

MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

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Summary

Spiritual leaders are called to lead the spiritual development of Christians within community. Their common responsibility is to lead God's people to become more like Christ, to equip them to minister according to their gifts, and to unify them within community. Spiritual leaders fulfill their callings as they remain in God's will. This includes an ongoing recognition of the boundaries, responsibilities, and spiritual power that define their leadership. When spiritual leaders attempt to coerce and control rather than empower others, they misuse that authority, which leads to spiritual abuse.

The Assemblies of God condemns spiritually abusive behavior. The Fellowship was formed in recognition of the need for increased cooperation among Pentecostals to fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20. The proper use of spiritual authority is essential in fulfilling this command of Jesus. Spiritual abuse perverts our ability to make disciples.

Introduction

The Bible offers a variety of models for spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership may be exercised by parents, grandparents, and similar adults within families. Judges, prophets, priests, and kings have assumed the role for nations. Scribes and royal advisors have served among refugees and exiles. A wide variety of leaders can serve a wide variety of communities, helping people experience spiritual growth.

Authority can be abused. Scriptural accounts, from judges like Samson (Judges 14–16) to kings like Saul (1 Samuel 13–15), show this. Spiritual leadership rests on spiritual authority and influence coming from faithful obedience to God's calling and representation of God's will to a community.

Leadership may be understood and judged through three components: motivation, methods, and results. A leader may be critiqued harshly on one component while being praised on another. However, all three components must work together within spiritual leadership. All spiritual leadership shares the same goal—healthy spiritual development of God's people, which can only be accomplished through spiritually healthy methods. A spiritual leader cannot achieve the best results without the right motivation. Regardless of proper methods, one's spiritual development shapes his or her methodology (Luke 6:45).

While this document emphasizes leadership as a responsibility given to individuals, it is important to recognize that spiritual leadership is often expressed through communal discernment, not solely positional assignment. In many cultures around the world, including among some indigenous peoples of North America, leadership is primarily

relational, rooted in mutual trust, lived wisdom, and the recognition of spiritual gifting, rather than hierarchy or formal office. A biblical model of ministry is similar to this framework—valuing consensus, contextual knowledge, and shared discernment over command structures (Acts 15:28).

A community that aims for spiritual health needs healthy spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders are responsible for living in a way that others would want to follow (Hebrews 13:7). Just as communities are responsible for holding leaders accountable, they are also responsible for remaining accountable to the leader's calling.

However, some community members may be uncomfortable even when spiritual leaders exercise their responsibility well. Often, this is due to being uncomfortable with accountability. Despite feelings of discomfort, leaders steward authority for the good of the community and by helping others recognize their God-given purpose. Conversely, the abuse of this spiritual leadership can harm the community and is contrary to God's will.

Spiritual Leadership in the Bible

In the Old Testament, Moses stands out as a spiritual leader. He excelled in that role through faithfulness, obedience, and humility. Scripture described him as “more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3).¹ However, his leadership fell short of perfection. Because Moses did not honor God as holy before the people at Meribah Kadesh, he died before he could lead Israel into the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12; 27:14; Deuteronomy 32:51–52).

Under Moses, God raised a priesthood to care for Israel's worship (Exodus 28–31). He also raised Levites who supplied priests, singers and musicians, guards for the tabernacle, and workers who broke down, carried, and rebuilt the tabernacle as Israel moved (Numbers 1–8, 18). The tribe of Levi was responsible for teaching Israel how to treat God's presence (Leviticus 10:1–3) and could be punished for abusing their position (1 Samuel 2:27–36).

God continued to provide leadership after Moses, including Joshua, judges, and kings. These leaders required the gift of God's Spirit to assume leadership of Israel (Numbers 11:16–29; 27:18; Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:6; etc.). At times, God removed His Spirit from leaders who failed to submit to Him in their lives and leadership (Judges 16:20; 1 Samuel 15:23; 2 Samuel 12:7–13; Psalm 51:11).

From the Exodus through the exile, God called prophets to speak for Him to Israel (Exodus 4:11–12; 1 Samuel 3:10; Isaiah 6:8; Malachi 1:1; etc.). He empowered by the Spirit (2 Kings 2:15) men and women (Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14) to speak His word to leaders (2 Samuel 12:1) and the people (Jeremiah 1:4–10).

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As spokespeople for God, prophets faced harsh judgment if they failed. Some prophets failed by disobeying God's orders (Numbers 22; 31:8; 1 Kings 13:6–32). Others failed by wrongly taking payment as if for services rendered (2 Kings 5:26–27). And many failed by falsely prophesying in the Lord's name (1 Kings 22:24–25; Jeremiah 28:15–16). Even when prophets proved faithful to God, some faced condemnation by the king or the people who rejected God's word (Luke 13:33). Prophets could suffer because of their obedience and endure rejection by people unfaithful to God (1 Samuel 8:7).

Spiritual leaders guided families, tribes, and the nation to act as one faithful people of God (Joshua 24:15). Leaders failed by not trusting God (Numbers 20:12; 2 Samuel 24), rejecting limits to their authority (1 Samuel 13:7–13; 2 Chronicles 26:16), using their position to take advantage of God's people (1 Samuel 2:12–17; 2 Samuel 11; 1 Kings 21:1–16), and leading Israel astray from God's will (1 Kings 12:26–33; 16:30–33; Ezekiel 13). Some leaders failed so consistently that God removed them from power entirely. That happened to priests (1 Samuel 2:12–25), kings (1 Samuel 15:10–11, 23), and prophets (1 Kings 22:24–25).

Yet, the Old Testament prophets spoke of something better. They described a righteous leader to come who would be identified by the presence of God's Spirit (Isaiah 11:1–5). Spiritual leadership in the New Testament centers on Christ. Jesus embodied God's answer for the restoration of the world (2 Corinthians 5:19). After His death and resurrection, He sits upon God's throne (Revelation 5:6) and serves as Head of the church (Colossians 1:18).

Jesus chose apostles to serve as His representatives (John 20:21–23). After His ascension, He sent the Spirit to empower the church (Acts 2:33). Besides apostles, Christ gave the church prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Together, they equip believers for ministry until the church reaches unity in the faith and matures into the image of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–13).

The apostles chose people to oversee the ministries of the church (Acts 6:6) and to lead in their absence (1 Timothy 3:1–12). These leaders were expected to lead as those who remain accountable to God (Hebrews 13:17). The early church regarded elders as spiritual leaders of the community along with the apostles (Acts 14:23; 15:6). Paul appointed elders in the churches he planted. He also gave qualifications for deacons and those who oversaw the resources of the church (1 Timothy 3:1–13). Yet, Paul expected everyone to use spiritual gifts in a way that uplifted the community (1 Corinthians 12–14).

A New Testament understanding of spiritual leadership is deeply connected to the image of the church as the fully-gifted body of Christ. Spiritual leaders are members of that body whose authority flows from the exclusive Head of the church. As all members unify under Christ, the church works in harmony to fulfill His purposes (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:11–16).

In the Assemblies of God, leadership functions within a voluntary cooperative fellowship, not a hierarchical system of spiritual ranking. Every credentialed minister shares a common trust before God. Elected offices, such as presbyter or superintendent, are administrative roles over specific areas. Those in such offices should be relationally or contextually engaged in the communities they are entrusted to walk with and steward in partnership.

Pastoral Nature of Spiritual Leadership

A variety of New Testament leaders are seen as spiritual leaders (Ephesians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 3:1–13). Pastors, also identified as “overseers” in 1 Timothy 3:1, are the church’s most recognized spiritual leaders today. However, others might occupy positions of spiritual authority, acting as a shepherd over the spiritual care of other believers without the title of pastor.

The English word *pastor* comes from the Latin word for *shepherd*. “Shepherd” became a commonly used image for spiritual leadership in Scripture. In Ezekiel 34, God called out Israel’s leaders as failed shepherds. They cared for themselves while ignoring the needs of the flock. The leaders also harshly mistreated the flock and did not search for them when they scattered. They abandoned their responsibilities and their people. In contrast, God promised to be a good shepherd to Israel. He searches for missing sheep, heals the injured, and meets the needs of the entire flock (Ezekiel 34:1–16).

Using the same analogy, Jesus contrasted His leadership with the spiritual leaders of Israel in John 10. Leaders act like hired hands when they abandon the sheep to danger. Jesus finds, leads, protects, and provides for the sheep as the “Good Shepherd.” He sacrificed His life to fulfill that role (John 10:1–15).

The willingness to serve others sacrificially lies at the heart of all Christian leadership. Jesus demonstrated sacrificial service by willingly going to the cross and refusing to use His power to usurp the will of the Father (John 5:19; Philippians 2:6–8). Shepherds who are willing to lay down their lives for the flock follow Jesus’ example. They also follow Christ through not exerting power to dominate the flock. Pastoral leadership remains an exercise in submission (Ephesians 5:21).

The apostles warned church leaders to lead sacrificially and submissively. Paul, in writing to Timothy and Titus, gave guidance for leaders. He told them to choose elders or overseers who are gentle, have self-control, do not lose their temper, are not quarrelsome, do not love money, and are not conceited (1 Timothy 3:2–7; Titus 1:7–8). Peter called elders to shepherd communities freely and not begrudgingly. They must commit to serving, not be self-serving, and not “lord” their authority over others (1 Peter 5:3).

The Greek word for *lord* used here by Peter is the same word used by Jesus in Matthew 20:25 and Mark 10:42. Along with Luke 22:24, these passages describe disciples fighting over their position. Jesus warned them not to lead like “the Gentiles,” who see leadership as a way to lord over others. Instead, a Christlike leader serves and willingly gives his or

her life. Jesus gave the model for spiritual leadership. He “did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45).

Spiritual leadership cannot be self-serving or oppressive. Shepherds who care more about their benefit than their flock are bad shepherds. Pastors who cannot govern their tempers and do not reflect gentleness or kindness are not good shepherds because they do not exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, which marks spiritual growth (Galatians 5:22–23).

The breadth of pastoral leadership should never exceed the depth of a minister’s spiritual formation (1 Timothy 3:6). Jesus left an example of being prepared for ministry. He did not begin public ministry until after winning the battle over Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). A pastor’s character must be strong enough to bear the weight of his or her influence.

Abuse of Spiritual Leadership

While examples are found throughout church history, the church in recent decades has openly named spiritual abuse as a problem. Definitions vary for spiritual abuse. Some focus on abuse at the hands of spiritual leaders. Others include abuse faced by leaders from those they lead.² Most definitions include the use of authority (a position, a community, Scripture, etc.) to control an individual. Spiritual abuse (1) occurs in a spiritual context, (2) is motivated by a desire to lord one’s “authority” over others, (3) is marked by persistent behavior, and (4) causes real harm whether intended or not.

Not every action that influences others in a spiritual context is abusive. Proper use of spiritual authority leads to enrichment rather than abuse, though the experience of that authority may be uncomfortable. Christian communities need spiritual authorities to encourage, confront, teach, correct, edify, and rebuke (2 Timothy 3:16 to 4:2).³ The apostle Paul gave a wonderful example of a leader able to rebuke lovingly through his letters (Romans 2; 1 Corinthians 1; 2 Corinthians 11; Galatians 1). A spiritual leader who corrects in love is following God’s call.

Healing and maturity result from a proper use of spiritual leadership. Spiritually abusive leadership, however, negatively impacts the process of discipleship for the abused. A spiritual injury usually will not heal through the ministry of leaders who created the wound.

People who have experienced spiritual abuse may face increased bouts of fear, anger, shame, depression, and the potential need for therapy. They can become isolated from others due to an inability to trust in community. Their ongoing spiritual struggles can include doubts about their self-worth, the safety of the church, and the goodness of God.

² One of the earliest definitions is also one of the simplest; spiritual abuse is “controlling behavior linked to spiritual beliefs.” Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* (SPCK Publishing, 2019), 20.

³ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Zondervan, 2022), 35–39.

Patterns of controlling behavior often reveal spiritual abuse.⁴ Abuse becomes spiritual when it occurs within a spiritual environment and uses spiritual means to assert control. It is abusive because of the harm received as a result of controlling behavior. Spiritual abuse does not develop disciples. It unravels the work done in those who could have become healthy disciples otherwise.⁵

Controlling behavior can take many forms. Inappropriate appeals to God's authority (using Scripture, personal prophecy, etc., to control) offer one form. It can take the form of insincere public praise or shame (e.g., making an example of someone as a form of manipulation). Controlling behavior also uses intimidation tactics to create the fear of being removed from the leader's favor or isolated from one's peers. Excessive accountability practices also control (e.g., overprogramming so people cannot choose how to spend their time).⁶

Another form of spiritual abuse arises when leaders, elevated by election or appointment, assume that their office automatically qualifies them to "lord" their authority (Matthew 20:25) in unfamiliar ministry settings. This is particularly damaging in contextualized ministries where credibility is built on relationships, cultural fluency, and spiritual recognition by the community. Positional power must always be tempered by communal humility and the awareness that the Holy Spirit often speaks through the unexpected or overlooked.

Harmful mistakes in ministry may reflect immaturity or incompetence rather than being signs of spiritual abuse. Even spiritually and professionally mature leaders can fail. However, when a pattern forms through repeated mistakes, it may reveal an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders may all seek control, but not all share the same motives. Predators use their positions of influence to feast on the flock, motivated by appetites. Such leaders depend on secrecy for survival. Predators need others to fail to recognize their patterns of behavior. They distance themselves from those who might discover their activity or nature. This kind of spiritual abuser causes unmistakable harm.

Narcissists control to feed their egos. These leaders exert control in various ways. They give responsibility without power. Some withdraw praise to keep people motivated by their attention. Others make it difficult to question or talk about their decisions. They build a structure centered on themselves that prioritizes personal loyalty over biblical faithfulness.⁷

⁴ Elements that continue to show up in varied definitions of spiritual abuse are controlling behavior, spiritual environment, and psychological harm. For example, Oakley and Humphreys define it in *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* as "a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it." 30–31.

⁵ For a deeper examination of the effect of spiritual abuse, see Kruger, 99–109; David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority* (Bethany House Publishers, 2005), 41–51; Oakley and Humphreys, 85–86.

⁶ Johnson and Van Vonderen, 53–93; Kruger, 24–33; and Oakley and Humphreys, 64.

⁷ To better understand how narcissistic behaviors and types also exist on a spectrum, see Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 25–43.

Some leaders, who are neither predators nor narcissists, are just insecure. Insecurity leads them to engage in controlling behaviors to protect their authority. Insecure leaders may surround themselves with people they see as weaker than themselves in charisma, talent, or other ways. They feel threatened by the ministry gifts of others. Insecure leaders discourage those who grow beyond their comfort level.

All forms of controlling leadership can be dictatorial. Regardless of motivation, many dictatorial leaders share the need to build structures with themselves at the center. Loyalty to their authority carries more weight than faithfulness to God's will.

However, some dictatorial leaders are neither predators, narcissists, nor personally insecure. Controlling or dominating other believers may not be a leader's primary motivation. Instead, some lead through control as the only way they know how to exercise leadership. Some leaders do not recognize the difference spiritual leadership makes in managing an organization, and they treat the individuals they are called to disciple as little more than tools they are trying to use for the good of the organization.

Even still, a pure motivation does not justify using spiritually abusive methods of control. Controlling methods will lead to harm. Even if well-intentioned, these leaders fail to build up the body of Christ well. They must learn to share power with others whom God has also called.

The Assemblies of God urges ministers to put accountability structures into place. Yet, those processes can fail for a variety of reasons. People who dismiss patterns of abusive behavior as isolated incidents can cause failure. Leaders nullify accountability when they dismiss those who claim abuse or blame them for being hurt. Processes break down when more concern is shown for *how* the complaint was given than for the complaint itself. And failure is close when solutions focus on forgiveness without change or reconciliation without repentance.⁸

A healthy Christian community puts structures in place to build up everyone. They prioritize transparency from leaders through the right processes and practices. Communities should choose leaders based on their character rather than just competency. They share the ministry responsibilities that belong to the body of Christ. Leaders must remain accountable to the greater community for decisions and behaviors.

To prevent spiritual abuse from occurring or continuing, every Christian community should be taught the following:

1. Spiritual leadership empowers rather than dominates. Spiritual growth is an indicator of a healthy spiritual community. A community that expects to grow spiritually will be more sensitive to spiritually abusive practices that interfere with that.

⁸ Kruger, 59–97.

2. Accountability belongs to the whole church. The ministry of the church and the treatment of its members remain the responsibility of the community, including the leaders who oversee and equip it.
3. Exercise awareness of the signs and dangers of spiritual abuse. No leader should be solely responsible for preventing spiritual abuse. The whole community shares this responsibility of awareness.⁹
4. The community is also responsible for the care of those who have previously been hurt by spiritual abuse. One of the greatest dangers of spiritual abuse is the distance it can create between believers and their community. Communities must become places of healing and wholeness for those who are wounded.

Conclusion

The Assemblies of God was founded as a cooperative fellowship that honors the calling and gifting of all Spirit-filled believers, not as a clerical hierarchy. As we seek to cultivate healthy spiritual leadership, we must resist any drift toward positional superiority and instead affirm diverse models of leadership found throughout the global church. To walk in step with the Spirit, we must honor the voices of those God has raised up from within, not just those with titles. The nature of spiritual leadership listens, learns, and leads in discernment within community.

The spiritual development of Christian communities requires spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership is marked by a willingness to sacrifice, serve, and put others first for their good and the glory of God. Spiritual leaders who care for and empower those under their charge do an incredible service for God's people. Their work should be honored (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Conversely, abusing the position and influence of spiritual leadership does great harm to the gospel, the reputation of the church, and to individual believers. Spiritual leadership empowers and edifies believers; it does not coerce and control in the self-interest of the leader. Spiritual leadership flows from the authority and heart of Christ.

⁹ Oakley and Humphreys, 134–135 argue for a preventative approach to spiritual abuse under the acronym ESSTA: Empowerment of all believers, Supervision of leaders, Support of the abused, Training for ministry teams, and Awareness of spiritual abuse.