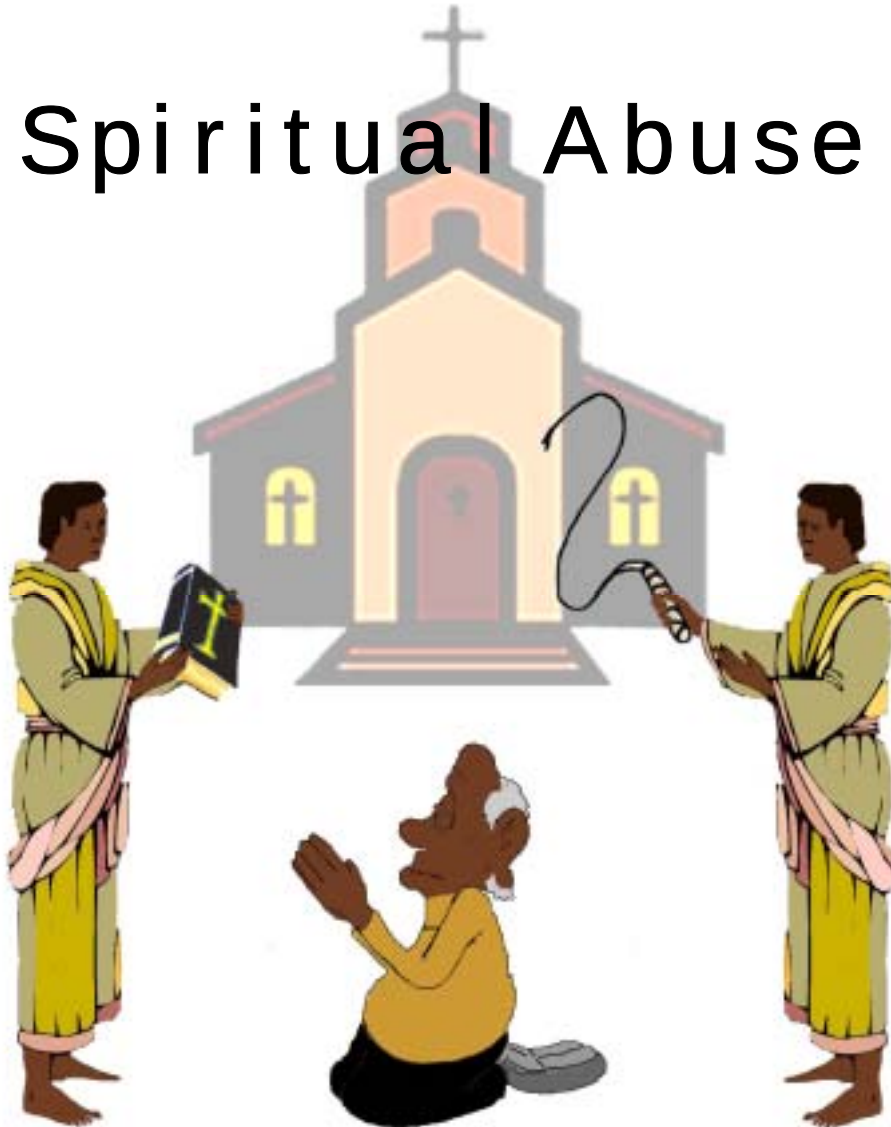




Spiritual Abuse



Major Scott Nicloy



This issue represents a departure from the normal scope of subjects treated in Micronesian Counselor. As broad as the range of topics has been, we have never published anything about religion even though we are a church-based organization. It seems only fair to critique religious practices, as we have economic, social and even political in the past. This article is not intended as an attack on any denomination, but on practices that can be found in any religious group.

While pastoring a congregation in an Alaskan native village I unexpectedly received a phone call from the district office of the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian pastor and his wife in the village had lost their daughter in a plane crash high up in the Alaskan mountains. In fact, the site of the plane crash was in such an inaccessible region in the mountain range that there was no hope of ever getting the daughter's body off the mountainside.

The only connection they saw between the pastor, his ministry, and the Bible was the belief that the Bible-quoting pastor was a direct lineal descendant of Balaam's donkey.

Upon receiving the news I immediately ran over to the parsonage to meet with Pastor Greg and his wife who were, naturally, in a state of shock and deep mourning. A few minutes after I got to the parsonage, the other village pastor showed up at the Presbyterian parsonage throwing out Christian cliches and Scripture texts. I did not have to read Pastor Greg's mind to know what he was thinking. His thoughts about this Bible quoting pastor were written all over his pain filled face. "Get this rude, insensitive boor out of my house," he was thinking.

No doubt the saved and sanctified pastor left the Presbyterian parsonage believing that he had ministered to a distraught couple



by the mighty moving of the Holy Spirit in a time of great distress. But the distraught couple had another opinion regarding this pastor's Spirit-filled "ministry." The only connection they saw between the pastor, his ministry, and the Bible was the belief that the Bible-quoting pastor was a direct lineal descendant of Balaam's donkey.

Do the abusers intend to inflict hurt? In most cases, probably not. They usually are unaware of what they are doing to people in the name of God.

The next year there was another phone call. This time a son had died of a ruptured aneurysm. Again, I ran over to the Presbyterian parsonage. Again, the same saved, sanctified, Spirit-filled, Bible-quoting pastor showed up at the parsonage throwing out Scripture texts, cliches and mantras. This time the Bible-quoting pastor was also trying to get everyone in the community to come over to his church that night for a real revival meeting to witness the power of God, as if Pastor Greg and his wife could have seriously considered attending a revival meeting that evening after losing a second child in the course of a year. Again, I looked upon the pain filled face of the Presbyterian minister who was in deep mourning for the second time. There was that same expression on his face that was there the year before: "Get this rude, insensitive boor out of my house." Pastor Greg asked me to conduct his son's funeral service on one condition—that the third pastor of the village would not be allowed to have any part in the funeral service.

What is Spiritual Abuse

The hurt and harm of spiritual abuse is rarely inflicted upon people with the intention to wound anyone. Most spiritual abuse is inflicted by Christians who are very sincere, who believe they are obeying the Bible in sharing Christ with others, and who often believe that they are being led by the Holy Spirit. Ronald Enroth writes in his



book *Churches that Abuse*:

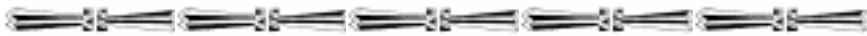
Do the abusers intend to inflict hurt? In most cases, probably not. They usually are unaware of what they are doing to people in the name of God. They may, in fact, be convinced that their behavior is what the Lord has mandated. What others interpret as control they may view as caring for the flock. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.

Spiritual abuse has been defined as “a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who we are. It leaves us spiritually discouraged and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God.” Another definition of 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.”

There is no point in claiming that Jesus is the answer, when you have not heard the question.

Reasons Christians Commit Spiritual Abuse

For the most part, spiritual abuse is committed by those who sincerely love Jesus, who believe the Bible to be the Word of God and who want to win lost souls for Jesus. Hence, spiritual abuse can often be found, as Ronald Enroth points out, in churches that are doctrinally sound, conservatively Christian, thoroughly Biblical, and zealously maintaining the fundamentals of the Faith. There are several reasons why Christian people of good will and a sincere desire to share Jesus can inflict serious harm and injury upon others in the Name of Jesus.



Lack of Empathy. Empathy is the ability to perceive, to understand, to sense, to feel what another person is experiencing. Unfortunately, in witnessing for Jesus many evangelicals talk to people, not with people. It is impossible to truly talk with anyone about Jesus, or anything else for that matter, without *knowing* the other person. Authentic ministry is based upon knowing a person. There is no point in claiming that Jesus is the answer, when you have not heard the question. A physician who prescribes medicine without knowing the patient is likely to injure the patient. In like manner, evangelicals who try to minister without knowing the sheep in an empathic manner will most likely injure it.

The fact that other people may see their words as being less than holy, their motives as being less than pure, and their actions as being hurtful and injurious never occurs to them.

Narcissism. The reason that many Christians have a problem with developing empathy skills is because they have a problem with narcissism. Narcissists are not necessarily bad people. Narcissism simply means that, for whatever reason, the person's only point of reference in life is himself. For the narcissist only his thoughts, his feelings, his perceptions are fully real. For him the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of others are less real. In the religious context, narcissists simply assume that what they think God thinks, and what they believe is Bible-based. They take it for granted that any idea that jumps into their heads is from the Holy Spirit and that they are only following the promptings of the Holy Spirit whenever they decide to do anything. The fact that other people may see their words as being less than holy, their motives as being less than pure, and their actions as being hurtful and injurious never occurs to them. When you believe that you are right and righteous, then all that you say and do is right and righteous. Any thought to the contrary never enters the picture.

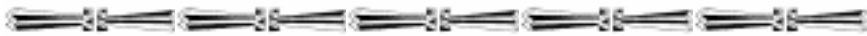
Dichotomous Thinking. Abusive Christians in abusive church fellowships generally exhibit dichotomous (either-or) thinking patterns. With them everything is black/white, this/that, either/or, us/them,



good/bad, etc. There are never any weeds among the wheat. When something is good it is all good; when something is bad it is all bad. Of course, dichotomous thinking Christians put themselves in the all-good camp, while others who may not agree with them on some minute detail of theology or Bible interpretation are in the all-bad camp.

With abusive Christians there are no ambiguities, no unanswered questions, no gray areas, no doubts. Everything is sorted, classified, and properly labeled. They are right, others are wrong; they are spiritual, others are not; they truly believe the Scriptures, others do not; they are thoroughly committed to Jesus, others are not; etc., etc. To disagree with them is to disagree with God. They are, of course, the final judge and jury of what the Bible says, regardless of subject matter. They have the exact interpretation of any given particular Scripture text; any other nuance or shade of meaning is considered heresy. Dichotomous thinking Christians believe they have everything all figured out (when they do not) and that they have everything properly classified and labeled, which is often not the case. They have the definitive Bible-based answer for every question, even when they have not understood the question. Dichotomous thinking Christians have a one-size-fits-all hammer for every problem, even when what is needed for a particular problem is a screwdriver.

Dissociation. In the lives of abusive Christians the ideal often exceeds the real. Don Quixote in his rusty armor riding headlong on his broken-down horse runs over and injures many people as he hits a windmill in his quest to glorify God, to right wrong, to rid the world of Satan's influence, and to defend the honor of his lady (who could not care less that he is alive). The members of one church congregation were exasperated at the fastidious righteousness of one of their church members. Consequently, they met with the pastor to discuss what could be done with this raging righteous, condemning, judging, censoring, damning holier-than-thou church member. After much debate that went nowhere, a deacon finally suggested the obvious solution: hire the guy a prostitute. As the deacon explained, there was nothing wrong with the Bible-quoting saint that a good roll in a hay-



stack with a good prostitute would not cure. The pastor pointed out, however, that church funds did not allow for that kind of therapeutic treatment, as accurate as the diagnosis might have been.

One of the reasons why we have a major problem with abuse in Christian churches is because we have Christian people who are dissociated. They are mystified. They do not know what they feel, what motivates them, who they are or what they are about. They are divorced from their sexuality, divorced from their feelings, divorced from their real needs, divorced from their authentic selves. They are strangers unto themselves. Jesus said from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Disassociated Christians are people who do not know what they are doing. Abraham Maslow wrote, "The great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of knowing of oneself—of one's emotions, impulses, memories, capacities, potentialities, of one's destiny." Disassociated Christians are people who do not know themselves and are afraid to know themselves.

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Zealotry. Obviously, we want people to be passionate about their Faith in Jesus. Unfortunately, in evangelism zealotry often sharpens the claws but dulls the senses. In other words, zealots may have a burning desire to win lost souls for Jesus but they do not have much sense. Consequently, our daily prayer needs to be, "Lord, this day deliver us from your saints."

Zealots often commit much harm in the Name of Jesus because they have tunnel vision. Their zealotry blinds them from being able to see the big picture. They are myopic. They can only see what is close to them and even that is blurry. They do not mean to hurt people but when people go through life with blinders on they tend to run over others.



I knew a Baptist minister who carried around with him several notebooks containing all the names of people that he had won to the Lord. I went around with him one day on his soul- winning crusade and figured that most his converts accepted Jesus just to get rid of him. Most of his “converts” considered him more of an annoying bombastic pest than an ambassador of salvation. Then there was one zealous Baptist minister who used to sneak into hospitals at night to pass out gospels tracts such as “Are You Ready to Meet Your God?” or “Hell is Hot, Hot, Hot!” The hospitals in that city had to cancel numerous operations because of that guy.

The Power in Being "Holy"

Abusive people in church fellowships have stumbled upon the fact that “holiness”—at least holiness in a legalistic sense—is a way to have power and control over a congregation. For example, I was raised in a church where a woman exercised a great amount of power and control in the fellowship due to her “Holy Ghost convictions.” When a new church building was being planned, Sister Orpha had this Holy Ghost conviction about having no food in the church. According to Sister Orpha's Holy Ghost conviction, a mouse hiding in the janitor's closet could not even have a crumb of cheese, as that was dishonoring God's Holy Spirit. One midweek afternoon the pale white walls of the church flashed a brilliant red when Sister Orpha caught a Sister Alice serving Kool-Aid and cookies to a group of elementary aged children in the basement of the church building.

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Sister Alice had deliberately and willfully challenged one of Sister's Orpha's Holy Ghost convictions. The challenge to Sister Orpha's Holy Ghost conviction was reported to the pastor, the church board,



and eventually to the denominational headquarters. The bishops of the Free Methodist Church had to take the time to send out a ruling stating that it was okay to eat in the church building, providing there was

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a door separating the sanctuary from the dining room. Sister Orpha, however, insisted that the Holy Ghost took precedence over the ruling of the Bishops. So, the whole point of contacting denominational headquarters about the matter was meaningless. Sister Orpha defended her stand, while Sister Alice and her husband eventually joined another church fellowship. In the end, the important thing for Sister Orpha was that she had taken her stand for holiness and righteousness. She had defended the standards of holiness and was very proud of it.

When the new church building was being built, there were no plans to have a kitchen in the building because it violated one of Sister Orpha's Holy Ghost convictions. Of course, Sister Orpha had so many Holy Ghost convictions that it was pretty hard for the church fellowship to get through a week without a couple of those Holy Ghost convictions being violated. Anyway, one Saturday morning while the church was being built, my dad snuck down to the church building site and secretly installed the plumbing for a kitchen, hiding it underneath the flooring. Years later, when the church board finally decided that they had enough of Sister Orpha's Holy Ghost convictions, they voted to install a kitchen. When someone opposed the idea because no plumbing had been installed in the foundation of the church during construction, my dad tore up a piece of the floor without a word. There was the plumbing needed for a new kitchen.

Dad and Sister Orpha had their problems. He was teaching the teenage Sunday School class one Sunday morning when Sister Orpha



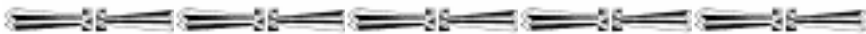
came into the classroom and commenced a long scolding lecture. Sister Orpha found out that one of the young ladies in the class had been hired as a waitress at a local restaurant where alcohol was served in a bar, which was off to the side of the restaurant. Upon being informed of this travesty against holiness, Sister Orpha barged into the teens' class and started to lecture the teenagers on the sins and evils of the world. Although Sister Orpha never named names, it was obvious to all present that the young lady in question was being singled out and attacked. When Sister Orpha finally came up for air in her long scolding lecture on the sin of being a waitress in a restaurant where alcohol was sold, my dad piped up and said, "Nehemiah was a bartender." Sister Orpha was not amused. (Actually, Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king of Persia, which for all practical purposes made him a bartender.)

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Substance Abuse, Addiction, and Abusive Righteousness

It should not be surprising that much of the spiritual abuse that we see in our churches often involves people with substance abuse in their past. In reality, the raging drunk that becomes a raging saint is still a raging addict. Naturally, the fact that a saved and sanctified saint of God has not touched a drop of alcohol for five, ten, fifteen or however many years really means nothing in terms of recovery and healing. Exchanging a substance abuse addiction for a religious addiction is not recovery. Often when listening to people testifying to how they have been delivered from addiction "by the mighty moving of God's Holy Spirit," I have had to bite my tongue hard to keep from saying, "You are still an addict."

Abstinence does not mean that a person is recovered. Abstinence



does not mean that the person is healed. Abstinence does not mean that the person is delivered from alcoholism. Abstinence may only mean that the person is not drinking alcohol. In every other way he may just as much be an alcoholic as the guy who is passed out on skid row.

Many times when an alcoholic has "found Jesus" family members deliberately try to get them drinking again, since handling a raging drunk is much easier than handling a raging saint.

We have saints running around testifying to a complete and total deliverance from alcoholism when they are still alcoholics. They think like alcoholics. They act like alcoholics. In fact, some of these dry drunk saints do more harm while sober than they did while being wet drunk sinners. At least, when they were wet drunk sinners everyone knew to stay out of their way. Many times when an alcoholic has "found Jesus" family members deliberately try to get them drinking again, since handling a raging drunk is much easier than handling a raging saint. When it comes to dry drunk saints, cognitively their thinking patterns are dichotomous, emotionally they are disassociated, physically they are in a state of protracted withdrawal, and spiritually they are quixotic.

Obviously, a person who is obsessing on Jesus is still obsessing. The person who is compulsively quoting Scripture is still compulsive. The person who is mood altering by hypnotically singing worship choruses over and over again is still mood altering. The quixotic person fighting the forces of hell is still quixotic. The person with a narcissistic personality disorder is still a narcissist. Changing one's addiction garb is not recovery.

Because of this, a sober non-drinking alcoholic should not be involved in Christian pastoral counseling ministry for about five years after the last drink. The originators of the Twelve Step program saw



that a major component of the treatment for alcoholism was the need to share one's spiritual awakening and message of healing with other

Abusive churches...are first and foremost characterized by strong, control- oriented leadership. These leaders use guilt, fear, and intimidation to manipulate members and keep them in line.

people. Sharing one's recovery process with others, however, is not the same as counseling others. Sharing one's life experience with another is based upon the principle of equality—one beggar telling another where to find bread. On the other hand, providing pastoral counsel implies a position of power, influence, and authority in reference to the one being counseled. Alcoholics tend to be co-dependent, as the development of their relational skills was interrupted when they started drinking. Therefore, co-dependency issues often impede their ability to acquire the empathic skills so vital in providing pastoral counseling. People lacking empathic skills may be sincere, but they may be sincerely abusive.

Signs of an Abusive Church

In his book *Churches that Abuse*, evangelical sociologist Ronald M. Enroth points out that:

Abusive churches...are first and foremost characterized by strong, control- oriented leadership. These leaders use guilt, fear, and intimidation to manipulate members and keep them in line. Followers are led to think that there is no other church quite like theirs and that God has singled them out for special purposes. Other more traditional evangelical churches are put down. Subjective experience is emphasized and dissent is discouraged. Many areas of members'



lives are subject to scrutiny. Rules and legalism abound. For those who leave, the road back to normalcy is difficult.

Enroth also writes, “All that is needed for abuse is a pastor accountable to no one and therefore beyond confrontation.” The problem with most cases of spiritual abuse in Christian churches is that so many abusive Christians have wrapped themselves in a robe of holiness and a cloak of righteousness. Therefore, they believe themselves to be beyond confrontation. What they think, God thinks. To disagree with them is to disagree with God. All they are doing, after all, is living by God’s Holy Word.

The pursuit of righteousness ennobles a person; the belief that one is righteous depraves him. Thus, how do we protect the people of God from the tyranny of the righteous and the despotism of the saints? How do we protect people in the church from the toxic influences of those who are intoxicated with righteousness? Let us look at some signs of an abusive church.

**Abusive groups will not mix
with the impure or with the
unholy.**

1) Abusive church leaders in abusive churches are into power and control. Enroth writes, “The spiritual autocrat, the religious dictator, attempts to compel subordination; the true Christian leader can legitimately only elicit fellowship.” Within a church context a legitimate leader promotes cooperation among church members, not dominate-submissive relationships. Legitimate church leaders have leadership rooted in trust. Enroth points out that legitimate Christian leaders lead with an *entrusted authority*.

2) Abusive church leaders in abusive churches are into dichotomous thinking. With them everything is black-white, either-or, this-that, us-



them. Dichotomous thinking is generally expressed in overt or implied terms such as “we the true followers of Jesus” versus those others “who are not as spiritual as we are.” Of course, dichotomous abusive church leaders are the judge and jury on who is or who is not spiritual, who is or who is not fully walking with Jesus.

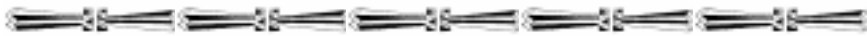
3) Abusive church leaders in abusive churches are into legalistic perfectionism and perfectionist legalism. Again, legalisms are not about holiness; they are about power and control. Naturally, activities like fasting, keeping away from worldly amusements, attending numerous

...in abusive churches absolute truth claims are numerous, excessive and are often about insignificant issues that really do not matter.

prayer meetings may in fact be spiritual and wholesome activities. However, when these activities are extreme, rigid, or excessive then we are talking about addiction, not spirituality.

4) Abusive church leaders in abusive churches have a tendency towards isolationism. Some of this isolationism may be more social than physical. Abusive groups will not mix with the impure or with the unholy. With them light has no fellowship with darkness, and they are very clear who is in the light and who is in the dark. Thus, they tend to isolate themselves from the world and even from other Christian groups.

5) Abusive church leaders in abusive churches are obsessed with discipline and even excommunication. In some abusive Christian circles, to question the church leader(s) means questioning God Himself. Abusive Christians are so certain that they are right and that they have the mind of Christ that they can be extremely punitive if they are not obeyed.



6) *Abusive church leaders in abusive churches discourage church members' having contacts with people outside the fellowship, including family members.* Obviously, church leaders that tell young people “Do not listen to your parents, listen only to us” should be suspected.

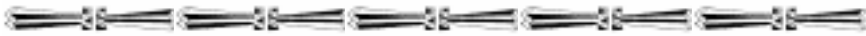
7) *Abusive church leaders in abusive churches install surveillance systems (read "pastoral care") within their fellowships.* Of course, for abusive church leaders a surveillance system is all about a spiritual concern regarding people's souls and how to best pastorally and brotherly look after the sheep of the flock. However, these surveillance systems go way beyond pastoral care. They are about power and control.

8) *Abusive church leaders in abusive churches promote a Pied Piper mentality, especially among young people.* For example, a youth leader who becomes a Pied Piper and has all the youth of the congregation running after him is a bad scene. A legitimate Christian youth leader should want the youngsters of the church fellowship to be forming positive and healthy relationships with a variety of people in the fellowship, not just with himself. There is no room for a personality cult in a legitimate non-abusing Christian fellowship.

Five Warning Signs

Baptist minister Charles Kimbal, in his book *When Religion Becomes Evil*, gives us five warning signs of abusive fellowships:

Absolute Truth Claims. There is naturally a sense where each church group has absolute truth claims. Obviously, “Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life” is a fundamental truth claim for any Christian fellowship. However, in abusive churches absolute truth claims are numerous, excessive and are often about insignificant issues that really do not matter. In abusive churches absolute truth claims often reflect the personal views and opinions of a church leader that are expressed as

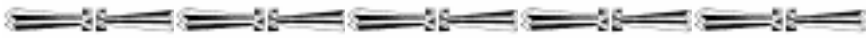


divine dicta.

Blind Obedience. Abusive church leaders expect to be obeyed because they have the mind of Christ and they know the Word of God. To disobey them is to disobey God.

Establishing the "Ideal" Time. Eschatology, the study of Last Things, is often a subject of major interest in church fellowships that tend to be abusive. In the evangelical community eschatological time line scenarios have changed drastically over the years. In the 19th century most evangelicals were post-millennialists, whereas in the 20th century most evangelicals shifted to the position of premillennial dispensationalism. The point here is not to debate the merits of any millennial position. The problem with abusive Christians is that they are often obsessed regarding eschatological time lines and with end times preaching. This obsession with end times scenarios feed the fears and uncertainties of people in abusive Christian fellowships. Of course, a person who can keep people in a state of anxiety and fear is a person who can control and dominate others.

The End Justifies Any Means. Many abusive churches are unethical and dishonest in their evangelistic tactics. They will sponsor and advertise a “community” event—an Easter egg hunt for children or a community barbecue, for instance—that is nothing more than a cover for a hard sell Gospel campaign. There is nothing wrong with an event being a hard sell Gospel campaign, but false and deceptive advertising is morally and ethically wrong. Sometimes, an abusive church fellowship may cover up the criminal misconduct of its leaders on the grounds that if the reputation of the church is harmed, then the church's ability to win souls for Jesus is compromised. A perfect example that winning lost souls for Jesus' sake is more important than ethical and moral considerations was Jimmy Swaggart's refusal to accept church discipline because the Holy Spirit told him that thou-



sands, even millions, of souls would end up in hell if he was not out there preaching.

Declaring Holy War. Abusive Christians often crusade for holiness and righteousness. Aldous Huxley noted that “Those who crusade not for God in themselves, but against the evil in others, never succeed in making the world better... To be more against the devil than for God is exceedingly dangerous.” Of course, those who crusade for righteousness in others claim that they “hate the sin but love the sinner.” One can only imagine that whenever one of these raging righteous guys talk about “hating the sin but loving the sinner” the angels up in heaven gag and vomit all over the celestial streets of gold.

Conclusion

In my own particular faith tradition, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is a key figure. Wesley spoke of sin in terms of overreach. We sin when we overreach. The sin is not in wanting to live a holy life. The sin is putting down other people in the pursuit of one’s personal holiness. The sin is not in wanting to win the lost for Jesus. The sin is sacrificing any consideration of respect, limits, boundaries, and propriety in winning the lost for Jesus. The aims of those who abuse others in the name of Jesus may in fact be good aims. However, in striving to fulfill those aims, abusive Christians overreach and disregard other important and significant matters pertaining to the gospel.

Psycho-biologist Konrad Lorenz, author of *On Aggression*, wrote, “Men may enjoy the feeling of absolute righteousness even while they commit atrocities.” In like manner, the famed psychoanalyst Eric Fromm wrote, “We know that a person, even if he is subjectively sincere, may frequently be driven unconsciously by a motive that is different from the one he believes himself to be driven by.” In one sense, it needs to be recognized that there are many in Christian



churches and ministries who may in fact be subjectively sincere, even while they are objectively abusive. We need not question, except in severe cases, the sincerity of those who abuse others in the name of Jesus. Most of the time abusive people will change when lovingly confronted with the effects of their abuse.

Here, of course, lies the responsibility of the Christian community. We need to lovingly confront those who may in fact be sincere in their Christian faith, and yet who are, nonetheless, abusive. We must not call Christian love what is really in essence abuse. At times, in doing good, Christians do great harm. Christians need to recognize the harm we often inflict upon others, even when we are seeking to do the greatest good of all, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The great challenge for Christians is to observe that ancient dictum: "In doing good, do no harm."

* * *

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