### Book Review

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<th>Book Title: Churches That Abuse</th>
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<tr>
<td>Author: Ronald M. Enroth</td>
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<td>Reviewer: Margaret Thaler Singer</td>
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<td>Publication: Cultic Studies Journal</td>
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In prior works sociologist Ronald Enroth has demonstrated the poignancy and power of case studies to bring alive the interactions between leaders and followers in a range of current religious groups (The Jesus People; The Gay Church; Youth, Brainwashing and the Extremist Cults; and The Lure of the Cults). This new book, case histories of individuals, couples, and families whose lives have been devastated by the abusive practices of power-driven leaders are presented in detail. Further, Enroth outlines the backgrounds of the pastors and how the groups evolved. The pastors and groups are named. The authoritarian, idiosyncratic practices rationalized by these abusive pastors are detailed and explained.

Most useful are the explanations of why the social and psychological influence techniques work. Their impact on the lives and psychology of members is explicated.

Enroth faced the task of exposing the psychological, social, and financial methods unscrupulous pastors use to enroll, train, and retain followers. Without accomplishing this, he could not overcome the centuries-old prejudice that causes many individuals, including some clergy, to blame victims. He has been able to lead readers to see what thought-reform programs are, and how mind control works, that is, how the enticements affect the decision making and commitments of the person who enters and stays in an abusive group.

Enroth identified 10 sets of features found in abusive churches: control-oriented leadership, spiritual elitism, manipulation of members, persecution, life-style rigidity, emphasis on experience, suppression of dissent, harsh discipline of members, denunciation of other churches, and the infliction of painful exit processes.

An overview of the churches described indicates that control was obtained over every aspect of temporal life ranging from dress codes, the space between parishioners in pews, the kinds of cookies eaten, the assigning of marital partners, the destruction of marriages, the segregating of families—to the point that the readers see that individuals were led to replace their conscience and internal accountability with leader-dominated dictates that reflected that man's personal desires. (Few were woman pastors, and most of the pastors were self-appointed rather than ordained.)

These leaders were able to recruit followers to join into a world created by their sermons. The teachings and preachings of abusive pastors produced self-created islands where followers were taught (deceived, coerced, manipulated) through fear, guilt, intimidation, and the use of thought-reform or mind-control techniques to accept values and conduct that relabeled reality. When looked at dispassionately, reality was reinterpreted in order to construct a church with doctrines that permitted the pastor to have whatever sexual, financial, or social habits were desired and not challenged. Unchallenged power. These men were not teaching Christianity; they were using their assumed power to produce a group in which whatever they wanted to do was taught as "doctrine." One way of phrasing what the abusive pastors appear to reason is to say: "If I create a community that obeys my rules, these rules are then reality, and I can put God's imprimatur on my wishes, my fantasies, my desires."

One pastor, who began with the prominent theme of "submitting to him," was not slow to set into play the practice of "dancing before the Lord" (individuals dancing before the congregation) which was eventually transformed by pastoral instruction into "intimate dancing" with one's "spiritual connection." To an outside observer, the pastor had set into play a sequencing of desensitizing activities and mental rationalizations in the thinking and decision-making process of followers that led them to accept very sensual, overtly sexual dancing with a nonmarital partner with implied permission to extend that harmless expression of intimacy into matters of the heart. Relabeling and endorsement of conduct by the pastor gave acceptance to conduct that had devastating effects on individuals, marriages, and families. To the outside observer, the pastor had created explanations under the guise of spiritual teachings that instituted practices that permitted him to indulge in behavior not condoned by either the Christian or secular society.

This semantic reframing was not an isolated instance, but rather a technique widely used by a number of pastors who instituted a plethora of practices not designed to promote Christianity, nor to promote better spiritual and temporal lives for followers, but as ways to permit themselves to instigate practices that gave them what they wanted and permitted them to do as they pleased. These reframings were in concert with spiritual endorsements in order to rationalize what they wanted done, to make possible indulgences in otherwise nonacceptable behavior, to enhance their domination, and to increase their realms of control.

One of the excellent features of Enroth's presentation is his use of examples of pastoral conduct to illustrate psychological concepts that assist readers who are victims themselves to understand what has happened to them. However, the same device allows clergy, psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, and others in the helping professions to grasp the mechanics of the influence techniques and to sense the psychological changes these induce.

For example, in discussing the state of unreality many former members of abusive groups experience while they are in the groups, Enroth illustrates the frequently used psychological concept of the "double bind" to explain the actual irreconcilable contradictions found in the exhortations of the abusive pastors. One pastor preached to women to model themselves after his wife and not to appear "worldly women" and draw attention to themselves. His wife wore a wig, false eyelashes, spiked heels, and as some parishioners commented in their interviews, "The wife looked more like the prostitute Jezebel than the godly wife of Proverbs 31."

This book contains a near-complete catalogue of techniques and conduct used to produce what is termed "swallow-follow"
methods of totalitarian controls used by the abusive pastors. It illustrates the technical concept of thought reform and makes the popular term of mind control understandable.

The author summarizes certain lingering problems (p. 185) he has noted in victims, such as difficulty relating to supervisory personnel in the workplace; difficulty trusting new friends, acquaintances, and workmates, all while feeling guilty for having a judgmental attitude; experiencing deep fears of abandonment by a spouse, death of one's children, or never again having a date.

He also lists the areas in which healing must occur: between victims and their friends, family, and spouses (who are often pitted against one another by the abusive pastors), and reconciliation with children (often badly abused and neglected by parents at the instigation of the leader). Finding confidence again to approach group or church affiliation and overcoming distorted spirituality are part of a long list of problems to sort out and deal with on the path to recovery.

Enroth sees some troublesome tendencies: “It seems that we have a need to create evangelical gurus, Christian celebrities, superpastors in megachurches, and miscellaneous ‘teachers’ and ‘experts’ that we place on pastoral pedestals. What is it about people, including evangelicals, that explains this apparent need for authority figures, the need to have someone co-sign for our lives? As David Gill noted years ago: ‘We want heroes! We want assurance that someone knows what is going on in this mad world. We want a father or a mother to lean on. We want revolutionary folk heroes who will tell us what to do until the rapture. We massage the egos of these demagogues and canonize their every opinion. We accept without a whimper their rationalizations of their errors and deviations’ (p. 205).

A theme throughout the book is that “spiritual abuse can take place in the context of doctrinally sound, Bible-preaching, fundamentalist, conservative Christianity. All that is needed for abuse is a pastor accountable to no one and therefore beyond confrontation” (p. 189). The author believes that “tendencies toward abusive styles of leadership are more prevalent than most Christians realize” (p. 205). Legalisms, and the destructive applications of discipleship, authority, shepherding, and abuses within charismatic groups are discussed.

Enroth concludes, “In our homes, in our churches, and in our programs of Christian education, we must strive to cultivate critical, discerning minds if we are to avoid the tragedy of churches that abuse” (p. 206).

This book brings information, insight, and direction to those helping and to those needing help after being abused by a wide range of churches. Individuals, couples, and families will find help here directly for themselves. Professionals offering guidance will find that this book spells out for them what has happened mentally, socially, spiritually, and financially to the victims of abusive churches.

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Resources

- Churches That Abuse
- Enroth, Ronald, Ph.D. - Dysfunctional Churches
- G Conference 2003 CA: Presenter
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