

# **When the Church Hurts: Spiritual Abuse and Religious Co-Dependency**

***Healing from Toxic Faith Communities***

## **Chapter 1: When the Church Becomes a Wound Instead of a Refuge**

### **Theme: The shock of spiritual betrayal**

**Key Verse:** *"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."* — Psalm 147:3 (NASB)

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There are wounds that bleed invisibly. Injuries that leave no visible scars, yet throb with an ache that reaches into the deepest chambers of the soul. Among the most devastating of these is the wound inflicted not by the world, but by the very place meant to shelter us from it—the church.

Perhaps you know this pain. You came seeking sanctuary and found judgment. You reached for grace and received condemnation. You trusted spiritual leaders who betrayed that trust. You witnessed the ugliness of human sin wearing the mask of holiness. And in that moment, something sacred shattered.

When the church wounds us, it is not merely an interpersonal conflict or a disappointing experience. It is a betrayal that cuts to the core of our faith because it intertwines with our very image of God.

### **The Divine Design: What the Church Was Meant to Be**

Before we can understand the depth of church hurt, we must first grasp the beauty of what God intended. The church was never meant to be a monument to human effort or a stage for religious performance. It was designed as a living, breathing organism—the Body of Christ—where broken people would find healing in community with one another and with their Savior.

Luke paints a breathtaking portrait of this design in the early church:

*"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in*

*common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." — Acts 2:42–47 (NASB)*

This is the church as God dreamed it—a place of devotion, authentic fellowship, shared life, generosity, joy, and praise. A community where needs were met, where gladness and sincerity marked every interaction, where the presence of God was so tangible that people were drawn to Him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who understood both the beauty and the brokenness of Christian community, wrote: "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others." In God's design, the church exists not for its own preservation or prominence, but as an instrument of healing and hope in a wounded world.

But what happens when sin distorts this divine design?

### **When Sin Distorts the Sacred**

Sin does not merely damage the church; it perverts its very purpose. The place meant for healing becomes a source of harm. The community designed for authenticity breeds hypocrisy. The sanctuary intended for the weary becomes unsafe for the vulnerable.

Sin in the church takes many forms: spiritual abuse by leaders who wield authority as a weapon, legalism that suffocates grace, gossip disguised as prayer concerns, judgment masquerading as discernment, exclusion in the name of holiness, and the protection of institutional reputation at the expense of wounded souls.

When these things occur, they do not merely represent personal failures—they represent a cosmic tragedy. They are the Enemy's vicious mockery of God's redemptive plan. As C.S. Lewis wisely observed, "Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst." Why? Because they wound in the name of the One who came to heal.

## **The Deeper Cut: Why Spiritual Wounds Hurt Most**

Not all wounds are equal. Physical injuries heal. Time softens emotional bruises. But spiritual wounds—wounds inflicted in the context of faith—cut with a unique and terrible depth.

This is because our relationship with God is foundational to our entire existence. When that relationship is damaged by those who claim to represent Him, the injury is not merely horizontal (person to person) but vertical (affecting our view of God Himself). The wound doesn't just hurt; it distorts our vision of the Divine.

**"When those who claim to speak for God wound us, the wound goes to the soul."**— Dr. Diane Langberg

Dr. Langberg, a psychologist who has spent decades working with trauma survivors, understands what many do not: church hurt is not merely about hurt feelings or interpersonal conflict. It is about the soul's deepest questions: Can God be trusted? Is He good? Does He see? Does He care? If His people can hurt me like this, what does that say about Him?

A woman gossips about you in a Bible study, and suddenly prayer feels hollow. A pastor misuses his authority, and Scripture becomes a source of anxiety rather than comfort. Church leaders cover up abuse, and your faith in any spiritual authority crumbles. You're told your suffering is the result of hidden sin, and shame wraps around your heart like chains.

These wounds are compounded by their context. You were hurt *in His name*. Betrayed *in His house*. Wounded *by His people*. The pain is not just personal—it feels theological. And that makes it exponentially more difficult to bear.

## **Jesus and the Spiritually Oppressed**

If you have been wounded by the church, you need to know something crucial: Jesus sees you, and His heart breaks with yours.

Matthew records a moment that reveals the heart of Christ toward those crushed by religious systems:

*"Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd."* — Matthew 9:36 (NASB)

The Greek word translated "compassion" here is *splagchnizomai*—a visceral term that means to be moved in one's innermost being, to feel something in the depths of one's gut. This was not polite sympathy. This was deep, aching compassion.

And notice who evoked this response: people who were "distressed and dispirited." The Greek words paint a picture of people who were harassed, helpless, thrown down—like sheep that had been torn and scattered by predators. These were people wounded by the very religious system that was supposed to care for them.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus reserved His harshest words not for sinners, but for religious leaders who placed burdens on people's backs while refusing to lift a finger to help (Matthew 23:4). He condemned those who devoured widows' houses and made long prayers for appearance (Mark 12:40). He overturned tables in the temple because God's house of prayer had become a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13).

Jesus was—and is—furious at spiritual abuse. He is tender toward the spiritually wounded. And He stands with you in your pain.

A.W. Tozer wrote: "God never hurries. There are no deadlines against which He must work. Only to know this is to quiet our spirits and relax our nerves." If religious people have rushed you, pressured you, manipulated you in the name of God, know this: that was not Him. God is not in the business of harassing His children.

## **The Path Forward Begins Here**

You may have opened this book carrying a terrible burden: the belief that God is the author of your pain. That He stood by while you were wounded in His name. That perhaps you deserved it. That maybe you're too damaged, too bitter, too far gone to ever trust again.

Let this truth sink deep into the wounded places of your soul:

**God is not the author of your pain. He is the healer of it.**

He did not inspire the gossip that tore apart your reputation. He did not ordain the spiritual abuse that left you feeling powerless. He did not design the legalism that crushed you under impossible standards. He did not applaud the hypocrisy that made you question everything you believed.

What happened to you grieves Him. And He is committed to your healing.

*"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."* — Psalm 147:3  
(NASB)

This is not a nice sentiment. This is a promise from the God who keeps His word. He specializes in broken hearts. He binds up wounds that no one else can even see. The Hebrew word for "binds up" is *chabash*—it means to wrap firmly, to bandage with care, to tend with the skill of a physician who will not leave a wound to fester.

Your wound may be invisible to others, but it is not invisible to Him. He sees every tear you've cried—those that fell publicly and those you hid in the dark. He knows the depth of your disappointment, the weight of your disillusionment, the ache of your betrayal.

And He has not abandoned you to it.

## **Reflection**

As you continue through this book, you will be invited to process your pain honestly, to grieve what was lost, to recalibrate your understanding of God's character, and to discover what healthy faith looks like on the other side of betrayal.

This journey will not be easy. Healing never is. But it is possible. You can trust again—differently, more wisely, with better boundaries—but you can trust. You can return to community—carefully, selectively, with discernment—but

you can return. You can worship again—authentically, freely, without the weight of performance—but you can worship.

The God who created you is the God who will restore you. The hands that formed you in your mother's womb are the hands that will bind up every wound inflicted in His name.

Henri Nouwen, a priest who understood suffering, wrote: "In the midst of the pain of being rejected, we may discover something else...we may discover that while we have been abandoned by the world, we have not been abandoned by God."

You have not been abandoned.

Your healing begins with this truth: The church may have wounded you, but God has not. People may have failed you in His name, but He has not failed you. And the One who heals the brokenhearted is bending close, ready to bind up your wounds.

Let Him.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, I come to You with wounds I can barely speak of. I have been hurt in Your name, and I confess that sometimes I've blamed You for it. Help me to separate the sin of people from Your character. Show me who You really are—not through the lens of my pain, but through the truth of Your Word. I'm broken, I'm struggling to trust, and I desperately need Your healing. Be near to me now. Begin the work only You can do. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## **Chapter 2: What Is Spiritual Abuse? Naming What Was Never Meant to Be**

### **Theme: Defining the problem to dismantle confusion**

**Key Verse:** "*Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!*" declares the Lord." — Jeremiah 23:1 (NASB)

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One of the most insidious aspects of spiritual abuse is that it often leaves victims confused about what happened to them. They know something was wrong. They felt violated, controlled, diminished. Yet when they try to name it, the words won't come—or worse, they're told they're being "divisive," "rebellious," or "unteachable."

This confusion is not accidental. It is part of the abuse itself.

Spiritual abuse thrives in the shadows of ambiguity, hiding behind religious language and the appearance of godliness. It masquerades as spiritual concern while exercising ungodly control. It quotes Scripture while violating its spirit. It invokes God's name while contradicting His character.

Before healing can begin, we must bring this hidden evil into the light. We must name it clearly, define it accurately, and recognize it for what it is: a gross distortion of God's design for spiritual leadership and a direct assault on the dignity of those made in His image.

If you have been spiritually abused, naming what happened to you is not gossip. It is not unforgiveness. It is not dishonoring authority. It is truth-telling. And truth-telling is the first step toward freedom.

### **Defining Spiritual Abuse: What It Is and How It Operates**

Spiritual abuse occurs when a person in spiritual authority uses that position to control, coerce, manipulate, or harm others, often in the name of God or for supposedly spiritual purposes.

Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, researchers who have extensively studied spiritual abuse, define it as "a form of emotional and psychological

abuse characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it."

Let's break down the key components:

### **1. Coercion: Forced Compliance Through Fear**

Coercion in spiritual contexts means pressuring people to comply with demands by instilling fear—fear of divine judgment, fear of losing their salvation, fear of being "outside God's will," or fear of community rejection.

This might sound like:

- "If you leave this church, you're leaving God's covering and opening yourself to spiritual attack."
- "Questioning the pastor is like questioning God Himself."
- "If you don't give sacrificially, you're robbing God and can't expect His blessing."
- "Your refusal to submit shows you have a rebellious spirit."

True spiritual authority invites, teaches, and persuades—but never coerces. God Himself, who holds all power, gives us genuine choice. As Joshua declared to Israel: "*Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve*" (Joshua 24:15, NASB). Any leader who removes your ability to choose freely is operating outside of God's pattern.

### **2. Guilt: The Weapon of False Responsibility**

Abusive spiritual systems manufacture guilt to maintain control. They make you responsible for things that are not your responsibility while those in power evade accountability for things that are theirs.

You're made to feel guilty for:

- Having boundaries ("That's not very Christ-like")
- Questioning decisions ("Where is your trust?")

- Protecting yourself or your family ("You're putting yourself above the Kingdom")
- Expressing hurt ("You're being divisive")
- Needing rest ("The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few")

Meanwhile, leaders who misuse funds, abuse power, or harm the vulnerable excuse their behavior or shift blame to victims.

The Apostle Paul addressed this dynamic directly: *"Each one will bear his own load"* (Galatians 6:5, NASB). Spiritual abusers reverse this principle—they place their load on your shoulders while refusing to carry their own.

### **3. Manipulation: Truth Twisted for Control**

Manipulation is perhaps the most difficult element to identify because it often comes wrapped in biblical language and spiritual-sounding reasoning. It uses Scripture as a weapon rather than as bread for the hungry.

Examples include:

- **Scripture-twisting:** Taking verses out of context to support ungodly demands ("Obey your leaders and submit to them"—Hebrews 13:17—becomes a blank check for authoritarian control)
- **Gaslighting:** Denying your reality ("That didn't happen," "You're too sensitive," "You're misremembering")
- **Spiritual one-upmanship:** Claiming special revelation or authority that cannot be questioned
- **Love-bombing followed by withdrawal:** Showering you with attention and affirmation, then removing it to control behavior
- **Triangulation:** Using other people to relay messages, spread information, or apply pressure

**"Abuse of power in the name of God is the most dangerous abuse of all."** — Ruth Haley Barton

Why is it the most dangerous? Because it doesn't just harm the body or psyche—it distorts a person's understanding of God Himself. When abuse is committed in God's name, victims often cannot separate the abuser's behavior from God's character. The cross gets confused with the crown. Gentleness gets mistaken for weakness. And Jesus' invitation to rest becomes just another obligation.

#### **4. Misuse of Authority: Power Without Accountability**

God establishes authority structures for order, protection, and flourishing. But earthly authority was never meant to be absolute—only God's authority is absolute. All human authority is delegated, limited, and accountable.

Spiritual abuse occurs when leaders:

- Claim their authority is unquestionable
- Operate without meaningful accountability
- Use their position for personal gain (financial, sexual, or ego-driven)
- Demand loyalty to themselves rather than to Christ
- Punish those who raise legitimate concerns
- Create systems where questioning is equated with sin

Jesus modeled servant leadership: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant"* (Matthew 20:25–26, NASB).

When leaders "lord it over" others, they are not following Christ's pattern—they are following the world's pattern. And Jesus explicitly said, "It is not this way among you."

#### **The False Theology of Control Masked as Holiness**

At the root of spiritual abuse lies a theological error so fundamental that it corrupts everything it touches: the belief that control equals holiness.

This false theology teaches that:

- Strict control of behavior produces godliness
- Questioning authority equals rebellion against God
- Suffering under poor leadership is a test of faithfulness
- Leaving an abusive situation means you lack perseverance
- The leader's vision is synonymous with God's will

This is not Christianity. This is authoritarianism wrapped in religious language.

Watchman Nee, who himself suffered under oppressive systems, wrote:

"God's way is that we should gradually mature under His nurture, not that we should be prematurely forced into an assumed spirituality." Forced spirituality is not spirituality at all—it is performance, pretense, and ultimately imprisonment.

True holiness cannot be manufactured through external control. It is the fruit of the Spirit's work in a heart that has experienced grace. Paul makes this clear: *"For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another"* (Galatians 5:13, NASB).

Notice: we were called to *freedom*. Not to license, but to freedom. And the guardrail is love, not control.

When leaders substitute control for discipleship, they reveal that they do not trust the Holy Spirit to do His work. They believe they must manufacture what only God can produce. And in their attempts to play God, they damage the people God has entrusted to their care.

### **Jesus' Blistering Rebuke of Religious Abusers**

If you have been wounded by spiritual abuse and wonder whether God is angry about it, read Matthew 23. Here, Jesus unleashes His most severe condemnation—not against prostitutes or tax collectors, but against religious leaders who abused their position.

*"Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: 'The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.'" — Matthew 23:1–4 (NASB)*

Notice what infuriates Jesus:

- **Hypocrisy:** They don't practice what they preach
- **Burden-placing:** They load people down with requirements they won't carry themselves
- **Lack of compassion:** They won't lift a finger to help those struggling under the weight

Jesus continues with seven "woes"—prophetic pronouncements of judgment. Among them:

*"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in." — Matthew 23:13 (NASB)*

This is the terrible irony of spiritual abuse: those who claim to show people the way to God actually block people's path to Him. They make the gospel burdensome when Jesus said, *"My yoke is easy and My burden is light"* (Matthew 11:30, NASB).

*"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." — Matthew 23:27 (NASB)*

The image is striking: religious systems and leaders who look righteous on the outside but are spiritually dead inside. Beautiful exteriors covering inner corruption.

Jesus reserves His harshest words for the final woe:

*"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city."* — Matthew 23:34 (NASB)

Religious abusers don't just discourage people—they destroy them. They "kill and crucify" through character assassination, public shaming, and spiritual intimidation. They "scourge" through verbal attacks disguised as correction. They "persecute from city to city" by spreading rumors and turning communities against those who dare to speak truth.

If you have experienced this, you need to know: Jesus sees it. He names it. And He is furious about it.

### **God's Heart for the Scattered Sheep**

God's indictment through the prophet Jeremiah could not be clearer:

*"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the Lord.* — Jeremiah 23:1 (NASB)

The word "woe" in Hebrew (*hoy*) is a cry of grief and a declaration of coming judgment. God is not neutral about shepherds who harm His sheep. He grieves over it, and He will hold them accountable.

The chapter continues:

*"Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: 'You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,' declares the Lord."* — Jeremiah 23:2 (NASB)

Notice two things:

1. God calls the sheep "My flock" and "My people." You belong to Him, not to any human leader.
2. God promises to "attend to" the evil shepherds. Justice will come, even if not immediately.

And then, the promise of restoration:

*"Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply."* — Jeremiah 23:3 (NASB)

If you have been scattered by shepherds who should have protected you, God Himself will gather you. He will bring you back. You will be fruitful again.

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, wrote: "God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart." Even when spiritual leaders have been unkind, unwise, and deeply mistaken, God's character remains unchanged. He is good. He is trustworthy. And His heart is for you.

### **The Liberating Authority of God vs. The Enslaving Authority of Man**

Here is the crucial distinction you must understand:

**God's authority liberates; man's misuse of it enslaves.**

When God exercises His authority, He:

- Gives us choice (Deuteronomy 30:19)
- Invites us to reason with Him (Isaiah 1:18)
- Removes our burdens (Matthew 11:28–30)
- Leads us beside still waters (Psalm 23:2)
- Makes our paths straight through wisdom, not force (Proverbs 3:5–6)
- Transforms us from the inside out (2 Corinthians 3:18)

When humans misuse spiritual authority, they:

- Remove choice through coercion
- Forbid questions and punish doubt
- Add burdens and refuse to help carry them
- Create chaos and anxiety

- Demand compliance without explanation
- Attempt to control external behavior without heart transformation

Jesus came to set captives free, not to create new forms of captivity. *"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1, NASB).

If a church, leader, or spiritual system has enslaved you—through guilt, fear, manipulation, or control—that is not of Christ. You are not rebellious for recognizing it. You are not faithless for walking away from it. You are not dishonoring God by protecting yourself from it.

Philip Yancey observed: "Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less." Spiritual abusers reverse this—they create systems where you must constantly earn approval, where love is conditional, where you can never do enough.

That is not the gospel. That is bondage dressed up as holiness.

### **Reflection**

Naming spiritual abuse is an act of courage. It means stepping out of the fog of confusion and calling what happened to you by its true name. Not to be vindictive, but to see clearly. Not to destroy, but to be free.

You may have been told that naming abuse is "lacking grace" or "harboring bitterness." That is manipulation speaking. Truth-telling is not the opposite of grace—it is a necessary prerequisite for it. You cannot extend grace to what you will not name.

As you continue this journey, remember:

- You are not crazy for feeling hurt
- You are not weak for being affected by spiritual abuse
- You are not bitter for recognizing manipulation
- You are not rebellious for setting boundaries

- You are not dishonoring God by speaking truth

You are a beloved child of God who was harmed by people who should have protected you. Your healing matters to Him. Your freedom is His heart. And your future is not defined by what was done to you, but by what He is doing in you.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you." You were created for freedom, for flourishing, for authentic relationship with God and others. Spiritual abuse tried to rob you of that, but it does not have the final word.

God does. And His word over you is love.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, I am beginning to see that what happened to me was wrong. It has a name, and that name is abuse. I have been coerced, manipulated, and controlled in Your name, and it has damaged my ability to trust—both people and You. Give me courage to continue naming the truth. Help me separate abusive human authority from Your good and perfect authority. Thank You that You do not control me, but invite me. You do not manipulate me, but love me. You do not enslave me, but set me free. Continue this work of clarity and healing in my heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## **Chapter 3: Religious Co-Dependency — When Faith Becomes Enmeshment**

### **Theme: When "serving" becomes a substitute for intimacy with God**

**Key Verse:** *"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."* — Galatians 1:10 (NASB)

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She served on five committees, taught two Bible studies, volunteered in the nursery every Sunday, and led the women's ministry planning team. She arrived early to set up chairs and stayed late to lock doors. She said yes to every request, absorbed every criticism, and apologized for things that weren't her fault. She was exhausted, burned out, and increasingly resentful—yet she couldn't stop.

Because beneath all the activity was a terrifying question: *If I stop serving, will I still matter?*

This is the quiet tragedy of religious co-dependency: the faithful who serve not from the overflow of God's love, but from the emptiness of their own need for validation. They are the ones who keep dysfunctional systems running, who enable unhealthy leaders, who sacrifice themselves on the altar of other people's approval—all while believing they are simply being "faithful servants."

But there is a profound difference between serving God and needing to be needed. One flows from fullness; the other from fear. One brings life; the other brings exhaustion. One glorifies God; the other secretly seeks the approval of people.

If you recognize yourself in these words, take heart. Naming religious co-dependency is the first step toward discovering what true service—joyful, sustainable, life-giving service—actually looks like.

### **The Need to Be Needed: People-Pleasing in the Name of Ministry**

Religious co-dependency is a specific form of co-dependency that operates within spiritual contexts. It occurs when a person's sense of identity, worth, and spiritual standing becomes enmeshed with their ability to meet the needs, expectations, and approval of others—particularly church leaders or the church community.

Dr. Henry Cloud, a Christian psychologist who has extensively studied unhealthy relationship patterns, writes: "**When we rescue others to feel valuable, we replace God as Savior.**"

This is the heart of the issue. Co-dependent people are driven not by love, but by need—the need to be needed, the need to be praised, the need to feel indispensable, and ultimately, the need to validate their own existence through service.

The person caught in religious co-dependency:

- Says yes when they should say no because they fear disappointing people
- Takes responsibility for others' emotions, problems, and spiritual growth
- Feels guilty for resting or having boundaries
- Derives their sense of worth from how much they do for the church
- Believes they are being "Christ-like" when they are actually being exploited
- Cannot separate their identity from their role in ministry
- Feels anxiety when they're not actively serving

This pattern often begins innocently. Someone discovers they have a gift or skill the church needs. They receive praise and affirmation. They feel valued, perhaps for the first time. The positive feedback creates an emotional dependence, and soon they are serving not because God is leading them, but because they cannot bear the thought of letting people down.

Paul's words in Galatians directly confront this trap:

*"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."* — Galatians 1:10 (NASB)

Paul makes an either/or distinction: you are either seeking God's favor or man's favor. You cannot authentically do both. Why? Because the two often require opposite responses. God may call you to rest; people may pressure you to serve. God may lead you to set a boundary; people may guilt you into staying. God may tell you to leave; people may manipulate you into remaining.

The co-dependent person will choose people's approval over God's will every time—not because they don't love God, but because they have confused pleasing people with pleasing Him.

### **Confusing Love with Approval, and Humility with Self-Erasure**

One of the most damaging theological distortions in co-dependent systems is the confusion of biblical concepts with their counterfeits.

#### **Love vs. Approval**

Biblical love (*agape*) is unconditional, self-giving, and rooted in the character of God. It seeks the highest good of the other person, even when that means saying hard truths or allowing them to face consequences.

Approval-seeking masquerades as love but is actually a transaction: *I will do what you want so that you will affirm me.* It is conditional, self-serving, and rooted in fear. It avoids confrontation, enables sin, and prioritizes peace-keeping over peace-making.

Jesus loved perfectly, yet He said no. He disappointed people. He let crowds walk away. He refused to be manipulated by family members (John 2:4) or by those who wanted to make Him king on their terms (John 6:15). His love was not contingent on approval, and neither should ours be.

The Apostle John makes this distinction clear: *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love"* (1 John 4:18, NASB). If your service is

motivated by fear—fear of rejection, fear of disapproval, fear of being seen as unspiritual—then it is not flowing from love, no matter how sacrificial it appears.

### **Humility vs. Self-Erasure**

Biblical humility is a proper understanding of yourself in relation to God and others. It means not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought (Romans 12:3), recognizing that every gift comes from God (James 1:17), and serving others with a genuine heart.

Self-erasure, by contrast, is the obliteration of your God-given identity, needs, limits, and worth. It is the belief that holiness requires you to have no needs, no boundaries, no voice, and no personhood apart from what others need from you.

This is not humility. This is self-destruction.

C.S. Lewis, in his characteristic clarity, wrote: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." But religious co-dependency takes this further—it insists you must think *nothing* of yourself, feel *nothing* of your own needs, and exist *solely* for the benefit of others.

Jesus modeled true humility. He was a servant, yes—but He also:

- Withdrew to rest when weary (Mark 6:31)
- Said no to demands (Luke 4:42–43)
- Had close friendships where He received, not just gave (John 11:5)
- Expressed His own needs and emotions (Matthew 26:38)
- Set boundaries with those who tried to manipulate Him (Matthew 16:23)

Jesus' humility did not require Him to erase Himself. He knew who He was, what His mission was, and when to say no. His service flowed from His secure identity as the beloved Son, not from a need to prove His worth.

### **How Unhealthy Systems Depend on Enablers**

Here is an uncomfortable truth: dysfunctional churches and abusive leaders cannot survive without co-dependent people to enable them.

Enablers are those who:

- Make excuses for leaders' bad behavior
- Fill the gaps when leaders neglect their responsibilities
- Absorb the emotional chaos leaders create
- Silence their own concerns to maintain "peace"
- Sacrifice their own wellbeing to keep the system functioning
- Take on inappropriate responsibility for others' choices

Unhealthy systems actively cultivate co-dependency because co-dependent people are easy to exploit. They don't push back. They don't ask hard questions. They don't leave, even when they should. They can be relied upon to keep secrets, work for free, and blame themselves when things go wrong.

These systems often use spiritual language to reinforce co-dependent patterns:

- "Die to self" means suppress your needs and boundaries
- "Servant leadership" means you do all the work while leaders take the credit
- "Submission" means never questioning authority
- "Bearing one another's burdens" means taking responsibility for things that aren't yours to carry
- "Going the extra mile" means having no limits on what you'll sacrifice

Melody Beattie, in her groundbreaking work on co-dependency, explains: "Codependents are reactionaries. They overreact. They under-react. But rarely do they act. They react to the problems, pains, lives, and behaviors of others." In religious contexts, this means co-dependents are constantly reacting to the

church's needs, the pastor's moods, the congregation's expectations—never stopping to ask what God is actually calling them to do.

The result? Burned-out believers, neglected families, ignored callings, and a constant state of exhaustion parading as faithfulness.

Dallas Willard astutely observed: "The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'Christians' will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ." Co-dependency hijacks discipleship. Instead of becoming students of Jesus, co-dependent believers become servants of human expectations.

### **The Spiritual Cost of Enmeshment**

When your identity becomes enmeshed with your service, several devastating spiritual consequences follow:

#### **1. Your Intimacy with God Becomes Transactional**

Prayer becomes about asking for strength to serve rather than communing with a Father who loves you. Bible reading becomes about finding verses to teach others rather than hearing God's voice for yourself. Worship becomes performative. Sabbath becomes impossible.

You relate to God primarily as a resource to fuel your service rather than as the Beloved who delights in you simply because you exist.

#### **2. You Lose the Ability to Hear God's Voice**

When you are constantly attuned to what others need from you, you cannot hear what God is saying to you. The voices of people's expectations drown out the still, small voice of the Spirit. You become so busy doing "ministry" that you miss your actual calling.

#### **3. Your Joy Disappears**

Service that flows from co-dependency is joyless because it is compulsive. You are not choosing to serve; you are compelled to serve by the fear of rejection. And compulsion always kills joy.

#### **4. You Enable Sin**

By never confronting unhealthy behavior, by covering for irresponsible leaders, by taking on burdens that others should carry themselves, you actually prevent people from experiencing the consequences that might lead to their growth and repentance.

Your "help" becomes harm.

#### **5. You Model an Inaccurate Gospel**

The gospel is not "Jesus died so you could exhaust yourself trying to earn approval." It is "Jesus died so you could rest in God's approval and serve from that secure place." When you model co-dependency as Christianity, you distort the very message you're trying to serve.

### **Breaking Free: From Co-Dependency to Holy Service**

How do you break free from religious co-dependency? Not by refusing to serve—service is a beautiful and essential part of the Christian life. The question is: *What is motivating your service?*

#### **Examine Your Motivation**

Ask yourself these hard questions:

- Can I say no without feeling crushing guilt?
- Do I serve because I want to or because I'm afraid of what will happen if I don't?
- Do I need people's praise and recognition to feel valuable?
- Am I angry or resentful about my service, even while continuing to do it?
- Do I take responsibility for things that are not my responsibility?

- Have I sacrificed my own time with God, my family, or my health for the sake of "ministry"?

Paul writes: *"Each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another"* (Galatians 6:4, NASB). Your service should be between you and God, not dependent on comparison to or approval from others.

### **Establish Your Identity Apart from Service**

You are not what you do. You are who God says you are:

- *Beloved* (1 John 3:1)
- *Chosen* (1 Peter 2:9)
- *Accepted* (Ephesians 1:6)
- *Righteous* (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- *Free* (Galatians 5:1)

These truths are established by Christ's work, not your own. Your worth is not determined by how much you serve, how many people need you, or how indispensable you are to your church.

Brennan Manning wrote: "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion." When you know—deeply, unshakably know—that you are beloved apart from your performance, co-dependency loses its power.

### **Learn to Say No**

This may be the most difficult step. Co-dependent people believe that saying no is selfish, unspiritual, or unloving. But boundaries are biblical.

Jesus said no. The apostles said no when demands would distract them from their calling (Acts 6:2). Paul said no to those who would put him back under the law (Galatians 2:5).

Saying no to one thing is always saying yes to something else. When you say no to an inappropriate demand, you say yes to what God is actually calling you to. When you say no to exhaustion, you say yes to sustainable faithfulness.

### **Serve from Overflow, Not from Emptiness**

True service flows from a heart that has spent time with Jesus and has been filled by Him. *"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28–30, NASB).

Notice: Jesus invites the weary to rest *first*, then to take on His yoke. His service is easy and His burden is light—a stark contrast to the heavy, crushing burden of co-dependent service.

Henri Nouwen understood this well: "We are not called to respond to every need, but to the needs to which God calls us to respond." Not every need is your calling. Not every request deserves a yes. Not every crisis requires your intervention.

### **Reflection**

#### **True service flows from love, not from fear of rejection.**

When you serve from love—love that is rooted in God's love for you—you are free. Free to say yes when God leads. Free to say no when He doesn't. Free to rest without guilt. Free to serve without resentment. Free to receive as well as give. Free to be a person, not just a function.

Religious co-dependency may have told you that this kind of freedom is selfish. But Jesus called it abundant life.

You were not created to be consumed by the church. You were created to commune with God and, from that communion, to serve in the specific ways He has gifted and called you. Not in all ways. Not in every way. Not without limits or boundaries or rest.

In the specific, sustainable, joy-filled ways that flow from who you are in Him.

Thomas Merton, the contemplative monk, wrote: "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence."

If you have surrendered to too many demands, you have not been serving God—you have been succumbing to violence against your own soul.

It is time to come home. Home to the Father who loves you whether you serve or not. Home to the Jesus who calls you to rest. Home to yourself—the self that God created, loves, and is not willing to see sacrificed on the altar of others' expectations.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, I confess that I have confused serving others with pleasing them. I have said yes when You were telling me no. I have sought the approval of people instead of resting in Your approval. I am exhausted, Lord. I don't know how to stop, yet I know I cannot continue this way. Teach me the difference between holy service and co-dependency. Show me what it means to serve from overflow rather than emptiness. Give me courage to set boundaries, to say no, and to rest without guilt. Help me root my identity not in what I do, but in who I am in You. I want to serve You freely, joyfully, and sustainably. Heal my need to be needed, and replace it with the security of being loved. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## **Chapter 4: The Misuse of Scripture — How the Word Gets Twisted**

**Theme: Scripture as a tool of control versus an instrument of freedom**

**Key Verse:** *"Thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."* — Mark 7:13 (NASB)

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The most insidious weapon in the arsenal of spiritual abuse is not overt manipulation or obvious cruelty. It is the Bible itself—twisted, decontextualized, and weaponized to control those who love God and long to obey Him.

When Scripture is misused, the damage goes deeper than when someone simply speaks their own opinion. Because if the abuser is merely wrong, you can dismiss them. But if they claim God Himself is saying it—and they quote chapter and verse to prove it—how do you argue with that? How do you know if you're standing against a human or standing against God?

This confusion is the goal. When abusers wrap their demands in Bible verses, they make questioning them feel like questioning God. They make resisting them feel like resisting Scripture. They make leaving them feel like leaving the faith.

But here is the truth you must grasp: there is a profound difference between rightly understanding Scripture and twisting it for control. God's Word, properly understood and applied, sets people free. Misused Scripture, by contrast, enslaves them.

**"Whenever Scripture is used to bind the conscience rather than set it free, it has been misused."** — Larry Crabb

If someone is using the Bible to trap you, silence you, manipulate you, or control you, they are not wielding the Sword of the Spirit—they are wielding a counterfeit. And Jesus Himself gives us language for this:

*"Thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."* — Mark 7:13 (NASB)

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were experts at nullifying God's Word through their traditions. They took what God intended for freedom and life, wrapped it in layers of human interpretation, and used it to control people. Jesus called them out for it. And we must do the same today.

### **How Scripture Gets Twisted: The Patterns of Misuse**

Before we examine specific verses, we need to understand the common tactics abusers use to twist Scripture:

#### **1. Proof-Texting: Verses Ripped from Context**

Proof-texting takes a single verse or phrase out of its literary, historical, and theological context and uses it to support a predetermined conclusion. This is how the devil himself tried to tempt Jesus—by quoting Scripture out of context (Matthew 4:6).

D.A. Carson, a renowned biblical scholar, warns: "The person who is prepared to isolate verses and passages from their contexts to support his or her own theories is close to rejecting the authority of Scripture." When someone pulls a verse out of its context to support their agenda, they are not honoring Scripture—they are mishandling it.

#### **2. Selective Application: Rules for Thee, Not for Me**

Abusive leaders apply Scripture's demands rigidly to others while exempting themselves. They quote verses about submission, obedience, and respect when addressing followers—but ignore verses about servant leadership, accountability, and humility when they apply to themselves.

#### **3. Elevating Secondary Matters: Straining Gnats, Swallowing Camels**

This tactic emphasizes minor issues (dress codes, music styles, specific worship practices) while ignoring major ones (justice, mercy, integrity, love). Jesus accused the Pharisees of this: *"You tithe mint and dill and cummin, and*

*have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness*" (Matthew 23:23, NASB).

#### **4. Spiritual Gaslighting: "God Told Me..."**

Perhaps the most insidious tactic is claiming direct divine revelation to silence disagreement. "God told me you should..." or "The Lord revealed to me that you need to..." are phrases that shut down discussion and make questioning feel like questioning God Himself.

But Scripture gives us a test: "*The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets*" (1 Corinthians 14:32, NASB). In other words, prophetic words can and should be tested. If someone claims God has spoken but their "word" contradicts Scripture, violates your conscience, or serves their agenda, you have every right—indeed, a responsibility—to test it.

#### **Common Verses Weaponized for Control**

Let's examine several verses frequently misused in abusive church contexts:

##### **Hebrews 13:17 — "Obey Your Leaders"**

*"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."* — Hebrews 13:17 (NASB)

**How It's Misused:** This verse is wielded as a blank check for unquestioned authority. "You must obey your leaders in everything. Questioning them is rebellion. Leaving is disobedience to God."

**The Truth:** The Greek word translated "obey" (*peitho*) actually means "be persuaded by" or "trust." It implies being won over through teaching and example, not coerced through fear or manipulation. Furthermore, the verse itself contains built-in limitations: leaders are to watch over souls in a way that brings joy, not grief. If leadership is oppressive, harsh, or abusive, it has already violated this verse.

Additionally, the phrase "as those who will give an account" reminds leaders they are accountable to God. They are not autonomous authorities—they are under-shepherds who will answer for how they treat God's flock.

Finally, notice what the verse does *not* say. It doesn't say "obey your leaders even when they contradict Scripture." It doesn't say "submit to abuse." It doesn't prohibit leaving an unhealthy situation. The verse assumes godly leadership worthy of trust—not tyranny demanding compliance.

### **1 Samuel 26:9 — "Touch Not God's Anointed"**

*"But David said to Abishai, 'Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be without guilt?'"* — 1 Samuel 26:9 (NASB)

**How It's Misused:** "Don't criticize the pastor/leader. They are God's anointed. Touching them brings a curse."

**The Truth:** This verse records David's personal decision not to kill Saul, the sitting king of Israel, despite having opportunity and justification. It is not a universal command that church leaders are beyond criticism, accountability, or correction.

Moreover, in the New Covenant, *all believers* are anointed (1 John 2:20, 27). If this verse prohibited any challenge to "God's anointed," then no Christian could ever correct another Christian.

The verse is being used to create a special class of untouchable leaders—precisely the opposite of Jesus' teaching that "*the greatest among you shall be your servant*" (Matthew 23:11, NASB).

### **Ephesians 5:22 — "Wives, Submit to Your Husbands"**

*"Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord."* — Ephesians 5:22 (NASB)

**How It's Misused:** This verse is torn from its context and used to justify male domination, silencing women's voices, and even covering up abuse. "Your

husband has final authority. Submit means obeying without question. If you're being harmed, submit more."

**The Truth:** This verse sits within a larger passage (Ephesians 5:21–33) that begins with "*be subject to one another in the fear of Christ*" (v. 21). Mutual submission is the foundation. The passage then gives specific applications to different relationships.

Critically, husbands are commanded to "*love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her*" (v. 25). Christ's love is sacrificial, protective, and nurturing—never abusive. A husband who demands submission while failing to love sacrificially has violated his biblical role.

Furthermore, submission to a human authority is never absolute. When authorities command what God forbids or forbid what God commands, "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29, NASB). This applies to all human authority, including marriage.

Biblical submission is never a call to enable sin, endure abuse, or silence one's voice. As John Piper, hardly a feminist theologian, has written: "If a husband asks his wife to do something evil, she should refuse to do it... Submission does not mean leaving your brains at the altar."

### **Romans 13:1 — "Submit to Governing Authorities"**

*"Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God."* — Romans 13:1 (NASB)

**How It's Misused:** "All authority comes from God, therefore you must submit to church leadership in everything. Resistance is rebellion against God."

**The Truth:** This passage is about civil government, not church leadership. Even so, it does not command blind obedience to evil. Paul himself disobeyed governing authorities when they commanded him to stop preaching (Acts 5:29). Peter and John did the same. The Hebrew midwives disobeyed

Pharaoh's command to kill babies (Exodus 1:17). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow to the king's idol (Daniel 3).

All authority is delegated authority, limited by God's higher authority. When human authority contradicts God's law or character, obedience to God takes precedence.

N.T. Wright explains: "Paul is not suggesting that Christians should be doormats for tyrants. He is explaining the God-given role of legitimate authorities, which is to promote good and restrain evil. When they cease to do that, they cease to function as God intends."

### **Biblical Submission vs. Blind Obedience**

Understanding the difference between biblical submission and blind obedience is crucial:

#### **Biblical submission is:**

- Voluntary, not coerced
- Within the boundaries of Scripture
- Mutual (Ephesians 5:21)
- For the purpose of order and flourishing
- Never absolute (only God receives absolute obedience)
- Accompanied by accountability and transparency
- Exercised by leaders who serve rather than dominate

#### **Blind obedience is:**

- Demanded through fear or manipulation
- Without regard for conscience or Scripture
- One-directional (authority flowing only downward)
- For the purpose of control

- Treated as absolute
- Exercised without accountability
- Enforced by leaders who lord their authority over others

Paul addresses this directly: *"Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others"* (Philippians 2:4, NASB). Authority that only looks to its own interests while demanding submission from others has abandoned biblical leadership.

### **Jesus: The Model of Gentle Authority**

If you want to understand what godly authority looks like, look at Jesus. He had—and has—absolute authority. Yet notice how He exercised it:

*"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded."* — John 13:3–5 (NASB)

This is astonishing. At the moment John emphasizes Jesus' total authority—"all things into His hands"—Jesus uses that authority to wash feet. The Son of God, before whom every knee will bow, kneels before His followers and serves them.

Then He says: *"You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you"* (John 13:13–15, NASB).

Jesus establishes the pattern: authority is for service, not domination. Leaders are to follow His example, not the world's pattern of lording authority over others.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus:

- Invited rather than coerced: *"Come to Me"* (Matthew 11:28)

- Taught and explained rather than demanding blind compliance
- Gave people freedom to walk away (John 6:67)
- Rebuked those who used authority to oppress (Matthew 23)
- Protected the vulnerable rather than exploiting them
- Spoke truth even when it was unpopular
- Submitted Himself to the Father's will (John 5:30)

This is the model for all Christian leadership. When someone claims to speak for Christ yet exercises authority in a way opposite to Christ's example, you can be certain they are not representing Him accurately—no matter how many Bible verses they quote.

Timothy Keller wisely observed: "If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealized version of yourself." Similarly, if a leader's interpretation of Scripture always benefits them and never requires their sacrifice or accountability, they are likely not rightly interpreting Scripture—they are using it to validate their own agenda.

### **Reclaiming Scripture: The Word That Liberates**

God's Word was never meant to be a weapon in the hands of the powerful to control the vulnerable. It was meant to be bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty, light for those in darkness, and freedom for those in bondage.

When Jesus inaugurated His ministry, He read from Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."* — Luke 4:18–19 (NASB)

*Release to the captives. Freedom to the oppressed.* This is the heart of Scripture's message. Any use of the Bible that produces the opposite—that creates captivity and oppression—has fundamentally misunderstood and misapplied God's Word.

Eugene Peterson writes: "The Bible is not a script for a funeral service, but it is the record of God always bringing life where we expected death, blessing where we expected curses." If your experience of Scripture has been deadening rather than life-giving, oppressive rather than liberating, you have not experienced Scripture rightly interpreted—you have experienced Scripture weaponized.

### **Learning to Read for Yourself**

One of the most important steps in healing from spiritual abuse is learning to read Scripture for yourself, not through the lens of an abusive interpretation.

Practical steps:

**1. Remember that God wants you to understand His Word.** The Holy Spirit is your teacher (1 John 2:27). You do not need a human mediator to understand Scripture's basic truths.

**2. Read verses in context.** Look at the verses before and after. Consider the audience, purpose, and historical setting. Ask: What is the main point of this passage?

**3. Compare Scripture with Scripture.** The Bible interprets itself. If an interpretation of one verse contradicts the clear teaching of other verses, that interpretation is wrong.

**4. Test interpretations against the character of God.** Does this interpretation align with what Scripture reveals about God's character—His love, justice, mercy, and truth? Does it align with how Jesus treated people?

**5. Ask: Who benefits from this interpretation?** If an interpretation consistently benefits those in power while burdening those without power, be suspicious.

**6. Seek wisdom from healthy teachers.** Not all teaching is abusive. There are godly, humble teachers who rightly handle Scripture and can help you understand it better. Seek them out.

## Reflection

### **God's Word restores agency; it never erases it.**

Scripture does not turn you into a puppet. It does not demand you silence your conscience, ignore your God-given discernment, or blindly obey human authorities. Instead, it:

- Calls you to "*test all things; hold fast to what is good*" (1 Thessalonians 5:21, NASB)
- Commands you to "*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" (Romans 12:2, NASB)—a process that requires you to think, discern, and choose
- Tells you that "*where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*" (2 Corinthians 3:17, NASB)
- Describes truth as something that sets you *free* (John 8:32)

If your experience of Scripture has been enslaving, you have not encountered Scripture rightly understood—you have encountered Scripture twisted by human tradition, just as Jesus described in Mark 7:13.

The Word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12). It is powerful and transformative. It is inspired and authoritative. But it was given to lead you into truth and freedom, not to trap you in fear and control.

You have permission to read it afresh. To see what it actually says, not what abusers claimed it said. To discover that the God who speaks through it is far more gracious, far more liberating, far more trustworthy than those who misrepresented Him to you.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great Welsh preacher, said: "Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?" Perhaps we could add: much spiritual harm comes from listening to abusers interpret Scripture rather than letting Scripture interpret itself.

It is time to let God's Word speak for itself—and to discover that what it says is not "be controlled," but "be free."

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**Prayer:**

*Father, Your Word has been twisted and used to wound me. I have been told that questioning was rebellion, that protecting myself was unfaithfulness, that leaving abuse was abandoning You. Lord, I am confused. I don't know what to trust anymore. Teach me to read Your Word with fresh eyes. Help me distinguish between Your voice and human voices claiming to speak for You. Give me discernment to recognize when Scripture is being misused. Restore my confidence that Your Word is good, true, and meant for my freedom—not my bondage. Thank You that Jesus came to set captives free, and that includes being free from the misuse of Your truth. In His name, Amen.*

## Chapter 5: The Psychology of Control — Understanding How It Works

**Theme: Why we stay, and how the cycle of control keeps us captive**

**Key Verse:** *"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."* — 2 Corinthians 3:17 (NASB)

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If you have ever been caught in a spiritually abusive situation, someone has likely asked you—or perhaps you have asked yourself—a painful question: "Why did you stay?"

It's a fair question, but it carries an implicit accusation: *You should have known better. You should have left sooner. Why didn't you see what was happening?*

The truth is more complex and more compassionate than that question allows. People don't stay in abusive church situations because they are weak, foolish, or lacking in discernment. They stay because abusive systems are designed to keep them there. These systems use sophisticated psychological tactics—often unknowingly borrowed from cult dynamics—to create a cycle of control that is extraordinarily difficult to break.

Understanding *how* control works is not about shifting blame or making excuses. It's about recognizing that you were not defective for staying—you were trapped in a carefully constructed psychological cage. And recognizing the cage is the first step toward finding the door.

**"Control is the opposite of love. Love lets people choose."** — Dr. John Townsend

This simple but profound truth exposes the heart of the problem. Healthy churches and godly leaders create environments where people are free to choose, free to question, free to grow, and yes—free to leave. Abusive systems do the opposite. They eliminate choice through manipulation, fear, and dependency.

But God's way is different. "*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.*" If you have experienced spiritual captivity rather than spiritual liberty, you have encountered human control masquerading as divine leading.

Let's examine how this captivity develops and why it is so difficult to escape.

### **The Stages of Spiritual Abuse: A Predictable Pattern**

Spiritual abuse rarely begins with obvious red flags. It typically follows a predictable progression that mirrors the stages of other forms of relational abuse. Understanding these stages helps explain why you didn't see it coming—and why leaving felt so impossible.

#### **Stage 1: Recruitment — The Love Bombing**

The first stage is characterized by overwhelming warmth, acceptance, and affirmation. You are welcomed enthusiastically. People express genuine interest in you. You're told how much the community has been waiting for someone like you. Your gifts are recognized and celebrated. You feel seen, valued, and needed.

This is not accidental. Abusive systems target people who are:

- New to the faith and eager to belong
- Transitioning through life changes (moves, losses, major decisions)
- Gifted but insecure about their gifts
- Hungry for spiritual depth or community
- Recovering from previous church hurt (making them vulnerable to idealizing a "better" church)

The love bombing serves several purposes: it creates a positive initial impression that you'll remember later when things get difficult; it establishes a debt of gratitude that makes it harder to say no to future demands; and it begins the process of emotional attachment that will later become dependency.

This stage feels wonderful. You think, *Finally, I've found my people. This is where I belong.* And that feeling of belonging becomes the hook.

### **Stage 2: Idealization — The Pedestal**

Once you're emotionally invested, the system begins to elevate itself in your mind. You start hearing language like:

- "This isn't just a church; this is God's church for this city."
- "Our pastor has special insight. God speaks to him in ways He doesn't speak to others."
- "We're not like other churches. We're actually living out biblical community."
- "If you leave here, you won't find anything like this anywhere else."

Simultaneously, the outside world is subtly (or not so subtly) devalued:

- Other churches are "lukewarm" or "compromising"
- Former members who left are "bitter" or "never really committed"
- Family members who express concern "just don't understand spiritual things"
- Secular counselors or therapists are "worldly" and can't be trusted

This stage accomplishes two things: it creates an "us versus them" mentality that isolates you from outside perspectives, and it makes the thought of leaving feel like spiritual suicide. *Where else would I go? This is the only place that really understands me.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against this in *Life Together*: "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter... God hates visionary dreaming." When a church becomes idealized beyond reality, disillusionment is inevitable—but by then, you're too invested to leave easily.

### **Stage 3: Dependency — The Trap**

This is where the system moves from attraction to entrapment. Your life becomes increasingly intertwined with the church community:

- Your social life revolves entirely around church activities
- Your primary relationships are all within the church
- Your time is consumed by meetings, services, and ministry commitments
- Your finances are heavily invested (through tithing, giving, or shared living arrangements)
- Your decision-making is increasingly outsourced to leaders
- Your identity becomes inseparable from your role in the church

The dependency is both emotional and practical. Emotionally, you have come to rely on the community for validation, purpose, and belonging. Practically, leaving would mean losing your entire support system, potentially your job (if you work for the church), your housing (if you live in church-provided housing), and your social network.

Leaders reinforce this dependency through:

- **Constant accessibility demands:** "We're family, so you should always be available."
- **Blurred boundaries:** Leaders involve themselves in your personal decisions, relationships, and even thoughts.
- **Manufactured crises:** There's always an urgent need that requires your involvement.
- **Spiritual gatekeeping:** Access to God's blessing, direction, or favor is mediated through submission to leadership.

By this stage, leaving is no longer a simple decision—it feels like losing everything.

#### **Stage 4: Burnout — The Breaking Point**

The final stage is characterized by exhaustion—physical, emotional, and spiritual. You're giving more than you have. You're serving out of obligation, not joy. You're questioning things but feeling guilty for questioning. You're noticing problems but telling yourself you're being judgmental.

Signs of burnout include:

- Chronic fatigue that rest doesn't fix
- Cynicism about church, ministry, or faith in general
- Inability to set boundaries or say no
- Physical symptoms (headaches, digestive issues, insomnia)
- Emotional numbness or emotional volatility
- Spiritual dryness despite increased religious activity
- Fantasies about leaving but terror at the thought of actually leaving

At this stage, you may seek help—only to be told you need to:

- Pray more
- Serve more faithfully
- Deal with your "root of bitterness"
- Submit more completely
- Trust leadership's vision

In other words, the solution to the problem *caused* by the abusive system is to go deeper *into* the abusive system.

Some people break free at this stage. Others collapse under the weight and simply disappear, leaving church entirely—not just the abusive one, but all churches, sometimes even their faith.

Dan Allender, a Christian psychologist specializing in trauma, writes: "Burnout is what happens when you try to avoid being human for too long." Spiritual abuse systems demand you function at a superhuman level without the

normal limits God built into human nature—rest, boundaries, honest emotion, genuine relationships. Eventually, you break.

### **The Emotional Addiction: Fear and Belonging**

Understanding the stages helps, but it doesn't fully explain why leaving feels impossible. That requires understanding two powerful emotional forces: fear and belonging.

#### **The Addiction of Fear**

Abusive systems run on fear. Not just any fear, but a particular kind: the fear of losing God's approval, the fear of spiritual disaster, the fear of being wrong, the fear of divine punishment.

This creates a terrible internal conflict: staying is painful, but leaving feels even more dangerous. You're caught between the pain of the present and terror of the future.

Fear becomes addictive because it creates a neurological feedback loop. When you're afraid, your brain releases stress hormones. When leaders offer relief from that fear (through reassurance, prayer, or promises), your brain releases calming chemicals. You become physiologically conditioned to seek relief from the same people who created the fear in the first place.

This is why abusive systems alternate between creating anxiety and offering comfort. The pattern of "wound and heal, wound and heal" creates a powerful psychological dependency.

Scripture tells us: *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love"* (1 John 4:18, NASB). When a spiritual system operates primarily through fear, it has abandoned love—regardless of what it claims.

#### **The Addiction of Belonging**

Humans are wired for belonging. We are created for community. Abusive systems exploit this God-given need by making belonging conditional on compliance.

You learn that acceptance requires:

- Agreement with leadership's vision
- Participation in all activities
- Public displays of loyalty
- Silence about concerns
- Sacrificial giving of time, money, and energy

The moment you step out of line, you feel the withdrawal of belonging—through cold shoulders, concerned confrontations, or being labeled "divisive." The pain of exclusion is so acute that you quickly fall back in line.

Brené Brown's research on belonging is relevant here: "True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are." In healthy communities, you belong because of your inherent worth as a person made in God's image. In abusive communities, you belong because you conform.

The addiction to belonging keeps you trapped because the prospect of losing your community feels like death. And in a sense, it is a kind of death—the death of a version of yourself and a life you've invested everything in.

### **The Trauma Bond: Why Leaving Feels Like Betrayal**

Perhaps the most powerful mechanism keeping people trapped is something called a trauma bond—an emotional attachment formed through cycles of abuse and intermittent reinforcement.

Trauma bonds form when:

- There's a power imbalance
- Abuse is intermixed with positive experiences

- The victim experiences isolation from other perspectives
- The victim has invested heavily in the relationship

In abusive church contexts, the trauma bond means that despite the harm, you feel:

- **Loyalty to your abusers:** "They're not all bad. They really do care about me."
- **Responsibility for their wellbeing:** "If I leave, it will devastate them."
- **Guilt about questioning:** "Maybe I'm the problem. Maybe I'm being too sensitive."
- **Confusion about your own perceptions:** "Am I remembering this wrong? Maybe it wasn't that bad."

Dr. Patrick Carnes, who first identified trauma bonding, explains: "The betrayal bond is compounded because the abused person becomes convinced that this type of treatment is deserved."

This is why leaving can feel like *you* are the betrayer, even when *you* are the one who was betrayed. The abusive system has inverted reality so thoroughly that protecting yourself feels like hurting others.

Leaving triggers intense feelings:

- Guilt ("How can I abandon them?")
- Fear ("What if they were right and I'm making a terrible mistake?")
- Grief ("I'm losing my entire life.")
- Shame ("Why did I stay so long? How could I have been so blind?")

These feelings are normal responses to breaking a trauma bond. They don't mean you made the wrong decision—they mean you were genuinely attached, which is precisely why the abuse was so damaging.

## **How the Holy Spirit Leads: Conviction, Not Coercion**

The most important distinction you must understand is the difference between how God leads and how abusive systems control.

*"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."*  
— 2 Corinthians 3:17 (NASB)

Liberty. Freedom. Not control, not coercion, not manipulation—liberty.

When the Holy Spirit leads:

- **He convicts without condemning:** Conviction from the Spirit is specific, leads to repentance, and brings freedom. Condemnation is vague, leads to shame, and brings bondage.
- **He confirms through multiple means:** God rarely gives direction through only one source. He confirms through Scripture, wise counsel, circumstances, and peace.
- **He never violates Scripture:** The Spirit will never lead you to do something that contradicts the written Word of God.
- **He produces peace, not panic:** *"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline"* (2 Timothy 1:7, NASB).
- **He respects your conscience:** The Spirit leads through conviction, not coercion. You are invited to respond, never forced.
- **He illuminates truth:** *"When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth"* (John 16:13, NASB). He brings clarity, not confusion.

Human control systems do the opposite:

- They use vague condemnation to keep you off-balance
- They claim exclusive access to God's will for your life
- They twist Scripture to support their agenda
- They create urgency and anxiety

- They override your conscience with external pressure
- They obscure truth with spiritual-sounding language

A.W. Tozer wrote: "The Holy Spirit is a living being who loves us and desires our fellowship. He seeks to help us in our difficulties, to teach us to pray, to give us power for holy living, to make real to us the things of Christ." Notice: the Spirit helps, teaches, gives, makes real—never forces, manipulates, or controls.

If what you experienced in your church or from your leaders produced bondage rather than liberty, it was not the Spirit's leading—regardless of the spiritual language used to describe it.

### **Breaking the Cycle: Understanding Brings Freedom**

Understanding the psychology of control doesn't immediately free you from its effects, but it does something crucial: it removes the shame.

You didn't stay because you were defective. You stayed because you were caught in a carefully constructed system designed to keep you there. You weren't weak—you were in a trap that exploits normal human needs for belonging, meaning, and spiritual connection.

The fact that you're reading this, that you're questioning, that you're seeking to understand—this itself is evidence that the Holy Spirit is leading you toward truth and freedom.

Gordon MacDonald observed: "We must not assume that the first generations of Christians had a corner on insight, courage, and power. We honor them, but we do not need to be paralyzed by their examples. God has fresh insights and fresh power for each generation." Similarly, God has fresh insight and fresh power for your healing. The patterns that trapped you do not define your future.

### **Reflection**

**The Holy Spirit leads through conviction, not coercion.**

As you process the psychological mechanisms that kept you trapped, remember this: recognizing manipulation is not cynicism—it's wisdom. Understanding control tactics is not being unforgiving—it's being discerning. Protecting yourself from further harm is not being weak—it's being wise.

You have permission to think clearly about what happened. To name the tactics. To understand how they worked on you. This is not about villainizing people (though accountability matters); it's about understanding the dynamics so you can be free of them.

And here's the beautiful truth: once you understand how counterfeit leading operates, you become far better at recognizing authentic leading. The Spirit's voice becomes clearer when you can distinguish it from voices of manipulation.

You were made for freedom—not the false "freedom" of doing whatever you want, but the true freedom of becoming who God created you to be, unburdened by the control of others.

Charles Spurgeon said: "The Lord, our God, is a jealous God. He will not give His glory to another, nor His praise to graven images." God will not share His authority over your life with human controllers. He is calling you back to freedom—freedom to hear His voice clearly, to follow His leading freely, and to discover that where His Spirit is, there truly is liberty.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, I am beginning to understand how I became trapped. I see the stages now, the tactics, the emotional hooks that kept me captive. I am angry about what was done to me, and I am grieving what I lost. But I also feel shame—shame that I stayed so long, shame that I didn't see it sooner. Lord, please lift this shame. Help me understand that I was not defective for being caught in this system—I was human. Teach me to recognize the voice of Your Spirit, which leads with conviction but never coercion, with truth but never manipulation. Break the trauma bonds that still hold me. Free me from the*

*addiction to fear and the false belonging that kept me in bondage. Lead me into the liberty that is found in You alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Chapter 6: Leaving the Church Without Leaving God

**Theme: Disentangling from spiritual systems while holding onto faith**

**Key Verse:** *"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you."* — 2 Corinthians 6:17 (NASB)

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The decision to leave a church is never easy. But leaving an abusive church—one that has entwined itself around your identity, your relationships, your understanding of God—feels nearly impossible. It feels like spiritual suicide.

You've been told, directly or indirectly, that leaving means:

- Abandoning God's plan for your life
- Opening yourself to spiritual attack
- Proving you were never truly committed
- Choosing comfort over faithfulness
- Rejecting God's "covering" and authority
- Turning your back on family

The fear is overwhelming. *What if they're right? What if leaving is the biggest mistake I'll ever make? What if I'm throwing away my faith?*

Here is the truth you desperately need to hear: **Leaving a toxic church is not the same as leaving God. In fact, sometimes leaving a toxic church is the most faithful thing you can do.**

**"Sometimes leaving a toxic church is the most faithful thing you can do."**

— Chuck DeGroat

This is not about running from commitment or avoiding difficulty. This is about recognizing when a system has become so distorted that remaining in it actually prevents you from genuinely following Christ. It's about

understanding that God sometimes calls His people *out* of religious systems in order to call them *into* deeper relationship with Him.

God Himself, speaking through Paul, gives language for this: "*Come out from their midst and be separate.*" This is not a call to isolation or cynicism. It is a call to holy discernment—to recognize what is of God and what is not, and to have the courage to separate yourself from what is not.

### **Signs It's Time to Leave: Recognizing Systemic Toxicity**

How do you know when problems in a church are serious enough to warrant leaving? This is one of the most difficult questions you'll face because leaving is costly, and you don't want to give up too easily.

Here's the crucial distinction: *All churches have problems because all churches are made of flawed humans. But not all churches are systemically toxic.*

The difference lies not in the presence of problems, but in how the system responds to problems:

- Are concerns welcomed or punished?
- Is there accountability or defensiveness?
- Are mistakes acknowledged or covered up?
- Is change possible or is the system rigid?

### **Warning Signs That Leaving May Be Necessary**

#### **1. Leaders Refuse Accountability**

If leaders operate without meaningful oversight, dismiss valid concerns, or claim their authority cannot be questioned, the system is fundamentally broken. No amount of your faithfulness will fix structural problems with accountability.

#### **2. Your Wellbeing Is Consistently Dismissed**

If expressing legitimate needs—for rest, boundaries, or honesty—is labeled as spiritual immaturity, selfishness, or rebellion, you are in a system that views you as a resource to be exploited, not a person to be cared for.

### **3. Fear Is the Primary Motivator**

If you stay primarily because you're afraid of what will happen if you leave—afraid of divine punishment, afraid of losing relationships, afraid of being wrong—you are being controlled through fear, not led by the Spirit.

### **4. Scripture Is Consistently Twisted**

If the Bible is routinely used to benefit leaders and burden followers, if verses are taken out of context to silence dissent, if questioning biblical interpretations is treated as questioning God Himself, the Word of God is being weaponized.

### **5. You Cannot Have Honest Conversations**

If you must carefully manage what you say, if honesty is met with punishment, if real questions are labeled as "having a bad attitude," authentic community does not exist—only a performance of community.

### **6. Patterns Never Change**

If the same problems recur repeatedly, if promises of change never materialize, if confrontation leads nowhere, the system is either unwilling or unable to change. Your continued presence will not fix what leadership refuses to address.

### **7. Your Physical or Mental Health Is Deteriorating**

If you experience chronic anxiety, depression, panic attacks, nightmares, or physical symptoms tied to church involvement, your body is trying to tell you something. God does not require you to destroy yourself to serve Him.

### **8. Your Relationship with God Is Damaged**

If church has become an obstacle to knowing God rather than a pathway to Him, something is profoundly wrong. The church exists to point you to Christ, not to replace Him.

Dr. Wade Mullen, who researches organizational abuse, writes: "When leaders prioritize the image of the organization over the care of those within it, toxic culture is inevitable." If your church cares more about its reputation than about the people it harms, it has abandoned its calling.

### **How to Know When It's Time: The Internal Witness**

Beyond external signs, there is often an internal knowing—a conviction from the Holy Spirit that it is time to go. This conviction may come through:

- **Persistent unease that won't be silenced:** A sense that something is deeply wrong, even when you can't articulate exactly what.
- **Dreams or physical symptoms:** Your body and subconscious may be processing what your conscious mind is afraid to acknowledge.
- **Clarity during time away:** When you're on vacation or miss a week of church, you feel relief rather than longing to return.
- **Confirmation through multiple sources:** God often confirms direction through Scripture, wise counsel outside the system, and circumstances.

Oswald Chambers wrote: "Never make a principle out of your experience; let God be as original with other people as He is with you." Your journey of knowing when to leave will be unique to you. Trust that the Spirit who leads you into all truth is capable of making this clear—even if others don't understand.

### **Biblical Precedent: You're in Good Company**

Leaving is biblical. Scripture records multiple instances of God's people separating from corrupt religious systems:

#### **Jesus Left the Synagogue**

*"And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way."* — Luke 4:28–30 (NASB)

Jesus was driven out of His hometown synagogue by religious people enraged at His teaching. But notice: He didn't argue, didn't defend Himself, didn't try to fix the system. He simply "went His way."

Jesus regularly withdrew from religious systems that rejected truth. He walked away from people who tried to manipulate or control Him. He refused to be held hostage by religious expectations. If Jesus left toxic religious environments, so can you.

### **Paul Left Legalism**

*"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision... But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"* — Galatians 2:11–14 (NASB)

Paul confronted Peter publicly when Peter's behavior contradicted the gospel. More broadly, Paul's entire ministry was a separation from the legalistic Judaism of his past. He counted his religious credentials as "rubbish" (Philippians 3:8) compared to knowing Christ.

Paul understood that sometimes defending the gospel requires separating from those who distort it—even when those people are respected leaders, even when it causes controversy, even when you're accused of being divisive.

### **The Call to Separate**

*"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty. — 2 Corinthians 6:17–18 (NASB)*

This is not a call to perfectionism or isolation. It is a call to discernment. God promises that when you separate from what is unclean—from systems that distort His character, from leaders who abuse His name, from environments that harm His people—He will receive you.

You will not be abandoned. You will be welcomed. And you will discover a Father who has been waiting for you to come out from the midst of what was harming you.

### **How to Leave with Dignity and Peace**

Once you've decided to leave, the question becomes: How? The manner of your leaving matters—not because you owe the abusive system anything, but because how you leave affects your own healing and witness.

#### **1. Have a Plan**

Don't announce your decision impulsively in a moment of anger. Take time to:

- Secure your living situation if it's connected to the church
- Prepare for loss of income if you work for the church
- Identify supportive relationships outside the church
- Find a therapist or counselor who understands spiritual abuse
- Have a next step for spiritual community, even if it's small

#### **2. You Don't Owe Them a Detailed Explanation**

In healthy relationships, honest conversation is important. But abusive systems will use your honesty against you. Anything you say will be:

- Twisted to make you look bad

- Used to pressure you to stay
- Shared with others to control the narrative
- Held up as evidence of your spiritual problems

A simple statement is sufficient: "After much prayer and consideration, we've decided this church is no longer the right fit for our family. We're grateful for the time here and wish everyone well."

You don't need to justify, defend, or explain. If pressed, you can simply repeat: "This is a decision we've made after much prayer." Period.

### **3. Protect Yourself from Manipulation**

Be prepared for manipulation tactics:

- **Love-bombing:** Sudden attention and affirmation to draw you back
- **Guilt-tripping:** Reminders of all the church has done for you
- **Spiritual threats:** Warnings about leaving "God's covering"
- **Character assassination:** Rumors spread about your reasons for leaving
- **Flying monkeys:** Well-meaning people sent to convince you to return

Set clear boundaries: "I appreciate your concern, but this decision is final and not open for discussion."

You may need to block phone numbers or social media accounts, at least temporarily. This is not cruel—it's self-preservation.

### **4. Grieve What You're Losing**

Leaving means loss: relationships, routines, roles, identity, dreams. These losses are real and deserve to be grieved. Give yourself permission to be sad, angry, confused, and even to miss aspects of what you left—without letting that pull you back into harm.

### **5. Resist the Urge to Wage War**

You may be tempted to expose, to fight back, to make sure everyone knows what happened. This is understandable, especially if leaders are still harming others.

But consider: Is public exposure your responsibility or is it a trauma response? Are you trying to warn others or trying to vindicate yourself? Will it bring healing or keep you bound to the past?

There may be appropriate times for public testimony, especially if criminal behavior or ongoing abuse is involved. But often, the healthiest thing is to simply walk away and let your quiet departure speak for itself.

Corrie ten Boom, who survived Nazi concentration camps, said: "Forgiveness is to set a prisoner free, and to realize the prisoner was you." You cannot heal while you're still fighting battles with those who harmed you. At some point, you must lay down your weapons and walk away.

### **Managing Guilt, Grief, and Accusations**

The aftermath of leaving is often harder than the leaving itself. You will face internal and external challenges:

#### **The Guilt**

*"Maybe I should have tried harder. Maybe I'm being selfish. Maybe I'm destroying God's work."*

Remember: You are not responsible for fixing a system you didn't break. You are not required to set yourself on fire to keep others warm. Leaving an abusive situation is not unfaithfulness—it is wisdom.

#### **The Grief**

Grief is appropriate and necessary. You're mourning:

- The community you thought you had
- The leaders you trusted
- The version of yourself that existed there

- The time and energy you invested
- The dreams that won't be realized

Let yourself grieve. Don't rush it. Don't spiritualize it away with "God is sovereign" platitudes. Sit in the loss. It's part of healing.

## **The Accusations**

You will likely be accused of:

- Having a bad attitude
- Being divisive
- Running from God
- Lacking perseverance
- Being deceived

These accusations are designed to make you question yourself and return. They are also often projection—the accusers describing their own behavior while attributing it to you.

You don't need to defend yourself to people who are determined to misunderstand you. God knows your heart. That is enough.

Elisabeth Elliot, missionary and writer, wisely noted: "In order to learn what it means to be a woman, we must start with the One who made her." Similarly, in order to understand your decision to leave, start with the One who knows you fully. His opinion is the only one that ultimately matters.

## **The Distinction: Leaving Church vs. Leaving God**

This is the most important truth in this chapter: **You are not leaving Jesus.**

**You are leaving what misrepresented Him.**

Jesus is not confined to one building, one community, one leader's vision. He is not fragile, needing you to prop up a broken system to preserve His reputation. He is not trapped in the place you're leaving.

In fact, He may be the One calling you out.

Just as Jesus said to the church in Sardis, "*You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead*" (Revelation 3:1, NASB), some churches have the appearance of life but are spiritually dead. Leaving death for life is not abandonment—it's resurrection.

Consider these truths:

- You can love Jesus while recognizing a church has become toxic
- You can honor Scripture while rejecting its misuse
- You can value community while leaving a specific community
- You can serve God faithfully while setting boundaries with people
- You can maintain your faith while reconstructing your theology

C.S. Lewis wrote: "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity." But there's a difference between the discomfort of true discipleship and the trauma of spiritual abuse. Jesus calls us to die to self, not to be destroyed by toxic systems.

You're not leaving Jesus. You're leaving what stood between you and Jesus.

### **What Comes Next: The Wilderness Season**

After leaving, you may enter what feels like a wilderness season—a time of spiritual dryness, confusion, and isolation. This is normal. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. Jesus Himself went into the wilderness before beginning His ministry.

Wilderness seasons are not punishment. They are preparation.

In the wilderness:

- God strips away false dependencies

- You learn to hear His voice without mediators
- You discover who you are apart from roles and performance
- You heal from wounds you couldn't heal while still in the toxic environment
- You develop discernment for what is healthy and what is not

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "The wilderness does not have to be cursed for Eden to be blessed." Your time outside organized church is not wasted time. It may be the most important season of spiritual formation you ever experience.

Trust the wilderness. Don't rush out of it. Let God do His work.

### **Reflection**

Leaving is an act of faith. It requires believing that God is bigger than one church, that your relationship with Him can survive this disruption, that His grace is sufficient to lead you through the unknown.

You are not being disobedient. You are being discerning. You are not being weak. You are being brave. You are not leaving God. You are leaving what misrepresented Him so that you can find Him more truly.

God is not surprised by your decision. He is not disappointed in you. He is not withdrawing His love. In fact, He may have been whispering "Come out" for longer than you realized, waiting for you to trust Him enough to obey.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases 2 Corinthians 6:17–18 this way in The Message: "Get out of there! Don't take that stuff into your house. Don't make yourselves at home among things polluted by dishonor. I'll be your home. I'll be a Father to you; you'll be sons and daughters to me."

Do you hear the tenderness? "I'll be your home." Not a building. Not a system. Not a leader. God Himself will be your home.

That is enough. He is enough.

And when you're ready—not on anyone else's timeline, but when you're ready—He will lead you to a community where His presence is genuinely honored, where His Word is rightly taught, where His people are genuinely loved.

Until then, rest in this: You are not alone. You are not lost. You are not abandoned.

You are coming home.

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**Prayer:**

*Father, I am leaving, and I am terrified. I am afraid I'm making a mistake. I am afraid of the accusations. I am afraid of the loneliness. But I am also exhausted, Lord—exhausted from trying to make a toxic system work, exhausted from the fear and control, exhausted from the performance. I believe You are calling me out, but my faith feels so fragile right now. Be my home, Lord. Be my community when I have none. Be my certainty when everything feels uncertain. Lead me through this wilderness into a place of genuine healing. Help me distinguish between leaving a church and leaving You—because I don't want to leave You. I want to find You more truly. Give me courage for each step, wisdom for each decision, and grace for each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Chapter 7: Healing the Image of God

### Theme: Restoring trust in a loving, non-controlling Father

**Key Verse:** *"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* — Psalm 34:18 (NASB)

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The deepest wound of spiritual abuse is not what it does to your emotions, your relationships, or even your faith. The deepest wound is what it does to your image of God.

When you are harmed by those claiming to represent God, when Scripture is twisted to control you, when love is made conditional on performance, when grace is rationed out based on compliance—you don't just lose trust in people. You lose trust in God Himself.

Because how do you separate them? How do you know which god is real—the harsh, demanding, unpredictable god of the abusive system, or the loving Father Jesus spoke of? When the two images are so entangled, how do you unwind them?

**"We must separate the face of Christ from the face of those who misused His name."** — Dr. Diane Langberg

This separation is not easy, but it is essential. Until you can distinguish between the false god you were introduced to through abuse and the true God revealed in Scripture, you cannot fully heal. You will remain perpetually afraid, perpetually performing, perpetually uncertain of your standing with Him.

This chapter is about reconstruction—carefully, patiently dismantling the distorted image of God you were given and rebuilding a true one from Scripture itself. Not the Scripture filtered through abusive interpretation, but Scripture speaking for itself, revealing a God whose love is not contingent upon your performance but anchored in His unchanging nature.

*"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* This is not metaphor. This is promise. And it begins with a God who draws near to the wounded, not away from them.

## **How Abuse Distorts the Image of God**

Spiritual abuse creates a composite god—a false deity cobbled together from the characteristics of abusive leaders, distorted interpretations of Scripture, and traumatic experiences. This false god bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible, yet victims often believe this is who God actually is.

### **The Distorted God Is:**

#### **1. Angry and Easily Displeased**

The god of abusive systems is perpetually disappointed. Nothing you do is quite enough. There's always another level of commitment you haven't reached, another sin you haven't conquered, another way you've failed to measure up.

This god's love is earned, not given. His approval is conditioned on your performance. One misstep and you're back to square one, scrambling to regain His favor.

#### **2. Distant and Unapproachable**

This god requires mediators—pastors, leaders, special people who have access to Him in ways you don't. You cannot approach Him directly with your doubts, your questions, your real self. You must go through the proper channels, follow the correct protocols, and hope your request makes it past the gatekeepers.

#### **3. Obsessed with Behavior**

The false god cares primarily about external compliance. He tracks your attendance, your giving, your service. He demands you manage your appearance, monitor your speech, and control every thought. He wants robots, not children.

#### **4. Unpredictable and Capricious**

This god changes the rules without warning. What pleased Him yesterday angers Him today. His will is impossible to discern unless you have access to the special revelation given to leaders. You walk on eggshells, never sure which version of god you're going to encounter.

#### **5. Harsh and Unforgiving**

The distorted god keeps a record of wrongs. He brings up past sins. He uses your failures against you. Mercy is scarce, given grudgingly, and always with conditions attached. Grace is theoretical but practically unavailable.

#### **6. Controlling and Manipulative**

This god uses fear to motivate obedience. He threatens punishment for non-compliance. He manipulates through guilt and shame. He demands absolute control over every area of your life and calls it "lordship."

#### **The Result: Living in Fear**

When this is your image of God, you cannot rest. You live in perpetual anxiety about your standing with Him. You pray not in intimacy but in desperation, hoping today you'll finally get it right. You read Scripture not for nourishment but for ammunition against your own inadequacy. You serve not from love but from terror.

Philip Yancey observes: "I rejected the church for a long time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else." But what happens when the church presents a god of no grace? Where do you turn then?

You turn to the actual God—the one revealed in Jesus Christ, not filtered through the distortions of abusive systems.

#### **The True God: Revealed in Scripture**

The journey of healing your image of God begins with Scripture—not verses ripped from context to prove a point, but the full biblical narrative of who God actually is.

### **The True God Is:**

#### **1. Gracious and Compassionate**

*"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness."* — Psalm 103:8 (NASB)

Not quick-tempered. Not easily offended. *Slow to anger*. And not merely kind, but *abounding* in lovingkindness—overflowing with it, lavish with it, characterized by it.

This is not a god who is looking for reasons to be angry. This is a God whose default posture is compassion.

#### **2. Near and Accessible**

*"The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth."* — Psalm 145:18 (NASB)

No mediators required. No special access needed. He is near to *all* who call on Him. Not just the spiritually elite. Not just those who have it all together. All who call.

And what do you call Him? Jesus taught us to pray, "*Our Father*" (Matthew 6:9). Not "distant deity." Not "harsh judge." Father.

#### **3. Concerned with the Heart**

*"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."* — 1 Samuel 16:7 (NASB)

God is not obsessed with external performance. He cares about who you are becoming, not merely what you are doing. He sees beneath behavior to motivation, to wounds, to struggles, to genuine desire.

This is why Jesus reserved His harshest words not for sinners, but for religious people who had right behavior but wrong hearts.

#### **4. Consistent and Unchanging**

*"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."* — Hebrews 13:8 (NASB)

God does not change. His character is stable. His promises are reliable. What pleased Him about you yesterday pleases Him today. You are not navigating the moods of a capricious deity—you are in relationship with the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

#### **5. Forgiving and Merciful**

*"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* — 1 John 1:9 (NASB)

God forgives. Fully. Freely. Not grudgingly or conditionally, but as an expression of His faithfulness and righteousness. He doesn't hold your past against you. He cleanses you from *all* unrighteousness.

#### **6. Liberating, Not Controlling**

*"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."* — Galatians 5:1 (NASB)

God sets free. He liberates. He breaks chains. He does not enslave His children. The very purpose of Christ's work was *freedom*—not the freedom to sin without consequence, but the freedom to become fully who He created you to be.

A.W. Tozer wrote: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." If what comes to mind is a harsh, controlling, unpredictable deity, you are not thinking of the God of the Bible—you are thinking of the god constructed by your abusers.

It's time to meet the real One.

### **The Prodigal Father: God's True Heart Revealed**

If you want to understand God's heart toward you—especially after you've been wounded, especially after you've failed, especially when you're afraid to return—look at Luke 15.

Jesus tells a story about a son who demands his inheritance early (essentially wishing his father dead), squanders it in reckless living, and ends up destitute, feeding pigs. When he comes to his senses, he decides to return home—not as a son, but as a hired servant. He rehearses a speech: "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men*" (Luke 15:18–19, NASB).

But watch what happens:

*"So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."* — Luke 15:20 (NASB)

Let's sit with this image:

**The father was watching.** He wasn't indifferent to his son's absence. He was looking, hoping, waiting.

**He saw him while still a long way off.** The son didn't have to arrive, clean up, prove himself, or earn his way back. The father saw him in his brokenness, still covered in the stench of the pig pen.

**He felt compassion.** The Greek word (*splagchnizomai*) means a gut-level, visceral compassion. Not tolerance. Not resignation. Deep, aching compassion.

**He ran.** In that culture, dignified men did not run. Running was undignified, beneath the station of a father. But this father abandoned dignity for love. He ran.

**He embraced and kissed him.** Before the son could get through his rehearsed speech, before he could earn anything, while he was still filthy and broken, the father pulled him close.

Then, as if that weren't enough:

*"But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."* — Luke 15:22–24 (NASB)

The robe—a symbol of honor. The ring—a sign of authority. The sandals—marking him as a son, not a slave. The fattened calf—a feast of celebration. Not reluctant acceptance. Not probationary status. Full restoration, immediately, joyfully.

This is Jesus' portrait of the Father's heart.

Henri Nouwen, reflecting on this parable, writes: "The father loves his son. The same love that had fed, clothed, and educated the boy continued to sustain him when he ran away from home. It was waiting for him to make the choice to return." God's love doesn't begin when you get it right. It sustained you even when you were running away.

### **Replacing Fear with Grace and Intimacy**

The shift from fearing God to knowing Him intimately doesn't happen instantly. It's a gradual reconstruction, a careful reorientation.

#### **Practical Steps for Reconstruction:**

##### **1. Distinguish Between Conviction and Condemnation**

The Holy Spirit convicts—specific, corrective, leading toward change. Condemnation accuses—vague, destructive, leading toward shame.

Conviction says: "You spoke harshly to your child. That's not who you are in Me. Apologize and ask for My help to change."

Condemnation says: "You're a terrible parent. You always mess up. You'll never change."

God convicts to restore. Abusive systems condemn to control.

## **2. Relearn Prayer as Conversation, Not Performance**

Prayer is not about saying the right words, praying long enough, or having proper form. It's conversation with a Father who delights in hearing your voice.

Start simply: "*God, I don't know how to talk to You anymore. I'm afraid. Can we start here?*"

He's not grading your prayers. He's listening to His child.

## **3. Read the Gospels Slowly**

Watch Jesus. How does He treat people? The desperate woman who interrupts dinner to cry at His feet? The disciples who constantly misunderstand? The Samaritan woman with five divorces? The paralyzed man lowered through a roof? The criminal dying beside Him?

Notice: He is gentle, patient, welcoming, gracious. *This* is God's heart. Not the harsh, controlling god of abusive systems, but the Jesus who says, "*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28, NASB).

## **4. Challenge Automatic Thoughts**

When you think, "God is disappointed in me," stop and ask: Is that true? Does Scripture actually teach that God's disposition toward His children is perpetual disappointment?

Replace the lie with truth: "*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1, NASB).

Your feelings are real and valid, but they are not necessarily accurate. Let Scripture correct your perception.

## **5. Experience Healthy Christian Community**

Find people who embody the true God—gracious, safe, truthful. Not perfect, but healthy. People who model what it looks like to follow Jesus without manipulation or control.

Sometimes we need human faces that reflect God's face accurately before we can trust God Himself.

Timothy Keller explains: "The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." Let this truth sink deep: simultaneously more broken than you thought, and more loved than you imagined.

### **The God Who Draws Near to the Broken**

*"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* — Psalm 34:18 (NASB)

This verse is not describing God's reluctant toleration of broken people. It's describing His intentional proximity. He draws *near*. He positions Himself close to the brokenhearted.

Why? Because brokenness doesn't repel Him—it attracts Him. Not because He delights in our pain, but because broken people are often the ones most willing to receive His help.

David understood this. The psalmist who wrote, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"* (Psalm 23:1) also wrote, *"Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord"* (Psalm 130:1). David knew both the heights of God's provision and the depths of desperate prayer. And in both places, he found God present.

You may feel that your brokenness disqualifies you from God's presence. The opposite is true. Your brokenness positions you to experience His nearness in ways you never could when you thought you had it all together.

Brennan Manning, a priest who struggled with alcoholism and understood brokenness intimately, wrote: "In every encounter Jesus had with broken people, He was gentle, understanding, and compassionate. But the proud, arrogant, and self-righteous made Him fighting mad."

If you are broken and humble, aware of your need, honest about your wounds—you are exactly the kind of person Jesus draws near to. The crushing

of your spirit is not evidence that God has abandoned you. It's the very thing that positions you to experience His saving presence.

### **The Anchor: God's Love Is Not Conditional**

Here is the truth that must become the bedrock of your reconstructed theology:

**God's love is not contingent upon your performance—it's anchored in His nature.**

You cannot make God love you more by serving more, praying more, or getting it right more. You cannot make God love you less by failing, doubting, or questioning. His love is not a response to your behavior—it's an expression of His character.

*"God is love."* — 1 John 4:8 (NASB)

Not "God feels love when you deserve it." Not "God has love available if you qualify." God *is* love. It's not something He does; it's who He is.

*"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* — Romans 8:38–39 (NASB)

Nothing can separate you. Not your failure. Not your doubt. Not your anger at Him. Not your time away from church. Not your questioning. Not your wounds. *Nothing*.

This is not the god of abusive systems—the god whose love must be earned and can be lost. This is the God of Scripture, whose love is as unchanging as His nature.

C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, writes: "God is not merely mending, not simply restoring a status quo. Redeemed humanity is to be something more glorious than unfallen humanity would have been." God is not trying to get you back to where you were before the abuse. He's taking you somewhere better—

to a place where you know, deeply and unshakably, that His love is not performance-based but grace-given.

## **Reflection**

The journey of healing your image of God is not quick. You cannot simply decide to see Him differently and have it be so. The distortions run deep. The fears are visceral. The old patterns of thinking are well-worn.

But healing is possible. One truth at a time, one Scripture at a time, one gentle encounter at a time, you can rebuild.

Start here: The God of the universe is not angry at you. He is not disappointed in you. He is not distant from you. He is not waiting for you to get it right before He loves you.

He is the Father running toward you while you're still a long way off. He is the Shepherd searching for the one lost sheep. He is the God who draws near to the brokenhearted.

And He is inviting you—not to perform, but to rest. Not to earn, but to receive. Not to prove yourself, but to be yourself.

The false god of abusive systems has no power here. That god was never real. It was a distortion, a counterfeit, a lie wrapped in religious language.

The true God—the Father of Jesus Christ, the One who inspired Scripture, the One whose Spirit dwells in you—this God is love. And His love is not contingent upon your performance.

It's anchored in His nature.

And His nature never changes.

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## **Prayer:**

*Father, I confess that I don't know You as well as I thought I did. The god I learned to fear in that abusive system is not You. But I'm struggling to separate*

*the two. Show me who You really are. Not through the filter of hurt, but through the truth of Your Word and the person of Jesus. I'm afraid to trust You—afraid You're as harsh and controlling as they said. Prove to me gently, patiently, that You're not. Teach me to see You as the Father who runs toward His broken children, not away from them. Replace my fear with Your grace. Restore intimacy where there has been distance. Heal my image of You, Father, because until I see You clearly, I cannot fully heal. Thank You for being near to the brokenhearted. Please be near to me now. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Chapter 8: Discerning the Shepherd's Voice Again

### Theme: Hearing God without distortion

**Key Verse:** *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."* — John 10:27 (NASB)

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After spiritual abuse, one of the most disorienting losses is the ability to hear God's voice with clarity.

You used to pray with confidence. You sensed His leading. You knew—or at least believed you knew—when He was speaking and when He wasn't. But now? Now everything is muddled. Every impression is suspect. Every sense of direction is questioned. Did God say that, or did I make it up? Is this the Spirit's conviction or just residual guilt from the abuse? Is this His call or am I being manipulated again?

The confusion is maddening. And it's compounded by the promises of Scripture that seem unreachable: *"My sheep hear My voice."* But what if you can't? What if the voice you thought was His turned out to be someone else's? What if you followed what you believed was His leading straight into spiritual abuse?

How do you learn to trust your discernment again? How do you distinguish God's voice from the echoes of manipulation still reverberating in your mind? How do you hear Him without the distortion?

**"Spiritual maturity is the ability to discern God's voice from all others."** — Dallas Willard

This ability is not lost forever, even though it feels that way now. It can be rebuilt. But the rebuilding requires patience, practice, and most importantly—truthful understanding of what God's voice actually sounds like versus what you were told it sounded like.

This chapter is about relearning spiritual discernment. Not quickly, not perfectly, but genuinely. Learning to recognize the Shepherd's true voice so that when He speaks, you know—not because someone told you what He's saying, but because you've learned His tone, His character, His way of leading.

### **The Confusion: When All Voices Sound Like God**

Spiritual abuse creates a cacophony of voices all claiming divine authority:

- The pastor says, "God told me you need to..."
- The Bible study leader says, "I sense the Spirit leading us to..."
- The worship team declares, "God is saying to this congregation..."
- Your own internal voice, trained by years in the system, says, "God is disappointed in you..."

All of these voices sound spiritual. They use biblical language. They invoke God's name. And after enough repetition, they become indistinguishable from what you believe is God's actual voice.

Then you leave the abusive system, and suddenly you realize: you don't know how to hear God without those mediating voices. You don't know if you've ever actually heard Him directly, or if you've only ever heard interpretations of what others claimed He was saying.

This realization is both terrifying and liberating. Terrifying because it leaves you feeling spiritually deaf. Liberating because it means you can start fresh—learning to hear Him without the distortion of others' agendas.

Eugene Peterson describes this well: "We live in a world of illusions. The world flashes gaudy images at us, that 'this is life!' But it is all lies. God is the source of true life. The way we keep holding on to the reality of God is by paying attention to what he says and does as it is revealed in Scripture."

The question is: how do we learn to pay attention correctly?

### **The Characteristics of God's True Voice**

Before we can discern God's voice, we need to understand what it actually sounds like. Not what abusive systems told you it sounds like, but what Scripture reveals about how He communicates.

### **1. God's Voice Is Gentle, Not Harsh**

When God speaks, His tone is not harsh, condemning, or cruel. Even when He corrects, He does so gently.

*"A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish."* — Isaiah 42:3 (NASB)

Jesus, the perfect revelation of God's character, was gentle with broken people. When He encountered the woman caught in adultery—someone caught in the very act of sin—He did not condemn her. He protected her, dismissed her accusers, and then said, *"I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more"* (John 8:11, NASB).

Notice the order: first, assurance of no condemnation. Then, the call to change.

If you're hearing a voice that leads with condemnation, harshness, or shame—that is not God's voice. It may be the voice of your internalized abuser, the voice of the Enemy, or the voice of your own wounded conscience. But it is not the voice of the Good Shepherd.

### **2. God's Voice Brings Freedom, Not Bondage**

*"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."*  
— 2 Corinthians 3:17 (NASB)

God's voice leads toward freedom—freedom from sin's power, freedom from fear, freedom to become who He created you to be. It does not lead you into new forms of bondage, anxiety, or control.

If what you're hearing produces chronic anxiety, a sense of being trapped, or compulsive behavior, pause and question the source. God's voice might call you to hard things, but it will not enslave you.

### **3. God's Voice Aligns with Scripture**

The Holy Spirit will never contradict the written Word of God. This is your primary test for discernment.

*"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."* — 2 Timothy 3:16 (NASB)

If someone claims God is leading them to do something that violates Scripture—if it contradicts His revealed character, His commands, or His values—it is not God speaking, no matter how spiritual it sounds.

This is why knowing Scripture is essential to discernment. You cannot test voices against a standard you don't know.

### **4. God's Voice Produces the Spirit's Fruit**

*"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."* — Galatians 5:22–23 (NASB)

When you follow God's leading, over time you see these fruits in your life. Not instantly, not perfectly, but progressively.

If what you believe is God's voice consistently produces the opposite—anxiety instead of peace, harshness instead of kindness, chaos instead of self-control—you're likely following a counterfeit voice.

### **5. God's Voice Respects Your Agency**

God invites. He doesn't coerce. Even when He calls Abram to leave his homeland, He invites: *"Go forth from your country"* (Genesis 12:1). When He calls Moses at the burning bush, Moses questions Him—and God patiently answers (Exodus 3–4). When Jesus called His disciples, He said, *"Follow Me"* (Matthew 4:19)—an invitation, not a command that overrides their will.

God treats you as a person with the capacity to choose, not a puppet to be controlled. His voice appeals to your reason, your conscience, your will. It does not bypass your personhood.

### **6. God's Voice Is Confirmed Through Multiple Witnesses**

God rarely gives major direction through a single source. He confirms through:

- Scripture
- The counsel of wise, healthy believers
- Circumstances
- Internal peace
- Time

If you have a "word from the Lord" but it's contradicted by Scripture, opposed by every wise person you talk to, impossible given your circumstances, and produces internal turmoil—it's probably not from the Lord.

Conversely, when something is truly God's leading, you typically see confirmation through multiple channels. Not always perfectly or all at once, but over time, the pattern becomes clear.

A.W. Tozer wisely noted: "God will not hold us responsible to understand the mysteries of election, predestination, and the divine sovereignty. The best and safest way to deal with these truths is to raise our eyes to God and in deepest reverence say, 'O Lord, Thou knowest.'" Similarly, when we're uncertain about God's voice, we can simply say, "Lord, please make this clear to me," and trust Him to do so.

### **How Manipulation Distorts God's Voice**

Understanding manipulation helps you recognize it when it masquerades as God's voice:

#### **Manipulation Says:**

- "God told me you need to..." (claiming access to God's will for your life)
- "If you don't obey immediately, you'll miss God's best" (creating urgency and panic)
- "This doesn't make sense to you because God's ways are higher" (shutting down discernment)

- "You're hearing from the flesh, not the Spirit" (gaslighting your conscience)
- "God is testing your obedience" (explaining away red flags)

### **God's Voice Says:**

- "I am leading you..." (direct communication, not through human mediators)
- "Wait on the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage" (patience, not panic)
- "Test all things; hold fast to what is good" (inviting discernment)
- "My sheep hear My voice" (affirming your capacity to hear Him)
- "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go" (clarity, not confusion)

### **God's voice draws you closer; manipulation pushes you deeper into fear.**

If what you're hearing makes you feel increasingly anxious, small, confused, or controlled—it's not God. God's voice may challenge you, may call you to difficult obedience, may convict you of sin—but it will not terrorize you or make you feel crushed under impossible demands.

Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline*: "Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people." Learning to discern God's voice requires depth—the depth to sit with uncertainty, to wait for clarity, to resist the pressure of instant answers.

### **Relearning Spiritual Discernment: The Process**

Rebuilding discernment after manipulation is like learning to walk again after an injury. You need to start slowly, test each step, and gradually rebuild strength and confidence.

## **Step 1: Create Distance from Manipulative Voices**

You cannot learn to hear God clearly while still immersed in voices that distort His. This might mean:

- Taking a break from certain media, podcasts, or teachers
- Limiting contact with people who claim to speak for God into your life
- Reducing exposure to Christian content for a season
- Creating silence so you can hear your own thoughts again

This is not abandoning your faith—it's creating the space necessary to rebuild it on a solid foundation.

## **Step 2: Start with What You Know Is True**

When everything feels uncertain, anchor yourself in what you know for certain:

- God loves you (Romans 5:8)
- Jesus died for you (John 3:16)
- The Holy Spirit lives in you (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- Nothing can separate you from God's love (Romans 8:38–39)
- God's Word is trustworthy (Psalm 119:160)

These are the foundation stones. Build from here.

## **Step 3: Test Everything**

Paul commands: *"But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good"* (1 Thessalonians 5:21, NASB).

This is permission—even a command—to test. You are not being rebellious when you test voices claiming to speak for God. You're being obedient to Scripture.

Ask of every "word from God":

- Does this align with Scripture?
- Does this produce the fruit of the Spirit over time?
- Do wise, healthy people confirm this?
- Does this respect my agency or override it?
- Does this lead toward freedom or bondage?

#### **Step 4: Practice Listening in Low-Stakes Situations**

Don't start by trying to discern God's will for your life's direction. Start smaller:

- What Scripture passage should I read today?
- How should I respond to this person's need?
- What am I supposed to learn from this circumstance?

As you practice in smaller decisions, you rebuild confidence in hearing His voice in bigger ones.

#### **Step 5: Keep a Journal**

Write down what you believe God is saying. Include the date, the context, what you sensed. Then, over time, review. You'll begin to recognize patterns:

- What proved true?
- What was your own voice?
- What was fear or anxiety?
- What was the Enemy's lies?

This practice trains you to distinguish between the voices.

#### **Practices for Soul Rest and Clarity**

Discernment requires a quiet soul. You cannot hear the still, small voice when your inner world is chaotic. Here are practices that create the space for hearing:

## **Silence and Solitude**

*"Be still, and know that I am God."* — Psalm 46:10 (ESV)

The Hebrew word for "be still" (*raphah*) means to let go, to release, to stop striving. In silence, you let go of the need to figure everything out, the compulsion to have immediate answers, the pressure to hear something profound.

You simply... stop. And in the stopping, God speaks.

Start with five minutes. Sit in silence. Don't fill it with words. Don't panic if nothing "happens." The practice itself is valuable.

## **Scripture Meditation**

This is different from Bible study. Bible study is about understanding the text. Meditation is about letting the text understand you.

Choose a short passage. Read it slowly. Multiple times. Notice what catches your attention. What word or phrase do you keep returning to? Sit with it. Pray it. Let it speak to your situation.

*"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night."* — Joshua 1:8 (NASB)

Meditation allows God's Word to move from your head to your heart.

## **Sabbath Rest**

God built rest into the rhythm of creation. One day in seven to stop, to cease striving, to remember that the world does not depend on you.

Sabbath is both physical rest and spiritual practice. It's the weekly reminder that God is God and you are not. It's practicing trust that everything doesn't fall apart when you step back.

In rest, you remember what's true. And truth is the foundation of discernment.

## **Community Feedback**

You were not designed to discern alone. God gave you the Body of Christ for a reason.

Find two or three wise, healthy believers—people who know you, love you, but aren't controlled by you or controlling of you. Share what you believe God is saying. Ask for feedback.

*"Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory."* — Proverbs 11:14 (NASB)

Not every voice gets equal weight. But healthy voices speaking biblical truth can help you see blind spots and confirm what the Spirit is saying.

### **The Promise: My Sheep Hear My Voice**

*"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."* — John 10:27 (NASB)

This is not a promise for super-spiritual people. It's a promise for sheep—ordinary, everyday followers of Jesus.

Notice what Jesus says: *"My sheep hear My voice."* Not "might hear" or "could hear if they try hard enough." They *hear*. It's part of what it means to be His sheep.

And notice what comes next: *"I know them."* Before they do anything, before they prove anything, He knows them. The relationship is established not by their hearing, but by His knowing.

Then: *"they follow Me."* Following is the result of hearing, not the prerequisite for it.

You don't have to earn the ability to hear His voice. If you belong to Him, you already have it. What you need is to relearn how to recognize it—to distinguish it from the other voices clamoring for your attention.

Brennan Manning writes: "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion." When you know you are beloved—deeply, unshakably beloved—you can hear His voice more clearly

because you're not listening with the desperation of someone trying to earn love. You're listening as a child who knows they are already loved.

### **The Shepherd Who Searches**

While you are learning to hear His voice, remember: He is not waiting in silence for you to get it right. He is actively pursuing you.

*"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?"* — Luke 15:4 (NASB)

He is the Shepherd who searches. If you feel lost, if you can't hear His voice, if discernment feels impossible—He is searching for you. He is calling to you. And He will not stop until you hear.

### **Reflection**

Learning to hear God's voice again takes time. You will make mistakes. You will sometimes confuse your own thoughts with His voice. You will occasionally follow what turns out to be fear or manipulation rather than divine leading.

That's part of the learning process. God is patient with the process. He knows you're rebuilding. He knows you're wounded. And He is gentle with those who are relearning to trust.

Start small. Test everything. Create space for silence. Immerse yourself in Scripture. Seek wise counsel. And trust that the Shepherd who promises His sheep will hear His voice is faithful to that promise.

Your discernment is not broken forever. It's being rebuilt—stronger, wiser, more grounded in truth than it ever was before the abuse.

And one day, you will hear His voice with clarity again. Not because you mastered a technique, but because you know the Shepherd. And when you know Him, His voice is unmistakable.

**Prayer:**

*Jesus, You said Your sheep hear Your voice, but right now I feel deaf. I don't know how to distinguish Your voice from all the others. I'm afraid to trust what I'm hearing because I've been wrong before—or was told I was wrong when I was actually right. I need You to teach me to hear You clearly again. Give me patience for this process. Help me to be still. Open my eyes as I read Your Word. Surround me with wise people who can help me discern. And please, Good Shepherd, keep calling until I recognize Your voice again. I want to follow You, not echoes of manipulation or fear. Teach me Your voice. I'm listening. Amen.*

## Chapter 9: Healthy Authority and Authentic Community

### Theme: Rebuilding trust and learning what healthy leadership looks like

**Key Verse:** *"shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."* — 1 Peter 5:2–3 (NASB)

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After leaving spiritual abuse, you face a profound dilemma: you desperately need Christian community, yet the thought of trusting church leadership again feels impossible. You know isolation isn't the answer, but neither is walking blindly into another toxic situation.

How do you re-engage with the church when the church has wounded you? How do you recognize healthy authority when you've been conditioned to accept the unhealthy as normal? How do you build trust again without being naive?

These are not simple questions. And they require more than platitudes about "not all churches being like that" or "giving it another chance." You need concrete tools for discernment. You need to know what healthy actually looks like so you can recognize it—and equally important, so you can recognize its counterfeit.

**"True authority exists to serve, not to dominate."** — A.W. Tozer

This simple statement captures the essence of biblical leadership. Yet in practice, distinguishing serving from dominating isn't always obvious. Abusive leaders often use the language of service while exercising domination. They claim to serve while demanding to be served. They speak of humility while displaying arrogance.

This chapter is about learning to see past religious language to actual behavior. It's about understanding the characteristics of healthy spiritual communities and godly leadership. And it's about discovering that you can

engage with community and authority again—wisely, carefully, and with appropriate boundaries.

You don't have to choose between isolation and re-traumatization. There is a third way: discerning engagement with healthy community.

### **The Biblical Model: Servant Leadership**

Before we can identify healthy authority, we must understand God's design for it. Jesus makes this explicitly clear:

*"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."* — Mark 10:42–45 (NASB)

Jesus establishes a radical alternative to worldly leadership. In the world's system, power flows downward—those at the top dominate those below. But in God's Kingdom, authority exists for the benefit of those being led, not for the leader's benefit.

Notice what Jesus says about Himself: the Son of Man—the One with all authority—*did not come to be served*. If Jesus, who had every right to be served, instead served, how much more should human leaders follow this pattern?

Peter, writing to church leaders, echoes this:

*"shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."* — 1 Peter 5:2–3 (NASB)

Let's break down what Peter says healthy leadership looks like:

1. **Voluntary, not compulsory:** Leaders serve because they want to, not because they're forced or because it's a power grab.
2. **Eager, not for gain:** Their motivation is genuine care for people, not financial benefit, status, or control.
3. **Not lording over:** They don't dominate, manipulate, or rule with an iron fist.
4. **Leading by example:** They live what they teach. They don't demand from others what they don't demonstrate themselves.

This is the standard. Any leadership that deviates from this pattern, regardless of how spiritual it sounds, is not biblical leadership.

### **Marks of a Grace-Centered Community**

What does a healthy, grace-centered church actually look like? Here are the characteristics that distinguish authentic community from toxic systems:

#### **1. Humility: Leaders Are Teachable**

In healthy communities, leaders:

- Admit when they're wrong
- Welcome questions and feedback
- Acknowledge their limitations
- Speak about their own ongoing growth and struggles
- Don't position themselves as having "arrived" spiritually

Paul writes: "*Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves*" (Philippians 2:3, NASB). This applies to leaders especially. They are to regard those they lead as important, not as inferior or as resources to be used.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed: "It is very easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements in comparison with what we owe others." Healthy

leaders recognize they owe much to others and don't overestimate their own importance.

## **2. Accountability: No One Is Above Question**

Healthy churches have:

- Clear structures of accountability for all leaders
- Multiple leaders (eldership, not one-man rule)
- Financial transparency
- Processes for addressing concerns
- Outside accountability (denominational structures, boards with non-staff members)
- A track record of addressing problems rather than covering them up

The absence of accountability is one of the clearest red flags. When someone says, "I answer only to God" or "You can't question my authority," they have abandoned biblical leadership.

Scripture commands: *"Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses"* (1 Timothy 5:19, NASB). This verse protects leaders from false accusations, but notice—it also provides a process for receiving accusations. Leaders are not immune to accountability.

## **3. Transparency: Honesty About Reality**

Grace-centered communities are characterized by:

- Honest communication about church health, finances, and decisions
- Leaders who share their real lives, not just curated versions
- Permission to ask questions and receive honest answers
- Acknowledgment when things aren't going well
- Admission of past mistakes

Abusive systems thrive on secrets and image management. Healthy systems operate in the light.

*"But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."* — 1 John 1:7 (NASB)

Walking in the light means being honest about reality—both successes and struggles. It means leaders don't hide behind a facade of perfection.

#### **4. Safety: People Can Be Honest Without Punishment**

In healthy communities:

- People can express doubts without being labeled
- Questions are welcomed, not punished
- Disagreement is seen as normal, not as divisiveness
- Vulnerable disclosures are held confidentially
- Mistakes are opportunities for growth, not occasions for shame

Ruth Haley Barton writes: "The spiritual life is not about becoming more religious; it is about becoming more human, more ourselves—the selves God intended." Healthy communities create space for people to become themselves, not to perform a role.

#### **5. Grace: The Gospel Shapes Everything**

Grace-centered communities are marked by:

- Emphasis on what Christ has done, not just what we must do
- Rest and Sabbath rather than constant activity
- Acceptance of people in process, not demands for immediate perfection
- Forgiveness that's freely given and freely received
- Joy and freedom rather than fear and obligation

Paul declares: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8–9, NASB). If a church talks about grace but operates on works-based acceptance, it has abandoned the gospel.

## **6. Service: Meeting Needs Without Strings Attached**

Healthy churches serve:

- Without expecting something in return
- The vulnerable and marginalized, not just those who can give back
- With compassion rather than judgment
- In ways that empower rather than create dependency
- Because of love, not to earn favor or status

Jesus' example is clear: He washed feet. He touched lepers. He fed crowds. He healed without requiring allegiance first. Healthy churches follow this pattern.

## **7. Truth: Scripture Is the Authority, Not Personality**

In grace-centered communities:

- The Bible is taught in context, not proof-texted for agendas
- Leaders submit to Scripture, not the other way around
- Teaching can be tested and questioned
- Multiple teachers and perspectives are valued
- The focus is on knowing Jesus, not elevating human leaders

John Stott wrote: "We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior." Healthy churches allow Scripture to confront everyone, including—especially—leaders.

## **Red Flags: Warning Signs of Unhealthy Authority**

Just as important as recognizing healthy authority is identifying its counterfeit. Here are warning signs that should give you pause:

**Red Flag #1: Charismatic Leadership Over Shared Leadership** One

dynamic personality dominates rather than a plurality of leaders sharing authority.

**Red Flag #2: Criticism Is Labeled as "Divisive" or "Having a Wrong Spirit"**

Legitimate concerns are dismissed without being addressed.

**Red Flag #3: Leaders Live Differently Than They Teach** Rules apply to members but not to leadership. "Do as I say, not as I do."

**Red Flag #4: Emphasis on Loyalty to Leadership Over Loyalty to Christ**

Phrases like "you need to be submitted to this house" or "you're either with us or against us."

**Red Flag #5: Financial Secrecy or Pressure** No financial transparency, or constant emphasis on giving to the point of manipulation.

**Red Flag #6: Isolation from Other Churches or Perspectives** You're told this is the only place with true teaching, or discouraged from reading/listening to other voices.

**Red Flag #7: Leaders Claim Special Access to God** "God told me..." used to shut down discussion or override your conscience.

**Red Flag #8: Love-Bombing Followed by Devaluation** Initial overwhelming welcome followed by criticism or coldness if you don't comply.

**Red Flag #9: Your Gut Says Something Is Wrong** Don't dismiss your instincts. If something feels off, investigate rather than suppressing that feeling.

Timothy Keller wisely notes: "The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me." Any system that emphasizes flaw without equal emphasis on love and value has lost the gospel.

## **The Role of Boundaries—Even in Healthy Communities**

One of the most important lessons after spiritual abuse is this: even in healthy communities, you need boundaries.

Boundaries are not walls that keep people out. They are property lines that clarify where you end and others begin. They protect your time, energy, emotional health, and conscience.

### **Healthy Boundaries in Church Include:**

**Saying No Without Guilt** You can decline to serve on a committee, volunteer for an event, or take on another responsibility. "No" is a complete sentence.

**Protecting Your Schedule** Church activities are good, but they are not the only good thing. Family, rest, friendships outside church, and solitude are also important.

**Maintaining Outside Relationships** Your entire social life should not revolve around one church. Healthy churches encourage friendships and connections beyond their walls.

**Questioning Without Fear** You can ask why things are done a certain way, question theological positions, or express disagreement respectfully.

**Leaving If Necessary** Even a healthy church might not be the right fit for you. You can leave without drama, explanation, or guilt.

**Protecting Your Conscience** If you're asked to do something that violates your conscience, you can say no—even in a healthy church.

Henry Cloud and John Townsend write in *Boundaries*: "When we begin to set boundaries with people we love, a really hard thing happens: they hurt. They may feel a hole where you used to plug it up... But remember: we can't really love others unless we love in freedom."

Setting boundaries is an act of love—love for yourself and ultimately love for the community, because boundaries make sustainable relationships possible.

## **Healthy Leaders Point to Jesus, Not to Themselves**

This is perhaps the most important distinguishing mark: **healthy leaders point you to Jesus, not to themselves.**

Unhealthy leaders:

- Make themselves indispensable
- Position themselves as the primary source of spiritual insight
- Create dependency on their approval and guidance
- Take credit for people's growth
- Become defensive when their authority is questioned

Healthy leaders:

- Work themselves out of a job by equipping others
- Point to Scripture as the authority
- Encourage people to develop their own relationship with God
- Celebrate when people grow and sometimes grow beyond them
- Welcome feedback and accountability

John the Baptist modeled this perfectly: "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30, NASB). Healthy leaders understand their role is to point to Jesus and then step out of the way.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "The humility that cringes in order that reproof may be escaped or favor obtained is as evil as the pride that makes us fearful of being wrong or being criticized." True humility in leadership doesn't cringe or manipulate—it simply points beyond itself to Christ.

## **Taking Your Time: The Wisdom of Slow Re-Engagement**

After spiritual abuse, you may feel pressure—from yourself or others—to "get back in church" quickly. Resist this pressure. Wisdom moves slowly.

### **Give Yourself Permission To:**

- Visit multiple churches before committing to one
- Attend for months before joining or serving
- Ask lots of questions before getting involved
- Leave a service early if you feel triggered
- Take breaks when you need them
- Seek professional counseling as you navigate re-engagement

### **Warning Signs to Watch For In Yourself:**

- Jumping quickly into leadership or service
- Ignoring red flags because you're desperate for community
- People-pleasing to gain acceptance
- Suppressing doubts or concerns
- Isolating your church involvement from other relationships

Healing is not linear. Some weeks you'll feel ready to engage; other weeks you'll need to pull back. Both are okay. Trust the process.

### **The Promise: The Church as God Intended**

Despite all the pain caused by the church's failures, God's design for Christian community is beautiful and worth pursuing.

The church, at its best, is:

- A place where the lonely find family
- A community where the broken find healing
- A space where doubters can ask questions
- A refuge for those the world rejects
- A training ground for disciples

- A launching pad for mission
- A foretaste of heaven

Paul describes it this way: "*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household*" (Ephesians 2:19, NASB).

God's household. Not a corporation. Not an institution. Not a performance hall. A family—imperfect, messy, but held together by grace.

This is worth searching for. Not naively, not desperately, but hopefully.

## **Reflection**

You can trust again. Not blindly, not quickly, not without wisdom—but you can trust.

Healthy spiritual authority exists. Grace-centered communities are real. Leaders who point to Jesus rather than themselves are out there.

Your past does not condemn you to a future without community. It equips you with discernment to recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy.

As you move forward, remember:

- Take your time
- Trust your instincts
- Set boundaries
- Ask questions
- Look for fruit, not just words
- Seek accountability and transparency
- Prioritize grace over performance

And know this: the God who designed community and authority hasn't given up on either one. He is faithful to lead you to a place where you can flourish—

a community where authority serves, where grace abounds, where Jesus is central.

That place exists. And it's worth the careful search to find it.

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**Prayer:**

*Father, I want to trust again, but I'm afraid. I've been hurt by those who claimed to speak for You, and I don't know how to recognize healthy leadership anymore. Give me wisdom to discern between healthy and unhealthy authority. Help me to see red flags clearly and not dismiss them. Lead me to a community where grace is real, where leaders point to Jesus, where I can heal and grow. Give me courage to set boundaries even in healthy places. And please, Lord, restore my hope that authentic Christian community exists and that I can be part of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## **Chapter 10: Forgiveness Without Reconciliation — Releasing What God Never Asked You to Carry**

### **Theme: Healing without minimizing harm**

**Key Verse:** *"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."* — Romans 12:19 (NASB)

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Perhaps no topic in spiritual abuse recovery is more misunderstood—or more weaponized—than forgiveness.

You've likely heard it: "You need to forgive and move on." "Forgiveness means letting it go." "If you don't forgive, you're the one in sin now." "True Christians forgive quickly and completely." And the most damaging: "Forgiveness means reconciling with those who hurt you."

These statements sound spiritual. They use biblical language. But they often do more harm than healing because they conflate biblical forgiveness with cheap grace that protects abusers and re-traumatizes victims.

Here is a truth that may be new to you: **Forgiveness does not require reconciliation. You can forgive someone without ever speaking to them again. You can release anger without re-entering a toxic relationship. You can choose to let God handle justice without minimizing what was done to you.**

**"Forgiveness is not trusting the abuser; it's trusting God with justice."** — Dr. Leslie Vernick

This distinction is crucial. Forgiveness is about your internal release of the debt. Reconciliation is about the restoration of relationship. The first requires only you. The second requires both parties, genuine repentance, changed behavior, and safety.

Conflating these two leads to profound harm: victims are pressured to return to abusive situations in the name of "forgiveness," boundaries are labeled as "unforgiveness," and self-protection is called "sin."

This chapter is about understanding what forgiveness actually is—and what it isn't. It's about discovering the freedom that comes from releasing what God never asked you to carry. And it's about learning that you can forgive without re-entering a cycle of harm.

## **What Biblical Forgiveness Actually Is**

Before we can understand what forgiveness requires, we must understand what it actually means in Scripture.

The Greek word most commonly translated "forgive" in the New Testament is *aphiēmi*, which means "to send away," "to release," or "to let go." It's the image of releasing a debt, canceling what is owed, choosing not to exact payment for what was taken.

Biblical forgiveness means:

### **1. Releasing the Debt**

When you forgive, you release the person from owing you what they can never repay anyway. They cannot give you back the years lost to spiritual abuse. They cannot undo the damage to your faith. They cannot restore what was taken.

Forgiveness is acknowledging this reality and choosing to release them from the impossible debt, entrusting justice to God rather than carrying the burden of vengeance yourself.

### **2. Choosing Not to Use Their Sin Against Them**

Forgiveness means you will not repeatedly bring up their offense, use it as ammunition, or leverage it to punish them. You release the right to hold it over their head.

This doesn't mean pretending it didn't happen. It means you're no longer wielding it as a weapon.

### **3. Desiring Good Rather Than Harm**

Paul writes: *"If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink"* (Romans 12:20, NASB). Forgiveness shifts your heart from wishing them harm to being willing for them to experience good—even if that good is the conviction that leads to their repentance.

This is radically different from being required to be in relationship with them or to provide that good directly at cost to yourself.

### **4. Trusting God with Justice**

*"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."* — Romans 12:19 (NASB)

Forgiveness is releasing your grip on vengeance and entrusting justice to God. This is perhaps the hardest part—believing that God will actually address the wrong, that He sees it, that He will handle it in His way and His timing.

Lewis B. Smedes writes: "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." Forgiveness frees you from the prison of bitterness, even when the person who harmed you remains unrepentant.

### **What Biblical Forgiveness Is NOT**

Understanding what forgiveness doesn't require is as important as understanding what it does:

#### **Forgiveness Does NOT Mean:**

**1. Minimizing or Denying the Harm** Forgiveness does not require saying "it wasn't that bad" or "they didn't mean it." What was done to you was real, it was wrong, and it caused genuine damage. Forgiveness acknowledges this reality rather than denying it.

**2. Immediately Feeling No Pain** Forgiveness is a decision of the will that often precedes the healing of emotions. You can choose to forgive while still grieving the loss, while still angry about what was taken, while still in pain. Forgiveness doesn't erase the wound instantly.

**3. Forgetting What Happened** The phrase "forgive and forget" is not biblical. You cannot—and should not—erase your memory of what happened. Your memory protects you. It helps you recognize warning signs. It informs your boundaries.

What forgiveness does is remove the emotional charge over time, so the memory becomes less dominating.

**4. Trusting the Person Again** Forgiveness is free; trust must be earned. You can forgive someone completely and still never trust them again. Trust is rebuilt through consistent, demonstrated change over time—not through a one-time declaration of forgiveness.

**5. Reconciling the Relationship** This is the most important distinction. Forgiveness is one-sided; you can do it alone. Reconciliation is two-sided; it requires both parties. Forgiveness is immediate (or at least initiated now); reconciliation is a process that requires repentance, change, and safety.

**6. Re-entering an Unsafe Situation** God does not require you to return to harm in the name of forgiveness. Protecting yourself is wisdom, not unforgiveness. Setting boundaries is healthy, not sinful.

**7. Never Feeling Angry Again** Forgiveness doesn't mean you won't occasionally feel fresh anger when you remember what happened or when you discover new layers of damage. These waves of emotion are normal and don't negate your forgiveness.

Corrie ten Boom, who forgave Nazi guards who tortured her and killed her sister, said: "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart." Your feelings don't have to cooperate immediately for your forgiveness to be real.

## Why Reconciliation Requires Repentance and Safety

Scripture makes it clear that while we are commanded to forgive, we are not commanded to reconcile with everyone.

Paul writes: *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men"* (Romans 12:18, NASB). Notice the qualifiers: *"if possible"* and *"so far as it depends on you."* Paul acknowledges that peace with everyone is not always possible. Sometimes the other person refuses. Sometimes safety makes it unwise.

### Reconciliation Requires:

**1. Genuine Repentance** Not just an apology, but true repentance—a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior. Biblical repentance includes:

- Acknowledging the specific wrong
- Taking full responsibility without excuses
- Expressing genuine remorse for the harm caused
- Making restitution where possible
- Demonstrating sustained change in behavior

A simple "I'm sorry if you were hurt" is not repentance. That's deflection disguised as apology.

**2. Changed Behavior Over Time** Words are easy. Sustained change is hard. Reconciliation requires observing consistent, demonstrated change—not just promises of change.

*"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance."* — Matthew 3:8 (NASB)

Fruit takes time to grow. You have the right to wait and see if the fruit is real before considering reconciliation.

**3. Safety** If someone remains unsafe—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—reconciliation is neither wise nor required. God does not ask you to sacrifice your wellbeing or that of your family for the sake of reconciliation.

Jesus Himself didn't reconcile with everyone. He walked away from those who tried to kill Him (Luke 4:30). He didn't maintain close relationship with Judas after the betrayal. He set boundaries with the Pharisees who repeatedly rejected truth.

If Jesus practiced wisdom in relationships, so can you.

### **When Reconciliation May Be Appropriate:**

- The person has genuinely repented
- Their behavior has demonstrably changed over time
- They have made restitution where possible
- They accept responsibility without defensiveness
- They respect your boundaries
- The relationship can be restored without compromising your safety or wellbeing
- You have done your own healing work and can engage without being re-traumatized
- The Holy Spirit confirms this is the right path

Notice: even when all these conditions are met, reconciliation is still *optional*, not required. You may choose not to reconcile, and that is a valid choice.

Dan B. Allender writes: "Forgiveness is not pretending the past didn't occur. It involves an honest appraisal of what did occur and a choice to extend grace in spite of what was done." But grace doesn't require restoring a relationship that was fundamentally broken by abuse.

### **Coerced Forgiveness: The Secondary Abuse**

Perhaps nothing compounds the trauma of spiritual abuse more than being pressured to "forgive" in ways that Scripture doesn't require.

Coerced forgiveness looks like:

- Being told you must forgive immediately or you're in sin
- Being pressured to reconcile before there's repentance
- Being required to forget or minimize what happened
- Being told your boundaries are evidence of unforgiveness
- Being made to feel guilty for protecting yourself
- Being told that if you were truly spiritual, you'd be "over it by now"

This is not biblical teaching about forgiveness—it's manipulation designed to silence victims and protect abusers.

Neil T. Anderson observes: "True forgiveness does not deny the harmful actions of others. It acknowledges the debt and chooses to cancel it." When churches pressure victims to skip the "acknowledging the debt" part and jump straight to "canceling it," they create what's called "cheap grace"—grace that costs the victim everything and the abuser nothing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against this in *The Cost of Discipleship*: "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." True forgiveness acknowledges the cost of sin, doesn't minimize it, and entrusts justice to God.

### **The Emotional Freedom of Releasing Bitterness**

While forgiveness doesn't require reconciliation, it does offer something profoundly valuable: freedom from the prison of bitterness.

Bitterness is what happens when legitimate anger at injustice curdles into something that poisons your own soul. It's when your pain becomes your identity, when rehearsing the offense becomes a compulsion, when your abuser occupies more space in your head than the people you love.

*"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled."* — Hebrews 12:15 (NASB)

Notice: the writer doesn't say "don't be angry about injustice." He warns against allowing a *root* of bitterness to take hold—the kind that springs up and spreads, defiling not just you but those around you.

### **Bitterness Vs. Righteous Anger**

#### **Righteous Anger:**

- Is specific to the offense
- Motivates justice and change
- Diminishes over time
- Doesn't consume your entire life
- Can coexist with forgiveness

#### **Bitterness:**

- Colors everything
- Seeks revenge
- Grows over time
- Becomes your identity
- Cannot coexist with forgiveness

You can be angry about what happened—deeply, legitimately angry—without being bitter. The difference is in what you do with the anger. Do you bring it to God? Do you let it motivate healthy change? Or do you nurse it, rehearse it, and let it grow?

### **The Process of Release**

Forgiveness is often not a single decision but a process. You may need to forgive the same person multiple times—not because your initial forgiveness was inadequate, but because you discover new layers of hurt or because the anger resurfaces.

Corrie ten Boom describes this: "Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness."

The release comes gradually:

- First, you decide to forgive (an act of will)
- Then, you bring the pain to God repeatedly (prayer)
- Over time, the emotional intensity diminishes (healing)
- Eventually, you can remember without being controlled by the memory (freedom)

This process can't be rushed. Give yourself grace for how long it takes.

### **Trusting God with Justice**

One of the hardest aspects of forgiveness is releasing your grip on justice. You want to see the abuser held accountable. You want vindication. You want others to know the truth. You want consequences for the harm done.

These desires are not wrong. They reflect God's own heart for justice. But when you hold onto these desires so tightly that they consume you, when you take on the role of avenger, you step into a role that belongs only to God.

*"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."* — Romans 12:19 (NASB)

"Leave room" means step back. Create space. Let God be God.

This doesn't mean doing nothing. You can:

- Report criminal behavior to authorities
- Warn others who may be in danger
- Speak truth publicly when appropriate
- Advocate for systemic change

- Seek legal justice through proper channels

What you cannot do is take revenge—seeking to harm the person out of a desire to make them suffer.

### **What Does It Look Like to Trust God with Justice?**

#### **It Means Believing:**

- God sees what happened to you
- He will address it in His way and time
- His justice is more perfect than yours could ever be
- You can rest from the burden of making it right

#### **It Doesn't Mean:**

- God won't use you to pursue justice through proper channels
- You must be silent about what happened
- Abusers will never face earthly consequences
- You can't grieve that justice feels delayed

Philip Yancey writes: "Grace is free, yes, but it is not cheap. It cost God the life of His Son." Similarly, forgiveness is free for the forgiver but not because sin is cheap—it's because God Himself will handle the cost.

### **Living in the Freedom of Release**

What does life look like on the other side of forgiveness?

#### **You Know You've Begun to Forgive When:**

- You can tell your story without the same emotional intensity
- You genuinely hope for the person's repentance and restoration
- You're no longer consumed by thoughts of revenge
- You can set boundaries without guilt

- You feel freedom to move forward with your life
- You can pray for them without wishing them harm
- The memory no longer dominates your present

This doesn't all happen at once. It's a journey. But the destination is worth it: freedom from the weight of bitterness, from the prison of unforgiveness, from the exhaustion of carrying what God never asked you to carry.

Henri Nouwen beautifully describes this: "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

## Reflection

### **You can forgive without re-entering a cycle of harm.**

This is the truth you need to hold: forgiveness does not require you to be unsafe. It does not require you to reconcile with someone who hasn't repented. It does not require you to minimize what happened or to pretend it didn't hurt.

What forgiveness does require is this: releasing the debt to God, trusting Him with justice, and choosing not to let bitterness take root in your heart.

This is hard. It goes against every natural instinct for self-protection and justice. But it is also liberating because it removes from you a burden you were never meant to carry.

God is the judge. God is the avenger. God is the one who will set all things right. Your job is to release what happened into His hands and to walk forward into the freedom He offers.

You don't have to do this perfectly. You don't have to do it all at once. You don't have to do it on anyone else's timeline.

But when you're ready—when you've grieved enough, when you've received enough healing, when you've established enough safety—you can choose to release. Not for their sake primarily, but for yours.

Because the person you set free when you forgive is you.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, forgiveness feels impossible right now. What was done to me was real, it was wrong, and it caused genuine damage. I'm angry, I'm hurt, and part of me wants those who harmed me to suffer as I've suffered. But I also know that carrying this bitterness is destroying me from the inside. I want to be free. Help me to forgive—not in a way that minimizes what happened or forces reconciliation where there's no safety, but in a way that releases me from the prison of unforgiveness. I'm choosing, by an act of my will, to release this debt into Your hands. I trust You with justice, even when I can't see it. I trust You to address the wrong in Your way and Your time. Please heal the bitterness in my heart. Give me the freedom that comes from letting go. And thank You that Your grace is sufficient for this impossible task. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Chapter 11: Rebuilding Your Faith and Calling

### Theme: Discovering who you are outside institutional validation

**Key Verse:** *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."* — Philippians 1:6 (NASB)

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After leaving a spiritually abusive environment, one of the most disorienting experiences is discovering you don't know who you are anymore.

Your identity was so intertwined with your role in that system—worship leader, small group coordinator, children's ministry volunteer, faithful member—that when the role disappears, you feel like you disappear with it. Your sense of calling was so validated by that community's affirmation that when the affirmation stops, you wonder if the calling was ever real.

You stand in the rubble of what was, looking at the fragments of who you thought you were, and ask: *Who am I now? What am I called to? Was any of it real, or was I just performing a part assigned to me?*

These are not small questions. They go to the core of your identity and purpose. And they cannot be answered quickly or easily.

But here is what you must know: the loss of institutional validation is not the loss of your calling. The stripping away of roles and titles is not the stripping away of who you are in Christ. The silence of human voices does not mean God has gone silent.

**"Faith rebuilt after abuse is often deeper, more honest, and freer."** — Dr. Dan Allender

What feels like death is actually the beginning of resurrection. What looks like loss is making room for discovery. You are not starting over from nothing—you are peeling away what was never truly you to discover who you actually are

beneath the performance, beneath the expectations, beneath the need for institutional approval.

This chapter is about that discovery. It's about reconnecting with the person God created you to be, rediscovering gifts that were exploited or suppressed, and learning what it means to follow Jesus authentically rather than dependently.

### **The Identity Crisis: When the Role Disappears**

In abusive spiritual systems, your identity becomes fused with your function. You are:

- What you do for the church
- How much you serve
- How faithfully you attend
- How generously you give
- How visibly you display spiritual maturity

When that system is removed, the question becomes: *Who am I when I'm not defined by these things?*

This identity crisis is normal and necessary. You're not losing yourself—you're discovering that what you thought was yourself was actually a role you were playing. And beneath that role is a person God created with inherent worth, specific gifts, and a unique calling that exists completely independent of any institution's acknowledgment.

Paul addresses this directly:

*"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."* — Ephesians 2:10 (NASB)

Notice: you are God's workmanship—His masterpiece, His creation. Not the church's project. Not leadership's product. His.

And the good works? God prepared them *beforehand*—before any pastor affirmed you, before any system validated you, before any role was assigned to you. Your calling existed in God's mind before any human institution had a say in it.

## **The Difference Between Calling and Role**

This distinction is crucial:

**Role** is the specific position you occupy in a system. It's temporary, assigned, and dependent on the system's structure. When you leave the system or the system changes, the role disappears.

**Calling** is the overarching purpose God has woven into your life. It transcends specific roles. It moves with you from season to season, from community to community. It may express itself differently in different contexts, but the core remains.

For example:

- Your *role* might have been worship leader. Your *calling* is to create beauty that points people to God.
- Your *role* might have been Bible study teacher. Your *calling* is to help people understand truth.
- Your *role* might have been children's ministry coordinator. Your *calling* is to nurture and protect the vulnerable.

The role was context-specific. The calling is you-specific.

When the role is stripped away, the calling remains—even if it needs to be rediscovered, renamed, and expressed in new ways.

Frederick Buechner famously wrote: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Notice he doesn't say "the place a church assigns you to" or "the role a leader validates for you." He says the place *you* find deep gladness meeting the world's need.

Your calling is about that intersection—your authentic self with the world's genuine needs. Not your performed self with institutional expectations.

### **Reconnecting with the Holy Spirit's Personal Guidance**

In abusive systems, the Holy Spirit's guidance is often mediated through leaders. "God told me to tell you..." becomes the primary way you hear from Him. Over time, you lose confidence in your ability to hear Him directly.

Rebuilding your faith requires reestablishing direct communion with the Holy Spirit—learning to hear Him without human mediators, trusting His guidance without requiring external validation.

Jesus makes this promise:

*"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come."* — John 16:13 (NASB)

The Spirit guides you. Not your pastor, then you. Not your small group leader, then you. *You*, directly.

#### **Practices for Reconnecting:**

**1. Silent Listening** Create space with no agenda, no checklist, no pressure to hear something profound. Simply sit in God's presence and listen. Not every time will produce dramatic revelation, but over time, you learn to recognize His voice.

**2. Scripture Without Obligation** Read the Bible not to prepare a lesson, not to find a "word for today," but simply to encounter God. Let Scripture speak to you rather than mining it for application.

**3. Following Peace** Paul writes: *"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts"* (Colossians 3:15, NASB). The word "rule" means to act as an umpire. God's peace is often His way of indicating direction. When something is His will, there's a deep peace even in difficulty. When it's not, there's a persistent unease even when it looks good.

**4. Small Experiments** Practice following what you sense the Spirit saying in low-stakes situations. "I think I should call this person." "I sense I should give this amount." "I feel led to read this passage." Over time, you learn to recognize when you're actually hearing Him versus hearing your own thoughts or fears.

**5. Journaling Your Journey** Write what you're sensing, learning, feeling. Over time, patterns emerge. You begin to see how God has been faithful to guide even when you felt lost.

Andrew Murray wrote: "The man who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history." But before mobilizing anyone else, you must learn to pray yourself—authentically, directly, personally.

### **Discovering Gifts Apart from Performance**

In abusive systems, gifts are exploited. You serve not primarily because you're gifted and it brings you joy, but because there's a need and you're available. Over time, you lose touch with what actually gives you life versus what drains you.

Rebuilding requires rediscovering your gifts:

#### **True Gifts:**

**1. Energize Rather Than Deplete** When you operate in your gifting, even when it's hard work, it's life-giving. You finish tired but satisfied, not exhausted and resentful.

**2. Come Naturally** Gifts flow from who you are. You don't have to force them or fake them. Others recognize them in you before you do.

#### **3. Serve Others**

*"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."* — 1 Peter 4:10 (NASB)

Gifts are for service, but healthy service—service that flows from fullness, not obligation.

**4. Bring Glory to God** When you exercise your gifts authentically, others see Christ in you, not you performing Christianity.

### **Questions for Rediscovery:**

- What did I love before the abuse complicated everything?
- What do I do that makes time disappear because I'm so engaged?
- What do others affirm in me apart from my role?
- What breaks my heart in a way that motivates action?
- What would I do even if no one ever noticed or applauded?

Parker Palmer wisely observes: "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

Listen to your life. What has consistently shown up across contexts, across seasons? That's likely where your calling lies.

### **Living in Authentic Discipleship Rather Than Dependency**

Perhaps the most profound shift in rebuilding is moving from institutional dependency to authentic discipleship.

#### **Institutional Dependency:**

- Looks to human leaders for direction
- Bases spiritual maturity on visible metrics
- Requires constant external validation
- Defines success by institutional standards
- Makes decisions based on what leadership wants

#### **Authentic Discipleship:**

- Follows the Holy Spirit's leading

- Measures growth by internal transformation
- Finds validation in God's acceptance
- Defines success by faithfulness to calling
- Makes decisions based on what God is saying

This shift is terrifying at first. Dependency, while unhealthy, feels safe. You knew what was expected. You had clear metrics. You could measure whether you were "doing it right."

Authentic discipleship is messier. It requires discernment. It involves risk. It means sometimes standing alone. But it's also *real*—not performance, not pretense, but genuine relationship with God and genuine expression of who He created you to be.

*"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."* — Galatians 5:1 (NASB)

Freedom is the goal. Not freedom to do whatever you want, but freedom to become who God designed you to be, to follow where He leads, to serve from love rather than obligation.

Dallas Willard writes: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action." Authentic discipleship involves effort—the effort of paying attention to God, of growing in Christlikeness, of serving faithfully. But it's effort motivated by love and grace, not by the attempt to earn approval.

### **God's Faithfulness to Complete His Work**

In the midst of rebuilding, when everything feels uncertain and progress seems slow, anchor yourself in this promise:

*"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."* — Philippians 1:6 (NASB)

Read it again. Let it sink in:

**"He who began a good work in you"** — God started something in you. Not the church. Not the leadership. God. And what He starts, He finishes.

**"will perfect it"** — Not might. Not could. *Will*. It's a certainty.

**"until the day of Christ Jesus"** — The completion isn't tied to your timeline or your performance. It's tied to Christ's return. God has all the time He needs to complete what He started.

This means:

- Your calling didn't disappear when you left the abusive system
- The spiritual abuse hasn't derailed God's plan
- The time in the wilderness isn't wasted—it's part of the process
- God is still at work in you even when you can't see or feel it
- Your failures, your doubts, your questions don't invalidate His faithfulness

J.I. Packer writes: "God uses chronic pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as His chisel for sculpting our lives. Felt weakness deepens dependence on Christ for strength each day." The pain of spiritual abuse is not the end of your story. God is using even this to shape you into who He created you to be—perhaps more truly than ever before.

## **The Beauty of Faith Rebuilt**

**"Faith rebuilt after abuse is often deeper, more honest, and freer."** — Dr. Dan Allender

Why is this true?

### **Deeper**

Because you've been forced to examine the foundations. You can't coast on inherited beliefs or unquestioned assumptions. You've had to dig down to bedrock—what's actually true about God, about Scripture, about faith. What remains after that excavation is solid.

## **More Honest**

Because you've lost the ability to pretend. The religious facade has been shattered. You can't perform spiritual maturity anymore. All that's left is honest wrestling with God, honest acknowledgment of doubt, honest admission of pain. And paradoxically, that honesty is closer to true faith than all the performance was.

## **Freer**

Because you've discovered that God's love doesn't depend on your role, your performance, or any system's validation. You've learned you can question without being rejected, can rest without being condemned, can set boundaries without losing His love. That's freedom—the freedom to be authentically yourself before God.

This rebuilt faith may look different from what you had before. It may be quieter, more contemplative. It may express itself in smaller, less visible ways. It may not fit neatly into traditional church categories.

That's okay. In fact, that may be exactly what makes it real.

Thomas Merton observed: "The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them." God loves you perfectly as you are—not the version of you that fit the abusive system, but the real you. And He's inviting you to love yourself that way too.

## **Your Calling Cannot Be Revoked**

Here's a truth that may change everything:

**God's call is personal. No system can revoke what He has anointed you for.**

The abusive church may have told you you're not qualified, not submitted enough, not spiritual enough. They may have removed you from leadership, silenced your voice, or dismissed your gifts.

But listen: *they don't have that authority.*

*"For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."* — Romans 11:29 (NASB)

*Irrevocable.* Cannot be taken back. Cannot be canceled. Cannot be nullified by human decision.

What God has placed in you—the unique way He wired you, the specific burden He gave you, the particular way you reflect His image—none of that is subject to institutional approval or disapproval.

They can remove you from a role. They can refuse to validate your calling. They can exclude you from their system.

But they cannot—absolutely cannot—revoke what God has given you.

Your calling may need to find new expression. It may manifest differently outside that system. It may take time to rediscover and reclaim it.

But it hasn't disappeared. It's still there, waiting to be lived out in freedom.

### **Practical Steps for Rebuilding**

As you move forward, here are tangible steps:

**1. Give Yourself Time** Rebuilding takes longer than you think. Don't rush it. Rest is part of the process.

**2. Explore Without Pressure** Try things without the pressure to succeed or perform. Take a class. Volunteer for a cause you care about. Write, paint, create—not for an audience, but for yourself.

**3. Listen to Your Body** Your body holds wisdom. What brings you energy? What brings dread? Pay attention.

**4. Find a Guide (Not a Controller)** Look for a spiritual director, counselor, or mentor who helps you listen to God rather than telling you what God is saying.

**5. Journal Your Journey** Write about what you're discovering, what surprises you, what brings you life.

**6. Serve in Low-Stakes Ways** Find ways to serve that don't require joining an institution or submitting to authority structures. Serve a neighbor. Volunteer at a food bank. The Kingdom is bigger than the church.

**7. Be Patient with the Process** Some days will feel like progress. Others will feel like regression. Both are part of healing.

### **Reflection**

You are not who they said you were. You're not limited to the role they assigned you. You're not disqualified because they rejected you.

You are who God says you are: His beloved child, His workmanship, created for good works He prepared in advance for you.

The loss of institutional validation is not the loss of your calling. It's the removal of what was obscuring it. Now, in the quiet, in the wilderness, in the space between what was and what will be, you have the opportunity to discover who you actually are.

Not who you had to be to fit the system. Not who you performed being to gain approval. But who God created you to be from the very beginning.

That person is still there. Bruised, yes. Wounded, yes. But not destroyed. Not erased. Still there, still called, still loved.

And God, who began a good work in you, will be faithful to complete it.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, I feel lost. The roles are gone, the validation is gone, and I don't know who I am anymore. But I'm beginning to understand that maybe I never really knew who I was—I only knew who I had to be to survive in that system. Show me who I actually am. Show me the person You created before any system tried to shape me. Help me rediscover the gifts You gave me, the calling You placed in me, the purpose You designed for me. I trust that You who began a good work in me will complete it. Give me patience for this process. Give me*

*courage to explore. Give me freedom to become. Thank You that my calling cannot be revoked by human opinion. Thank You that I am Your workmanship, created for good works You prepared beforehand. Lead me into that calling, in whatever form it takes. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

## Chapter 12: When the Church Heals — Becoming Agents of Restoration

### Theme: Hope and redemption after spiritual trauma

**Key Verse:** *"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners... to comfort all who mourn... giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified. Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations; and they will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations."* — Isaiah 61:1–4 (NASB)

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You've journeyed through eleven chapters examining the wounds, understanding the dynamics, naming the abuse, and beginning the process of healing. And perhaps you've wondered: *Is there any hope for the church? Can something so broken be healed? Or should I just walk away and never look back?*

These are fair questions. The temptation to write off the church entirely is understandable. After all, it was the church that wounded you. Why would you invest any hope in its healing?

But here is what you must understand: **The church is not dead—it's being refined. And you, with your hard-won wisdom and your painful scars, are part of her redemption story.**

**"Healing people help heal the Church."** — Diane Langberg

This is not about putting the burden of fixing broken systems on your shoulders. You are not responsible for healing the entire church. But your healing—the wisdom you've gained, the truth you can speak, the discernment you've developed—can become a gift that serves others and contributes to the broader work of restoration God is doing.

This final chapter is about hope. Not naive hope that ignores reality, but grounded hope that sees what is and believes for what could be. It's about discovering that your story of pain can become a bridge for others' freedom. And it's about daring to believe that the church Jesus loves and died for is worth redeeming—even when she has failed so catastrophically.

## **The Vision: What a Healed Church Looks Like**

Before we can work toward healing, we need a vision of what we're working toward. What does a healed church actually look like?

Drawing from Scripture and from the characteristics we've explored throughout this book, here is the vision:

### **1. A Church Marked by Humility**

A healed church acknowledges its failures. Leaders don't pretend to have all the answers or position themselves as spiritually superior. They lead as fellow pilgrims, people in process, learning alongside those they serve.

*"Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." — 1 Peter 5:5 (NASB)*

Humility in the church means:

- Admitting mistakes and seeking forgiveness
- Creating space for questions and doubt
- Honoring the gifts and insights of all members, not just leaders
- Learning from past failures rather than repeating them
- Acknowledging the limits of human understanding

### **2. A Church Characterized by Compassion**

A healed church responds to hurting people the way Jesus did—with compassion, not judgment. It's safe for the broken, the struggling, the doubting. Weakness is not exploited but protected.

*"The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works." — Psalm 145:8–9 (NASB)*

Compassion means:

- Meeting people where they are, not where we think they should be
- Prioritizing care over programs
- Protecting the vulnerable, especially from those in power
- Creating space for grief, anger, and honest emotion
- Believing victims and taking reports of abuse seriously

### **3. A Church Committed to Truth**

A healed church values truth more than reputation. It doesn't cover up sin, protect abusers, or silence victims to preserve image. It operates in the light, believing that truth ultimately serves everyone.

*"But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." — 1 John 1:7 (NASB)*

Commitment to truth means:

- Transparent financial practices
- Clear processes for addressing concerns and complaints
- Accountability structures that actually function
- Willingness to invite outside investigation when needed
- Valuing integrity over image management

### **4. A Church Rooted in Grace**

A healed church understands the gospel—that we are saved by grace, not by works. This isn't just doctrine; it shapes the entire culture. People are free to

grow at their own pace, to rest without guilt, to serve from love rather than obligation.

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." — Ephesians 2:8–9 (NASB)*

A grace-centered church:

- Celebrates progress, not perfection
- Allows people to say no without penalty
- Makes Sabbath rest a priority
- Emphasizes God's love as foundational, not conditional
- Creates freedom, not control

## **5. A Church That Empowers Rather Than Controls**

A healed church equips people to hear God for themselves, to use their gifts, to follow their calling. It doesn't create dependency on leaders but fosters mature disciples who can think, discern, and lead.

*"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." — Ephesians 4:11–12 (NASB)*

Leadership exists "for the equipping," not for the controlling. Empowerment means:

- Training people to read Scripture for themselves
- Celebrating when people discover their gifts and calling
- Supporting people in following God's leading even when it takes them elsewhere
- Creating shared leadership rather than concentrated power

- Measuring success by maturity, not by attendance or compliance

Eugene Peterson writes: "The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them." A healed church understands it's not about being successful—it's about being faithful.

## **Using Your Story as a Bridge for Others' Freedom**

Your story matters. Not just to you, but to others who are where you once were—trapped, confused, hurting, and wondering if they're the only ones.

When you speak your truth, you do several things:

### **1. You Break the Silence**

Spiritual abuse thrives in silence. When victims stay silent out of fear, shame, or obligation, abusers continue unchallenged. Your voice breaks that silence.

This doesn't mean you must tell your story publicly or to everyone. But somewhere, somehow, your story needs to be told—to a counselor, to trusted friends, in a support group, perhaps eventually in wider circles.

### **2. You Validate Others' Experiences**

When you name what happened as abuse, you give others permission to name their own experiences. So many people endure spiritual abuse while telling themselves "it's not that bad" or "I must be too sensitive." Your story validates their reality.

### **3. You Offer Hope**

When people see you on the other side of spiritual abuse—healing, growing, rediscovering faith—it gives them hope that they too can survive and even thrive after leaving.

### **4. You Contribute to Change**

Individual stories, when told enough times, create pressure for systemic change. Churches, denominations, and Christian organizations have been forced to examine their practices because brave individuals told their stories.

Desmond Tutu observed: "There is no handy roadmap for how to find your way through pain. We must make the road by walking." Your willingness to walk this road and then point others toward healing is an act of profound courage.

### **Important Caveats:**

**You don't owe anyone your story.** Telling it is your choice, on your timeline, in ways that feel safe to you.

**Your story is not your only identity.** You are more than what happened to you. Don't let "survivor of spiritual abuse" become your entire identity.

**Boundaries are essential.** You can share your story without taking responsibility for everyone else's healing. You can point people toward resources without becoming their counselor. You can say "I'm not in a place to talk about this right now" without guilt.

**Healing comes first.** Don't share your story before you're ready. Make sure you're telling it from a place of strength, not a place of open wound.

### **Encouraging Accountability and Reform in Leadership**

Part of the church's healing requires addressing systemic issues that enable abuse. This isn't about vengeance—it's about creating structures that protect the vulnerable and hold leaders accountable.

#### **What Healthy Accountability Looks Like:**

**1. Multiple Leaders, Shared Authority** No single leader should have unchecked power. Biblical church leadership is plural (elders, not elder). Decisions should be made collectively, with checks and balances.

**2. Outside Oversight** Churches need accountability beyond their own leadership team—denominational structures, external boards, third-party reviews. Internal-only accountability inevitably protects the system.

**3. Clear Policies and Procedures** Written policies for:

- Reporting abuse or misconduct
- Investigating complaints
- Removing leaders when necessary
- Financial transparency
- Mandatory training on abuse prevention

**4. Safe Reporting Mechanisms** People must be able to report concerns without fear of retaliation. This often requires anonymous reporting options and third-party receivers of reports.

**5. Mandatory Training** All leaders and volunteers should receive training on:

- Recognizing and preventing spiritual abuse
- Healthy use of authority
- Boundaries in ministry relationships
- Responding appropriately to disclosures of abuse

**6. Consequences for Abuse** When abuse occurs, there must be real consequences—not just for legal liability, but for the harm done. This may include:

- Removal from leadership
- Public acknowledgment of what happened
- Restitution to victims where possible
- Requirements for restoration (therapy, supervision, demonstrated change over time)

**Your Role in Encouraging Reform:**

You can contribute to reform by:

- Advocating for policy changes in your current or former church

- Supporting organizations working for reform in church structures
- Speaking to media or regulatory bodies when appropriate
- Voting with your presence and resources for churches that demonstrate health
- Educating yourself and others about what healthy church looks like
- Connecting with others working toward the same goals

Chuck DeGroat writes: "The pathway to healing our toxic religious systems is, first and foremost, a pathway into our own hearts." Individual transformation contributes to systemic transformation.

### **The Ancient Ruins: Rebuilding What Was Broken**

Return to Isaiah 61—the passage Jesus read in the synagogue to announce His mission:

*"Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations; and they will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations."* — Isaiah 61:4 (NASB)

This is the vision: restoration so complete that ancient ruins are rebuilt, devastations are raised up, desolations of many generations are repaired.

Notice who does the rebuilding: *"they."* Not God alone—though it's His power that makes it possible. Not a special class of leaders. *They*—the people who have been comforted, who have received beauty for ashes, who have been called oaks of righteousness.

In other words: you.

The wounded, now healed, become the rebuilders. Those who received comfort become the comforters. Those who were set free become the liberators.

This is God's pattern throughout Scripture:

- Joseph, sold into slavery, becomes the one who saves his family

- Moses, rescued from death as an infant, becomes the deliverer of his people
- Ruth, a foreigner who lost everything, becomes part of the lineage of Christ
- David, the forgotten youngest son, becomes the king
- Paul, the persecutor of the church, becomes its greatest missionary

Your pain has not disqualified you. It has equipped you. The very wounds that nearly destroyed you can become wells of compassion for others. The wisdom gained through suffering can guide those still in darkness. The freedom you've found can inspire others to seek it.

### **Realistic Hope: Neither Naive Nor Cynical**

Hope for the church's healing is not:

- Believing every church will change
- Thinking abuse will disappear completely
- Expecting quick or easy transformation
- Trusting institutions blindly again

Hope for the church's healing is:

- Believing God is still at work despite human failure
- Knowing that some churches are healthy and more can become so
- Trusting that speaking truth contributes to change over time
- Participating in the slow work of reform while protecting yourself

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "The only real difference between Anxiety and Excitement was my willingness to let go of Fear." Hope requires willingness to let go of cynicism—not to become naive, but to remain open to the possibility of redemption.

Some churches will not change. Some leaders will not repent. Some systems are too far gone. And it's okay to acknowledge that and walk away from them.

But somewhere, there are churches learning, growing, repenting, and becoming healthier. There are leaders who humbly receive correction and change their practices. There are communities courageously addressing their failures and committing to do better.

These churches exist. And more can join them.

### **You Are Part of Her Redemption Story**

The church—the universal Body of Christ—is not dead. She's been wounded, yes. She's betrayed her calling in countless ways. She's caused enormous harm.

But she's also:

- Fed the hungry
- Clothed the poor
- Visited the imprisoned
- Cared for the sick
- Fought for justice
- Preserved truth through dark ages
- Produced saints, mystics, reformers
- Carried the gospel across cultures and centuries

She is simultaneously deeply flawed and eternally loved by Christ. And Christ is committed to her redemption, even when she seems beyond hope.

*"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or*

*wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." —*  
Ephesians 5:25–27 (NASB)

Jesus loves the church. He died for her. And He's working to present her to Himself holy and blameless—despite her current spots and wrinkles.

You are part of that work. Not because you're responsible for fixing everything. Not because you must return to toxic systems. But because:

- Your healing testifies to God's faithfulness
- Your discernment protects others from harm
- Your voice contributes to needed change
- Your presence in healthy community models what's possible
- Your compassion for other wounded people extends Christ's love

Brennan Manning writes: "In every encounter we either give life or we drain it; there is no neutral exchange." As you heal, you give life. Your very existence as someone who survived spiritual abuse and found faith on the other side is a testimony of hope.

### **The Invitation: From Victim to Agent of Restoration**

You began this book as a victim of spiritual abuse. That's the reality of what happened to you, and naming it was necessary.

But you don't have to stay a victim. Through healing, you become a survivor. Through growth, you become a thriver. And through using what you've learned to serve others, you become an agent of restoration.

This progression is not mandatory. You don't owe anyone your service, especially if you're still healing. But when you're ready, if you're called, there is a role for you in the church's healing:

- As one who speaks truth when others stay silent
- As one who recognizes warning signs and warns others

- As one who models healthy boundaries
- As one who advocates for the vulnerable
- As one who refuses to enable dysfunction
- As one who embodies the possibility of healing

Thomas Merton beautifully states: "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness." Even in the brokenness of the church, there is hidden wholeness waiting to emerge. You can be part of calling it forth.

### **Reflection**

The church hurt you. Deeply. That wound is real, and this book has not asked you to minimize it.

But the church is also larger than the people who hurt you. She is the Body of Christ—broken and beautiful, sinful and redeemed, failing and beloved.

She needs healing. And you, having been healed, can contribute to that healing. Not by carrying what isn't yours to carry. Not by fixing what you didn't break. But by:

- Being honest about what happened
- Living in the freedom you've found
- Pointing others toward health
- Supporting reform efforts
- Embodying grace and truth
- Trusting that God is not done with His church

The church isn't dead. She's being refined. And the refinement process includes people like you—people who have been through the fire, who know what it means to be wounded in God's name, who have chosen to heal rather than to harden.

Your story matters. Your healing matters. Your voice matters.

Welcome to the work of restoration. Not as one who must fix everything, but as one who, having received mercy, can extend it. As one who, having been set free, can point others toward freedom.

The ancient ruins are being rebuilt. And you are part of the team of rebuilders.

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### **Prayer:**

*Father, I never imagined my pain could become part of something redemptive. I've been so focused on surviving, on healing, on just getting through each day. But now I'm beginning to see that maybe—just maybe—You can use even this. Not because the abuse was good, but because You are faithful to bring beauty from ashes. Give me wisdom to know when and how to share my story. Give me courage to speak truth even when it's uncomfortable. Give me discernment to know where I can serve without re-traumatizing myself. And give me hope—real, grounded hope—that the church can be healed. Thank You for loving Your church despite her failures. Thank You for including me in her story of redemption. Use me as You will, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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### **Epilogue: The Road Ahead**

You've walked a difficult road. You've examined wounds that many would rather ignore. You've named what happened to you. You've begun the work of healing.

The road ahead is not perfectly clear. There will be setbacks and struggles. Some days you'll feel strong; others you'll feel the old pain resurface. That's normal. Healing is not linear.

But you are not where you were. You know more, you see more clearly, you're stronger than you were. And most importantly, you know this:

**God is not the author of your pain. He is the healer of it.**

**You can leave a church without leaving God.**

**Forgiveness doesn't require reconciliation.**

**Your calling cannot be revoked by human opinion.**

**Healthy church exists and is worth seeking.**

**The church is being refined, and you are part of her redemption story.**

Walk forward with confidence—not in yourself, not in any institution, but in the God who has been faithful through every dark valley and will be faithful still.

*"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."* — Psalm 147:3

(NASB)

He is healing you. And through your healing, He is healing His church.

May you find the freedom, peace, and wholeness that are yours in Christ. May you discover community where grace is real and love is genuine. May you use your voice to speak truth and your story to set others free. And may you know, deeply and unshakably, that you are beloved—not for what you do, but for who you are.

The journey continues. Walk it in hope.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.* — 2 Corinthians 13:14 (NASB)

## Personal Assessment: Where Am I in the Healing Journey?

### Introduction

Healing from spiritual abuse is not a linear process. You may find yourself in different stages in different areas of your life, or you may move back and forth between stages as new layers of healing emerge. This assessment is not meant to judge your progress or create pressure to "move faster." Instead, it's designed to help you:

- Recognize where you are
- Celebrate the progress you've made
- Identify areas that may need attention
- Release shame about wherever you find yourself

**There is no "right" timeline for healing.** Some people move through these stages quickly; others take years. Both are normal and valid.

**Instructions:** Read through each stage description and check the statements that resonate with your current experience. You may identify with multiple stages simultaneously—that's completely normal.

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### Stage 1: Crisis & Survival

**"I'm just trying to make it through each day."**

This is the immediate aftermath of leaving or recognizing spiritual abuse. You're in survival mode, and that's exactly where you need to be right now.

#### Common Experiences:

- [ ] I recently left or am considering leaving my church/spiritual community
- [ ] I feel emotionally overwhelmed much of the time

- [ ] I have physical symptoms (insomnia, digestive issues, headaches, panic attacks)
- [ ] I'm questioning everything I believed about God, faith, and church
- [ ] I feel numb, disconnected, or like I'm moving through fog
- [ ] I'm experiencing grief that comes in waves
- [ ] I isolate myself because it feels safer than being around people
- [ ] I have intrusive thoughts or memories about what happened
- [ ] I can't imagine ever trusting a church or spiritual leader again
- [ ] I'm struggling with basic daily functions (work, relationships, self-care)
- [ ] I feel guilty for leaving or for having negative feelings about the church
- [ ] I'm afraid of God's punishment or spiritual consequences for leaving

### **What You Need Right Now:**

- **Safety:** Physical, emotional, and spiritual safety is your first priority
- **Basic Self-Care:** Eat, sleep, move your body, breathe
- **Professional Support:** Consider finding a therapist who understands spiritual abuse
- **Permission to Grieve:** You've lost a lot. Let yourself feel it
- **No Major Decisions:** If possible, delay big life decisions while in crisis mode
- **Trusted Support:** Even one or two safe people can make a difference

### **Remember:**

You are not weak for being in crisis. What you experienced was traumatic. Your body and soul are responding appropriately to trauma. Give yourself compassion, not criticism.

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## Stage 2: Recognition & Naming

### "I'm beginning to understand what happened to me."

You're moving from confusion to clarity. You're learning language for your experience and starting to distinguish between what was healthy and what was abusive.

#### Common Experiences:

- [ ] I can now name what happened as spiritual abuse
- [ ] I'm reading books, articles, or listening to podcasts about spiritual abuse
- [ ] I'm recognizing patterns I couldn't see before
- [ ] I feel angry—sometimes intensely—about what was done to me
- [ ] I'm making lists of red flags or unhealthy behaviors I experienced
- [ ] I feel validation when I hear others' stories similar to mine
- [ ] I'm beginning to separate God's character from my abusers' actions
- [ ] I oscillate between clarity and doubt ("Was it really that bad?")
- [ ] I'm identifying specific lies I was taught and replacing them with truth
- [ ] I feel relief in understanding that I wasn't "crazy" or "too sensitive"
- [ ] I'm starting to set small boundaries with people from my past
- [ ] I can talk about what happened without completely falling apart

#### What You Need Right Now:

- **Education:** Learn about spiritual abuse dynamics and psychology of control
- **Validation:** Connect with others who understand (support groups, online communities)

- **Truth:** Immerse yourself in Scripture that reveals God's true character
- **Expression:** Journal, create art, talk with a counselor—get it out
- **Patience:** You're building new frameworks for understanding. This takes time
- **Discernment:** Learn to recognize manipulation tactics so you can spot them

**Remember:**

Anger is appropriate. Grief is necessary. Doubt is normal. You're not being vindictive by naming abuse—you're telling the truth. And truth-telling is essential for healing.

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**Stage 3: Deconstruction & Wilderness**

**"I'm examining everything I believed and rebuilding from the ground up."**

You're in the wilderness—the space between what was and what will be. This stage feels uncomfortable, even frightening, but it's essential for authentic reconstruction.

**Common Experiences:**

- [ ] I'm questioning beliefs I once held without doubt
- [ ] I feel spiritually "homeless" or disconnected from church
- [ ] I'm deconstructing my theology and distinguishing truth from manipulation
- [ ] I have good days and bad days with my faith
- [ ] I can't pray the way I used to, and I'm not sure how to pray now
- [ ] I feel guilty for questioning, but I can't stop questioning
- [ ] I'm discovering parts of myself that were suppressed in the abusive system

- [ ] I'm testing boundaries and learning what's mine to carry and what's not
- [ ] I'm grieving the time, energy, and resources I invested in that system
- [ ] I feel lonely because my old community is gone and I haven't found a new one
- [ ] I'm afraid I'll never have the certainty I once had
- [ ] I'm reading Scripture for myself without feeling obligated to agree with any interpretation

### **What You Need Right Now:**

- **Permission to Question:** Questioning is not unfaithfulness—it's seeking truth
- **Space to Deconstruct:** Don't rush to rebuild. Let the old crumble
- **Spiritual Direction:** A guide (not a controller) who can walk with you
- **Patience with the Process:** The wilderness is preparation, not punishment
- **Small, Life-Giving Practices:** What brings you closer to God without obligation?
- **Community (When Ready):** Even informal gatherings with safe people help

### **Remember:**

The wilderness is not abandonment—it's where God meets you without mediators. This stage feels unstable because you're learning to stand on your own faith rather than borrowed beliefs. That's growth, even when it's uncomfortable.

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### **Stage 4: Reconstruction & Reorientation**

## **"I'm rebuilding my faith on a solid foundation."**

You're discovering what you actually believe, not what you were told to believe. Your faith is becoming your own—deeper, more honest, and freer than before.

### **Common Experiences:**

- [ ] I can distinguish between God's voice and voices of manipulation
- [ ] I'm rediscovering spiritual practices that feed me rather than drain me
- [ ] I have a clearer sense of my boundaries and can maintain them
- [ ] I'm exploring my calling and gifts outside institutional validation
- [ ] I can read Scripture and hear God's love rather than condemnation
- [ ] I've found (or am finding) healthy spiritual community
- [ ] I can forgive without feeling pressure to reconcile
- [ ] I recognize red flags quickly and trust my discernment
- [ ] I'm serving in ways that flow from love, not obligation
- [ ] I can talk about my experience without being consumed by it
- [ ] I'm integrating my story into my identity without letting it define me completely
- [ ] I have hope for my spiritual future

### **What You Need Right Now:**

- **Continued Learning:** Keep developing discernment skills
- **Healthy Models:** Observe healthy leaders and communities to recalibrate your normal
- **Authentic Expression:** Find ways to express your authentic faith
- **Spiritual Practices:** Prayer, worship, service—but from freedom, not duty

- **Ongoing Processing:** Healing continues even when you're doing well
- **Risk-Taking:** Cautiously re-engaging with community and service

**Remember:**

Reconstruction takes time. You're not just patching up the old structure—you're building something new and stronger. What emerges from this process is often more authentic and resilient than what existed before the abuse.

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### **Stage 5: Integration & Restoration**

**"I'm living in freedom and helping others find it too."**

You've done deep work, and while you're not "perfectly healed" (no one is), you're functioning in freedom. Your past informs you but doesn't control you.

**Common Experiences:**

- [ ] I can tell my story without being retraumatized by it
- [ ] I'm part of a healthy spiritual community
- [ ] I can hold healthy boundaries without guilt
- [ ] I recognize my gifts and calling and am walking in them
- [ ] I can worship freely without performance anxiety
- [ ] I trust my discernment and make wise decisions about spiritual involvement
- [ ] I can distinguish between conviction and condemnation
- [ ] I've forgiven those who hurt me (even if there's no reconciliation)
- [ ] I see how God has used my pain for good without minimizing the pain
- [ ] I can spot spiritual abuse and warn others without obsessing over it
- [ ] I'm helping others who are where I once was

- [ ] I have a realistic, grounded hope for the church's healing
- [ ] I'm living authentically rather than performing spirituality

### **What You Need Right Now:**

- **Continued Vigilance:** Stay aware of red flags in yourself and systems
- **Ongoing Community:** Maintain healthy relationships and accountability
- **Purpose Beyond Survival:** Discover how your healing can serve others
- **Self-Compassion:** You'll still have hard days—that doesn't mean you've regressed
- **Balanced Engagement:** Stay involved without becoming consumed by survivor identity
- **Joy:** Permission to experience joy, peace, and spiritual freedom

### **Remember:**

Integration doesn't mean you never think about what happened or never feel pain about it. It means the pain has been metabolized into wisdom, compassion, and strength. You've taken what was meant to destroy you and allowed God to transform it into something redemptive.

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### **Interpreting Your Results**

#### **If you checked mostly Stage 1:**

You're in survival mode, and that's okay. This is not a sign of weakness—it's a normal response to trauma. Focus on basic safety and self-care. Don't pressure yourself to "move through" this stage quickly. Get professional help if you're experiencing severe symptoms.

**Key Focus:** Safety, basic self-care, finding one or two trusted supports

#### **If you checked mostly Stage 2:**

You're gaining clarity, and that's significant progress. The anger you're feeling is appropriate. The validation you're experiencing is healing. Keep learning, keep processing, keep naming truth.

**Key Focus:** Education about spiritual abuse, validation through community, truth-telling

**If you checked mostly Stage 3:**

The wilderness is hard, but you're doing essential work. Deconstruction feels like loss, but you're actually making room for authentic faith to emerge. Don't rush this process.

**Key Focus:** Permission to question, spiritual direction, patience with uncertainty

**If you checked mostly Stage 4:**

You're rebuilding, and that takes courage. Your faith is becoming yours—not inherited, not forced, but genuinely owned. Keep taking small risks toward healthy community.

**Key Focus:** Continued discernment development, cautious re-engagement, authentic practice

**If you checked mostly Stage 5:**

You've done deep work, and it shows. You're living in freedom and can help others find it. Continue to protect your healing while using your story to serve.

**Key Focus:** Purposeful use of your story, ongoing self-awareness, balanced engagement

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## **Important Reminders**

### **Healing is Not Linear**

You may be in Stage 4 emotionally but Stage 2 in your ability to trust community. You might spend months in Stage 3 and then have a breakthrough into Stage 4, only to revisit Stage 3 when a trigger surfaces. This is normal.

### **There's No Timeline**

Some people move through these stages in a year. Others take five years or more. Factors affecting timeline include:

- Severity and duration of abuse
- Available support systems
- Previous trauma history
- Access to professional help
- Personal resilience and coping skills
- Other life stressors during healing

### **Triggers Are Normal**

Even when you're in Stage 5, you may be triggered back to feelings from Stage 1. This doesn't mean you've lost your progress—it means something touched an old wound. Be gentle with yourself.

### **You Don't "Graduate"**

Healing from spiritual abuse is not like finishing school. It's more like physical therapy—you do the work, regain function, but you may need tune-ups or may need to revisit techniques when new challenges arise.

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### **Next Steps Based on Your Stage**

#### **If You're in Crisis (Stage 1):**

- **Immediate:** Ensure your physical and emotional safety
- **This Week:** Find one person you can talk to honestly

- **This Month:** Consider professional counseling
- **Don't:** Make major life decisions if avoidable

### **If You're Recognizing/Naming (Stage 2):**

- **Immediate:** Write down what you're learning about spiritual abuse
- **This Week:** Read one resource about spiritual abuse dynamics
- **This Month:** Connect with a support group or online community
- **Don't:** Minimize what happened or rush to "forgive and move on"

### **If You're in the Wilderness (Stage 3):**

- **Immediate:** Give yourself permission to question
- **This Week:** Try one small spiritual practice without obligation
- **This Month:** Journal about what you're discovering about God and yourself
- **Don't:** Force yourself back into church before you're ready

### **If You're Reconstructing (Stage 4):**

- **Immediate:** Identify one healthy spiritual practice to incorporate
- **This Week:** Visit a potentially healthy church or community (with no pressure to commit)
- **This Month:** Begin exploring your calling and gifts outside institutional validation
- **Don't:** Ignore red flags because you're desperate for community

### **If You're Integrating (Stage 5):**

- **Immediate:** Consider how your healing might serve others
- **This Week:** Share your story with one person who might benefit

- **This Month:** Evaluate if you're called to more active advocacy or ministry to survivors
- **Don't:** Let your survivor identity consume your entire life

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## **Closing Encouragement**

Wherever you are in this journey, you are exactly where you need to be right now. Healing is happening even when you can't see it. God is faithful even when you can't feel it. And you are stronger than you realize.

*"He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."*  
— Philippians 1:6 (NASB)

The work God started in you continues. Trust the process. Trust the Healer. And be gentle with yourself along the way.

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**Date Completed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Notes to Myself:**

[Space for personal reflection]

**I will check in with this assessment again on:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Suggestion: Revisit this assessment every 3-6 months to track your progress and adjust your focus as needed.*