

Twenty Questions to Help Identify Church Abuse
By Nancy Arant Williams

1. After doing everything you are told, to the best of your ability, your pastor or church still finds your performance unsatisfactory.
2. No matter how hard or often you confess and ask for forgiveness, you never feel forgiven or loved by God or the church, though you know the scriptures promise forgiveness.
3. Although you attend church with a desire to please God, you go home from every service feeling condemned and worthless, though you may struggle to pinpoint the reason.
4. You attend every service because you feel compelled to, not because you want to. You have been told that a lack of church attendance is sin.
5. The pastor's words and opinions, as far as the church is concerned, are equal with God's, and any attempt to question them is regarded as being out from under authority.
6. You find the church or its members telling you how to run your personal life, or somehow taking away your personal freedom to make your own decisions.
7. You feel like you must agree with what the church says, despite a check in your spirit to the contrary, and you feel you must live up to expectations of the church to be loved and accepted.
8. You have been taught that the only way to get something from God is to give money, perform, or otherwise earn it.
9. God seems like a magical genie, and you can only get what you need from him if you know the secrets.

10. You have memorized many scriptures, but have no personal relationship with God.
11. Church people toss out patent scripture verses in answer to every problem, but have little patience with your neediness.
12. You are burned out by church activities, which consume more and more of your time, and you are doing it out of obligation instead of passion.
13. If you miss a Sunday for any reason, you feel condemned or are, perhaps, even berated for your absence.
14. You have considered giving up Christianity because it's simply too hard to measure up. You feel anxious about going to church, anticipating feelings of conflict.
15. When you have a problem or are in bondage to some sin, you dare not mention it in church, because there is no room there for admitting imperfection.
16. You feel unloved and unworthy, and have thought of suicide as a solution. There is no one in your church whom you can go to with your problems.
17. You suffer chronic depression, (though you may be on medication to control it), and the church has suggested that if you were living right, you wouldn't have these problems.
18. You experience uncontrollable fear or anxiety after long term church attendance, which you didn't have before you began to attend there.
19. You feel inadequate to manage your own affairs, believing a church leader could do it better. Instead of your focus being on Jesus Christ, it has turned, in dependence, to a pastor.

20. You find yourself giving more than you want to the church in regard to time, money and service, but you feel condemned if you say no.

Answering TRUE to one or two of these questions may not be an indication of church abuse, but if you answered TRUE to more than five, there is a good chance you are a victim of church abuse.

The abusive messages may start out subtle and suggestive, but over time become demands that you cannot refuse without overwhelming guilt and condemnation.

These churches often prey upon soft-spoken, tender-hearted seekers, who desire to commit themselves to Jesus Christ.

These churches look good and tend to be lively, enthusiastic places, sometimes promising great rewards to those who join, but soon you may find yourself mired, deeply committed, questioning your own motives, even your salvation, for no apparent reason.

The pastors of these churches are often charismatic and may begin by preaching the pure Word of God, but little by little, you hear things you are unsure about.

When you refuse to comply in such a church, you will find yourself ostracized until you 'repent' and once again, comply.

In such cases, the Word of God, the Bible, is your only and final authority for truth and direction.

The reason these churches succeed is this—they mix truth with falsehood, and even the very elect, as scripture says, are deceived.

Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with charismatic leadership, it can be used by one or more people with wrong motives, eventually enslaving its people.

This method of ministry falls flat on its face, when coming up against the problems of a sin-sick and weary world, whose only real answers are found in the person of Jesus Christ and those who have no agenda but His. Churches with control agendas do damage rarely seen in such magnitude outside the church world.

Remember, God is not the author of confusion, control or desperation, and He will show you the way out of bondage, as you seek Him.

If you have been a victim of such a church, there is hope for you, but first you must back away from the abusive situation.

Then with whatever (even minimal) effort you can muster, call out to God, and ask Him to reveal Himself to you. He is more than capable of meeting you where you are, no matter what shape you are in now.

You are not a hopeless case. You are loved with an everlasting love. You are NOT a mistake or useless to the body of Christ.

You were made in the image of God, bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and there is hope for you.

If you feel depressed, do NOT take any desperate measures, except to remove yourself from the abusive situation.

God is there for you, and will run to the aid of His beloved when he calls. In fact, when you are at your worst, reduced to the helplessness of a child, He will come to you, speaking to you with words of tenderness and healing. If you seek him in truth, He will speak to you through scriptures that will personally address your needs.

Colossians 2:16-21 encourages us to keep our focus on God and not on man. "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" v. 23: "These are matters which have...the appearance of wisdom in self made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."

He promises He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Promises for you to claim—

In Psalm 34:7 it says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them."

Psalm 33:18—"Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in famine."

Psalm 32:8—"I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

Psalm 31: 19—"How great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast stored up for those who fear Thee before the sons of men."

Ps. 31:7—"I will rejoice and be glad in Thy lovingkindness because Thou hast seen my affliction; Thou hast known the troubles of my soul, and Thou hast not given me over into the hand of the enemy. Thou has set my feet in a large place."

You may feel like you are too weak, too tired to fight your way back to sanity and health. Well, the Lord even addresses that in Psalm 28:6-9—Blessed be the Lord, because He has heard the voice of my supplication. The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him and I am helped; therefore my heart exults and with my song I shall thank Him. The Lord is their strength, and He is a saving defense to His anointed. Save Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever."

Above all, do NOT give up hope. Psalm 30:2-5 says, "I cried to Thee for help, and Thou didst heal me. O Lord, Thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol; Thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. Sing praises to the Lord, you His godly ones, and give thanks to His holy name... Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.

Psalm 27:4-6—"One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in His temple. For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; in the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock. And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me, and I will offer, in His tent, sacrifices with a shout of joy; and I will sing praises to the Lord."

Listen to the words of Psalm 23 and take refuge in them. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. Thou doest prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

These words are promises to you. You ARE the beloved of the Lord, and He offers you a future and a hope as you call out to Him. If I can be of help, please email me at william2@advertisnet.com, and I will pray with you, standing with you as you walk toward healing and wholeness.

Thus far, you may never have seen the church functioning as He planned. When the Body of Christ reaches out to you, you will feel the love, acceptance and support that will encourage you to soar in your spirit. As you heal, you will see that, indeed, His yoke is easy and His burden is light. There is hope for you, beloved. As Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and you will find rest." (Matt. 11:28)

Author Note--The reason this subject is so dear to my heart is that I have been where you are. The pain was so great that I came within inches of taking my life, simply to find relief. Since then, He has proven Himself faithful beyond my wildest dreams, and He has made me soar, showing me how He cherishes His people. Because He is faithful, you, too, can once again be whole, capable and hopeful as you cling to Him.

You are cherished by the King of Kings Himself, and by me.
Keep looking up. Jesus never fails.
Cherishing you--the beloved,
Nancy Arant Williams.

Resources: <http://www.spiritualabuse.com>
<http://www.sosa.com> (survivors of spiritual abuse)
<http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/3658>
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/spiritual-abuse-recovery>
<http://www.spiritualabuse.org> (online support group)
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Christian/Koinonia/>
Online-6-lesson Bible study for Recovery of Spiritual Abuse-
http://www.nacronline.com/dox//library/biblestudies/sp_abuse.pdf

Books: "The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse" by David Johnson
& Jeff Van Vonderen (Bethany House)
"When Shepherds Become Wolves" by Pastor Randy Hadwick
(see <http://www.lastdaysharvest.org>)

"Scripture taken from The New American Standard Bible
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