

Coaching *Spiritual* Abuse

BILL PRICE

Abuse: Affront, belittle, blaspheme, cruelty, curse, defame, defile, exploit, harm, hurt, injure, insult, manipulate, mistreat, misuse, violate, wrong.

The world of work and the world of church are not as different as we would hope. I think, most people think that working in a church team is so spiritual and ideal that there must just be no negativity at all. The fact of the matter is that research shows that the church world is led by the same kind of managers and leaders. There is as much politics, game playing and ego drive in action in a church, as there is anywhere else in the world system. The reason is that people will be people and their definitions of spirituality and Christian maturity are often limited to congregational times of worship. We all have to allow what happens in the services to be integrated by us, into our being and persona, in a proactive way.

Many of the stories related in this article come from actual coaching sessions, so be warned that you are going to be faced with some shocking truths.

Story #1

A pastor asks the congregation to stand just before the end of the morning service, and asks them to make a vow with him. They are not pre-warned and he makes them vow that they will attend the evening service; then he gently reminds them that they have just made a vow to Almighty God! All he really wanted was a full church to satisfy his ego and to brag at the next minister's fraternal.

Story #2

An African minister and her security entourage tell a businessman that he has to make a "love gift" of R30,000 to the church; they also instruct him that he must not invoice the church for the work done in the gardens of four of their ministers and the church landscaping costing over R450,000! This would indeed offend God and would be deemed by God as an insult to the anointed of God.

Story #3

Arguing elders split a church and divide the church into two or three so that they can get their own way. Years later there is nothing left of that church and they are sitting in new church groups with not a care in the world of the damage done to lives and inner beings of people. They were right! God has been vindicated. Life goes on.

The Spirit of Truth

We all have been given the Spirit of truth and are empowered by God to live freely, fully and boldly who we are. We have been given the ability to think, ponder, extrapolate, analyse, integrate, grow and develop into our God-given destiny. Lets face it, the Church is one of the best examples of a place where people, throughout the ages, have been abused, hurt and manipulated. It is true that there are exceptions to the rule, so while we certainly don't want to paint the whole Church with the same brush, one must admit that people will be people! In some way we all are hurt and broken. We all are sojourners in Christ and have to work out our own salvation. The fact of the matter is that on that day we stand alone before the Father, no one will be there to defend or correct us. We will be responsible and be the sole owner of the story of our lives. So why do we put up with being manipulated and maligned and abused?

Many people do not check the consequences of ideas and thoughts and “truths” that have been woven into our own set of prejudices. Many convince themselves that they are chosen, special or spiritual and they then set others up to be criticized, persuaded that they are on the wrong path and so much more. The case of where recently some Christians wanted to burn the Koran at a commemoration of the 9/11 disaster in New York, is a case in point. I wonder what these same people would have said if other religious groups burned the Bible. What is our world coming to? Prejudice - who is right and who is wrong? “*You must be one of them...*” was a line heard in Peter’s day!

I see abuse happening in churches when adults are treated like children, where the personal obsessions of leaders are promoted, and when the ‘disciples’ fail to believe the same things, then they are labelled as ‘different’ and ‘having something wrong’ with them! Most of us have heard leaders who make their own inner convictions sound like age old and tested theology from the safety of “their” pulpit.

The fact that we have over 2000 different denominations (and counting!) in South Africa is proof that we have had at least 2000 disagreeing people on matters of doctrine. These issues range from how many times they must be dunked under the water during a baptism, to the inconsequential thing of how much water to use! History has record disagreements such as these as a matter of fact. Those who propose a belief-system (interpretation and doctrine) expect their disciples to follow in quiet submission, never asking questions, and never daring to challenge the status quo. Those followers who do “step out of line” and ask questions are quickly blamed for “going against” God’s anointed. What a shame! What a sad day has dawned on us!

“Take a moment,” I tell the person opposite me in the coaching session, “look at your life’s storyline and plot the times that you have been expected by the ministry leadership to prove yourself right, where you had to come up with the answers that they wanted you to.” That is called dogma. Abuse is seen where people have been shamed or had to reduce their way of thinking to fall in line with the way the leadership thought on matters, supposedly given to them directly by God. How can one ever try and fight or come up against God?

Then there is the subtlety of authority. Most leaders have an ego - it is a fact of life. But then they play the “authority card” and you are expected to live by their rules that are made up as they go. It’s all about power. Thomas told me he was visiting a minister in the East Rand once when he sat on the chair in the boardroom; he was told that he could not sit there as that was Dr Pastor’s Chair. Even CEO’s that I have been in consultation with over the past thirteen years in the corporate environment did not have a special chair in their boardroom. What a display of ego in action - special man, special chair!

Another ex-minister told me he was told, after having been fired in front of his family, that when he was bid farewell in

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the church he was to fall “*under the power of the spirit*” when the new pastor lays hands on him. All in order for the main leader-pastor to look because he had power! Now that’s abuse.

A lead pastor forcibly pushed Charles, a young youth pastor, one Sunday morning, as he was not doing what was expected of him. Church members were to register on that particular morning and Charles’ mistake was that he did not comply fast enough to the pastor’s liking - hence the “*man of God*” getting physical. The rest of the pastoral team stood by and watched. Some made comment to him later but were too afraid to make a career-limiting decision by challenging the lead pastor who was like a god up there somewhere in the eyes of the rest.

Peter, an associate pastor, told me that a disabled man looking for prayer to be healed, was instructed to tithe on his recently sold home, so that he could be in total obedience to God for his healing. When the lead pastor laid hands on him the question was asked yet again to ensure that his “*debt*” was paid to God. He was not healed but the church got the tithe. No refunds allowed. It was his faith that was wrong, he was told after he enquired.

Reading about all these “*horror*” stories one could easily be led to believe that all is bad. Fortunately that is not the case at all! There are churches in all denominations that do not use guilt or judgment as a measuring stick to abuse or coerce people to “*give*”, “*do*”, or “*become*.” But abuse also includes the way the Church practises judgment on groups of people outside the ranks, such as prostitutes, same-sex orientated people and demands that they have to conform to the Bible because we say/think its right. The Church says, “*This is what God says*,” but forget that He never condemned the prostitute before Him when He instructed those that never committed that sin to stone her. Abuse is how the Church treats poor people, discriminate against others, play games with rules and regulations, and misleading people through false teachings. Isaiah wrote, “***My people are half healed because the pastors prophecy falsely....***”

Obviously, any kind of abuse influences the way we think and act after being emotionally, physically and spiritually battered and bruised. We need to arm ourselves with the right knowledge and as we mature, can identify abuse for what it is and protect one self from it. It seems to me that spiritual maturity is the one thing needed for us to effectively counter-act the abuse found in the Church. Let us, through making positive choices, even with the help of a coach, help to make the Church the refuge it was meant to be. Let us stand proud and say with Christ, “***This is a house of prayer!***” - a house of healthy, uplifting and encouraging communication. Let’s work together to make abuse in the Church a thing of the past.