

The Signs Of Authoritarian Abuse ©

by Steven Lambert, ThD

Are you one of the many loyal and sincere church members who faithfully and cheerfully attend, support and participate in a local church, but have a nagging, persistent inward “thought” that “something is just not right here?”

Each time it rises within you, you peer around the room at the faces of fellow-worshippers caught up in seemingly heart-felt worship, you tune your ear to the soothing, melodious music crescendoing upward, and listen intently to the inspiring exhortations flowing from the lips of the various leaders on the platform...then...once again...you begin to chastise yourself...and “take authority” over those terrible carnal, negative thoughts, and command them to leave your mind. Now! There! No more of that! Right? Right!

That is, until the next time...and it happens all over again! You are enthralled in blissful worship and praise, focusing entirely on the Lord and His Magnificence. You begin to feel that familiar, but awesome sensation of His Presence filling the room and settling gently upon you. And then...BOOM!...there it is AGAIN!—that still, small inner voice, telling you He is pleased by your expression of love, adoration, and praise; it is a sweet savor which He has received from your heart to His. But, still, He wants you to be aware there is something wrong here...with the leadership...their teaching, their “leadership” attitudes and methods, their motives and ambitions, their personal life-styles, their earnestness regarding ministering on His behalf to the needs of the hurting, needy multitudes for whom He died.

Is it possible this really IS the Lord speaking to you? Is that possible? And, then you go through the drill once again, looking, listening, analyzing. “But,” you reply inwardly to the voice, “look at all these people here, the volunteer workers, the ministers, the musicians and choir! they can’t all be wrong! and there wouldn’t be this many people here if it wasn’t of God! Look at this wonderful building, its furnishings and decor, the instruments, all the regalia, all the money it cost? God has to be endorsing this, otherwise the money for all this would not have come in! Listen to the inspiring music and messages by the leaders! And, look at all the people who’ve been blessed! This CAN’T possibly not be of God! God! what’s wrong with me? why do I think such horrible thoughts?” you cry silently within.

Then, you begin realizing, somehow, somewhere along the line you began losing your joy, your zeal for the Lord. It used to be you could hardly wait for the services and to be involved; now it is drudgery to go at all. You used to have such a light and blissful feeling as you worshiped the Lord in the services; now you just go through the motions, feeling heavy, staring placidly toward the platform, sometimes wishing you were somewhere else. You used to be able to “look past” the leaders, and focus only on the Lord; now, all you see during the service is people, people behind the pulpit, people on the platform, and people in the pews. You used to feel God’s love and pleasure with you; now it seems all you feel is unworthiness, guilt, and that nothing you do is ever enough or pleasing to Him.

“What on earth has happened to me? What’s wrong with me?” you ask yourself. “Is it just me?” Then, you begin to look around the room and study other long-time members. You compare how they are now to how they were when they first came. Is their life, as it should be, appreciably better, or have they and their family experienced an inordinate share of tragedies, seemingly inexplicable difficulties, and reversals? By and by, you begin to realize that many of the other members have lost their “first love” too, their zeal, their enthusiasm, their joy in serving the Lord, and that, though Christians, like everyone else, certainly experience adversity, many of these members’ lives have been on a gradual, downward spiral, instead of advancement and blessing.

Does this scenario sound familiar to you? If so, don’t think you’re alone—it’s repeated several times every week by multitudes of sincere, faithful, and trusting believers. They’ve had this inward intuition for quite some time that something was just not right at their church or in their group, but just couldn’t put their finger on precisely what it was. The teaching “sounded” right, all the right things were being said, good things were happening, many members were being “used” in various “ministries” of the church. Still, this nagging sense something is awry persists.

Often, these are the symptoms of a church or group laboring under the heavy-hand of hyper-authoritarianism. That is to say, the leadership is dominating, controlling, and manipulating their followers, and exploiting them for their own personal gain and private kingdom-building. Wholesale abuse and misuse of authority is an integral part of the very foundation, fabric, and functions of such groups.

Exploitative abuse of authority occurring in groups where these hyper-authoritarian systems of governance are instituted come in various shapes and shades, ranging from members having to receive the approval (usually referred to as “witness”) of their spiritual leaders to date and/or marry, to virtual sole dependence upon the supposed superior spirituality of group-gurus regarding every detail of their personal financial matters and requiring their leaders’ approval for virtually every significant expenditure. Commonly, in these groups there is constant allusion to the members as “dumb sheep” who must be “led” by the shepherds, ad nauseam. The definition of the term “led” in these groups is that the “dumb sheep” cannot trust their own judgment or ability to receive direction from the Lord for the important decisions of their lives, but must rely instead upon the transcendent wisdom and spiritual acumen of their “personal pastors.”

The proper role of human under-shepherds is to lead people to the **Great** Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and teach them how to be **His** disciples, in submission to **Him** and **His** authority. Hyper-authoritarian leaders, instead, lead people to **themselves**, and indoctrinate them to be **their** followers, in total submission to **them** and **their** authority. In essence, these dominating shepherds teach **they** are the church-members’ de facto lord, master, and savior, rather than Christ. They indoctrinate members to believe the spiritual leaders of the church themselves are the members’ [“spiritual covering”](#) (a totally false and patently unbiblical concept), and any member who ever leaves the church will be “out from under” **their** “covering,” be without any covering or what they call, “uncovered,” and will experience terrible curses and other horrible consequences as a result. From the pulpit often come “horror stories” about what happened to such-and-so

person or family, who were so spiritually bereft or rebellious as to leave the group without the blessings and approval of their “spiritual authority.”

In these groups, the “authority” of the “shepherds” is absolute, sacrosanct, and inviolable, that is, without reprisal. Any semblance of anything other than total and unquestioning obedience to the desires and counsel of the church’s leadership chain is considered rebellion and insubordination, and simply is not tolerated. Members live under the constant threat of being branded with the Scarlet Letter “R” for “rebel,” openly denounced and shamed from the (bully-)pulpit, and consequently shunned by the “covenant-community” for failure to comply with the unwritten, unspoken rules and expectations established by the leadership. An oppressive performance-based approval and promotion system keeps members in constant internal turmoil and fear as they jump through all the hoops the spiritual taskmasters put before them, in an attempt to seek their leaders’ approval and favor. Moreover, members are indoctrinated and compelled to accept the leadership-set agenda of the group, regarding which they have next to no real say, as their personal burden and responsibility, and thus to commit their time, talent, and, most importantly, their **tithe**, to its successful completion. Sadly, most never see past the spiritual smoke and mirrors to realize that the so-called “church” to which they have sworn allegiance and promised their wholehearted and unflagging support, is nothing more than the personal “business” of its leaders, and not only are they free labor, but they actually pay out of their own resources for the privilege of being a participant, i.e., member.

The following are some of the signs and symptoms, or common characteristics, of hyper-authoritarian groups, churches, networks, and ministries. It simply is not feasible to elaborate on them in an article such as this. However, I have addressed most of them in various books, booklets, and articles I have written on the topic. Bear in mind that the list is by no means exhaustive, and that these are general, rather than, exact descriptions.

1. Apotheosis of the leadership -- exalting them to God-like status in and over the group;
2. Multi-level authority/government hierarchy;
3. Absolute authority of the leadership;
4. No real accountability of the leadership to the corporate body;
5. Hand-picked sub-leaders based on their demonstration of loyalty to the ultimate leader rather than on the basis of their leadership skills, spiritual acumen, and anointing and appointment by God;
6. Pervasive abuse and misuse of authority in personal dealings with members;
7. Paranoia and insecurity by the leaders;
8. Abuse, misuse, and inordinate incidence of “church discipline;”

9. Personal materialism, covetousness, and self-aggrandizement by the leaders;
10. Members/and or sub-leaders must either sign a covenant agreement or make a “spiritual covenant,” pledging their allegiance and financial support to the leadership and group;
11. Partitioning of the group into smaller groups that are led by internally “raised up” leaders;
12. Financial exploitation and enslavement of the members;
13. Inordinate attention to the public “image” of the ministry;
14. Doctrinal demeanment and devaluation -- the requisite of espousing and teaching “sound doctrine” is demeaned and devalued;
15. Theological incompetency by the leadership, especially with respect to the rules of hermeneutics and Bible exegesis employed in the formulation of doctrine, giving license to twisting and adulteration of Scripture in order to provide proof-texts for unorthodox and invented doctrines;
16. Spiritualism, mysticism, and unproven doctrines;
17. Abuse and misuse of prophetic giftings;
18. Devaluation, disallowance, disregard, and displacement of the true Fivefold Ministry within the church;
19. De facto legalism, or works mentality, and its resulting loss of the “joy of salvation,” though “freedom” is forever preached from the pulpit and the church is constantly touted as being a “safe church” by the leadership;
20. Esotericism -- hidden agendas and requirements revealed to members only as they successfully advance through various stages of “spiritual enlightenment,” i.e., unorthodox, unproven indigenous doctrines;
21. Isolationism -- corporate and individual, especially with respect to exposure to outside ministry sources;
22. Performance-based approval and promotion system of members predicated on “proven” loyalty to the leadership;
23. Devaluation, suppression, and non-recognition of members’ bona fide personal God-given talents, abilities, gifts, callings, and anointing as a means of subjugation;

24. Requiring members to perform menial tasks, such as cleaning toilets, setting up chairs, and acting as the leader's personal valet or slave, as a supposed means to humble them and teach them to "obey their leaders;"
25. Constant indoctrination with a "group" or "family" mentality that impels members to exalt the corporate "life" and goals of the church-group over their personal goals, callings, and objectives;
26. Members are psychologically traumatized and indoctrinated with numerous improper fears and phobias aimed at keeping them reeling in diffidence and an over-dependence on their leaders and the corporate group;
27. Corporately, there eventually develops an inordinately high incidence of financial, marital, moral, psychological, mental, emotional, and medical problems, including sudden deaths and contraction of "incurable" and "unknown" diseases;
28. Lack of true personal spiritual growth and development, especially in terms of genuine faith and experiencing the abounding grace, forgiveness, goodness, blessings, kindness, and agape-love of God;
29. Members are required to obtain the approval or "witness" of their leader(s) for decisions regarding personal matters;
30. Frequent "war stories" by leaders regarding individuals or families who left the group and the terrible consequences they suffered as a result;
31. Frequent preaching from the pulpit regarding staying under the "spiritual covering" of the leadership;
32. Departing members depart under a cloud of manufactured suspicion, shame, and slander;
33. Departing members often suffer from various psychological problems and display the classic symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

So...what to do? Well, here's a few questions for you to ponder.

Do you know what the signs of hyper-authoritarianism, control, and domination in a group or church and how to recognize them?

Do you know if the signs are simple, overt, and obvious, or are they sophisticated and complex, covert, and hidden?

Could you be objective enough about your church or group and leaders to analyze if authoritarian abuse is taking place at your church?

Do you know how to explain what the signs are to suspected victims in order to convince them they are under it?

Do you know how to throw out a lifeline to help rescue them?

Do you know what steps are necessary for victims to recover from the psychologically traumatizing and spiritually damaging effects of years of subjection to it?

Do you know why hyper-authoritarian doctrines and practices are unScriptural, and the Scripture passages in which God condemns them that you can cite in order to show victims, practitioners, and others its illegitimacy?

Does God require you to blindly “obey your leaders” when they set requirements that contravene Scripture or your conscience, and when they behave as unscrupulous and undisciplined tyrants rather than modeling the characteristics of servanthood that Jesus modeled and instructs His under-shepherds to likewise model?

These are just a few of the questions needing answers concerning this prevalent problem of authoritarian abuse plaguing the church today. Being able to readily identify the signs and symptoms of authoritarian abuse and psychological enslavement that is rampant among church groups today is absolutely essential for every believer in their quest to know and be personally related to the Great Shepherd, who is the Prince of **Peace** and the true “Guardian of our souls.”

Moreover, these and many other relevant matters are directly addressed in the book, [**Charismatic Captivation**](#), written by Dr. Steven Lambert, a Charismatic minister for more than three decades, “*in response to a Divine Call*” to expose widespread authoritarian abuse and psychological enslavement occurring in many Neo-Pentecostal church-groups espousing and employing hyper-authoritarian doctrines and practices.

The back-cover proclaims the work is “*a medium of advocacy on behalf of untold multitudes of innocent sheep of God’s Flock who, unknowingly, are being subjected to exploitive enslavement by self-aggrandizing and unscrupulous religious leaders for their own personal advancement and expansion of their private kingdoms.*” Identifying authoritarian abuse and psychological enslavement, and informing readers how to recognize and be set free from it, is the volume’s main objective.

Dr. Lambert presents in this book a thorough analysis of the hyper-authoritarian doctrines and practices being implemented by many Neo-Pentecostal churches and groups, citing and elaborating on the five erroneous concepts they are based upon, which render them undeniably heretical. An entire chapter is devoted to an extensive exposition of the nature, illegitimacy, and Scriptural condemnation of ecclesiastical enslavement and exploitation. In another chapter, the author also delineates **common control mechanisms** employed by both classic cults as well as hyper-authoritarian Neo-Pentecostal cults.

The capstone of the volume is Dr. Lambert’s “**15 Rs of Recovery from Authoritarian Abuse**,” steps victims of spiritual abuse must navigate through in order to regain their psychological equilibrium and be restored to spiritual wellness, derived from the author’s more than 25 years of experience in ministering to victims spiritual abuse.