

“Bully Pulpit”
Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church
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Sometimes you do things not because you want to but because they need to be done.

Bully leaders embody the essence of spiritual abuse—They are domineering, authoritarian, and heavy-handed in the way they rule those under their care. They often presume from the outset that the purity of their pastor’s doctrine must somehow guarantee the purity of their pastor’s character. Both mistakes—abdication of authority and abuse of authority—can be a problem. In sum, the problem is not just the abuse. It’s also the larger context that allows it to continue unchallenged. This book isn’t about proving a particular case. It is about documenting a trend in the church and calling the church to take steps to stop that trend.

Of all bad men religious bad men are the worst. —C. S. LEWIS

Bullies in the church often look (at least at first) like the hero. They look like the good guy until we discover they’re the bad guy. As Chuck DeGroat observed, narcissistic leaders “are obsessively preoccupied with their reputation, influence, success, rightness, progressiveness, relevance, platform, affirmation, and power.” These obsessions are the perfect recipe for a bully pastor who will do almost anything to retain their empire and squash anyone who threatens it. Martin Bucer noted, “It is better to take those who may be lacking in eloquence and learning, but are genuinely concerned with the things of Christ.”

When this God-given ratio is reversed and churches prefer giftedness over character, churches inevitably begin to overlook a pastor’s character flaws because he’s so successful the church decided it preferred a “gifted” pastor over a godly one.

If a pastor can articulate his theology, cite the Puritans, defend the truth against the liberals, and keep the church doctrinally “pure,” then character can take a back seat. Does that church ever let a pastor’s doctrinal eloquence function as a shield against character deficiencies?

Some people will never entertain the possibility of spiritual abuse against such a theologically sound pastor. In their minds it just isn’t possible. Most elder boards or leadership boards are not composed of the type of leaders who will stand up to narcissistic bully pastors. Most elder boards quickly succumb to the pressures of an aggressive senior pastor. Their abusive behavior is allowed to exist unchecked precisely because they are in situations where accountability is less than adequate. We live in the definitive anti-authority age.

Some churches have abandoned their leadership responsibilities, shifting to a more “organic” form of ministry where there’s little accountability or oversight of the flock. Maybe we have hired men more eager to call down thunder than to don the servant’s towel and wash people’s feet.

We can convince ourselves that loving the church means keeping our mouths shut about its weaknesses. Why? John Chrysostom said it best: “Christians damage Christ’s cause more than his enemies and foes.” James Bannerman’s classic, *The Church of Christ*, originally published in 1868, uses terms like spiritual tyranny and spiritual oppression to refer to a pastor’s heavy-handed leadership—

Spiritual abuse is when a spiritual leader—such as a pastor, elder, or head of a Christian organization—wields his position of spiritual authority in such a way that he manipulates, domineers, bullies, and intimidates those under him as a means of maintaining his own power and control, even if he is convinced he is seeking biblical and kingdom-related goals.

SPIRITUAL ABUSE INVOLVES SOMEONE IN A POSITION OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

Johnson and VanVonderen argue, “Spiritual abuse can occur when a leader uses his or her spiritual position to control or dominate another person.”

SPIRITUAL ABUSE INVOLVES SINFUL METHODS OF CONTROLLING AND DOMINEERING OTHERS

If many people, across many years, express significant fear of a pastor, then something is very, very wrong. The pastor who is unable to take criticism is often highly critical of everyone else.

Another sign of overly defensive pastors is that they continually remind people of their authority.

“power-posturing.”

A perpetual drum beat on the theme of the pastor’s authority should be a warning sign. Inordinate desire to prove one’s authority can be a pathway to abuse.

The only way abusive pastors can survive as long as they do is if they are able to manipulate the system in such a way that they are protected and their victims are silenced.

SPIRITUAL ABUSERS SEEM TO BE BUILDING GOD’S KINGDOM (BUT ARE REALLY BUILDING THEIR OWN)

“It’s possible to become so determined to defend a spiritual place of authority, a doctrine or a way of doing things, that you wound and abuse anyone who questions, or disagrees, or doesn’t ‘behave’ spiritually the way you want them to.” True repentance is rare among spiritual abusers.

So far I’ve laid out three features of spiritual abuse: (1) it involves people in ecclesiastical or spiritual authority, (2) it involves sinful means of controlling and dominating others, and (3) it usually involves a leader who seems to be doing great work for God’s kingdom (when he’s really building his own).

Sometimes the kind of leader God’s people want may be the opposite of what they need.

God will hold accountable not only the bad shepherds but also those who protect and enable them.

Those who prop up bad leaders and turn a blind eye to their abusive behavior will someday have to give an account of their own actions. Rather than something like senior pastor, I suggest something like servant minister. In short, a life of servant ministry is not a life of gain. It is a life of death. It is not a life of power and position but one of humility and sacrifice. Indeed, the people most eager to sign up for a life of power and prestige are precisely the ones in danger of becoming abusive pastors.

The minister of Christ's church is not to be a person who accomplishes goals by manipulation or intimidation or with a demanding spirit. In other words, a spiritually abusive person is disqualified from ministry. Jesus is not harsh and abusive but patient and kind. He is not pugnacious and demanding but long-suffering and humble. But even if it's just in their own minds, they genuinely see themselves as above others, which is why they are unwilling to receive criticism or correction.

If a person is not gentle and lowly, but instead a bully and arrogant, then he should not be a pastor. If they have a model of leadership, it's Jesus flipping over tables rather than holding the little children. The hallmark of a bad shepherd is that they are in it for themselves.

In case after case of spiritual abuse, there is a pattern of self-protection and self-gain by the abusive pastor. But for most bully pastors, the "gain" they seek is control and power. Sitting at the top of one's own little empire is intoxicating— Leading by example is the antithesis of leading by force.

Kindness is one of the most overlooked virtues of the Christian minister. People don't expect kindness from their leaders. We might expect them to be confident, focused, resilient, and decisive. And we might not even be surprised if they have a bit of an ego. But we do not expect them to be kind. How very sad. Gentleness is the core trait of Jesus. And it is the opposite of being an abusive bully.

This prohibition against being quarrelsome does not rule out disagreement, debate, or even vigorous theological exchanges. But it does rule out language or behavior that is belittling, harsh, or derogatory. We see several important contrasts laid out regarding what a Christian leader ought to be:

- Not lording it over but being a servant (Mark 10:43–44)
- Not a bully but gentle (1 Tim. 3:3; cf. Titus 1:7)
- Not for shameful gain but serving eagerly (1 Peter 5:2) • Not domineering but setting an example (1 Peter 5:3) • Not quarrelsome but kind (2 Tim. 2:24)

Many churches have been looking for the wrong kind of leaders.

"We [tend to] focus on the bad apple and what is wrong with it, rather than looking at the barrel in which it is kept."

People don't see the overall pattern because the victims of abuse don't speak out for fear of reprisal. They just leave, and the abusive pastor remains. The abusive pastor's pattern of broken relationships is often not revealed to the larger leadership body and certainly not to the entire church. Abusive pastors often have unresolved conflict.

They are typically estranged from many of the people they used to work with. Once a pattern appears, the leaders of the church need to do the math. Rather than taking the concerns seriously and investigating them carefully, leadership dismisses them as impossible or so unlikely as to not merit real consideration.

The doctrine of total depravity is forgotten when it comes to the pastor but remembered when it comes to the victims. We can imagine the dilemma playing out in their minds: Is it more likely that this respected pastor has been mistreating, bullying, and domineering his flock, or that people are oversensitive and get their feathers ruffled by a strong leader? Victims should not be asked to meet with an abusive pastor unless he has been held accountable. Victims should not meet with an abusive pastor unless he is genuinely repentant.

It's not enough that the abusive pastor merely claims to be repentant. He must demonstrate repentance to a governing body that is able to evaluate it properly.

Third, victims should not meet with an abusive pastor until they are emotionally and spiritually ready. What all abusive leaders want: peace without repentance and accountability. On the contrary, Saruman does something else abusive leaders do: He portrays himself as the real victim. He flips the script, making himself out to be the grieved party:

When an elder board or Christian organization is faced with accusations that their pastor or leader is abusive, we need to realize they may already have the following assumptions:

- (1) This is an isolated incident (what dead bodies?)
- (2) This pastor seems like an honest, good person whom we know and love (there are no monsters)
- (3) Everyone's an awful sinner and blame must exist on all sides (everyone's a monster); and
- (4) Accountability isn't needed because conflicts can be solved if the two parties just meet together (just meet with the monster).

Abusive leaders employ aggressive and well-orchestrated tactics to keep from being discovered. Abusive pastors try to defend themselves by "flipping the script." Unfortunately, these tactics work.

Here are the most common defensive tactics of abusive leaders.

BUILD A COALITION OF DEFENDERS

Defending is heroic. Accusing is risky. Spiritual abuse is allowed to continue because willing supporters protect and enable that pastor. Before long, the conversation has ceased to be about the crime and is now about the procedure. And that is exactly what the defendant wants. We should be concerned if procedural issues become so central that the pastoral abuse itself is forgotten. Failing to follow Matthew 18 does not give someone a “get out of jail free card.”

If a pastor is accused of abusive behavior, be wary if procedural issues become the biggest concern of all those involved. Slander is not merely saying something negative about another person. Rather, it is saying something negative while knowing it is false (or at least having no basis to think it is true).

Telling the truth is not slander. To speak up about a pastor’s abusive behavior—in appropriate ways—is not slander. We have little reason to think false accusations are a statistically significant problem. We shouldn’t assume an accuser is lying.

Abusive pastors want to put their (carefully edited) résumé on display. They convince people that they, not the victims, are the trustworthy ones. Ministry accomplishments and character references are not determining factors in whether a pastor is abusive.

It would not at all be surprising that such an individual might have a plentiful supply of character references. But this does not mean he is not abusive. Sympathy for the family should not lessen the need to hold the abusive pastor accountable.

Members of the church are often afraid to speak out because they know what happens to those who do. In sum, spiritual abuse is prone to create deep and serious mental scars that in turn can produce long-term physiological consequences. Since people often build their Christian identities around the ministries they serve, that identity can quickly change if those ministries are stripped away.

PREVENTION: KEEPING ABUSIVE LEADERS FROM GAINING A POSITION OF POWER

Here are a few points to consider for pastoral search committees.

CHARACTER OVER COMPETENCY.

They can show that they are committed to a leader who is not a bully but gentle (1 Tim. 3:3; cf. Titus 1:7); not out for shameful gain but eagerly serving (1 Peter 5:2); not domineering but setting an example (1 Peter 5:3); and not quarrelsome but kind (2 Tim. 2:24). The church needs to be clear that giftedness is not the only—or main—thing they are looking for.

If the candidate casts himself as the hero in every story of conflict and everyone else is to blame because they wouldn’t submit to his authority, those are red flags.

TEAMWORK OVER HIERARCHY.

A pastor who emphasizes team building and cooperation rather than one who executes his ministry in a top-down, hierarchical fashion. They want a pastor who leads by consensus and by example, not by command or by coercion

ACCOUNTABILITY OVER SECRECY.

ACCOUNTABILITY: OVERSEEING CHURCH LEADERS ONCE THEY'RE IN A POSITION OF POWER

LIMITING POWER.

Giving a senior pastor the sole authority to hire and fire staff is a dangerous level of power.

REAL FEEDBACK.

INDEPENDENT LEADERSHIP.

Churches need to make sure that some of the leaders surrounding the senior pastor are genuinely independent of him.

Women's voices can prevent the church leadership from becoming overly insular and ingrown.

GENUINE TRANSPARENCY.

"Silence becomes the fortress wall of protection shielding the pastor's power position from scrutiny or challenge."

PROTECTION: CARING FOR THOSE WHO BRAVELY CALL OUT ABUSE

ABUSE TRAINING.

AN ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE.

A POSTURE OF OPENNESS.

THIRD-PARTY INVESTIGATION.

PROCEDURAL-LEGAL GUIDANCE FOR THE VICTIMS.

The bully pastor gets all the support, and the victims get little.

VICTIM-SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION.

COUNSELING AND SPIRITUAL CARE.

Sadly, most churches spend more time caring for the abusive pastor than for the victims.

BEWARE MY-CHURCH-IS-THE-GREATEST SYNDROME

Genuinely humble assessments of one's own ministry are rare.

Pastors who believe their ministry is an indispensable, irreplaceable beacon on a hill also tend to be defensive if Someone threatens to derail it or slow it down.

NO, THE SLIGHTEST DISAGREEMENT OR COMPLAINT WON'T SINK YOUR CHURCH

There is one worry that seems to haunt certain pastors: that someone out there will speak negatively of them, which will in turn lead to division and sink the entire ministry. It may not be criticism from the congregation that sinks the church, but rather the overly defensive and heavy-handed tactics used to rebut the criticism.

YOU AND THE ELDERS NEED MORE HELP THAN YOU THINK

We are the boss; you are the servant. We are the rulers; you are the ruled. We tell you what to do; you don't presume to tell us what to do.

IF IT'S NEVER GOOD ENOUGH, THE PROBLEM MAY BE YOU

Your it's-never-good-enough approach, left unchecked, could be a pathway to becoming a bully pastor.

MOST PEOPLE NEED A PAT ON THE BACK, NOT A KICK IN THE PANTS

Anyone who makes correction and discipline the main thing is on the pathway to being an abusive pastor. Many abusive leaders are like Eustace. They think they are pretty nice people and that everyone else is the problem. If you are in leadership, ask the Lord to give you the humility to admit you may not see yourself as you really are.