

# Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness

Barbara M. Orlowski

Reviewed by Patrick J. Knapp

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*Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. (2010). ISBN-13: 978-1-60608-967-5 (paperback). \$23.90 (Amazon.com); \$9.99 (Kindle). 248 pages.*

This book is a result of the author's extensive doctoral research on the topic of religious abuse and recovery, identified as originating from Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Charismatic (EPC) churches. The primary focus of the book is on how Christian believers most effectively discover authentic healing after being spiritually abused by those in church leadership. Through the related experiences of those abused, the author puts forth a challenge to clergy to understand both the nature of spiritual abuse and how they may best act as effective change agents rather than continuing to contribute to the problem.

The author's research included an extensive questionnaire that resulted in the completion of 110 individual surveys coming primarily from Canada and the United States. Orlowski used strict and careful criterion to identify those most appropriate participants for the study. This approach resulted in 100 individual surveys being used in the final analysis of the research. Seven of these surveys were completed by clergy who had counseled with those who had had religiously abusive experiences. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative factors.

Participants were asked

- (a) the length of time they had attended their previous home church, their ministry areas, their date of exiting, how long ago they left, the church's Sunday attendance size, and the geographic location of the church (urban to rural). People's marital status was not one of the questions; but as participants described their situations, this factor was also discerned and added to the data.

- (b) what factors influenced their decision to leave their home church.
- (c) how these circumstances impacted them emotionally, how they coped, and how they processed their positive and negative emotions.
- (d) whether they had learned anything from this experience, and whether they felt that God had used this situation to mature them in their faith.
- (e) to describe what specific helps aided in their spiritual recovery.
- (f) whether they had found a church they could call home, and what criteria they now had for finding a home church.
- (g) whether they felt personally disillusioned with their former church group, and what advice they would give to others who find themselves in a similar circumstance.
- (h) whether they had any shifts in their beliefs, and whether their view of God or his Word had been affected. They were asked if they felt they were Pentecostal or Charismatic in experience. In the final question, participants were asked to describe their journey with Christ today (p.143–144).

From each of these basic categories, Orlowski derived information and made a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of this project. She provides a review of the primary Christian literature, with a discussion of the complex nature of the subject. She examines and discusses reasons for and results of religious abuse. She also considers various definitions of spiritual or religious abuse. Further, she examines the relational nature of this form of abuse and explores the unique individual and complex nature of recovery. She reviews the healing role of community and the importance of good theology. Orlowski gives considerable

attention to the importance of egalitarian relationships and the importance and role of forgiveness without at the same time denying abuse. She affirms the inseparability of emotional and spiritual health, and she considers the role of healthy decentralized relational leadership models.

One full chapter focuses specifically on how the Bible speaks into this topic. The author identifies four particular factors as relevant to the topic: She examines legalism, a faulty hermeneutic, the role of leadership, and the place of spiritual and emotional injury, all in Scripture. She places a primary emphasis on the place of authority as identified in both the Old and New Testament and suggests a suitable leadership model. She also examines the results of the research and explores and discusses its implications.

Orlowski identifies the most effective means of recovery from religious or spiritual abuse. The five most identified sources, in the order of their effectiveness, are (1) having a significant nonjudgmental confidant and support from friends and family; (2) reading relevant books; (3) examining various Scripture passages; (4) gaining insights derived from relevant blogs; and (5) receiving support from small, focused support groups. She also identifies prayer, journaling, and music as being significant in the healing process. She notes that the rarity of finding relevant small support groups was rather significant. She offers the antidote of sound theology and the importance of healthy relationships as most important to finding authentic healing. Finally, she suggests further research projects and topics of interest.

I found this text theologically and academically refreshing and on most levels well-informed. The book involved a great deal of time, energy, and carefully reasoned arguments on the part of the author. Although the text was clearly an academic effort, it provides the average reader with many insights and thoughtful suggestions. It offers helpful contributions to a broader audience than to the clergy to which it was originally intended.

I applaud the author's efforts in confronting this form of abuse. One additional chapter might

have significantly added to its gravitas. This chapter would have included considerations provided from both family systems and attachment theories as seen through the grid of a Trinitarian Christian worldview. This addition would have helped round out a more holistic conceptualized picture of how people are abused and how they might best understand and experience recovery. That said, I gladly recommend this book to those with interest on the topic of spiritual abuse and recovery.

**Patrick J. Knapp, M.A.** Philosophy of Religion, *Denver Seminary*. Pat's initial interest in cult recovery stems from his own involvement in a harmful bible-based group (1970-1984). His recovery resulted from individual and marriage counseling, in addition to several years of work in and facilitating support groups for ex-members and their loved ones. His M.A. thesis was titled: "The Place of Mind-Control in the Cult Recovery Process." Over the past 25+ years he has formally mentoring. He has done doctoral studies in Marriage and Family Counseling (Professional Track), at *Gordon-Conwell Seminary* in Charlotte, NC. Currently he is in the process of completing his Ph.D. in Pastoral Psychology, at *Graduate Theological Foundation* (GTF) and is involved in several writing projects examining spiritual abuse and recovery.