

Spiritual abuse

By [Don Scrooby](#)

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Just this last week I've encountered examples of what I can only describe as spiritual abuse. It saddens one, because what is meant to be life-giving, is turned in to death-like clouds of oppression, and that, by the very people who should know better.

Vulnerability to this abuse is widespread and the causes are many, but I think one of the biggest issues is the obsession with the Bible being a book of rules defining specific behaviour as pleasing, or not pleasing to God. The mindset this creates is that the "average" person, or "layperson" has very little or no real capacity to discern scripture for themselves. They have to be told what is true and untrue and the highest virtue they can practice in the faith community they serve, is that of obedience. They are not encouraged to think for themselves and for them to question anything is always seen as threat.

Now, put people who are not encouraged to think and question and who have no confidence in their own discerning abilities, together with strong leaders who believe exactly how to "interpret" these rules and impose them, and you have the ultimate recipe for abuse, especially where leaders are locked in to their own performance and achievement. People then simply become pawns on the egocentric chess boards of these leaders.

What makes this worse is that people become part of a church and a god created in the image of the leadership, serving the ego needs of that leadership, with faith having nothing to do with gaining a deeper understanding and experience of God and Church. In fact, such a deepened understanding may just expose the abusive system for what it is, causing it all to come crumbling down. Sometimes that's precisely what is needed to enable the birth of a Divine infusion of authentic work and

service.

One such community I know has now met this fate. The human pain left in its wake is hard to describe and will have to be dealt with, with all the compassion it so richly deserves.

Are our churches places of life-giving exploration where people are free and are encouraged to inquire and question, or are they communities solidified with attitudes of threat, cemented dogmatism and dictatorial leadership?

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