation

*It is a truism to say that order in nature depends upon right relationships; to achieve harmony each thing must be in its proper position relative to each other thing
In human life it is not otherwise.⁵⁶*

Thus far we have identified how relationships are to function from a Biblical perspective. How one relates with God, themselves and others. There is a further aspect that should be identified; that of relationship to creation. After all, enjoined in the Creation narrative of Genesis are the first commands God gave his new creation. These included the care of his environment (Genesis 1, 2 KJV).

In God's covenant promise to Noah, we observe that this offer carries a unique element. "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you.' The covenant was even extended to nonhuman creatures."⁵⁷

Grenz enlightens us further: "Knowing that God is love ought to motivate us to seek to reflect God's loving concern for all creatures. Consequently, Christians ought to be at the forefront in both practicing and promoting the genuine stewardship God has entrusted to mankind."⁵⁸ This includes the human responsibility for the welfare of nonhumans.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground (Genesis 1:27).

⁵⁶ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Greensboro, North Carolina: W_L_C, 2009), 55.

⁵⁷ Balswick and Balswick, 23.

⁵⁸ Grenz, 51.

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it (Genesis 2:14).

Boa writes that he thinks this understanding of our relationship with Creation has been lacking for centuries.

Most approaches to Christian spirituality in the history of the church have tended to minimize the wonder, glory, and splendor of the created order. The creation-denying influence of Gnosticism (see Heresies, Chapter 4) and Neo-Platonism profoundly shaped ancient and medieval spirituality, and this dualistic philosophy (nature and the body as evil and spirit as good) continues to emaciate many in the body of Christ. An incarnational theology that affirms the beauty and goodness of God's work in the created order is a needed corrective.⁵⁹

This idea of incarnational creation theology is expressed well by current Lutheran positions on the care of creation and the redemptive role Christians should be filling.

They state on their web page, "Lutherans have a creation-centered theology oriented to celebrate the gifts of creation. We affirm God as creator of all things. We have a deeply incarnational theology that cherishes the presence of God in all reality. We see redemption as the restoration of creation, indeed as 'new creation.' We see the future as straining toward the fulfillment of creation."⁶⁰

Scripture declares that creation is groaning for redemption.

For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Romans 8:19-22).

⁵⁹ Boa, 505.

⁶⁰ "Why Lutherans? - Lutherans Restoring Creation", <http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org/about-us/why-lutherans> (accessed August 6, 2011).

Recalling Genesis 2:14 above where God placed human kind in the garden to tend and care for it, our mission is clear: God expects us to maintain a redemptive, protective and incarnational relationship with creation. Therefore, we can agree with Stanley Grenz when he states, “Stewardship according to God’s own example includes living in fellowship (relationship) with our environment, of course.”⁶¹

God is not nature or creation; that is pantheism, which proposes “that God is the sum of all created things. Nature and God are one, so that whoever touches a leaf or a stone touches God.”⁶² If this is the case then we are caught in the repetitive cycles of nature and there is no hope of salvation—only the power of nature.⁶³ The psalmist states a truth much greater than the pantheistic model; that the presence of God is everywhere. He is both in and above nature.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.

If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me (Psalm 139: 7-10 NKJV).

Tozer eloquently writes on the vastness of God’s presence in *The Pursuit of God*:

God dwells in His creation and is everywhere indivisibly present in all His works. He is transcendent above all His works even while He is immanent within them. What now does the divine immanence mean in direct Christian experience? It

⁶¹ Grenz, 51.

⁶² Tozer, 36.

⁶³ Imbach, 193.

means simply that God is here. Wherever we are, God is here. There is no place; there can be no place, where He is not. Ten million intelligences standing at as many points in space and separated by incomprehensible distances can each one say with equal truth, God is here. No point is nearer to God than any other point. It is exactly as near to God from any place as it is from any other place. No one is in mere distance any further from or any nearer to God than any other person is.⁶⁴

As a consuming humanity, we have plundered the earth without regard to our God-given charge to “tend and watch over it” (Psalm 139:10 NKJV). If, in our arrogance, “we can worship, teach, discuss, and carry on all the normal experiences of spirituality without reference to creation, we must bear some responsibility for the crisis we now face.”⁶⁵ Our relationship with the earth must be congruent with our other relationships; God, ourselves and others.

Stanley Grenz helps clarify a path forward to a proper view of creation and how we, as willing participants in a covenant with God, can cultivate this caring relationship with creation. “We once saw the world as existing primarily for our benefit. But now we desire to imitate God in all areas of life. This includes sharing his concern for creation. We now seek to be the good stewards that God intended. And as we do so, we begin to show forth God’s own character to creation.”⁶⁶

Abuse of creation is much like that of human relationships. Toxic relationships with characteristics such as conditional love,⁶⁷ greed,⁶⁸ narcissism,⁶⁹ control and manipulation consume and devour people. Persecutors are compulsive, have no intimate

⁶⁴ Tozer, 36.

⁶⁵ Imbach, 195.

⁶⁶ Grenz, 185.

⁶⁷ Arterburn, 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 40-1.

⁶⁹ Friedman, 231-2.

relationships, are addicted to performance, will only trust themselves and will use people for their own gain.⁷⁰ The consumed (followers) “sacrifice their time and money and faith to support the system. They are compliant . . . are taken for granted . . . they are exploited . . . and are used to meet the needs of those in authority.”⁷¹ These misuses of human relationships have been replicated exactly in how we have mistreated creation.⁷²

Imbach adroitly connects the dots with his observation on the importance and application of relationship with creation. “A humble submission to the presence of God within the created world lies at the heart of our submission to the Lordship of Christ. The issue of our passionate dreams for creation is nothing less than an issue of obedience—a place for us to incorporate spiritual disciplines to nurture and structure our intimacy with God through a loving relationship with creation.”⁷³

Abusing creation is often driven by identity needs or wants that the satiation of which will promise to appease our demanding and needy self. Demand for certain natural resources, like diamonds and oil, coupled with dangerous uses (not all uses, of course) of technology can cause environmental hazards and disasters. But the risks seem to be weighed and justified with the anticipation of fulfilling our individual physical and emotional cravings. For example:

- the need to be better than others,
- the need to control, govern or manipulate others,
- the need to take advantage of others by relieving them of their wealth, and
- the need to improve our standing by denigrating others

⁷⁰ Arterburn, 207-9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷² Imbach, 195.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 197.

Acquiring things and status takes the place in our emotional needs for relationships because we value things more than creation. Living in this way is an abuse of creation and is an affront to God's relationship covenant. Being rightly related to God, self, others and creation will supplant the need to abuse and provide a healthy structure to followers and leaders of a system to live and work together for mutual benefit, moving on toward spiritual maturity.

We have seen here how the call to covenant relationship is foundational in a theology of healthy spiritual formation in community. This relationship is one that God intends to be reciprocal. His offer of covenant is unilateral, as Balswick and Balswick describe, but a mature covenant relationship is one that becomes bi-lateral: mutual unconditional love.⁷⁴

In Chapter 3 we will review the Biblical record for evidences of spiritual abuse. We will observe how codependent and dysfunctional relationships spawn anxiety and create religious addictions, supplanting God's intentions for a creation with *Imago Dei* who would be His friend in a love relationship.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Balswick and Balswick, 24-25.

⁷⁵ "And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: 'Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.' He was even called the friend of God" James 2:23.

CHAPTER 3

SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN THE SCRIPTURES

Old Testament Archetypes

*History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!"
But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new (Proverbs 1:9-10).*

In Chapter 3, we will explore Biblical narratives, which contrary to God's plan (law), will show evidence of manipulation and/or control by Biblical figures, the systems they represented, and how healthy or unhealthy leadership dealt with those individuals and situations. We will also include claims of Biblical principles for promoting healthy spiritual systems, which include areas of accountability, empowering organizational structures, and Biblical Spiritual Formation.

The term "spiritual abuse" was coined about thirty years ago in the book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, by Johnson and Van Vonderen.¹ However, the issue has been with us since Satan questioned the words of God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis, Chapter 3 KJV), to further his own sedition. Hoping to influence and corrupt this new creation, he re-interpreted God's directive, distorting and misrepresenting the order, resulting in an egocentric conclusion that plunged humanity into a cycle of sin and abuse.

The word sin in the OT, *chata'* (חַטָּא), refers to one's personal offence, to lead astray or to the harm he has done.² This would include relational offences to another that rise to this definitional level. Sin is the root and result of abuse because it distorts and

¹ Johnson and VanVonderen, 12.

² Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (4th revised and augmented edition, 1952)*. First Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago / Cambridge University, 1957), 38.

defiles the human creation made in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27). We say the root because sin, the ultimate self-indulgence, is the impetus that causes people to abuse others and the result because sin is the outcome. It is personal gain, that is, the twisted gratification of self in manipulating others because of identity needs, at the spiritual expense of those who are in one’s care.³

By explicit and implicit suggestions and directives, manipulative and abusive expectations demanded by spiritual leaders found even in scripture (OT context; priests, prophets and kings), by virtue of their position (seat of Moses), are sinful because they victimized their followers through spiritual abuse, *in direct conflict* with God’s covenant of relationship.⁴ This statement sets the table for the exploration of abuse by this paper.

Next, a look at how the law given to Moses was twisted and misapplied for the benefit of the leaders referred to above.

The Law Builds a Platform for Abusers

The Old Testament Torah narrative tells the story of God calling Abram to the land of Canaan where He would multiply his progeny into a great nation. This nation would be God’s special project coming under God’s protection and care if they would only follow His laws from a motivation of love for God.

³ Enroth, 29. “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.”

⁴ Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 29.

The prophet, Moses, received the law from God and presented it to the Hebrew people. Later, through redefinition and clarification by Moses' successors, a specific system of worship, procedures and ritual utensils, rules of conduct, calendar of observances and established roles for temple leadership was developed. The last five chapters of Exodus along with the entire books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy give highly detailed instructions on the laws for life and the temple cultic worship. This is an important source as it shows the structure and expectations for the regulation of their religious activity. Later, it will be shown how this ritual outline was employed and manipulated to become a vehicle of abuse against the followers.

Along with the history of sporadic faithfulness by the people, there evolved disturbing abuses by the priesthood. 1 Samuel, chapter 8, tells how Samuel, a judge of Israel, had appointed his sons as judges, "but they were not like their father, for they were greedy for money. They accepted bribes and perverted justice" (1 Samuel 8:3).

Israel suffered at the hands of these self-indulgent shepherds (spiritual leaders).⁵ God pronounced judgment on the prophets who led the people away from Him with messages they represented as being from God. They spoke words that became vehicles of manipulation by which they established their own authority and led their followers into sin. Instead of hearkening to the express word and laws of God, they even borrowed ideas from each other to sanction and favor their own agendas. We read God's response in Jeremiah 23:25-36;

I have heard these prophets say, "Listen to the dream I had from God last night." And then they proceed to tell lies in my name. How long will this go on? If they are prophets, they are prophets of deceit, inventing everything they say. By telling

⁵ Johnson and VanVonderen, 30.

these false dreams, they are **trying to get my people to forget me**, just as their ancestors did by worshiping the idols of Baal.

Therefore, says the Lord, I am against these prophets who **steal messages from each other and claim they are from me**. I am against these smooth-tongued prophets who say, “This prophecy is from the Lord!” I am against these false prophets. Their imaginary dreams are flagrant lies that lead my people into sin. I did not send or appoint them, and they have no message at all for my people. I, the Lord, have spoken!

But stop using this phrase, “prophecy from the Lord.” For **people are using it to give authority to their own ideas**, turning upside down the words of our God, the living God, the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.⁶

The indictment against priests and prophets is a sad one because these are the spiritual leaders of the people, established to speak directly to the people for God. Their authority and position became aberrant and perverted into what Johnson and VanVonderen consider “a codependency unfortunately enabled by the people.” The authors explain:

Notice that abuse is happening *from a place of religious authority*. Spiritual abuse can only come from a place of power or *perceived* power. In other words, it is possible to be abused by someone who does not have any true spiritual authority. The abuser only has to be perceived as someone who has power and authority in order to be in a place of leverage in which their words and actions can wound.⁷

Spiritual leaders are in many ways “gatekeepers” to a fulfilled life here on earth and interpreters of the roadmap to eternal life after physical death. That is, as leaders they have the responsibility to present, in the context of a visible institution expected to speak for an invisible God, the message that will guide them to their desired spiritual destiny.⁸

⁶ Jeremiah 23:25-36, Bold type added.

⁷ Johnson and VanVonderen, 30.

⁸ 1 Peter 4:11. “Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ.”

The attitudes they convey, the words they speak and advice they give is awarded weight by virtue of their position. They have power and protection derived from the system for which they speak, tolerated and empowered by their followers. (The system here meaning the accepted understanding of doctrine, interpretation of, and the implicit roles each participant plays with regard to accepted scriptures and the practice of such.)

For among My people are found wicked men; they lie in wait as one who sets snares; they set a trap; they catch men.

As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich.

They have grown fat, they are sleek; yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked; they do not plead the cause, the cause of the fatherless; yet they prosper, and the right of the needy they do not defend (Jeremiah 5:26-28 NKJV, italics mine).

Spiritual leaders referred to here are those who have positions of authority, by virtue of election, appointment or self-appointment, with influence over their followers or adherents. Some described by the biblical prophet above, in his day, seemed to be driven by the same motivations we see today; power, influence, wealth, uniqueness of ideas (their own interpretation of God's Word), importance and respect; in a word, their own identity needs.

They used their authoritarian positions to manipulate and lead people astray eventuating in sin. Jeremiah saw the end result when he witnessed Israel being carried away into captivity by the Babylonians (Jeremiah 39).

We read a startling passage in Ezekiel 34; an indictment against the leaders of Israel who fed themselves the best but denied basic care to their flock: The shepherds here have been self-indulging, ignoring the needs of the sheep and treating them with disdain.

What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty (Ezekiel 34: 2b-4).

The prophet goes on to state that these “sheep” have wandered about without a shepherd, scattered on the hillsides with no one looking for them when they were lost and they became an easy prey for wild animals (Ezekiel 34:5). This metaphor suggests that priests and spiritual leaders of the day only used their metaphorical flock for their personal benefit, using and abusing them.

In the continuing passage God promises to eventually come to the aid of His people and rid them of these greedy shepherds, rescuing the abused sheep and judging the abusers.

And as for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says to his people: I will judge between one animal of the flock and another, separating the sheep from the goats. Isn't it enough for you to keep the best of the pastures for yourselves? Must you also trample down the rest? Isn't it enough for you to drink clear water for yourselves? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Why must my flock eat what you have trampled down and drink water you have fouled?

Therefore, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will surely judge between the fat sheep and the scrawny sheep. For you fat sheep pushed and butted and crowded my sick and hungry flock until you scattered them to distant lands. So I will rescue my flock, and they will no longer be abused. I will judge between one animal of the flock and another. And I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them (Ezekiel 34:17-23).

With the promise of help God gives here and the indictment against “greedy shepherds,” it should be clear to the hearers of this message how God feels about abusers in general and those who claim to represent Him, specifically.

The Law and Abuse

Over time, the priests and the people soon learned that the literal words of the law could be used to their personal advantage. In 1 Samuel 2:12 and following, Eli's sons were wicked and "did not know the Lord" though they were priests. They used the laws of sacrifice and the priestly office to satisfy their own desires. Bending the rules of temple sacrifice etiquette, they took their portion of the meat offering improperly.

They also went out to the women waiting at the door of the temple meeting and had sex with them. Eli was appalled at their behavior but did not stop them. Judgment soon came to the house of Eli as the Ark of the Covenant was taken captive and his sons were killed.⁹ Eli fell and broke his neck upon hearing the news.

These examples show how position, power and conferred authority have been used in such destructive and abusive ways causing the people great harm. Again, the prophet Ezekiel so clearly declares in Chapter 22 the corruption of leadership caused devastation and ruin. The victims were the poor, the needy, foreigners, and the dishonoring of God Himself!

Your princes plot conspiracies just as lions stalk their prey. They devour innocent people, seizing treasures and extorting wealth. They make many widows in the land. Your priests have violated my instructions and defiled my holy things. They make no distinction between what is holy and what is not. And they do not teach my people the difference between what is ceremonially clean and unclean. They disregard my Sabbath days so that I am dishonored among them. Your leaders are like wolves who tear apart their victims. They actually destroy people's lives for money! And your prophets cover up for them by announcing false visions and making lying predictions. They say, "My message is from the Sovereign Lord," when the Lord hasn't spoken a single word to them.

⁹ 1 Samuel 3:11-14, NKJV. "In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them."

Even common people oppress the poor, rob the needy, and deprive foreigners of justice (Ezekiel 22:25-29).

The religious system and its corruption even resulted in a distorted economic system, one in which greed, thievery, lack of justice and violating human rights became a value. Worse, these travesties were protected by the institutional system!

A further aspect of manipulation is that of the law itself. Though God had intended the law to be a clear and precise covenant instrument that depicted a dynamic relationship, we will see below how as time moved on into the New Testament era the religious sects further clarified the details of the law to a finely tuned set of rules.

New Testament Archetypes

For centuries the Hebrew people lived in a culture saturated with religious pursuit and purpose. Every daily activity was weighed and measured against the 613 written rules of the Torah and the Oral tradition, codified in the Talmud.¹⁰ Into this intense religious culture, Jesus, the first son of a young virgin named Mary, was born under inauspicious, poor conditions (Luke 1:31-4).

At the time, the political climate was somewhat adverse for the descendants of Israel. Though invaded, defeated and annexed by the Roman Empire, they were allowed by the emperor to live in their own land, but they were governed by King Herod, a vassal

¹⁰ Joseph Barclay Pentland, trans. "The Talmud," Available at: http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:XDkEzk-kCzQJ:www.forgottenbooks.org/ebooks/eau/9781606802427.pdf+talmud+download&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEEsG4ffE-ltY6n9hXmG1jkfiYqf8IwIUtlgs6B5weyZr5T_5rcBaH9zGOq-XphdCevFe8-hHp0Ugwgq8tsITPNyeStsO0IRSHzFsCZym6lUqk4OFf2z8mrluYuC3R3E2KR2u-risD&sig=AHIEtbRHQ8h1y5zCIJwn4LdRvpjbAuYtDw, 28 (accessed June 12, 2011).

of Rome.¹¹ Josephus tells us that Pilate was sent by Tiberius to be the Procurator in Judea and he alternately oppressed and gave in to the religious fervor of the Jews.¹²

The religious sects of the day, in a careful political dance with Roman authorities, controlled temple worship with strict governance; their primary attention was given to the Oral law and the “tradition of the elders.”¹³ As a lad twelve years of age, Jesus engaged these spiritual leaders in conversation at the temple and they were “amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47). One might wonder if Jesus started his challenge of the establishment at that tender age.

Later, after his public ministry began, Jesus unambiguously confronts these leaders and their abuses of the law and the people. He knew that the observance and enforcement of the law given to Moses had been hijacked by legalists, especially the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, who used it to their own personal advantage, just as we saw with the priests in Samuel’s day.¹⁴ (A description of these religious sects

¹¹ “HISTORY: Second Temple Period - Return to Zion.” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/History+of+Israel/HISTORY-%20The%20Second%20Temple> (accessed June 12, 2011). “In 37 BCE Herod, a son-in-law of Hyrcanus II, was appointed King of Judea by the Romans. Granted almost unlimited autonomy in the country’s internal affairs, he became one of the most powerful monarchs in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. A great admirer of Greco-Roman culture, Herod launched a massive construction program, which included the cities of Caesarea and Sebaste and the fortresses at Herodium and Masada. He also remodeled the Temple into one of the most magnificent buildings of its time. But despite his many achievements, Herod failed to win the trust and support of his Jewish subjects.

Ten years after Herod’s death (4 BCE), Judea came under direct Roman administration. Growing anger against increased Roman suppression of Jewish life resulted in sporadic violence which escalated into a full-scale revolt in 66 CE. Superior Roman forces led by Titus were finally victorious, razing Jerusalem to the ground (70 CE) and defeating the last Jewish outpost at Masada (73 CE).”

¹² Charles K. Barrett, *New Testament Background: Selected Documents: Revised and Expanded Edition*. Revised, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995). 156.

¹³ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Dr. Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament, An*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 217-18.

¹⁴ Matthew 23. The entire chapter is an indictment of these sects. Verse 4 examples the flavor: “They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.”

follows on page 52.)

For the average Jew alive in 25 CE, offering endless sacrifices and following rules that were stringent and punitive were all they had to live for. Only an unfulfilled prophecy of the Messiah, whom they hoped would someday rescue them and return them to their former glory, kept them performing for their religious masters.¹⁵

The story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, as recorded in Luke 3, is followed in chapter 4 by his first public announcement that he had Good News for those captive to a system of perpetual penance and atonement. In synagogue one Sabbath, He quoted the prophet Isaiah and declared that scripture had been fulfilled:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free (Luke 4:18).

Jesus went from city to city healing the sick, casting out demons and calling the people to repentance. His heart was touched when He saw the abuse of the disenfranchised by the religious leaders. It made Him angry at a system that made such performance demands but offered little comfort and assurance in return.

Matthew's narrative records, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9: 36). Jesus had great empathy for their confusion; helplessness and exhaustion come from a life of *performance* with no hope of peace and rest.

The Gospels present numerous pictures of ways people are hurt by abusive spiritual systems in another way: by legalistic attack. It takes only a superficial reading of the New Testament to see that Jesus was not at odds with "sinners" –

¹⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1984), 11.

the prostitutes, lepers and the demonized –but with the religious system of that day.¹⁶

In a rare display of exasperation and anger, Jesus commanded a halt to these abusive religious practices. He interpreted the shady practices of those who preyed on the poor as abusive manipulation. The Apostle Mark writes,

So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, Is it not written, “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?*” But you have made it a “*den of thieves*” (Mark 11:15-17 NKJV).

In his commentary on the Gospels, Pasquier Quesnel wrote in pointed, almost terse tones, against those who made merchandise of their position and took advantage of the poor under cover of religious activity.

Avarice, covered with the veil of religion, is one of those things on which Christ looks with the greatest indignation in his Church. Merchandize of holy things, simoniacal presentations, fraudulent exchanges, a mercenary spirit in sacred functions; ecclesiastical employments obtained by flattery, service, or attendance, or by anything which is instead of money; collations, nominations, and elections made through any other motive than the glory of God; these are all fatal and damnable profanations, of which those in the temple were only a shadow.

If to do common and ordinary actions in a temple, which contained no more than a figure of the Christian mysteries, denominate a man a thief in God's house; what name do those deserve, who, by *criminal and scandalous discourses*, by lascivious looks and shameful dresses, profane the churches where Christ is present? They, who are *placed in the church on purpose to serve souls*, and do not do it; or who enjoy the revenues of the church, and neglect the service of it, are thieves in more senses than one (*italics added*).¹⁷

¹⁶ Johnson and VanVonderen, 31.

¹⁷ Pasquier Quesnel, *The Gospels: with moral reflections on each verse*, (Parry & McMillan, 1855), 256-67.

The Religious Authorities

The Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducee sects represented the Judaic religious system of that day. Background information on their differences includes this description from Josephus:

The Essenes have a reputation for cultivating peculiar sanctity. They shun pleasures as a vice . . . (adhere to) temperance and control of the passions . . . disdain marriage . . . Riches they despise . . . (they contribute to) their community of goods.¹⁸

The Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws. (They) ascribe all to fate, and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men.¹⁹

The Sadducees . . . take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; . . . (it) is at men's own choice . . . they may act as they please. They also take away the immortal duration of the soul.²⁰

The Pharisees “paid a great deal of attention to the ‘oral law,’ the ‘traditions of the elders,’ a body of regulations designed to interpret and supplement the written, Mosaic law.”²¹ They were more well-liked by the people and controlled the synagogues. The Sadducees were the high priests, controlling the temple. They were more politically concerned and connected, and represented the traditional wealthy elite.²²

We will see that for these religious authorities, obedience to every law—
exactly—was not only necessary; it was required in order to fulfill the law and thereby

¹⁸ Barrett, 158.

¹⁹ Flavius Josephus, “The Works of Flavius Josephus [4 vols.] (9780801050565): Flavius Josephus, William Whiston.” Translated by William Whiston, http://www.amazon.com/Works-Flavius-Josephus-vols./dp/0801050561/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297540195&sr=1-1. 150, (accessed February 12, 2011).

²⁰ Ibid., 151.

²¹ Carson, Moo, and Morris, 217.

²² Gonzalez, 10.

have God's approval. The laws of sacrifices, ceremonial washing, the tithing system, the Temple taxes, all had become so ritualistic and bound with protocol that people felt anxious and burdened with gratuitous ceremony.²³

Jesus understood the hardships and expectations the common people had to endure. Speaking directly to the issue we are addressing in this paper, the Jews had to bear and obey the rules from the Torah as well as the oral tradition, which included additional laws and expectations.²⁴ One might sympathize with the ordinary Jew of that day and the degree of fear he or she would have had while attempting to keep every law. Jesus showed a contrast over against the legalistic demands of a religious system with His offer of love, compassion and rest from works.

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

The Greek text infers that the "yoke" and heavy burdens were those forced on them by others. The Strong's root word definition is "to overburden with ceremony (spiritual anxiety)."²⁵ Even worse, as these gatekeepers of Divine approval stood measuring each worshipper, they also frustrated the efforts of those sincere seekers. In the words of Johnson and VanVonderen,

If the spiritual relationships you have in Jesus' name don't give you rest, but rather make you more tired as time goes on, then they aren't representing Jesus'

²³ Blue, 52.

²⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. 2nd ed., (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1990), 62.

²⁵ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, 872.

purpose accurately. He came to lift from the backs of tired people the burden of trying hard to earn God's approval.²⁶

From Luke, chapter 11,

Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered (Luke 11:52 NKJV).

The religious hierarchy should have understood the phrase about “the key of knowledge.” The Pharisees and Sadducees were guardians of the knowledge and enforcers of correct worship procedures and thereby judges of who would be in and who would be out. They should have had insights to deeper levels of spirituality than the common folk and Jesus called them on that.

The Oral law was commentary and clarification of the Torah and became the traditions of the elders that the Pharisees followed. As they were not written scripture, Jesus felt no obligation to obey these laws.²⁷ We can see how tradition can become equal with scripture in the theologies and doctrines of some religious systems.

In Mark, chapter 7, the narrative describes well the angst that the Pharisees had at the cavalier disregard they thought Jesus and his followers apparently had for tradition.

One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. Similarly, they don't eat anything from the market until they immerse their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.)

²⁶ Johnson and VanVonderen, 32.

²⁷ Dunn, 64. “Jesus rejected much of the prevailing Halakah (oral traditions).” He apparently “reacted strongly against several well established rulings of the oral law.” He opposed “resolutely the attitude which made the conduct of religion and of personal relationships dependent on the observance of such tradition.”

So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, “Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.” Jesus replied, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’ For you ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition.”

Then he said, “You skillfully sidestep God’s law in order to hold on to your own tradition. For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you, for I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’ In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others” (Mark 7:1-13).

Legalism, one of the dysfunctional characteristics of the religious system in Jesus’ day, has not abated in these two centuries since. Ken Blue defines legalism as any “variation on the notion that if we do the proper Christian disciplines well enough and long enough, God will be pleased with us and reward us.”²⁸

There is the idea that we can contribute to our salvation by working hard so that grace and mercy are supplemented by some effort of ours. Closely tied to legalism is the idea that “performing religious duties gains us a higher standing with God and secures His blessings.”²⁹ This, in part, can result in a “super-conservative” or “*perfectionist* theology” (*italics added*).³⁰

²⁸ Blue, 44.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 566-67.

Jesus was determined to confront and expose the religious hierarchy for the legalistic abuse they purveyed. He could read the spiritual pride and hypocrisy in their hearts as they went about daily activities. From Luke 20:

Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets. Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. Because of this, they will be severely punished (Luke 20:46-47).

Matthew, chapter 16 relates that the disciples were worried about not having brought lunch on one occasion. Jesus commented that they should beware of the yeast of the religious leaders. Not getting the connection, Jesus used this teaching moment to warn them about the deception and evil of the religious leaders.

Why can't you understand that I'm not talking about bread? So again I say, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then at last they understood that he wasn't speaking about the yeast in bread, but about the *deceptive* teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:11-12, italics mine).

Blue says it this way, ". . . for the Jews, yeast was a metaphor for evil. Yeast mixed into a lump of dough works invisibly and silently to transform its nature, slowly but surely. Jesus is saying (that) theological yeast mixed into a body of truth gradually but inevitably transforms and destroys that truth. Yeast is the irresistible power of corruption."³¹

Jesus is teaching his disciples that the "yeast," or evil manipulation, is not a dangerous threat from those who are harlots, thieves or tax collectors; it is the religious

³¹ Blue, 43.

authorities who present themselves as spokespersons from God that are to be watched.

William Hendricksen states that the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees was “the basic principle that governed their lives as shown in their effort to attain “salvation” or “security by their own efforts. Religion . . . was outward conformity to a certain standard.”³²

Another aspect of spiritual abuse is when a manipulative leader needs hegemony (control or dominating influence) and is fearful of not controlling the outcome of situations. Religious leaders were never able to control Jesus though they often tried. In Matthew, chapter 12, they insisted that he prove his authority by showing them a sign. Jesus never did any miracles or signs on demand and would not “perform” simply for the pleasure or entertainment of the leadership. Had He acquiesced, He would have allowed them to control His purposes. According to the narrative in Matthew, chapter 16:

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:1-3 NKJV).

The Pharisees and Sadducees could read the natural signs of events but Jesus called them hypocrites³³ here, not because of their personal duplicity, but because they had influence by virtue of their authority to confirm the signs of Messiah’s coming but refused to espouse Jesus as the Christ. Because they rejected Jesus, they abandoned their

³² William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 638.

³³ *Webster’s*, 701. Hypocrite: 1. a person who pretends to have moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that one does not possess. 2. a person who feigns some desirable or publically approved attitude.

role in proclaiming the advent of Messiah and therefore were standing in the door obstructing the entrance for others.³⁴

It must be said however, that Jesus was not disrespectful of the offices the religious leaders occupied. God had established the law and the structure, giving it to Moses verbally and on stone tablets many years prior (Exodus 19, 20). Jesus rejected the existing system that had evolved because it abused the followers and enabled the abusers. Matthew 23 records this discourse;

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples; “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example, for they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.

Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra-long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’

Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters” (Matthew 23:1-8).

Some of the leadership of the religious culture present in Jesus’ day exhibited these abusive characteristics: legalism, performance demands, perfectionism, authoritarian manipulation, deceptive practices, hypocrisy and spiritual pride. I submit that these were systemic issues because these rules had been institutionalized and propagated by generations of the leaders themselves. Jesus called them the “traditions of men.” (Mark 7:6-13 KJV).

³⁴ Matthew 23:13. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces. You won’t go in yourselves, and you don’t let others enter either.

The result was that these characteristics of abuse enslaved the followers with expectations apart from the loving law of God while they, the spiritual leaders, were living in unrighteousness. It is important to recognize that Jesus' purpose was not to destroy or even question the veracity of the law given to Moses; he simply challenged the integrity, righteousness and onerous expectations of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees.

Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven! (Matthew 5:17-20).³⁵

The “righteousness” Jesus insists is necessary goes beyond the acts, or works, of tradition and speaks directly to the motivation of the heart. Obedience of the rules alone was not sufficient.

Early NT Church Case Study

In the years following the Resurrection, the early church exploded with growth. The disciples of Jesus Christ became evangelists as He commanded them just before leaving this earth. Acts, chapter 1 directs Christ's followers, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people

³⁵ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, 195. The Greek word for righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*) infers the “practice of piety originating from this uprightness,” according to Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich.

about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Providentially, the uniform language of the Roman Empire was Greek, and the political unity and inter-empire commerce provided a stability that allowed the fledgling Christian community to extend its influence more rapidly throughout the known world.³⁶ Peter, Barnabas, Paul, Timothy and other disciples mentioned in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles went out to evangelize new territory, establish churches and encourage followers of this new sect, The Way.³⁷

A Roman citizen named Saul, from Tarsus of Cilicia, was a zealous member of the Pharisee sect. Well-schooled and ambitious for the law, he became known for his severe persecution of the followers of Jesus. With letters of authority from the chief priests he intended to wipe out this new community of faith (Acts 9:1-2 NKJV).

About 32-33 CE, on his way to Damascus of Syria to take Christians from there to Jerusalem to be punished, he was confronted by a bright light. He fell to the ground blinded and heard the voice of Jesus. A few days later Saul reversed his anti-Christian fervor and became a follower of Jesus. With more passion than he had as a Pharisee, he became an enthusiastic champion and evangelist for this new faith (Acts 9 NKJV).

As a missionary, Paul made at least three journeys to establish churches in Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and Europe. Approximately 46-48 CE, his first trip took him to the

³⁶ Gonzalez, 14.

³⁷ Thomas H. Greer, and Gavin Lewis. *A Brief History of the Western World*, (Cengage Learning, 2004), 165. “An enthusiastic and able organizer, (St.) Paul made hard journeys by land and by sea and founded numerous Christian congregations in Asia Minor and Greece. His task was made easier by the existence of the Pax Romana and the imperial roads, and by the fact that the Greek language was universally spoken in the eastern parts of the empire.”

province of Galatia, the south central area of present day Turkey.³⁸ It is important to note that these residents were Greeks (Gentiles) and Jews who generally knew little of Jesus Christ or this new Way.³⁹ Paul and the others would enter into a town, go to the synagogue and preach “with such power that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers” (Acts 14:1). Many signs and wonders were accomplished and churches were launched. According to Acts 14, Luke records the results;

After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, where they strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God. Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church. With prayer and fasting, they turned the elders over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:21-23).

Within a few months of returning to the origin of his trip, Antioch of Syria, Paul heard evidence of factions infiltrating the new churches demanding the Gentiles add a Jewish Mosaic ritual custom to their soteriology; the rite of circumcision. This presented a huge problem to Paul as he had taught them the Gospel was that of faith in Christ alone.

Stunned that people would be taken in by what he deemed false teaching, Paul immediately wrote a letter to the church community there. We know it as the letter to the Galatians. He writes in chapter one;

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ (Galatians 1:6-7).

³⁸ Carson, Moo, and Morris, 229.

³⁹ Gonzalez, 25.

Like a good father who has seen his children through the birth process and on toward adolescence, he tried to nourish them with correct doctrine. He is incensed that another philosophy, one he feels is damaging to their faith, is hawked onto these impressionable converts. We discover what the problem was and how it came to be addressed by Paul in this discourse following. Note his rationale and argument against adding conditions and expectations from others to the salvation he taught as a free gift. In chapter 4, he starts by pointing out that these false prophets are their persecutors:

And you, dear brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, just like Isaac. But you are now being persecuted by those who want you to keep the law, just as Ishmael, the child born by human effort, persecuted Isaac, the child born by the power of the Spirit (Galatians 4:28-29).

Next, in Galatians 5, Paul insists that going back to keeping the law to gain righteousness is not possible; they must choose the freedom that Christ offers which is righteousness by faith. He argues that there is no spiritual benefit in this ritual keeping of the law and trusts that God will protect them from these vendors of deceit.

I'll say it again. If you are trying to find favor with God by being circumcised, you must obey every regulation in the whole law of Moses. For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace.

But we who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive by faith the righteousness God has promised to us. For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love (Galatians 5:3-6).

Johnson and VanVonderen point out that “a spiritual system to be avoided is one in which the leaders or teachers add the performance of religious behaviors to the performance of Jesus on the cross as the means to find God's approval.” The teaching of the Judaizers (those peddling the circumcision mandate), went something like this: “Faith

in Jesus is right, and you must have it. But it's not enough. In order to really find positive standing in God's eyes, you have to become circumcised." In other words, false spiritual systems teach that right standing with God depends on what Jesus did plus those "spiritual' acts that you do" with the intent to gain God's acceptance (explanatory words in parenthesis added).⁴⁰

Paul then poses a question about the Galatian church's current spiritual health. It seems that this addition to God's grace caused hesitation in their spiritual commitment and progress to maturity. Paul uses the example of yeast here as Jesus did above reminding them that it leads to corruption of the whole:

You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth? It certainly isn't God, for he is the one who called you to freedom. This false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough! I am trusting the Lord to keep you from believing false teachings. God will judge that person, whoever he is, who has been confusing you (Galatians 5:7-10).

This is such a serious breach of Paul's theology that he pronounces an indictment on the persecutor, "I just wish that those troublemakers who want to mutilate you by circumcision would mutilate themselves" (Galatians 5:12).

Within the context of history, this is a time between "the already and the not yet" in that there were no New Testament scriptures.⁴¹ The new believers of The Way had only the Old Testament for a roadmap of worship. "Nothing in Paul's letters suggests that he was opposed to participating in Jewish rites—as long as they were neither being imposed as necessary to salvation nor causing a stumbling block to other believers."⁴²

⁴⁰ Johnson and VanVonderen, 36-37.

⁴¹ Gonzalez, 63.

⁴² Carson, Moo, and Morris, 189.

However, in this example with the Galatians, Paul saw danger in allowing doctrine to be established that could pervert their understanding of true grace and rest.

Paul then points out a further issue of abuse by these persecutors—manipulation. These Judaizers were trying to satisfy an unmet spiritual need of their own by insisting on another's performance.

Those who are trying to force you to be circumcised want to look good to others. They don't want to be persecuted for teaching that the cross of Christ alone can save. And even those who advocate circumcision don't keep the whole law themselves. They only want you to be circumcised so they can boast about it and claim you as their disciples (Galatians 6:12-13).

Marc DuPont writes in his book *Toxic Churches* that after one has been brought into relationship with Jesus Christ a legalistic system will infer or teach that “the ongoing relationship with the Lord and one another is determined by their performance. In short, if believers arrive at a high standard of outward holiness, they are led to believe that God really loves them. Usually, that standard is determined by the particular Christian culture of that denomination or the leader's background.”⁴³

These standards are usually areas lacking clear, specific wording in scripture as to whether something is sinful or righteous. The abusive leader will define for their followers how to act, removing any question or opportunity for the individual to hear from God directly. DuPont observes that this is abusive and destructive because it “usurps our priesthood” and individual intimacy with the Father. In addition, “one ends up focusing on oneself” instead of seeking God's face and worshipping Him.⁴⁴

⁴³ Marc Dupont, *Toxic Churches: Restoration from Spiritual Abuse*, (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2004), 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

The product of legalism and manipulation is guilt, a powerful tool of abusive leaders. “As guilt feelings set in (because we have failed to measure up), spiritual abusers can have their way with us.” Holiness and revival preaching is often, (not always) “manipulation to produce guilt. It sets up impossible standards of spiritual purity and performance; if taken seriously, these standards prove that we don’t measure up, so we must try harder and do more.”⁴⁵

Paul closes his letter to the Galatian churches with this statement:

As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world’s interest in me has also died. It doesn’t matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation (Galatians 6:14-15).

Ken Blue notes, “Modern evangelicals are much like the Galatians when we let ourselves be loaded down with works of the law in hopes that through them we may attain our goal. We so easily believe the lie that if we try harder and do more, maturity, holiness and blessedness will necessarily result.”⁴⁶ Johnson and VanVonderen encourage those who are Christians to “be on guard against the subtle use of ‘formulas’ and doctrines that are so often used to press good people of faith into conformity with a religious system instead of conformity to Christ.”⁴⁷

There are at least two important aspects in Paul’s argument: 1. He believes the salvation message of Jesus, the Christ, is one not of earning God’s approval by performance of the follower. It is a gift complete in itself that requires no added efforts by any man to obtain; and 2. There is a strong warning for leaders to guard the message and “protect the flock from legalists who push religious performance as the means to

⁴⁵ Blue, 53.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Johnson and VanVonderen, 39.

right standing or favor with God.”⁴⁸

In summary to this point, a foundation for relational theology was constructed and covenant relationship was explored in Chapter 2. Conclusions were then drawn that include describing God’s offer of a covenant of unconditional love and commitment with benefits of blessing to those who accepted that offer. This is contrasted with its antithesis—abusive relationships which are the outcome of individuals who pursue self-identity needs at the expense of healthy, interdependent relationships.⁴⁹ We further explored how relationship with God, ourselves, others and creation, in healthy balance, could thwart and prevent toxic faith and religious addictions.⁵⁰

In this chapter, we have reviewed issues evident in the Old and New Testament with the intent of pointing out the historical abuse archetypes to be considered. We related historical incidents where spiritual leaders abused their positions and their followers to meet their own physical and emotional needs. We saw where legalism threatened the early New Testament church. We then noted the response by both God and His faithful leaders to admonish and rebuke where necessary so that a healthy, relational community could be fashioned and sustained.

As will be seen, the objective of this paper is to expose and confront legalism and manipulation in the systems of evangelical churches today. It is believed those systems and leaders who are purveyors of perfectionism and performance are abusive persecutors of Jesus’ sheep and need transformation so they, the sheep, may enjoy the rest Jesus

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ This term, *interdependence* is defined in Chapter 2, page 11, as “mutually dependent.”

⁵⁰ Arterburn. Both of these concepts are discussed at length in Chapter 4.

promised. Chapter 4 will bring to light additional abusive elements from the case study there. We will see how an institutional system regressed into an abusive, authoritarian one whose demands and actions by its leader resulted in destruction of families and even homicide.

Finally, the marks of abuse to be explored in Chapter five as the focus of this research include some referenced here. These characteristics include manipulation, greed, misrepresenting God's words, legalism, authoritarianism, perfectionism, spiritual pride and performance to achieve acceptance. We will further see how these traits are motivated and enabled by identity issues and religious addictions of leaders and followers.

CHAPTER 4

SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

In Chapter 4, I will explore materials from Christian History and Thought which show historical perspective, accounts of manipulation and control by religious leaders and systems of the past. I will then seek to point out the resulting destruction of individuals and religious communities by those leaders and the *systems* driving them. I will also cite appropriate resources, which will support my thesis and definition of spiritually abusive systems and their victims.

I will review specific characteristics of abuse in the case study at the latter part of this chapter. It will serve as a classic model depicting the relevant abuse issues I outlined in the Foundation of Relational Theology, Chapter 2. These characteristics will then be explored in more detail in Chapter 5 and contrasted in my proposed healthy systemic model in Chapter 6.

Although spiritual abuse has been with us since the early beginnings of religion, the notion that the lay¹ adherents to a faith system could have significant power, voice or influence in the system of faith they followed is a newer development. Earlier, faith followers were primarily pawns, albeit religiously addicted pawns, who had no power of their own and were swept along in ignorance, generally doing what they were told because eternal destiny was apportioned to the obedient. Because of this, abuse has been primarily from leadership (the few) toward the followers (the masses).

¹ *Webster's*, 813. The definition refers to people of a religious faith, "as distinguished from its clergy."

Individuals of academics, members of the clergy and of monastic orders debated and developed orthodoxy and heresy (both defined below) for the masses of people that had little or no power in defining the conventions of their religion. They, the masses, were captive to the system created for them. Just prior to the Reformation, “the religious conscience of Europe was divided within itself, torn between trust in a church that had been its spiritual mother for generations, and the patent failures of that church.”²

There are, of course, the notable examples of individuals like Martin Luther, who took on the Catholic Church protesting systemic issues. “He himself (did) not seem to (be) aware of the radical contradiction between his discovery and the entire penitential system that was so fundamental to accepted theology and piety.”³ His concerns included theological (systemic) disagreements, such as the view of the authority of scripture, and abuses by the system like the payment of indulgences (prepayment for future sins).⁴ For our immediate use however, it is important to point out the concept of system here.

The system, as introduced in Chapter 2 and illustrated in the example in this chapter with Frank Sandford and his commune at Shiloh, shows a pattern of authoritarian leadership and abusive attitudes and/or actions toward the adherents. Standards of behavior, institutional culture and refined doctrine all contribute to establish the *system* that eventually develops. This definition of “system” as especially related to religious systems is taken from Merriam-Webster online and includes the following:

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Reformation to the Present Day, Vol. 2. 1st ed.*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1985), 7. “It was not only at the moral level that the Church seemed to be in need of reformation. Some among the more thoughtful Christians were becoming convinced that the teachings of the church had also gone astray.”

³ *Ibid.*, 20. This “discovery” refers to Luther’s unearthing of the truth in Romans 1:17 that “the just shall live by faith.”

⁴ *Ibid.*

- An organized set of doctrines, ideas, or principles usually intended to explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole.
- An organized or established procedure.
- An organized society or social situation regarded as stultifying or oppressive.⁵

While most institutions and organizations likely have expressions of all these traits, by their very existence and structure they are predisposed to incubating an abusive system. Experience, doctrine, methodology and mission combine and enmesh to characterize the system as will be illustrated in the sample institution below.

But first, let's take a closer look at another important aspect in institutional development; the conflict between orthodoxy and heresy. The purpose is to note that spiritual abuse was present in both as both were systemically vulnerable and neither could claim higher moral ground by virtue of lesser or greater acceptance or popularity.

Centuries of process and the transmission of tradition from generation to generation characterize the development of the Christian religion. In the handing down of these traditions, common acceptance and understanding of ideas resulted what became orthodoxy to the Church. Harold O. J. Brown writes:

In Christianity, the process of tradition is very important. The Latin word *traditio* refers to a process of transmission, literally, to the handing over of things. The first and most important things Christians handed over, handed down from one generation to the next, were the Scriptures themselves. Secondly . . . was the traditional understanding and interpretation of what those . . . Scriptural passages meant. What we now call orthodoxy is a *traditional* understanding.⁶

In what proved to be one of the greatest shifts in church history, in the fifteenth century, the scriptures were the property of the Church, written in Latin and not yet

⁵ "Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁶ Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies*, (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 5.

available to the common people.⁷ The decline and corruption of the papacy was well known. Some among the more thoughtful Christians were becoming convinced that the teachings of the church had also gone astray.⁸

Gonzalez makes the connection by reporting that manuscripts obtained by western scholars observed changes and “interpolations that had taken place in the copying and re-copying of ancient texts. From such quarters came the conviction that it was necessary to return to the sources of the Christian faith, and this would result in a reformation of existing doctrine and practice. . . . The desire for a radical reformation in the doctrine of the church did not seem so out of place if it was true that such doctrine had changed through the centuries, straying from the New Testament.”⁹

It was into this atmosphere Martin Luther was born. As a young priest, he struggled personally with the dichotomy between the church’s teachings and what he read in scripture himself.¹⁰ Luther’s discovery prompted the posting of his theses of discussion, ninety-five of them, causing “great religious commotion.”¹¹ Luther’s challenge launched the Reformation and “its unintended consequence,” the Protestant movement.¹² We will return to that part of the story after a brief examination of the competition to the development of orthodoxy, heresy.

⁷ Gonzalez, 7.

⁸ Ibid., 6,7.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Heiko Augustinus Oberman and Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart. *Luther: man between God and the Devil*, (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 211.

Abuse in Religious Constructs

*The language of heresy and orthodoxy has been used frequently in the history of the Church to justify intolerance, repression, even persecution.*¹³

The years of the Church's earliest history, 100 CE to 1500 CE, found the mass populaces of the empires collectively dependent and powerless in shaping their individual spiritual destinies. There were the "heresy of the month" clubs¹⁴ one could enjoy, but the Holy Roman Catholic Church and its antagonist, the Eastern Orthodox Church, were the primary Christian spiritual constructs for centuries.¹⁵ "Despite bitter and at times bloody conflicts, heretical movements never succeeded in undermining the unity of the Christian faith during its first fifteen centuries." However, because of the consequential effects of the Reformation, considered heresy at the time, "The external unity of Christendom was shattered to such an extent that it has not yet recovered."¹⁶ An endless variety of denominations and religious structures from which to choose, now exist.

¹³ Brown, 22.

¹⁴ "Heresy of the Month." *New Advent*, <http://www.askacatholic.com/heresies/heresy.cfm> (accessed May 7, 2011). A webpage designed to highlight past and present heresies as defined by the Catholic Church.

¹⁵ "The Bible and Christianity," <http://www.abc-of-christianity.com/info/art-of-printing.asp> (accessed May 7, 2011). "For over ten centuries the Roman Catholic Church had the monopoly within the world of Christianity and for all those years it represented the only form and only organization of this religion ... For fifteen centuries the Roman Catholic Church, at least in its own eyes, was the indispensable mediator between God and man and occupied a central position in the religious life of Christians. It is not easy to hand over such a central place to a book [The Bible translated for commoners]. In addition the Roman Catholic Church is highly aware of the fact that it is the oldest Christian Church, the Church which all other Christian Churches have originated from, the Church which has converted Europe and which during the Middle Ages was considered an omnipotent and infallible organization. Also the Church which from its very beginning (in its present form the fourth century) has always thought that it was guided by the Holy Spirit and that as an organization it is God's representative on earth. In this context people should not forget that in the course of the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church began to view the pope of Rome as the one who is God's substitute on earth."

¹⁶ Brown, 296.

The purpose of this short excursion into orthodoxy and heresy is to show that institutions and religious constructs, whether widely or narrowly accepted by humanity, were subject to characteristics that will later be described as abusive in nature. The systems of heresies and orthodoxy listed below will show these traits and will be defined and demonstrated in Chapter 5 as to how they are abusive.

It is not the purpose of this paper to specifically define orthodoxy over against heresy; rather we'll only use those terms here in a general sense to identify some characteristics of religious movements of the past as examples for this study. This is not to ignore that orthodoxy has evolved in the last two centuries to look differently than even Martin Luther understood it.

From approximately 50-60 CE to 350 CE, with the added trials of persecution, Christian communities seemed to experience constant systemic turmoil. Dunn holds that the reality of "second-century Christianity was a mixed bag. There was no 'pure' form of Christianity that existed in the beginning which can be properly called 'orthodoxy.' In fact there was no uniform concept of orthodoxy at all—only different forms of Christianity competing for the loyalty of the believers."¹⁷ To which R.A. Baker, in an article titled, "Early Church History: CH 101; Second Century Heresies", adds:

The second century brought with it a steady growth of Gentile Christianity, but not without opponents. We have seen the rise of various heresies, opposition marked by a twisting of "apostolic teaching." This led the early Christian leadership to further develop creeds and formulas as a way to solidify "orthodox" positions. One must remember that in the early second century the New Testament had not come fully into form – the writings of the apostolic successors was held in high esteem.¹⁸

¹⁷ Dunn, 3.

¹⁸ R.A. Baker, "Early Church History: CH 101; Second Century Heresies", 2011, <http://www.churchhistory101.com/century2-p6.php> (accessed February 28, 2011).

Today, of course, we have the New Testament giving us a written basis for our faith, but as will be seen later, even written scripture can be used to further an abusive leader or system's agenda.

Major Heresies of the Past

Brief descriptions of some major heresies follow. The intent here is to point out that certain traits or attributes of heresy are observable and could contribute not only to a skewed understanding of orthodoxy but set up individuals for control and manipulation by abusive leaders. These traits are *italicized* and are representative of those pursued below.

Several of these excerpts are from an online curriculum by R.A. Baker, Th.D.; Saint Augustine's College; Raleigh, N.C.:

Marcion:

Marcion observed the vast differences between the God represented in the Old Testament and the God of Jesus in the NT. His answer was to *reject the God of the OT*, seeing him as the evil craftsman (Greek, demiurge) creator of an evil world. Marcion constructed a list that represents the first recorded listing of NT texts, basically his personal canon - he *excluded the entire OT*, and included only Paul's letters and Luke's gospel. He also excluded a few parts of Paul's letters - anything where Paul refers to the OT in a positive way (Marcion claimed these had been tampered with by Jews) and *references to hell and/or judgment* (for example 2 Thess 1:6-8). It is this *unorthodox canon* that leads the church fathers to begin naming the "accepted" documents.¹⁹

Montanists:

Probably the most problematic aspect of the Montanists was the view that their *prophecies carried the authority of the gospels*, and of apostolic teaching. Montanus and his two prophetesses did not see *themselves in need of the authority*

¹⁹ Baker, "Early Church History: CH 101; The Apologists." *Early Church History - CH 101; The Apologists*, 2011, <http://www.churchhistory101.com/century2-p5.php> (accessed February 22, 2011).

of the church. In the end, Montanism was rejected more for being fanatical than for being heretical.²⁰

Gnosticism:

Similar to Marcion, basic Gnosticism consisted of an extreme dualism, drawing a distinction between the body and the spirit realm. The “demiurge” was the evil creator of the physical universe; humans were bound in their “evil” physical body, and could only be released from the confines of that body through the gaining of *gnosis*, or *divine knowledge*. Gnosticism in the second century was not a unified movement. Each group tended to gravitate around a single enlightened leader, and most groups were *exclusive*, seeing their particular set of *dogma to be unique and essential*.²¹

Carpocrates:

Carpocrates and his followers (maintained) that the world and the things therein were created by angels greatly inferior to the unbegotten Father. This idea raised them to such a *pitch of pride*, that some of them (declared) themselves *similar to Jesus*; while others, still (mightier), (maintained) that they (were) superior to his disciples. They (practiced) also magical arts and incantations; philters, also, and love-potions; and have recourse to familiar spirits, dream-sending demons, and other abominations, declaring that they (possessed) power to rule over, even now, the princes and formers of this world; and not only them, but also all things that are in it. They lead a *licentious life*, and, to conceal their *impious doctrines*, they (*abused*) the name [*of Christ*].²²

Judaizers:

1st Century Judaizers is not a condemnation of Judaism or ethnic Jews. Instead, (they have) historically been the label for those who attempt to *make observing the Mosaic Law a requirement for Christianity and salvation*. (They) continue to grow in our time. These movements require such things as strict observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, *mandatory tithing*, *observance of the Jewish feasts*, and *other regulations* in order for a Christian to *earn salvation*.²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Irenaeus. “Against Heresies: Book 1, Chapter XXV,” <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103125.htm> (accessed September 17, 2011).

²³ “The Watchman Expositor: Heresies - Then and Now,” <http://www.watchman.org/re/top/heresiesthenandnow.htm> (accessed February 22, 2011).

Pelagianism:

Pelagius, a Welsh monk, taught that humanity does not inherit original sin, and that *salvation is earned* by following the example of Christ. Grace is not necessary; instead, humans overcome the sin they gradually develop by using God's grace to assist them in *perfecting themselves and thus earning salvation*.²⁴

Traits of Abuse in Heresies

In each of the above heresies are examples of characteristics which I believe to be abusive. These characteristics militate against the relational theology I established in Chapter 2. Anything or anyone that distorts or destroys an individual's ability to self-determine or differentiate and mature toward an interdependent community relationship is abusive. Some of the ways this might occur are listed here. As will be shown, cults, near-cults and established institutions with systemic abuse potential or evidence will have some or all of these following traits defined by Agnes C. Lawless and John W. Lawless, *The Drift into Deception: The Eight Characteristics of Abusive Christianity*:

1. Questions about the identity of God
2. Exclusions of, variations of, or "private interpretation" of scripture (2 Peter 1:20)
3. Some leaders will infer that they carry the authority of Moses, Elijah or Paul and should be respected and obeyed as if they were those personalities²⁵

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Agnes C. Lawless and John W. Lawless, *The Drift into Deception: The Eight Characteristics of Abusive Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995), 187. Among others in history, such as John Alexander Dowie (founder of the commune city of Zion, Illinois), Frank Sandford called himself "Elijah, sent to prepare the world for Christ's coming reign. His partner, C. E. Holland, was 'Moses.' He felt that they were the 'two witnesses' who would prophesy for 1,260 days in the end times."

4. Some tout special knowledge, insight or “light” and confer special standing to those followers who reproduce certain experiential characteristics²⁶
5. Some may exhibit exclusivist tendencies because of their special uniqueness and understanding of scripture apart from all others and use that understanding to judge who is, or is not a Christian based on their subjective standards²⁷
6. Some use their positions of authority to avoid accountability and/or create structures that are only accountable to a small, select group, if at all.

I submit that there are certain amounts of these characteristics in all Christian groups. With that said, additional traits of abusive systems and their persecutors as noted above and identified below include spiritual pride, salvation by performance, personal ambition, perfectionism and legalism. Further, degradation and self-indulgence by leaders and followers often comes to light when such systems go awry. Scripture admonishes that those traits are incongruent with the wisdom, humility and purity that comes from above, as we read in James’ epistle:

If you are wise and understand God’s ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you are *bitterly jealous* and there is *selfish ambition* in your heart, don’t cover up the truth with *boasting and lying*. For *jealousy and selfishness* are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is *jealousy and selfish ambition*, there you will *find disorder and evil of every kind*.

²⁶ Baker, See Gnosticism above.

²⁷ Enroth, 65-67.

But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere (James 3:16, italics mine).

Founders and leaders of all institutions have exhibited the characteristics in italics above to some degree. There is identity and character issues in all of us that belie a lack of fruit of the spirit, as described in *A Foundation of Relational Theology*, Chapter 2 of this paper. Keeping that in mind, what I intend to show here is how and when these personal issues become abusive and damage relationships with those we love and with whom we worship.

Some Observations about Institutional Systems

The distinctives identified in this section of major religious institutions and constructs existing from the time of the NT church are a compilation from several sources and as such bear relevancy to the proposition of this paper for three reasons:

1. The propositions, teachings or behavior of institutions of the past are strikingly similar to dogma in present day cults, near-cults and mainstream denominations,²⁸
2. While institutional systems theoretically involve matters of faith or doctrine,²⁹ and are not in themselves the abuse referred to by this research, propositions, teachings and behavior of those dogma could

²⁸ Brown, 5.

²⁹ Ibid., 2-3. “Early in the history of the first Christians, however, ‘heresy’ came to be used to mean a separation or split resulting from a false faith. In the early church, heresy did not refer to simply any doctrinal disagreement, but to something that seemed to undercut the very basis for Christian existence.”

heavily contribute to the dysfunctional environment that positions the system to be, or have abusive elements.³⁰

3. Individuals become vulnerable to these systems because of their identity issues. “When the abuser and the victim find each other, they create a sick symbiosis currently called codependence”³¹

“What type of person is attracted to the abusive leader?” asks Ken Blue. “In my experience, the victims have often been unwittingly groomed for such a relationship. That is to say, something in the backgrounds of these people predisposes them to submit to a manipulative, controlling style of leadership.”³²

For example, in the case of a leader who is highly controlling, he or she may develop the system in the institution where the expectation is that followers must consult the leader for even the most mundane decision, which indicates an identity issue. Where this practice goes awry is in the fact that this produces followers whose self-differentiation is lost in the purposes and goals of the leader or group.

Friedman, whose theories prove invaluable throughout this paper, explains, “Differentiation means the capacity of a family (or system) member to define his or her own life’s goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures, to say ‘I’

³⁰ Brace, Robin A. “Cult Heresies.” *ANCIENT HERESIES & DISCREDITED THEORIES WHICH HAVE BEEN TAKEN UP BY THE CULTS & SECTS!*, 2000, <http://www.ukapologetics.net/cultheresies.htm>, (accessed March 26, 2011). Pelagianism (as listed above), for example, emphasizes works for salvation or performance See also, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 65-66

³¹ Blue, 110.

³² *Ibid.*, 104.

when others are demanding ‘you’ and ‘we.’”³³ This is the primary and major issue of abuse: 1. the absorption of individuals into the system and the identity of the group; and 2. the inability of persons to differentiate apart from that group or system because of their own identity issues.

The Reformation Story

Until the Reformation, heresies had been eventually forced to the fringes by orthodoxy. Martin Luther argued that heresy had “become institutionalized within the church (and he) wanted to purge the church” of heresy. “Luther’s reforming activities were sparked by a religious abuse, specifically by the selling of indulgences. Luther denounced this traffic as a false and deceptive hope that kept troubled sinners from trusting in Christ alone and thus from being saved.”³⁴ He saw “hawking of indulgences and dietary rules for Lent” as a shift away from the Christian faith of the NT Apostles.

Luther’s famous discovery, justification by faith, is a concept consistent with St. Paul’s writings but the Church had added supplements to Christ’s sacrifice with interpretive edicts like the “miracle of transubstantiation.”³⁵ The Roman Catholic Church saw the Mass as the body of Christ literally becoming a real, fresh sacrifice at each communion through transubstantiation.³⁶ Luther felt that the early church saw Calvary as the finished work of Christ and no additional sacrifice was necessary.

³³ Friedman, 27.

³⁴ Brown, 323.

³⁵ Ibid., 244. Doctrine was made official by the Catholic Church in 1215. “The bread and wine, after the consecration, are not only a sacrament, but the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and are sensually, not only as a sacrament but in truth handled and broken by the hands of the priest and crushed by the teeth of the faithful.”

³⁶ Ibid., 303-07.

The clergy “had been charged with corrupt living, excessive claims to authority, and a host of other offenses.” Moral failure, decadence, and self-indulgence described most popes to priests of this time period. The people lost faith and the “reverence (they) felt for those who had the power to change bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ turned to rage when people felt that they were being deceived and that their eternal salvation was in jeopardy.”³⁷ The debauched system of religion positioned itself to be the persecutor of its followers by reason of the abuse it disseminated.

Writing of the polemics of the situation in Luther’s day, Harold O. J. Brown says, “Reformation Protestantism acknowledges that Catholicism possesses the fundamental articles of the faith, but claims that it so overlays them with extraneous and sometimes false doctrines that the foundations are no longer accessible to the majority of Catholic believers.”³⁸ Here is an unambiguous example of the addition of performance to grace that affirmed Luther’s search and discovery of Romans 1:17, “the just shall live by faith” (NKJV), and Luther added his clarification, the word “alone.”

The Catholic Church had created, through their systemic regressions, a religion benefiting the authoritarian leadership to perpetuity of power and reducing the followers to a life of unquestioning obedience (control). “Thus for the Roman Catholic, faith was primarily a matter of accepting the teaching authority of the church and conceding, in advance, that all the church teaches is true.”³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 307. “In practice, the decadent clergy lost the trust of the people, and particularly of those most concerned about their personal salvation.”

³⁸ Ibid., 310.

³⁹ Brown, 379.

Brown further explains, “The Reformers saw themselves as recovering the authentic faith of the New Testament, and to a lesser degree of the early church,” and soon realized they faced the same quandary for which they accused the Roman Catholics. That “was the reappearance of an orthodox theology and a highly structured church life, one that failed to meet some of the spiritual needs and desires that had led to the beginning of the Reformation in the first place.”⁴⁰

During the years following the Reformation and recognizing the need for a systematic theology, they unwittingly formed their own orthodoxy. “Just as Luther had postulated that the true faith of the first Christians had been obscured by layers of non-biblical tradition and Scholastic theology, so they (those who inherited Luther’s cause) felt that Luther’s initiatives (had) been submerged in a new Scholasticism.”⁴¹

Luther fought against the legalism of the Roman Church but within a short time his apologist followers fashioned a Lutheran Traditionalism that became the new legalism, described by Brown as “dead orthodoxy.”⁴² Pietism, a daughter of the Reformation, took a different tack from that of Luther’s institutionalism.⁴³

Brown states that Pietism encouraged “believers to seek a subjective assurance through spiritual exercises, which sometimes degenerated into a new kind of legalism. Pietism . . . tended toward perfectionism . . . At the same time, Pietism is partly

⁴⁰ Ibid., 385.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 383.

⁴³ Ibid., 386.

responsible for the religious individualism that has permitted Protestantism to become theologically and ethically highly pluralistic.”⁴⁴

Pietism, the forerunner of modern Protestant revivalist movements also contributed to John Wesley’s personal theological formation. Ted Vial, in his article online about the Methodist beginnings states:

Methodism took shape in the context of the beginnings of modern industrialization, urbanization, and the Enlightenment emphasis on experience as the most secure path to knowledge. In addition to their roots in Anglicanism, the most direct influence on John Wesley and Methodism was pietism.⁴⁵

Though Wesley’s “movement had no intention of becoming a separate church, it did need an organization.”⁴⁶ In England, he first formed “societies,” new “wineskins” for this new modern movement, and then later organized “classes.”⁴⁷ Here in America the movement gained steam becoming an official denomination in 1784.⁴⁸

As Brown’s observation above noted the “legalistic” characteristic of perfectionism in Pietism, Michael G. Moriarty goes a step farther and sees it present in the next evolutionary form of Christianity, Pentecostalism. “Methodism’s perfectionist tendencies . . . filtered down into early Pentecostalism. Methodist Charles Parham . . .

⁴⁴ Ibid., 393.

⁴⁵ Vial, Ted. *Methodist Beginnings*, <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Methodist/Origins/Beginnings.html> (accessed May 19, 2011).

⁴⁶ Gonzalez, 213.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁸ Vial, *Methodist Beginnings*.

helped initiate the Pentecostal outpouring subsequent to receiving a crisis experience that accompanied speaking in tongues.”⁴⁹

In the mid to late 19th century, within the Methodist tradition, many felt that the church had abandoned Wesley’s teachings. “These groups wished to return both to the earlier concern for the masses (those of the urban poor), and to Wesley’s teachings on sanctification. They soon crystalized into several new denominations”⁵⁰ echoing the same institutional issues and complaints the reformers voiced in leaving the Catholic institution.

A Closer Look at an Abusive System

From this point forward, attention will be directed to a system of abuse that illustrates several traits that will later be explored. This example will show that as the system evolved it set up the followers for spiritual abuse. Ron Enroth, in his book *Churches that Abuse*, outlines the historical environment, ripe for religious activity:

In America, which has been a haven for numerous small religious sects, there are important historical precedents for abusive churches. Most sects offered variety rather than aberration, but a few could be categorized as extreme. As with their modern counterparts, they often began with noble aspirations and biblical foundations, but were led astray through human frailty. The whole of church history has indeed been one of conflict and reform. The body of Christ may be one, but Christ's churches are many.⁵¹

Through this unique American culture, competition has thrived between denominations, purveying every type of spiritual cuisine from the predictable and

⁴⁹ Michael G. Moriarty, *The New Charismatics: A Concerned Voice Responds to Dangerous New Trends*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 161.

⁵⁰ Gonzalez, 255.

⁵¹ Enroth, 53-54.

mundane to the bizarre.⁵² A definition is appropriate here. The word aberrant in this paper defines a special group category of system different from a cult or from traditional Orthodox Christianity. An aberrant congregation would *not* include the variety of styles and approaches to ministry we see now developing in emergent groups. This paper is not about ministry paradigms or creative programs to attract followers but about the health of the system to which followers are attracted.

While religious sects and divisions may not have themselves originated theologically abusive, the search for variety, safety, affirmation, significance and identity has found the American culture an environment of opportunity.⁵³ Men and women of talent and charisma have responded to provide denominational structures to present their own meal for the spiritual craving.⁵⁴

Sandford's Shiloh

The institution to be reviewed here as a case study was founded by Frank Sandford, 1862-1948. I chose this particular case because the traits are quite easy to identify in that context and may assist one in identifying similar characteristics in their own relational environment.

⁵² Hinnells, John R., ed. *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion, Second Edition*. 2nd ed. (New York: T & F Books UK, 2009), 461-475. "By the sheer fact of needing to compete with each other, clergy in different denominations will be forced to seek customers more vigorously. Other things being equal, a denomination as a unit will adjust itself to attract customers. As local churches and denominations compete with each other for customers, the market as a whole becomes more vigorous."

⁵³ Ibid. "Throughout the modern world, competing denominations offer different and distinctive bundles of goods and services tailored both to the different external conditions and internal tastes of their customers."

⁵⁴ Enroth, 53-55.

After a few years of Bible schools, missionary travels, pastoring and a stint as a denominational executive, Sandford developed his personal theology. He called people to a lifestyle of sacrifice and suffering through which they could please God.⁵⁵ He became a strong authoritarian leader who promised his followers they could be part of this apocalyptic, elite new band apart from the rest of the world.

During the years of 1893-99 he founded the Holy Ghost and Us Bible School and using donations and student labor he built a “large, white Victorian structure named Shiloh” in southwestern Maine.⁵⁶ Enroth describes the institution as follows:

In the Holy Ghost and Us Bible School the important spiritual foundations of Shiloh were laid down: mystic revelations from God to Sandford, the conviction of being set apart by God for some millennial purpose, the absence of individual thought, and unquestioned obedience at all times and in all things. Having accepted these things, Sandford's followers were willing to do anything.⁵⁷

By 1904, almost six hundred residents had donated all they owned to Sandford and were living together at Shiloh. The concept of a utopian community may sound inviting, “still all was not well at Shiloh . . . Sandford’s authoritarian rule and abusive discipline”⁵⁸ resulted in whippings, beatings and mind control.⁵⁹ He demanded isolationism from their natural families and former members later “told stories of physical or psychological manipulation or abuse.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁶ Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee, and Patrick H. Alexander. *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1988), 767.

⁵⁷ Enroth, 58.

⁵⁸ Burgess, 767.

⁵⁹ Enroth, 32-33.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66-67.

Communal living itself is not new as the early NT church exhibited a type of this.⁶¹ The issue here was the resulting handing over of expressions of individuality in exchange for uniformity and acceptance.⁶² This could rightly be called a religious addiction by virtue of the needs of both the leader and the follower. Patricia Ann Vanderheyden gives insight to this exchange in her essay on Religious Addictions: “I believe that religious addiction involves a dysfunctional church system as well as the neediness of the victim/perpetrator.”⁶³ Her definition follows:

A person who is religiously addicted chooses consciously or unconsciously to avoid pain and feel good by finding a sense of esteem through rigid faith practices and service within a spiritual setting.⁶⁴

Sandford grew disenchanted with life there at Shiloh and undertook a world cruise aboard his yacht. While wealth or material possessions are not the issue in this paper, Sandford grew greedy and linked giving with salvation.⁶⁵ He urged followers to sell their possessions and move to Shiloh. He pronounced “awful judgments on all who dared to rob God.”⁶⁶ He then used the money to “finance his grandiose visions.” Meanwhile, “the people of the commune suffered constant hunger.”⁶⁷

⁶¹ Acts 4:32-3 NKJV. “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”

⁶² Enroth, 59. “The object of Frank's authority was to break down individual will and self-identity.”

⁶³ Patricia Ann Vanderheyden, “Religious Addiction: The Subtle Destruction of the Soul,” *Pastoral Psychology* 47, no. 4 (1998): 293-302, 294.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Lawless and Lawless, 188.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

“Serious setbacks in Shiloh began in response to the very real threat of extinction through starvation. All of Shiloh's major struggles stemmed from financial pressure and the rigorous behavior required by Sandford.”⁶⁸ Enroth continues,

Beyond Sandford's charismatic ability to demand unswerving respect and obedience from his followers, he had managed to build a large complex of structures, all built and financed by the members of the community. The main building was called Shiloh, after which the movement was named. It was a three-storied, rambling structure resembling a castle complete with turrets, towers, and a large golden dome that shone like a beacon in the sun. Shiloh was more than just a collection of buildings or followers. It was a testament to one man's faith and authority. The people of Shiloh pledged allegiance to a man to whom God spoke directly, despite clear evidence that this man's version of reality was vastly different from the rest of the world's.⁶⁹

Family life was inhibited in the commune as parental decisions were made by Sandford and his ministers. He arranged and dissolved marriages, moved children to a separate dormitory, controlled contact between males and females and controlled friendships in and outside of the commune. This encroachment of an autonomous family system results when an institution becomes like a family and the lines of authority become blurred. It is further an indication of the incapacity of the leader to self-differentiate.⁷⁰

Some theologies may argue that this line of authority is beneficial,⁷¹ quoting scriptural license from such references as; “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that

⁶⁸ Enroth, 59.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁰ Friedman, 221.

⁷¹ Lawless and Lawless, 112-13.

sent me” (John 13:20 KJV). This is interpreted by proponents as “delegated authority” from Jesus “to certain men who have the charisma of leadership.”⁷²

However, “In speaking to church leaders, the apostle Peter advised: ‘Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;’”⁷³

Agnes and John Lawless state in their book, *The Drift into Deception*; “We should follow a leader who lives a Godly self-denying life with the welfare of his group in mind, not one who controls through an autocratic chain of command.”⁷⁴

In contrast, the following quote points out the level of scrutiny required to achieve the sinless perfection, legalism and control Sandford demanded. “In a world with few material possessions, the most minor flaws became the source of guilt and self-loathing. A young girl confessed to the sin of vanity because she looked in a mirror. Then she was told to fast for three days to atone for her sin.”⁷⁵

Sandford was however, given a pass on his own behavior. He and his family lived in separate quarters and ate well when others were starving. He traveled around the world spending money on his own whims such as two full size golden harps, which he carried with him on the yachts. He had anger management issues, slapping his wife in public and throwing chairs off the platform.⁷⁶

⁷² Derek Prince, *Discipleship, Shepherding, Commitment*, (D. Prince, 1976), 19.

⁷³ Lawless and Lawless, 119. (Reference is 1 Peter 5:2-3).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Enroth, 60.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 62

This scene might have been avoided had Sandford been accountable to other leaders for his actions. Arterburn states:

Often a strong leader mistakes the position of leadership for a position free from accountability. The leader will set up a toxic faith system that allows for free rein and no accountability. Underneath the raging ego of the persecuting leader is a suffering person who fears being unimportant.⁷⁷

Fitting Arterburn's description to a "t", Sandford demanded absolute obedience.

"At various times Sandford laid hands upon the heads of members who exhibited too much individuality and exorcised the demons of independent thinking and reasoning. The only thing that mattered was faith. Thinking accomplished nothing."⁷⁸ Individual creativity was not just discouraged, it was quashed. Because Sandford so extremely demonstrates an abusive leader, numerous scholars have since studied him. Shirley Nelson, author of *Fair, Clear, and Terrible: The Story of Shiloh, Maine*, writes:

He claimed to be "the anointed messenger of God and declared his power to forgive sins in God's name. 'God is here, and the representative of God is here that has power and authority from God to remit your sins. I declare that every one of your sins will be remitted today if you are baptized. If you accept it, you accept 'the counsel of God.' If you reject it, you reject 'the counsel of God.'"⁷⁹

Stephen Arterburn explains Sandford's behavior:

In the toxic system, the toxic minister will set himself or herself up as having a special destiny or mission that can be performed by no one else. This special anointing or calling many times is nothing more than the pathological need to be valued or esteemed. If others will not value the minister enough to submit to the dictatorial rule, God's anointing is called in to make sure everyone understands that any waver of support for the persecutor is seen as a waver in faith in God.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Arterburn, 169-70.

⁷⁸ Enroth, 63.

⁷⁹ Shirley Nelson. *Fair, Clear, and Terrible: The Story of Shiloh, Maine*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 162.

⁸⁰ Arterburn, 165.

Ron Enroth observes, “As the movement grew, its spiritual elitism became more pronounced.”⁸¹

Isolation from the world, clothing that distinguished the wearers from others in the nearby towns and the inability to interact with outsiders served to create a literal separation from the world and a visual illustration of the holiness that was expected of them. “Ex-members told stories of physical or psychological manipulation and abuse (They) were called quitters, turncoats, and traitors. At first they simply lost their place in the Lord's roll call, but gradually the act of leaving became an act of disloyalty. Ex-members were not to be spoken to or about.”⁸²

Enroth sums up the Shiloh story with these words:

The lesson we learn from Frank Sandford is that there is indeed nothing new about ‘new’ Christian movements. Now, as in the past, the spiritual power holders exert strong control-oriented leadership and exercise immense influence in the day-to-day lives of adherents. In the present, like the past, Christian groups claim new divine revelation through inspired prophets or preachers who ‘receive a word from the Lord’ regularly. Like Sandford and his predecessors, today's movements express the conviction they alone are the repository of ‘truth,’ or that they have been chosen by God to restore a lost or dormant spiritual vitality. Both groupings share a strong consciousness of persecution; both illustrate attitudes of negativity toward established churches; both view their ‘spiritual family’ as superior to the biological family; and both have exhibited concern about the role and fate of ex-members. In short, the narrative of churches is that abuse has important beginnings in our past.⁸³

Sandford was eventually convicted of child abuse, manslaughter and kidnapping in separate issues that had developed between 1904 and 1911. He served time in prison but after that, he and Shiloh never recovered.

⁸¹ Enroth, 64.

⁸² Ibid., 64-65.

⁸³ Ibid., 72.

This quick review of Sandford and his movement has revealed the abusive nature and activity in his “ministry” system. Manipulation, spiritual elitism, exclusivism, greed, legalism and spiritual perfectionism are all present and accounted for. Over time and claiming revelation from God, he developed this community of Shiloh for his own personal gain and emotional needs. He claimed to speak for God and could with God’s power even “forgive sins.”⁸⁴

“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; people obeyed willingly.”⁸⁵ In actuality, it was the identity and addictive needs of individuals that surrendered to Sandford giving him authority over them. “People broken by various experiences, people from dysfunctional families, people with unrealistic expectations, and people out for their own gain or comfort seem especially prone to it (toxic faith systems).”⁸⁶ Through Sandford’s personality and his ability to motivate, manipulate and sell his form of Christianity to sincere but duped followers, he created a system of expectations that abused those followers and even caused death to some.⁸⁷

The System Becomes the Persecutor

It is important to restate and emphasize how a *system* that is developed can become the persecutor demanding loyalty and enslaving even the leadership. Sandford proves this point. He left for an extended period of time and those left in charge dutifully

⁸⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Arterburn, 31.

⁸⁷ Enroth, 67.

continued his wishes; that is, the system established by Sandford kept them obedient. Also to be considered is the related issue of the followership's apparent inability to differentiate and may illustrate the level of religious addiction and/or chronic anxiety present.⁸⁸

Turning now to Chapter 5, I will expand the focus on these abusive elements looking at how they are abusive and why they are destructive to relationships. Recalling from Chapter 2 the idea of God's offer of covenant relationship I will show that the abusive traits in a dysfunctional system obstruct and obfuscate that divine proposition.

Further, I will explore illustrations and patterns of systemic abuse. I will be able to establish and show the victimization of the leaders and the members by virtue of the demands of an enslaving and persecutory system. As pointed out in Chapter 3, I believe characteristics of abuse, like the traits highlighted above, are present in most, if not all, religious institutional systems. Though usually in very subtle forms, these are the beginning stages of what may eventuate in overt abuse.

However, many leaders, conscious of appearances and fear of misinterpretation, can control the environment of abuse by "spiritualizing" the system's demands. This type of subtle abuse presents in expectations rooted in "proof texted" scripture where performance is tied to salvation. This concept and others will be explored in the next two chapters.

Lastly, I will explore the key to healthy leadership and followership. I suggest it is being aware of one's own vulnerability (the possibility of being taken in error), being

⁸⁸ Friedman, 58.

willing to take responsibility for self-care and health and willing to be accountable to peers. The concept of covenant will then be outlined as a model for a healthy system.

CHAPTER 5

THE PATHWAY TO ABUSE

In Chapter 5 I will investigate more closely the sample institution from Chapter 4, looking to answer the questions of how the activity and behavior of perpetrators are abusive. I will search for possible sources of that abusive behavior in their early personal history, as available, and try to identify the emotional issues that may lead to the toxic behavior of the leaders and subsequently, the system. I will also explore the roles of those persons in a toxic faith system.

According to Dictionary.com, abuse is: “improper, incorrect, or excessive use; misuse; maltreatment of a person; injury, insulting, contemptuous, or coarse speech; an evil, unjust, or corrupt practice.”¹ For my purpose in this paper, spiritual abuse would include the items in this definition, specifically in the context of a religious institution.

Who becomes a victim of abuse? What factors may set them up to be abused? Who are the abusers? What is religious addiction? Can an abusive cycle be broken and the victims healed? How can one be helped and what resources exist to assist in healing? Can an abusive institution’s system be changed from an unhealthy one to a system that promotes self-identity in Christ? Or, are institutions inherently prone, by virtue of existence, to abuse willing adherents? These questions are to be answered here and in Chapter 6.

Physical abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse and spousal abuse have been highlighted in the media for years. “But until recently, very little attention was paid to

¹ “World English Dictionary”, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/abuse> (accessed May 28, 2011).

what has become known as spiritual abuse. It takes place where we would ordinarily least expect to find something so harmful—in churches and religious organizations. We expect to be helped, not hurt, by pastors and others in positions of religious influence.”² The fact, Dupont says, is that “Abuse is always about those with power or authority using their power or authority wrongfully in order to compensate for their fears, hurts and insecurities.”³

Arterburn argues that there are people who have allowed their faith and church relationships to become toxic because of their own personal issues or addictions.⁴ Religious addiction can be caused by one’s past experience of rejection, rigidity of family systems, disappointments in life, low self-worth or having experienced some past physical, verbal or sexual abuse.⁵ A religious addict acts much the same as other addicts do. They become obsessed and compulsive, intolerant of other expressions of faith, addicted to experiential highs and performance.⁶

Toxic faith is a destructive and dangerous relationship with a religion that allows the religion, not the relationship with God, to control a person’s life. People broken by various experiences, people from dysfunctional families, people with

² Enroth, 16.

³ Dupont, 13.

⁴ A word about the children of religious addicts. As the reader might have guessed, I come from a similar background. My parents were religious addicts in the normal, evangelical, holiness, sinless perfection mold. But like most religious addicts, they were unaware of the *fact* of religious addiction. As I grew up, I too, became just like they were. So I guess it is a fair assessment to call me a religious addict—until I was able to differentiate and move away from the “dope.”

God IS faithful and His grace is great while we are young and impressionable. When we mature to the point of choosing for ourselves, that is when we take on the responsibility for our own identities. If we have been tutored in an abusive system it is very difficult to see another option. Only by grace and exposure to other streams of thought can we discern truth and balance. Many are still stuck and don't know it; many are too old to change; many don't care; and many resent being made aware of the fact they might be addicted to religion.

⁵ Arterburn, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37-43.

unrealistic expectations, and people out for their own gain or comfort seem especially prone to it. It is a defective faith with an incomplete or tainted view of God. It is abusive and manipulative and can become addictive. Those with toxic faith use it to avoid reality and responsibility. It often results in a perfectionist existence.⁷

In the end, every addiction ends up destroying relationships. “Toxic faith is no different. Faith (itself) has been eroded, and as persons place distance between themselves and God, the chasm formed is filled with compulsion, activity, addiction, manipulation, control and extreme effort. The work is never done, and the heart is never at rest because the faith has become so toxic.”⁸

“Why do abusive Churches exist?”⁹ This chapter title from Marc Dupont’s book, *Toxic Churches: Restoration from Spiritual Abuse* is a key question. “Such churches exist because of the potential for sin in us all, sin that results from the fall of humankind.”¹⁰ In this chapter, Dupont relays the story of the Garden of Eden and how the relationship they shared with God was initially one of intimacy and grace. Sin here is describing the separation from God that eventuated from the choice of our first parents to act on the suggestion by Satan.

According to the Biblical narrative, at the deceptive suggestion of Satan, Adam and Eve chose to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, believing they could seize control of their own destinies instead of trusting their relationship with, and love

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁹ Dupont, 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

from, God.¹¹ God created humanity with a need for love and acceptance, but only He can meet that need completely.

It is within the love of God that we discover our worth and value. As a result, each day we instinctively find ourselves seeking to satisfy this primary yearning for acceptance. We are either looking to the Father to satisfy this longing for love, or we are looking to others. The moment we turn to others to meet that need, our souls become captured with a spirit of insecurity. When we allow the acceptance of others to determine our worth, we become slaves to the opinions and attitudes of those around us. We begin to live for the approval of man.¹²

In a recorded sermon by Bill Johnson, he states, “Our identity is often in the opinion of people around us instead of how God sees us.”¹³ All of us are subject to, listen to and are influenced by our relationships and feedback we receive from others. Dr. Green states; “This is a huge part of the reason we are so easily seduced by dysfunctional and abusive religious communities.”¹⁴ The Balswicks add, “We acknowledge that, unlike God, we are not perfect, and therefore in applying these principles, we will have to struggle with our human imperfections. We must look to God for grace and strength to attain personal distinction in relationships.”¹⁵

However, a healthy, self-differentiated individual knows that “because of our security and significance in Christ, we do not need to be controlled by the opinions and expectations of others,” reminds Dr. Green. Boa adds, “We have nothing to prove

¹¹ Ibid., 18.

¹² Mike Fehlauer, *Exposing Spiritual Abuse: How to Rediscover God’s Love When the Church Has Let You Down*, (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2001), 90.

¹³ Bill Johnson, “Bethel Church: Sermon of the week- The Battle for Grace: Part 3.” *Bill Johnson Sermons for download Bethel*, 7 Sept 08., <http://ewenhuffman.podbean.com/2008/09/13/sermon-of-the-week-the-battle-for-grace-part-3-7-sept-08/> (accessed May 29, 2011).

¹⁴ Green, from an email communication.

¹⁵ Balswick and Balswick, 19.

because we know who and whose we are. Rather than trying to impress and manipulate people, we can do our work with excellence as unto the Lord.”¹⁶ At the same time we must recognize that the reality is that we are all personally vulnerable and must guard against being “seduced into abusive situations”¹⁷ by those who deceive with “enticing words” (Colossians 2:4).

Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ. For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So, you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority. . . . God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross. . . . You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world (Colossians 2:8, 9, 10, 15, 20).

In this passage from Colossians, the writer, Paul, specifically identifies the spiritual leadership as those who are peddling “high sounding nonsense.” He states that the list of “dos and don'ts” –record of charges—that the spiritual leaders have compiled against the followers has been cancelled so they have no power over followers with legalism any more. Better yet, St. Paul states that Christ has set us free from these controlling spiritual powers leaving us to conclude that a path to self-differentiation and self-identity is now open.

¹⁶ Boa, 45.

¹⁷ Green, from an email communication.

Sources of Abuse

There is a further question that deserves exploration. If a church or religious institution is abusive, or contains abusive elements or activity, what is the source of that abuse? It has been postulated by the case study of Sandford in Chapter 4 and through examining behavior in light of the Foundation of Relational Theology in Chapter 2, that leaders and founders of institutions can be abusive.

Those leaders who have identity issues and possible past abuse in their own history are driven to abuse and manipulate others, as has been suggested above. In addition, many leaders are only mimicking and reproducing the identity issues they were recipients of from their families of origin; a process called “multi-generational transmission,” a term coined by Friedman.¹⁸

That adherents or followers get caught up in religious addictions because of their identity needs and inability to differentiate or mature to a healthy interdependent self has been acknowledged and established. Arterburn and Felton label the abusers and the abused with roles described as “persecutor,” “co-conspirator,” “enabler,” “victim,” and the “outcast.”¹⁹ A short description of each follows:

- *Persecutor*: exhibits lack of self-worth, cannot trust others, trusts only the addictive relationship with the system, is driven to perform, resents having to live up to constantly outdoing previous performances. Is full of disappointment in

¹⁸ Friedman, 31-32. “Gaining a better understanding of the emotional processes still at work with regard to our family of origin, and modifying our response to them, can aid significantly in the resolution of emotional problems in our immediate family (marriage or parenting) or of leadership problems in a church or synagogue. When family members are able to see beyond the horizons of their own nuclear family area of trouble and observe the transmission of such issues from generation to generation, they often can obtain more distance from their immediate problems and, as a result, become freer to make changes.”

¹⁹ Arterburn, *Toxic Faith*, 191-241.

God, self and others, projects guilt and shame on others; is often materialistic, thinking he or she deserves being rewarded for a good performance, is manipulative, compulsive, motivated by greed, self-centered, needs the adulation of others, blames others for personal failures, has no accountable relationships, has an attitude of superiority.²⁰

- *Co-conspirator*: is the ultimate team player, exists to make the persecutor look good, rescues and “takes arrows” for the persecutor, may see this role as a search for significance or love. He or she values being part of something big even if flaws are seen; is submissive, allows control and manipulation of oneself, is addicted to the religious system, ties feelings of value to another person (the persecutor) rather than God, needs to feel safe and appreciated.²¹
- *Enabler*: is a role that allows victimization, supports, and rescues, placates and is a caretaker of the persecutor. Carries resentment for oneself as more and more self-worth is lost. Enablers are religious addicts and addicts of the persecutor who will believe any lie and rationalize to maintain homeostasis. They may know things are wrong but are fearful, feel powerless and guilty but continue to hope for change. “The system blackmails the enablers to stay in the supportive role—whatever the price.”²² They outwardly appear supportive, but inwardly are angry at living an unfulfilled life.²³ Ultimately, the payoff of perceived value is worth

²⁰ Ibid., 202-14.

²¹ Ibid., 214-21.

²² Ibid., 226.

²³ Ibid., 221-28.

the cost and they stay in the system because of their co-dependence and addiction.

- *Victim*: is manipulated by all those above, is compliant, will sacrifice time and money to be part of the system. He or she needs to be significant and fears rejection or abandonment so much one would rather bear exploitation than be part of nothing. A victim will often lose one's faith after realizing how badly he or she has been victimized. May continue to allow abuse after being spiritually molested by succumbing to threats from those in authority. Exhibits extreme religious addiction, low self-esteem, martyr complex, is lonely, and may sacrifice family for the sake of the ministry.²⁴
- *Outcast*: the role played by one who may in fact simply be a rebel and uses this role to gain attention (an identity issue in itself). An outcast may see the problems, may try to confront, may not play the games of the persecutor and coconspirator and is labeled as troublemaker and rejected by the organization. May sacrifice one's reputation to cry out against a toxic system and its abuse. "The toxic faith system has no place for anyone who challenges the integrity or disagrees with the methods of the leader."²⁵ The outcast will stand alone for what is right, may endure shame for speaking out, (in his mind, at least) refuse to be manipulated. When he or she finally exits the system, it might be because a place

²⁴ Ibid., 228-35.

²⁵ Ibid., 236.

to go has been found where self and reality is understood, and is able to differentiate from the system.²⁶

It may be rudimentary to picture an individual in any of those roles, but what if we were to press the question above a bit further about the source of abuse. Is it possible for the *system* itself to assume the role of persecutor? Cognizant that the *system* is an inanimate structure, it could still be a powerful motivator to continue to control future generations of followers long after the founder has passed. Friedman writes,

The nature of relationships in the present has more to do with the emotional processes that have been successively reinforced for many generations than with the logic of their contemporary connection. Institutions, for example, tend to institutionalize the pathology, or the genius, of the founding families. Whether we are considering families, hierarchies, or nations, only a certain type of leadership can alter the inevitability of this “persistence of form.”²⁷

Recall again the definition of system used in this paper: “the accepted understanding of doctrine, interpretation of accepted scriptures and the practice of such.” This includes doctrinal and theological positions, ways of “doing church,” expectations of behavior for followers or adherents; expectations for ministry participation and rules or standards for maintaining the system’s demands. The legacy or traditions of an institution should also be included in this component called “system.”

So how would an institutional system control those leaders and followers submissive to the system? How would it present as persecutor? Would it not have the same characteristics as a persecuting person with similar demands, theological constructs, standards, ways of “doing church,” and patterns of behavior? Certainly these expectations

²⁶ Ibid., 235-41.

²⁷ Friedman, 199.

are carried out by persons in generations to come, but if the fears, anxieties, insecurities and identity needs of the founder(s) mold the standards that are considered in practice to be equal to doctrine, and through fear unchangeable by current leadership, why wouldn't that system itself be a persecutor?

Answering the question of how the system might act as a persecutor, one must necessarily start by establishing the issues of the founding individuals themselves. Then by reviewing how, in the eventual absence of the founders of the case studies as mentioned here, the institutions and resulting systems they initiated can be seen to have continued to hold sway over the followers.

A short survey of the *early life* of Frank W. Sandford, the founder of Shiloh, will show the emotional anxieties leading to traits that developed later in his character and set him up as an abuser/persecutor. Then reviewing the facts of the historical account it can be seen that in his absence the system continued to control the followers.

Short Survey OF Frank W. Sandford's Life

Sandford was the tenth of twelve siblings, born in 1862. His father died when he was fourteen, which required him to help on the family farm. Two grandparents, four siblings and his father all took turns in the "sick room" of the home until each passed.²⁸ With death and poverty a constant companion, young Frank still managed to finish school, and work too.

Neither of two biographies thoroughly explored "the early family relationships which shaped his adult concept of himself."²⁹ However, William C. Hiss, in his

²⁸ Nelson, 27-28.

²⁹ Ibid., 28.

biography of Sandford suggests that Sandford may have been “one of the nineteenth century figures”³⁰ “for whom the loss of and subsequent search for the Father became the obsession which eventually propelled (him) into a hero’s and martyr’s role.”³¹ Frank’s mother was a strong and capable woman taking care of twelve children, losing four to early deaths, working hard as secretary of the missionary society.³² Perhaps she gave him his motivation and drive.

Headstrong and independent, Frank loved to put himself to the test. Through his love of baseball, he discovered that winning was an “overwhelming requirement. He felt privately accountable for both victory and loss.”³³ “He was quite aware of his importance, that if he were removed from the game, or from almost any scene in which he had a part, things would not go well.”³⁴ These facts show his quest for self-perfection and that he held himself responsible to and for success.

“Probably very early, Frank had learned to get boiling mad with effect—to use his anger to control his circumstances.”³⁵ He had two personality traits that stood in tension; “swift anger and judgment side by side with gentleness and humor.”³⁶ Later in his life, we see this trait exhibited as his anger explodes in public by throwing chairs off the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ William C. Hiss, *Shiloh; Frank W. Sandford and the Kingdom: 1893-1948; A Dissertation*, U.M.I Dissertation Info. Service, 1992.

³² Nelson, 29.

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 31.

³⁶ Ibid.

platform and slapping his wife.³⁷ “One of Sanford's greatest weaknesses as a leader was his lack of compassion. He enjoyed the simple exercise of power and authority.”³⁸ Indicating a compulsive personality, this shows Sanford’s need to be in control.³⁹

Compulsive leaders respond to their inner turmoil by so tightly binding their feelings that the opposite of turmoil results—they become highly controlled and ordered individuals.⁴⁰ “This is why it is common for such persons’ repressed anger to be expressed in sudden and violent outbursts only to be just as quickly controlled, with appropriate apologies extended.”⁴¹

There was a story where all the students organized a prank of which Frank refused to join in. He was labeled as a “self-righteous humbug, the lowest of human forms. Burning with humiliation, he saw the moment as a crossroads, proof of his willingness to be the one who was different, if that was what God required.”⁴² Here, Sanford shows his ability to be different and independent but it seemed to insulate him from the counsel or potentially corrective direction from others: i.e., disregarding horizontal relationships.

Sanford saddled himself with unrealistic expectations his first few years as a minister. He overworked himself nearly into depression.⁴³ He signed on with a local

³⁷ Enroth, 62.

³⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁹ Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, Sr. *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: The Paradox of Personal Dysfunction*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 87.

⁴⁰ Theodore Millon, *Disorders of Personality: DSM-III - Axis II*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1981), 228.

⁴¹ McIntosh and Rima, 89.

⁴² Nelson, 44.

⁴³ Ibid., 51.

youth movement to “present the Gospel to ‘every creature’ and realized after a trip to India that he had sworn his life to a job that simply could not be done.”⁴⁴ Being an overachiever is not of itself detrimental but over functioning leads to burnout.⁴⁵

As a baseball success early in life he had established his worth and self-imposed high expectations—and had achieved them, but when loftier goals were exposed as unattainable, this may have fomented the anger we later see directed at those he loved and those in his care. Recognizing this issue as his need for control it can be understood that in the ending days of Shiloh, when he was sought for manslaughter, he stayed at sea rather than face arraignment.⁴⁶

Narcissists, (self-absorbed individuals) “may have an over-inflated sense of importance as well as great ambitions and grandiose fantasies. At the heart of narcissistic leaders are self-absorption and uncertainty due to deep feelings of inferiority. In addition, they may not enjoy their success and may be dissatisfied with their lives.”⁴⁷ Certainly the term fits our case study for many reasons; one being Sandford’s continual dissatisfaction. One of his reasons for leaving on a long ocean cruise was “restless ambition.”⁴⁸ Narcissism might have been a properly applied diagnosis for Frank Sandford.

“Suffering a growing disenchantment with the daily struggles of Shiloh . . . Sandford left the compound, which would then experience poverty and persecution while their leader went on extravagant world cruises aboard his yachts, The Coronet and The

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁵ Friedman, 210-12.

⁴⁶ Lawless and Lawless, 194.

⁴⁷ McIntosh and Rima, 100-01.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 98.

Kingdom.”⁴⁹ The New York Times recalls; “While Sandford is absent from the hill top (Shiloh) on these voyages the flock at Shiloh is in charge of Elder (Charles) Holland. The same observances and the same ceremonies are continued. The flock seems as much under Sandford’s magnetism as if he were there.”⁵⁰

Lawless and Lawless write, “Not only did Sandford grow proud, but he also was angry with anyone who questioned or disagreed with him. Stormy confrontations became his way of life.”⁵¹ Later, angry that a teen had tried to run away from Shiloh, he denied medical care to the youth, called him “rebellious,” refused to pray for him and the boy died.⁵² Manipulation and control, as well as spiritual pride are strongly evident in this event.

Through a special experience in an old orchard, Sandford distilled several lines of thought that had been ruminating within. He concluded that a remnant of believers, “select” and “purified,” would show “signs and wonders.”⁵³ These called out ones would not be any specific institutional group known “or yet established, for none of these was going quite far enough in believing and obeying the Bible.”⁵⁴ In this postulation of Sandford’s, the idea of exclusivism and elitism begins to form and the seeds of a unique

⁴⁹ Enroth, 60-61.

⁵⁰ “The Amazing ‘Holy Ghosters’ and their Leader.” *New York Times*. New York, October 29, 1911. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archivefree/pdf?res=F30614FE355517738DDDA00A94D8415B818DF1D> (accessed June 5, 2011).

⁵¹ Lawless and Lawless, 187.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵³ Nelson, 57.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

movement that would become the commune of Shiloh. The need to continually re-invent or outperform oneself is typical of the personality of Mr. Frank Sandford.

Apostleship and the restoration of early church power fascinated Frank Sandford. A purifying movement, such as he envisioned, would need an apostle to facilitate its success. Realizing from 2 Corinthians that the apostles had performed the “signs, wonders and mighty deeds” in “all patience,”⁵⁵ he shrank from the idea knowing that patience was a “quality he emphatically lacked.”⁵⁶ Apparently it didn’t stop him from declaring himself prophet, prince and priest, demanding loyalty and honor as such, another clue to his eventual strong doctrine and teaching of authoritarianism and special revelation.⁵⁷

Sandford’s wife, Helen, experienced a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit causing Frank to naturally desire this experience, too. For months one winter, Frank, his wife, and several friends “rose before dawn, hitched up sleighs and drove to an abandoned church, where they lit a fire and knelt on the floor to pray. For hours, the group ‘consecrated and reconsecrated’ themselves until they ‘wearied of the exercise.’ Yet nothing happened. For Frank this was serious. Now he had been denied both the seal of apostleship and the infilling of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁸ Again, unrealized expectations in his life serve to feed the anger that is later seen in his character.

⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:12 (KJV). “Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.”

⁵⁶ Nelson, 60.

⁵⁷ Lawless and Lawless, 190-91.

⁵⁸ Nelson, 66.

Such a denial of high expectation served to build a platform for his later development of theological system in yet a different way. When listening to a speaker explain that receiving the Holy Spirit was a matter of faith regardless of the emotional trappings, Sandford accepted it. This idea of simply accepting a “truth,” which Sandford imagined in dialogue with the “Guest” (Holy Spirit), was for him an act of faith which he described as being “led, guided and controlled by Him henceforth . . .” Sandford clarified; “He (God) said I need have no responsibility whatever, but simply respond to His movings.”⁵⁹

The danger in this seemingly innocuous, simplistic position of faith is that it is a very short step from here to a subjectivist theology void of accountability. This systemic distortion shows itself later as Sandford makes demands and issues orders claiming authority from God. Unfortunately, these proclamations served to damage his followers with everything from poverty to starvation, from breaking marriage and family relationships to the death of several adherents.⁶⁰

Before Shiloh was established, Frank encountered a woman who was plagued with religious doubts. After a conversation, Frank offered to pray for her. Laying his hands on her he cast out a “clump of demons.” Sandford later interpreted this ability as a special gift, helping to form what eventually would become part of his system of theology and *modus operandi*; that of special revelation and authority. The abusive

⁵⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁰ Lawless and Lawless, 190.

element in this event developed when he used this authority to insist that anyone who disobeyed him “disobeyed God himself.”⁶¹

After Shiloh was founded, this type of behavior presented as control and manipulation. He claimed the same level of authority that Jesus Christ did, saying on at least one occasion; “God is here, and the representative of God is here that has power and authority from God to remit your sins . . . I declare that every one of your sins will be remitted today if you are baptized.”⁶²

Dr. Enroth points out that Frank seemed to think quite highly of himself, placing his own injunctions on par with scripture. “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.”⁶³ The object of Frank's authority was to break down individual will and self-identity⁶⁴ and Sandford found willing followers who became victims to an able persecutor. Enroth gives further insight:

Former members remembered subtle means for disorienting the members. For example, there was no schedule for work or prayer. At any moment during the day or night a loud alarm bell would call members to prayers or to other work. Members worked hard at keeping up the grounds and constructing new buildings. They were hungry, often overworked, and spiritually intimidated.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid., 189.

⁶² Enroth, 62.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 67.

Isolation and aloofness from others in his community after his conviction and jail time did not change or remove the demands of the persecutorial system. Even when leaving someone in charge, that leader continued the same policies for several years continuing to entrap and enslave the followers in the system Sandford initiated. After seven years in prison for manslaughter charges, he returned to Shiloh to a discouraged group.

Soon after, he released them to find work for wages outside the commune.⁶⁶ This confused the followers as they had been taught to live a life of faith—not to work for wages. “Had God changed his mind?”⁶⁷ Had not the injunction, “you cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13 NKJV) been pounded into their psyche and theology? “But of course Shiloh had always belonged to Mammon. Money had been in control all along.”⁶⁸ All their suffering, starvation and faith were weighed against reports that Frank W. Sandford never went hungry.⁶⁹ This, combined with Sandford’s penchant for luxury affirms his propensity for greed.

The followers that were left started a new school and headquarters close by. The Kingdom Press still prints sermons and writings which are used by the students in the school. “In spite of unfulfilled prophecies, these followers still believe in Frank W. Sandford. As one says, ‘Until we find some prophet who lives closer to God, we will stay loyal to this one, convinced that in the light of eternity, we shall see that Frank W.

⁶⁶ Lawless and Lawless, 196.

⁶⁷ Nelson, 413.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 413.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 336-37.

Sandford was indeed a servant of Jehovah, and that the word of God in his mouth was truth.”⁷⁰ The persecuting system still holds a grip.

In a summary of Frank W. Sandford’s early years, several events and personal emotional issues are evident which contribute to the system he created at Shiloh. Noted here are authoritarianism, lack of accountability structures, compulsivism, narcissism, manipulation, control, greed, special revelation, exclusivism, elitism and spiritual pride. Unrealized irrational expectations contributed to his anger issues.

Frank W. Sandford died in 1948 after having spent twenty-eight years away from Shiloh and out of the public eye. The announcement of Sandford’s death might have seemed to the outside world as “nothing but a poor denuded flock trying to adjust to a crushing disappointment, (which) was not the case.”⁷¹

Shirley Nelson, whose family was part of Shiloh, reminisces about the mood after Sandford passed:

They were all of one mind. Their leader might be dead, but his movement was not, and the work that lay ahead of them had nothing to do with what had *not* happened, only with what had.⁷²

From this case study several things can be noted as relevant with regard to this paper. When a leader uses his/her position of authority to advance or feed personal emotional needs at the expense of the followers that is an abuse of relationship, condemned by God. The Old Testament book of Ezekiel gives this indictment on abusive leaders:

⁷⁰ Lawless and Lawless, 196-97.

⁷¹ Frank S. Murray, *The Sublimity of Faith*, (Kingdom Press, 1982). No other information was available for this source.

⁷² Nelson, 424.

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal (Ezekiel 34:2-5).

The caring relationship a shepherd should have for his/her sheep; as a protector and provider, has been forgotten in favor of shearing the sheep, taking all they can give and then (in the Biblical reference above) literally eating them. Enroth provides a fitting description of a persecuting, abusing leader.

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 victims.⁷³

The sources cited thus far all contribute to the conclusions I will now propose. Spiritual abuse is sinful, emotionally damaging and will pervert and destroy faith. It is enslaving, breeds unhealthy co-dependent relationships, destroys family relationships, robs people of their resources, is manipulative, oppressive, demands unconditional obedience while offering conditional love and acceptance, and adds requirements to God's offer of salvation. It is toxic, separates friends, is obsessive and feeds religious

⁷³ Enroth, 30.

addictions. As noted above, I submit these traits can all be descriptive of the system of the institution, as well.

Covenant Relationship vs. Abusive Relationships

Examining the concept of covenant and relationship more closely, we will see that the principles of relationship in any social construct (or for the specific purposes of this paper, an institutional system), are to be mutually empowering and beneficial leading to healthy spiritual formation for each individual.⁷⁴ When spiritual abuse is present, subversion and destruction of these God-initiated principles will result.

In their book, *The Family*, Jack and Judith Balswick lay out the purpose of covenant and the role God takes in this testament. They state, “The central point of covenant is that it is an unconditional commitment, demonstrated supremely by God to the creation.”⁷⁵ Defining what they see as God’s role they write; “God’s actions toward Israel are characterized by compassionate loving, disciplining, guiding, pursuing, giving, nurturing, respecting, knowing, and forgiving.”⁷⁶ It is God’s intention for this covenant offer to eventuate in a mature, bi-lateral relationship that is mutually grace-full and empowering.

By its very nature, covenant is grace. From a human perspective the unconditional love of God makes no sense except as it is offered in grace. Grace is truly a

⁷⁴ Balswick and Balswick, 27-28. “Empowerment can be defined as the attempt to establish power in another person. Empowerment does not necessarily involve yielding to the wishes of another person or ceding one’s own power to someone else. Rather, empowerment is the active, intentional process of helping another person to become empowered. The person who is empowered has been equipped, strengthened, built up, matured, and has gained skill because of the encouraging support of the other . . . In a very real sense, empowerment is love in action.”

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

relational word. One is called to share in a gracious relationship with God. Grace means unmerited favor.⁷⁷

In abusive relationships, because they are of a “contractual” nature (they commit to giving only to the extent of what they get), empowerment and grace are scarce, if present at all. The Balswicks have illustrated this contrast between covenant and contract in the following model and related it specifically to families. However, the concept is the same in institutional contexts.

Types of Commitment in Family Relationships⁷⁸

	Conditional	Unconditional
Unilateral	Modern Open Arrangement	Initial Covenant
Bilateral	Contract	Mature Covenant

The objective, as laid out here, is to describe the ideal as a bilateral, unconditional relationship shown here as the *Mature Covenant*. God’s *Initial Covenant*, as offered to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 25.

Abraham and Moses, was unilateral and unconditional. God intended for their response to be reciprocal with Him, maturing the covenant. A *Contract* relationship would be an agreement between two people “with the unspoken understanding that as long as his or her needs are being met, all is well, but as soon as those needs are no longer met, the relationship will end.”⁷⁹

Herein is the key aspect of the abusive system. Both parties are in relationship to meet their individual identity needs and they believe “they have fulfilled the . . . contract when they get about as much as they give in the relationship.”⁸⁰ We see this on display in abusive environments as conditional acceptance. This is a self-focused, unilateral, conditional commitment and is shown in the Balswickian model as *Modern Open Arrangement*. A contrasting, more relationally healthy way is that outlined by Les Steele and shows the concept of interdependence:

Maturing Christians recognize the importance of community. This is to be a community of mutuality and reciprocity; as the community contributes to our growth, we contribute to its growth and the growth of its members.⁸¹

As noted above on pages 111 and 112, the list of relationship damaging abuse is extensive. Much of the abuse is expressed and employed through inappropriate use of power, both of position and authority, driven by the personal agendas of undifferentiated, needy leaders.⁸² “People using power try to decrease rather than increase the power of those they are trying to influence. They tend to use power in a way that assures the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Steele, 112.

⁸² Arterburn, 164-170.

maintenance of their own more powerful position.”⁸³ Mary Kate Morse, in her book *Making Room for Leadership*, describes one powerful, abusive way this occurs:

One of the oldest power ploys in history is equating one’s personal agenda with God’s. Who can argue with that? Often no one does. Unhealthy leaders play the “God card” to enhance their own position and their own agenda. A group accepts the “God card” because they don’t want to take responsibility for the consequences of bucking a leader.⁸⁴

I will also add that the group of followers is fearful of challenging the leader because they may be disenfranchised or rejected as outcasts. “For those under that type of manipulation and persecution, there is no way to challenge the persecutor’s position. They either agree and obey or suffer the consequences. And religious addicts are more than eager to agree and obey,” writes Arterburn.⁸⁵ Religious addicts will find it difficult at best to risk separation from their source of affirmation.

Dysfunctional and damaging use of power is contrasted with this excerpt from the Balswick’s book:

Empowerment can be defined as the attempt to establish power in another person. Empowerment does not necessarily involve yielding to the wishes of another person or ceding one's own power to someone else. Rather, empowerment is the active, intentional process of helping another person to become empowered. The person who is empowered has been equipped, strengthened, built up, matured, and has gained skill because of the encouraging support of the other.⁸⁶

An atmosphere of grace brings love, freedom and consideration for each other in a way that is empowering to the group and each individual in the group. Interdependence

⁸³ Balswick and Balswick, 27.

⁸⁴ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence*, (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008), 145.

⁸⁵ Arterburn, 164.

⁸⁶ Balswick and Balswick, 27-28.

and mutual commitment is the goal and result of this reciprocated, mature covenant of which God is author and progenitor.⁸⁷ The authors then state;

If covenant is the love commitment and grace is the underlying atmosphere of acceptance, then empowerment is the action of God in people's lives. We see it supremely in the work of Jesus Christ. The celebrated message of Jesus is that he has come to empower- 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10b).⁸⁸

In the case study above, I noted Frank W. Sandford's personal history included elements of the need for power. It is my conclusion that Sandford had leadership gifts that could have been used to empower others and extend God's kingdom on the earth. Sadly, he seemed to choose to use his personal power to broaden influence and authority over his followers for the purpose of manipulating them to his own end, to fulfill his personal dreams and needs. The system he developed was toxic, causing much pain and abuse to his followers, much like the one Arterburn describes:

In the toxic system, the toxic minister will set himself or herself up as having a special destiny or mission that can be performed by no one else. This special anointing or calling many times is nothing more than the pathological need to be valued or esteemed. It also takes some of the power that should be attributed to God and gives it to the toxic minister.⁸⁹

The perfect example for proper use of power and freeing others to become a healthy self is that of Jesus Christ. Balswick & Balswick write, "Jesus redefined power by his teaching and by his relating to others as a servant. Jesus rejected the use of power to control others and instead affirmed the use of power to serve others, to lift up the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁹ Arterburn, 165.

fallen, to forgive the guilty, to encourage responsibility and maturity in the weak, and to enable the unable. His empowerment was directed to those who occupied a marginal status. In a very real sense, empowerment is love in action.”⁹⁰

An institutional system is an inanimate structure. However, those who lead from its delegated authority and affirm its abusive policies by perpetrating them in their leadership mandates and community culture are not only complicit and responsible but answerable to a God who rejects everything that an abusive culture embodies. Covenant relationship that God offers allows a maturing self-discovery in which the individual is built up and encouraged to develop and use the gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the good of all of the body of Christ.

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Clearly, Sandford in his day and others today who persecute by abuse, along with the systems that enable and authorize the abuse do not build up the body of Christ in a grace-full committed manner, resulting in self-differentiation and interdependence. In Chapter 6 I will offer a possible remedy to those who find themselves in such situations—both leaders and followers.

⁹⁰ Balswick and Balswick, 28.

CHAPTER 6

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter will summarize the previous five chapters and construct specific propositions and principles for confronting and/or redeeming abusive environments. Some of these principles are drawn from other sources and are useful for this paper. Others are synthesized from several sources and compiled along with my own thoughts and rationale. Together, it is my hope that Christian institutions and their operating systems will above all apply the message of Jesus in a healthy, relational manner. I believe his ministry modeled well-differentiated servant leadership and inspired and empowered those who choose to follow him.

I have defined spiritual abuse and looked at how it presents in institutional environments. I parsed the different types and traits of abuse and explained why these are wrong and sinful. There was the foray in Chapter 3 establishing that spiritual abuse existed in Scripture, both Old Testament and New Testament. I examined a recent case study where characteristics of spiritual abuse were present and the devastating effects it had on the followers of that system.

Chapter 2 built a theology of relationship from Scripture with which we may establish what I think God's plan and purpose is for mature relationship with Him, ourselves, others and creation. Lastly, I introduced the concept of covenant, again from scripture, giving an outline for initiating and executing my theology of relationship.

The characteristics of spiritual abuse in the life of Frank Sandford identified in Chapter 5 are moderately overt and perhaps more easily recognizable when pointed out.

Though some followers of his may never have seen, recognized or acknowledged these traits because of their own addictions, standing at this place in history, three thousand miles from the epicenter at Shiloh we can use the facts available to observe and evaluate that system. An objective likely more difficult is honestly evaluating the systems with which we may be associated today.

As stated at the beginning, this paper is not specifically about cults with obvious or quantifiable relational dysfunction. Rather I hope to heighten an awareness of spiritual abuse that is less obvious. This is about evangelical religious institutions that cultivate subtle, controlling co-dependence in place of empowering the adherent toward healthy interdependence in a maturing covenant relationship. It is also about coming to recognize our own identity issues and susceptibility to the seductive line and lure of those who need to be needed.

Created for Community¹

Individuals cannot live in isolation, cut off from each other, and be fulfilled human beings. “At the heart of the Christian message” states Grenz, “is the good news that the Triune God desires to bring us into fellowship with himself, with each other, and with all creation. I believe that this biblical vision of community—this core set of beliefs—can provide the foundation for truly Christian living, as we are drawn by the Holy Spirit to live on the basis of this vision.”²

¹ Grenz, Title page.

² Ibid., 12.

Community, especially Christian community, is how we grow as persons, how we communicate and interact with others. It is where we learn to love, laugh, and cry, mature, discover, empower others and realize our purpose and the meaning of life. “Being created in the image of . . . God implies that we are created to be in interdependent relationships. By gathering followers around him, Jesus implicitly affirmed that participating in community plays a central role in maturing.”³

Community life is challenging, messy, is full of joy and tears, but when authentically inter-dependent, will prove to be an organic system displaying characteristics of relationship within the Trinity. “We use the biblical analogy in terms of how the members of the Godhead act in unity through distinctiveness through the themes of covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy . . . However, we acknowledge that, unlike God, we are not perfect, and therefore in applying these principles, we will have to struggle with our human imperfections.”⁴ This is why we grapple with issues like identity and differentiation, the negative effects of which result in abusive behavior.

If an individual were awakened to realize their own community of faith appeared to be one in which abusive behavior was active, what should, or could this one do? What might be the steps to healthy relationships both with leadership and followers? What if the awakened one were part of the leadership and recognized that they had been seduced and manipulated by the system itself to both be controlled and in turn control others? How might the system be changed and what elements should the process contain? In short; can it, and how might it be fixed?

³ Steele, 112-13.

⁴ Ibid.

As stated in Chapter 1, I want to offer abusive religious institutions a way back from unhealthy, addictive religious dependence to a community of maturing inter-dependence that responds in kind to God's covenant offer of unconditional love and commitment. A way this might happen could be organized around an adaptation of Balswick and Balswick's analogy of covenant themes listed above.⁵ Their book is primarily applied to the family structure but it is easily adapted, and I believe applicable, to institutions and the individuals making up the institution.

Principles of Relationship

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*⁶

Covenant

*The central point of covenant is that it is an unconditional commitment, demonstrated supremely by God to the creation.*⁷

Balswick and Balswick provide the path for which we reach mature and healthy inter-dependence, "The logical beginning point of any family (and I will expand to include any larger community of relationships) relationship is a covenant commitment, which has unconditional love at its core. Out of the security provided by this covenant love, grace develops. In this atmosphere of grace, family members have the freedom to empower one another. Empowerment leads to the possibility of intimacy among family

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 13:14. The Apostle Paul's final words to the Corinthian church include this stunning inside snapshot of the relationship of the Trinity that is both horizontal in nature (that is between and among each entity) and vertical (between us and them). We are invited to participate in this relationship by Paul through his blessing in this verse.

⁷ Balswick and Balswick, 22.

members. Intimacy then leads back to a deeper level of covenant commitment (parenthetical remarks added).”⁸ These themes, or principles, as stated here are covenant, grace, empowerment and intimacy. They design a structure for formulating my proposal for a healthy, inter-dependent community.

In Chapter 5, I explored the idea of covenant and God’s generous, unconditional commitment to Abraham and Noah. I noted with the Balswicks help that “the establishment of the covenant was based entirely on God's action” and initiation.⁹ The recipients of this promise did not initiate nor could they cancel this covenant because it was not a contract: it was a promise given irrespective of their acceptance. However, if they chose to respond to this offer, the blessings would be activated.

What is vital to the discussion at this point is describing the unconditional nature of this covenant. We must not suppose that the covenant itself is strictly unconditional because that would connote a theology of unconditional election, or as some say, predestination. The covenant I believe offered to Moses and Noah is an unconditional commitment with unconditional love from God, the Father. The unconditional love expressed through this covenant does not require, yet yearns and calls for a loving response. We do not initiate this covenant love but we can and are expected to reciprocate with love for Him, an unconditionally loving God. The power of choice is ours to accept this offer and receive the benefits of the promise.

This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

⁸ Ibid., 21. As I stated, we can adapt these principles developed by the Balswicks to any institutional system besides the family and have a blueprint for confronting and preventing spiritual abuse.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us (1 John 4:10-13).

“Here is the promise of the mutual indwelling of God's unconditional love in us as we dwell in God's love through the sacrifice of Christ and the presence of the Spirit. And as we have received that unconditional love represented in the unity of the Godhead, we offer that unconditional love to others.”¹⁰

If institutional systems and leaders could model this ideal of unconditional commitment, the need to control and manipulate would be non-existent because the relationship is not based on contract (I can commit as long as I get what I want), but on covenant (I will commit to you whether you reciprocate or not). However, this can only be accomplished from a position of self-differentiation—one who is secure in their own identity.

Balswick and Balswick provide a framework for laying out these elements or themes. They can be used to elucidate how abuse violates covenant and how enacting these relational themes can prevent abuse. They state; “Our starting point in developing a theology of family relationships is to recognize that, by way of analogy, relationships between family members are to reflect the relationality within the Holy Trinity.”¹¹ These aspects of unity and uniqueness, distinction and interdependence demonstrate the characteristic of differentiation and model for us how an institutional system, leaders and

¹⁰ Balswick and Balswick, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

followers may co-exist in relationship that is a bi-lateral, unconditional, maturing covenant that includes and fosters grace, empowerment and intimacy in community.

When an institutional system is discovered to perpetrate abuse in manners described above, or with characteristics of abuse as outlined in Chapter 4 and 5, unconditional love is not present or active and therefore covenant is not the praxis. Leaders or systems that abuse require dependence, obedience, financial support or a host of other material or emotional demands to feed the insatiable emotional appetites of the leader or system.

Not free from responsibility are followers who not only allow them-selves to be abused, but feed their religious addictions and emotional needs by enabling these leaders and systems with their own sycophant-acies.¹² Contrariwise, "it is covenant love that provides the basis for (community) . . . (community) is where you are loved unconditionally, and where you can count on that love even when you least deserve it."¹³

Grace

It is especially difficult to distinguish between covenant and grace. By its very nature, covenant is grace. From a human perspective the unconditional love of God makes no sense except as it is offered in grace. Grace is truly a relational word. One is called to share in a gracious relationship with God. Grace means unmerited favor.¹⁴

When covenant is the central operating principle, the system and its leaders administrate with grace, confident of their own identity, secure in who they are in Christ.

¹² My own word picture of an addicted, co-dependent religious follower. .

¹³ Ray Anderson, and Dennis B. Guernsey. *On Being Family*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1985), 40. I have taken the liberty to replace the word "family" in the original quote with community, making room for a larger context which is appropriate for this discussion.

¹⁴ Balswick and Balswick, 26.

A description of this ideal is written in a letter to a young church in ancient times; earlier in the letter affirming them and later encouraging them on to relationships of grace.

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had (Philippians 2: 1-5).

Note the attitude of compassion, tenderness, humility, selfless-ness and taking an interest in others. This would hardly evoke an image of Frank W. Sandford, the case study in this paper. Balancing one's own interests with those of others and the injunction to agree wholeheartedly with each other "with one mind and purpose" shows how covenant can mature to a reciprocal interdependence, the definition of a bi-lateral, unconditional covenant. Adding the component of grace to this allows the participants to be tender, understanding and compassionate instead of demanding and manipulative.

"... Relationships, as designed by God, are meant to be lived out in an atmosphere of grace, not law . . . life based on contract leads to an atmosphere of law and (is) a discredit to Christianity. On the contrary . . . life based on covenant leads to an atmosphere of grace and forgiveness."¹⁵ To put it more succinctly, the Balswicks say, "On both the individual and the family level, law leads to legalism, whereas grace offers freedom. In an atmosphere of grace, family members learn to act responsibly out of love

¹⁵ Balswick and Balswick, 26.

and consideration for one another.”¹⁶ Again, this principle is directly useful in the religious institutional setting to prevent the environment of spiritual abuse.

In an atmosphere of grace, faith becomes healthy, too. Faith is not held captive to the system’s interpretation of scripture alone or the doctrine as authorized and enforced by the system’s traditions. Nor is faith a monolithic, static statement composed by founders long gone. But faith is a dynamic, relevant relationship based on truth that is open to fresh understanding as new insights from scripture are blended with timeless, elemental verity. “Healthy faith welcomes critical evaluation and tough questions as opportunities to learn and relate. Those in a healthy system refrain from defining the truth for others and welcome the chance to share what they believe the truth for them may be. Those who question their faith are not considered disobedient. They are merely encouraged as they explore their doubts.”¹⁷ This is truly a grace-full faith system.

In a covenantal system of grace, legalism is not allowed to develop. The Balswicks clarify the traits of a legalistic, contractual environment;

Graceless religion tells us that, to be acceptable, we must live up to the customs and shun the taboos of its tradition. It shames us when we do what it forbids and do not what it requires. Our religion shaped self easily becomes a self of hypocrisy and appearances, we feel compelled to make up for what we lack inside by obeying all its prescriptions on the outside. Graceless religion creates the illusion that if we only follow the letter of the rules, we will be acceptable, and that if we fail, we will be rejected and despised.¹⁸

Practically speaking, in any institution, to maintain order and efficiency, rules, structure and responsibility must necessarily be maintained. However, in this covenant community

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Arterburn, 308.

¹⁸ Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don’t Deserve*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994), 39.

we are describing, “. . . grace means that order and regularity are present so that family members' needs are met and their lives enhanced, not as a means of repressing their needs and limiting their lives,” as we saw enacted in Sandford’s Shiloh.¹⁹

Empowerment

*If covenant is the love commitment and grace is the underlying atmosphere of acceptance, then empowerment is the action of God in people's lives.*²⁰

One characteristic of spiritually abusive institutional systems is that power is often centralized in an individual or small, select group of people. Since absolute or unrestricted power often corrupts persons, abuse of that power may result and everyone loses.²¹ Because of religious addiction or lack of self-identity, individuals often acquiesce to manipulation from leaders who use power inappropriately. They allow this in order to gain recognition, status or self-worth from those leaders who are abusive. Power is given to leaders with the expectation that it will be used to lift and empower those without it. A perfect example of the correct use of power is described by Balswick and Balswick.

The power given by Jesus is power of a personal order-power that is mediated to the powerless. To us in our sinful and powerless condition God gives the ability to become children of God. This is the supreme example of human empowerment. Jesus redefined power by his teaching and by his relating to others as a servant. Jesus rejected the use of power to control others and instead affirmed the use of power to serve others, to lift up the fallen, to forgive the guilty, to encourage responsibility and maturity in the weak, and to enable the unable. His empowerment was directed to those who occupied a marginal status.²²

¹⁹ Balswick and Balswick, 27.

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

²¹ Arterburn, 167.

²² Balswick and Balswick, 28.

Power is a gift given to us by God to build His kingdom. It must, however be used in a way that allows all members of a community to exercise their gifts and grow toward maturity and inter-dependence. In her writing, MaryKate Morse shows that power is not only necessary but an expected component of the Christian life.

Power is a neutral, natural and necessary component of influencing and leadership. Christians are designed to exercise power the way Jesus did. We are designed—as individuals and as a body—to influence others and ourselves toward a holy understanding of God’s redemptive love. Our use of social power, whether we feel powerful or not, can trigger transformation toward holy wholeness. This use of power corresponds to Jesus’ style of leadership.²³

This process of influencing others is often described as empowering. Webster defines empower as: “to give power or authority to.”²⁴ I would suggest that it could also promote self-actualization, influence and inspiration when power is shared in the context of a healthy system. One of the primary means that this process is accomplished is through the gifts, or graces that we have been given by Jesus. As Gerald May writes in *Addiction and Grace*, “God’s grace is always present intimately within us, inviting and empowering us toward more full, more free exercise of will and responsibility.”²⁵

St. Paul writes to the fledgling church in the city of Ephesus with the admonition to empower the community, leaders and followers, with the free flow and exercise of spiritual gifts.

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will

²³ Morse, 58.

²⁴ *Webster’s*, 468.

²⁵ Gerald G. May, *Addiction & Grace*. 1st ed., (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991), 155.

continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Through these gifts of leadership roles, leaders have the responsibility to equip, encourage, inspire, speak truth and otherwise build up Christ's body (community) in the earth.

Empowerment is the active, intentional process of helping another person to become empowered. The person who is empowered has been equipped, strengthened, built up, matured, and has gained skill because of the encouraging support of the other. In a nutshell, empowerment is the process of helping another person recognize his or her potential.²⁶

Growth and maturity occurs when people are released and empowered to use the gifts (charismata) they have been given in the body of Christ. In addition, when grace is allowed to operate fully, followers are released to be and express their true identities—even when struggling—because they are not threatened or fearful of rejection, as Arterburn points out:

As faith grows, respect for others grows with it. Too often religious addicts attack others with their own insecurities. When security depends on God, there is no longer a need to feel threatened. People can be appreciated for their strengths and their weaknesses. Their differing view can be seen as a result of different people at different places in the progression of a growing faith. Those who are of different denominations or even from different factions within a denomination are no longer perceived as the enemy when a healthy faith exists.²⁷

²⁶ Balswick and Balswick, 28.

²⁷ Arterburn, 297.

A final word about power: As individuals created by God, our greatest power is the power of choice. We see this exemplified by our first parents in the ancient story of the Garden of Eden. They were given the power of choice and from where we stand today would rightly conclude they chose poorly. It has often been the case that this very power of choice has been used by individuals and groups to their detriment.

Choices that humans have made to partake of ill-advised fruit, like addictive substances, behaviors and other attachments have served to bind them so that the power of choice is no longer theirs. They have been snared and cannot break free. Spiritual abuse, through its “tractor beam”²⁸ of control and co-dependency can be broken by a fresh release of God’s power bringing joy and peace, which is never found in a spiritually abusive system. We can say with St. Paul,

I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

Intimacy

*Instead of being obedient to another’s rules, the person of healthy faith strives to develop intimacy.*²⁹

The theme of intimacy epitomizes the entire underlying premise of this paper: that is the concept of relationship. “As we examine the nature of the pre-fall human family (which is the only social institution that belongs to the order of creation), we find an

²⁸ Michael Okuda, Denise Okuda, and Debbie Mirek. *The Star Trek Encyclopedia*. Original, (New York: Pocket Books/Star Trek, 1999).

²⁹ Arterburn, 305.

emphasis on intimacy-on knowing and being known.”³⁰ According to Genesis, the first parents, Adam and Eve, must have enjoyed a relationship of intimacy directly with the Creator God. Intimacy in this context refers to communication and relationship that is maturing toward deep openness and honesty with each other and includes unconditional commitment and love. Forgiveness is another attribute included in genuine intimacy.³¹

Arterburn then states how this loving, intimate relationship with God perpetuates and feeds the same kind of relationships with others, becoming what He intended all along; a bi-lateral covenant.

In most toxic faith systems of religious addiction, the focus is on what people do and how well they conform to the rules of the group. In healthy faith, the focus shifts from rules to relationships. Frequently, the religious addict abandons relationships, believing that God is all that matters. God has shown us that the more we love Him, the more we will seek out others and manifest His love through relationships with others. Sharing the faith and loving another in faith build the relationship with God.³²

Intimacy is cultivated in an atmosphere of grace and empowerment. Listening to others in the community, receiving what they have to offer, using the spiritual and practical gifts and skills to build God’s kingdom, giving, learning to “understand, accept differences, value, and confirm uniqueness.”³³ Toxic faith looks for differences and a reason to be separate. One is considered “different” when they stray from the expectations demanded by rule-minding.

³⁰ Balswick and Balswick, 31.

³¹ *Webster’s*, Intimacy: A close, familiar and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person.

³² Arterburn, 305.

³³ Balswick and Balswick, 31.

Legalism and judging are traits of abuse which exhibit conditional acceptance. “Healthy believers don’t judge what people say. In judging, people are placed in a system of conditional acceptance. Healthy believers look for the similarities of experience to establish a relationship. Each person is seen as a fellow struggler in different stages of the struggle. Healthy believers are so busy developing a personal relationship with God they have no time to judge where others are in developing their own relationship.”³⁴

Dysfunctional communities who cultivate rules to live by in place of relationships of intimacy and openness seem to be safe because they are predictable. Simply follow the rules and one is righteous and most of all, accepted. But that is highly deceptive! When intimacy grows in relationships, grace allows people the freedom to admit weaknesses because they can trust others and feel safe.

Dr. Frank Green comments on the issue of intimacy and identity:

Our identities are always determined by the feedback we get from one another. The integration of the identity we get from God has to be reinforced in our relationships we get from one another or we will never really be able to live into it. But at best the process will be incomplete. This is a huge part of the reason we are so easily seduced by dysfunctional and abusive religious communities.³⁵

Intimacy is threatening to undifferentiated, religiously addicted individuals because transparency is a quality of maturing intimacy and those with self-identity issues do not welcome openness. Healthy faith looks for ways to build intimacy with fellow community members as well as those who have yet to start relationship with God and His community.

³⁴ Arterburn, 309.

³⁵ Green, From an email communication.

Bringing Both Ends Together

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all.³⁶

In this paper it has been my impetus and goal to expose the contrast between healthy, interdependent communities and those institutional systems, which are agents of spiritual abuse. I would challenge the Christian community, especially the traditional evangelical institutions that serve thousands their spiritual diet each week, to take a long, honest look at the institutional system with which they are associated. Does it empower the followers toward inter-dependent, maturing self-differentiation? Or, because of its demands does the system perpetrate abusive behaviors like control, manipulation, greed, legalism, elitism, perfectionism, spiritual pride and others listed in Chapter 4.

Individuals in communities of faith—religious institutions—that may recognize patterns of abuse, or may admit a religious addiction, must review their personal propensity to become dependent on abusive relationships to feed their identity needs. A system which perpetrates unhealthy, binding demands on an individual is not a system that allows God's relationship covenant free exercise.

Chapter 1 outlined the topic and proposed that spiritual abuse could be perpetrated by the inanimate system of an institution as well as the leaders of that institution. I also hypothesized that the identity issues of the founder/s of an organization could initiate

³⁶ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, (B&R Samizdat Express, 2008), Kindle Locations 12850-12855.

patterns of systemic abuse which could then enslave generations following to perpetuate the abuse. In actuality, they become and continue to be, controlled and manipulated by dead people's theologies designed by their pathologies.

Chapter 2 established a foundation for relational theology showing how God desires and initiates relationship with His creation by means of covenant. We have been created in the image of God and with a natural need for relationship with Him.

“Ultimately, the ‘image of God’ is connected with God’s design for humankind. It speaks of God’s goal for us. It is a way of viewing God’s intention, or the role God desires that we fulfill in creation. In short, being the ‘image of God’ describes our identity as God’s special creatures. We are the image of God in that we have received, are now fulfilling, and one day will fully live according to the special calling God has given us. And this calling (or design) is that we mirror for the sake of creation the nature of the Creator.”³⁷

Being rightly related to God, ourselves, others and creation is imperative for thwarting the tantalizing call to find temporary satiation of our needs in the deception of self-indulgence and religious addictions. This chapter finishes by revealing the starting component of covenant; God’s initial unilateral, unconditional love.

I returned to the scriptures in Chapter 3 to review how some spiritual systems in ancient times were rife with abusive activity and behavior. I noted that individual priests and whole religious systems sponsored patterns of spiritual abuse and perpetrated them upon the people. All of the characteristics of abuse listed in Chapter 4 in the recent case study there were present in the biblical examples. It seems logical to conclude from the

³⁷ Grenz, 75.

evidence that both the propensity to abuse and be abused by others and by institutions is recurrent throughout human history.

I have established above and in Chapter 5 how God desires and offers a covenant of unconditional love and commitment containing attributes of empowerment, grace and intimacy. Proving and showing His great love for us, especially at the crucifixion of Jesus, we owe a reciprocal response to this offer of covenant. “God’s loving and enabling action precedes and makes possible free creaturely response. God initiates loving relationships, empowers creatures to love, provides possibilities for love, and calls creatures to choose those possibilities. Creatures who respond appropriately to God’s preceding grace promote overall well-being.”³⁸

Dear brothers and sisters, I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Corinthians 13:11).

³⁸ Oord, 129.

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