

Signs of Unhealthy Leadership

By Melanie Stone

Today we have an abundant number of wonderful, healthy churches – not perfect, but they are life-giving and a blessing to many. While we celebrate the good we see in the body of Christ today, we also know that we have a responsibility to educate and warn people of the error and evil that exists in our world. Unfortunately, spiritual dysfunction has been intertwined with healthy churches for centuries. Throughout the epistles, the apostles warned the churches of potentially harmful spiritual leaders (*II Peter 2:1-22, Titus 1:10-14; Rom 16:17-18; I Tim 4:1; II Tim 4:1-5; Gal 1:6-13; II Cor 11:13-15; Phil 3:2,18-19; Col 2:8, 18; II John 1:10-11; I Tim 6:3-10. Jude 1:1-4; I John 4:1-6*). Our Savior, Jesus Christ, also warned us of the same.¹ Dangerous leaders aren't always easy to recognize. They aren't always the extremely blatant and the obviously cultish ones. Often harmful leaders are leaders with charisma and gifting, teaching mostly truth, and doing charitable acts of service; however, obscure error or hidden manipulation can cause tremendous damage to individuals, families, churches, communities, and the kingdom of God at large. It is a misconduct that deeply grieves the compassionate heart of the Father for the weak. Don't be deceived; while God is gracious, His mercy is not to be used as a veil to cover the predatory behavior of a leader who is masked as a trusted caregiver. God takes notice of the leader who is misrepresenting His name and perverting the perception of His person. God warns us to learn to identify what is dangerous and to keep our distance from unhealthy spiritual leaders.

There are several ways that a spiritual leader can be unhealthy, bringing harm to God's people and discouraging the lost from knowing their salvation. The dangers include wrong doctrine, error in supernatural demonstration, and manipulation for personal gain or lust. Paul told Timothy that in the last days perilous times will come where people would be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. He warned Timothy, "from such people turn away! (II Timothy 3:1-5)." A leader might be respected for their ministry, but their character will be revealed in the few that are the objects of their abuse. If you become aware of misconduct and continue to support a dysfunctional leader, you are enabling that leader to continue to harm victims in secret and you may have made yourself an accomplice in their sin.

Potentially dangerous leaders have the position and the gifting to recognize those men and women who are vulnerable to their control, as well as to create the opportunity to take advantage of the weak. The vulnerable ones are usually men and women who are hurting or damaged from a previous experience, lack structure, have difficulty resolving conflict, are uncertain about their future, desperate for approval from an authority figure, or who are begging for their value to be noticed and developed. Instead of helping them, the motive of a dangerous leader is to misuse the hurting and weak. In Ezekiel 34, God compares these leaders to shepherds who use His name to locate and harm the sheep they are commissioned to feed, care for, and protect. Remember that a true shepherd will risk his life even for just one of his troubled sheep (Luke 15:4-7). God cares for the ones that are hurting in a stealth abusive relationship.

¹ Matthew 7:15-20-23; Matthew 24:4-5; Revelation 2:2, Matthew 10:16

What Are the Warning Signs of a Potentially Dangerous Leader?

The purpose of this article is for the few who are experiencing or have experienced the agony of unhealthy control, harassment, or abuse at the hands of a person who served them as a spiritual leader or pastor. The following are earmarks of a potentially dangerous spiritual leader. The intention of this article is not to use this information to find fault with a healthy pastor or leader. Ask the Lord to give you discernment if you suspect that you or others might be in a potentially harmful situation.

1. An unhealthy leader can be a domineering authoritarian who feeds on the suppression of loyal church members. They also use God as the muscle behind their position, claiming that the Lord established and endorses their leadership.
2. An unhealthy leader works to gain dominance over others by presenting themselves as being more spiritual than anyone else. They might take a portion of doctrine and distort it to distinguish them as having revelations that other leaders do not have. They may manipulate their followers into believing that the only way to stay in good standing with God is to be underneath their spiritual covering.
3. There are occasions where a dysfunctional leader will dominate people by winning their affections, knowing that weak people are looking to him or her with admiration for their strength and leadership. They also understand people are in need of love. In their position of popularity, they know they can win the affection of hurting people by causing them to feel that out of everyone in their congregation, that person is special to him or her.
4. The religious leader can be skilled at understanding the sin consciousness of human nature and use guilt, shame, and fear as means to manipulate people who are in need of knowing God. They also have the ability to twist scripture to religiously direct people as they desire.
5. The spiritual predator will work to maneuver weak people to lean on their leadership or their church ministries, gaining their dependency, making themselves or their church as the exclusive answer to their need.
6. The leader often is charismatic, and uses their charm to convince a person to change their way of thinking. It can be as if he or she is under a spell. Some call it brainwashing, a persuasion to accept their way of thinking. An unhealthy leader can also use that charisma to charm men and women into an admiration of who they are, an allegiance to their ministry, and participation in what they want to do.
7. The leader will typically have an abnormal control over their own spouse, children and inner circle of supporters. Often their spouse and team become an extension of their control. They will assist the leader with what he or she asks for in the manipulation of others. They have such an abnormal relationship with their leader that they would rather defend him or her than to stand up for what is right.

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8. The leader works to establish and maintain power over their team, demanding unhealthy requirements that exceed normal boundaries of their time or service. If they don't have control over their team, the dysfunctional leader knows he or she will not be able to intimidate others in the group. They often use public humiliation, guilt or extortion as methods of manipulating their followers to conform.
9. The leader may loosely connect with a faith-based association, but resists accountability and refuses correction. He or she doesn't take responsibility for their actions, often blaming their victims if they are caught. In blaming others, the abuser attempts to be portrayed as the victim in an effort to gain sympathy and maintain control over his or her congregation.
10. Once the leader has a person's affection and allegiance, he or she will use the threat of disassociation as a control tactic. He or she will quickly cut anyone off if they go against the grain, and will do so with indifference. Don't underestimate the devastation this causes the person who has already been damaged by this leader, feeling rejection from the person they not only care about, but the person that has become their source of spiritual guidance.
11. The leader works to disassociate members from outside influence and isolate members from friends and family that are suspicious of their control.
12. Former members are denounced for leaving and present members are discouraged from associating with them. Former members are often lied about in order to protect the leader and preserve their control.
13. The leader is exclusive and protective with financial information. The leader doesn't feel they need to be accountable for their spending. The leader will make sure those working with the money are under their thumb or they will quickly move them out of that area.
14. The leader's self-indulgence will sometimes express itself in the secret coercion for money or resources, sexual favors, or promotion through publicity. Often followers are not aware of the abuse, but informed brainwashed members will even turn their heads to overlook or to excuse their leader's misconduct.
15. If you were to investigate, you would find a trail of shamed victims in their history. They often lean on their followers to provide a covering of popularity so that their victims remain in the shadow of their towering power.
16. In cases of fraud, illegal activity, social defamation, negative publicity or the like the leader may change the name of the church. The leader may switch associations when he or she refuses correction.
17. There is usually discrimination associated with dominance against gender, age, faith background or other differences. Discrimination can be used to reinforce the leader's position.

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18. The leader will often feel the need to protect his or her ministry by any means necessary. They will try to cover up or downplay any inappropriate behavior on their part, justifying their behavior for the cause of the group.
19. Control is carefully maintained. Control is accomplished through an unhealthy reliance on the leader for their spiritual help or help with natural matters. Control is maintained through shared secrets. Control is kept by threats of being exploited or exposed. The control is deceptive and progressive, slowing building trust and becoming a new normal for the people who become trapped in it.
20. We have a spiritual enemy that hates God and wants to destroy His church. It would not be surprising if there were some kind of demonic activity present in cases of spiritual abuse. There are demons that work their way into the life of a leader and use the leader to get to people within their sphere of influence.

Restoration for Victims of Unhealthy Leadership

God warns us to identify and stay away from dangerous leaders; however, even the most intelligent people can be deceived. If there is damage done, God wants to bring healing and restoration for all involved. The following are principles of a restoration process, not necessarily in any order.

1. Recognize and admit that you were either misused or abused. When you admire a leader, it is sometimes difficult to accept what you have been through.
2. Realize that God was not behind the misconduct. Be able to differentiate between what was from God and what was from that human being. Ask God to help you to see clearly.
3. If it is best for your wellbeing, leave the church and separate from the leader. You need to be out from underneath control and deception to find health and freedom. Distance does not mean that you do not care about the people you love.
4. Realize that you need to grieve the loss of the leader and the people in the church that you cared about. From some, what they feel is similar to the grief one feels when a loved one dies. You may also struggle with the guilt of leaving a leader that you felt responsible to care for or serve.
5. You may also need to grieve what you lost during the experience. You may have lost your peace, your joy, your innocence, your trust, your reputation, and more. If you isolated yourself, you may have hurt your family or friends by pushing them away. You may have given up other jobs or opportunities. You may have lost time with your spouse and your children. You may have jeopardized your own ministry.

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6. Realize that we have a spiritual enemy. If you have ever been victimized by a spiritual leader, Satan could try to put condemnation on you to feel responsible for the leader, perhaps a leader that you still admire or care about. Know that the leader should be accountable for his or her actions and that he or she was most likely aware that they were using their power to misuse you. Know that if it weren't you it would have been someone else. Know that God loves you so much that He gave His Son to die for you. That love will free you from guilt, shame, and fear.
7. Be able to forgive yourself for any wrong choices you made. Accept responsibility for any mistakes that you are responsible for, if any. Show yourself mercy for failing to discern the deception. Allow God to remove feelings of fear, shame, and guilt.
8. Discern what you should not take responsibility for. Predators will often blame their victims. The people that love and support their leader will also blame the victims. Because of their influence on you, you might believe them and blame yourself. However, part of recovery is realizing where the blame truly lies, whether the predator ever owns up to it or not.
9. Forgive your leader and pray that he or she will come to repentance. You also need to forgive the leader's entourage that supported him or her in their misconduct. When you forgive, you aren't saying that what they did was okay. You aren't making yourself vulnerable to be hurt again. Forgiveness is simply trusting God with them by releasing them from your judgment. Ask God for His love to work in you.
10. Go to the leader's authority or association and let them know your story. This is the instruction that Christ gave us in His Word (Matthew 18:15-20). If you care about your leader, you will want them to be helped. Follow the Lord's leading if you should talk to anyone else about your experience to find healing and restoration.
11. Get into a healthy church, and let God reprogram your thinking with truth. Let God begin to unravel the lies and expose the deception you once embraced.
12. Discover what made you vulnerable. Maybe you were just deceived. Perhaps you have damage from your past that needs restored. Maybe you have a mentality about yourself that needs to be adjusted. Leaders who victimize people have a way of recognizing weakness in people they can dominate. You may need to consider Christian counseling.
13. Don't be intimidated by the leader after you leave. Don't be afraid of their lies, their influence over others, or their desire to hurt you. He or she is limited in their ability; God is not.
14. Commit to the Lord to restore you through His process and according to His timetable. Let God rebuild your trust in Him, in leaders, and in people. Keep your eyes on the Lord. Get into the Bible and let it speak to you. Have personal worship experiences and let God wash over you with His love.

15. Slowly begin to serve in ministry, allowing God to strengthen you as you become active again. Go from victim to victorious through the grace of God.

God is gracious and compassionate with us. He longs to make us whole and He desires to use us to reach the world with His love. People sometimes question why God allows bad things to happen, but God is not to blame. God has given the authority of the earth to mankind. The human race has allowed sin to enter and given Satan access to rule in our world. Our situation is a result of the human condition. It's not God's fault. God does His best to steer us away from pain and heartache, but He can't always prevent what people choose to do. When there is damage done, God offers His love and His healing.

God also cares for the leader who is in error. There is a reason why some misuse their spiritual authority and hurt other people. Some leaders have evil in their heart. Some leaders are deceived by the enemy and do not see the severity of their sin. Other may have learned to dominate others because they were once dominated themselves. Some have hurt others because they were once harmed themselves. It isn't an excuse for their behavior, but their damage is a reason for their behavior. In Isaiah 55, written in the context of mercy, God tells us that His ways are higher than our ways. God's way is to love His people, even when they are in sin. If they repent, He will forgive. If they don't repent, He will allow them separation and consequences of their sin.

God wants all of us to be made whole. He admonishes us to be part of a healthy church and He warns us to stay away from unhealthy ones. Let's be wise, let's show mercy, and let's grow the kingdom so the world can know God for who He really is.

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