
Subject: Chapter 5: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians.

Dear Saints

Below please find Chapter 5 of Andrew Strom's book: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians. Please visit his web-site at <http://www.streetrevival.com/>. His e-mail is prophetic@revivalschool.com. You can also subscribe to their newsletter by sending an empty e-mail to anzac-subscribe@welovegod.org.

Enjoy!

Eben Swart

CHAPTER FIVE CONTROL AND SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Many people assume that the main reasons for people leaving the churches must be that they have had a run-in with leadership. They have been "hurt" or wounded in some way, and that is why they leave. This is one of the few reasons that church people can understand - so they assume (often wrongly) that ALL leavers are bitter or "hurt". But this is often NOT THE CASE AT ALL. As we have seen, there are a whole raft of much deeper reasons for people leaving churches than just "problems with the leadership". However it is a factor for some leavers, especially those who have come from more "controlling" environments. Sadly, particularly amongst Pentecostals in recent years, control and spiritual abuse seem to have become more and more prevalent. It is the mis-use of terms like covering, submission and authority that have often led to these problems. A number of Out-of-church people who wrote to me highlighted the fact that leadership in the Bible often seemed quite different to much of what we see today. They also noted that some of the teachings found in today's churches were making the problem worse. Below are several emails relating to this:

From: Alistair (-New Zealand):

I have many sincere, clear thinking and effective friends, who just do not want to be a part of the system which is called church and in most cases it is the issue of leadership. When "authoritarianism" which is not of, or from God becomes evident, the discerning know and move out. They do not leave God, they just leave a system. Human imposition never did have Biblical authority...

From: Jeff (-New Zealand):

I believe that many Pastors require the congregation to make "them" first, i.e. to put "them" on a pedestal and if you don't then you are "in rebellion" or "can't come under authority" or have "a spirit of witchcraft" or something. I have challenged leaders that they are meant to be shepherds of the sheep God has sent them, not to lord it over them and treat them like slaves. Many Pastors are of the opinion that the sheep are there to serve them and not the way Jesus designed it in Scripture, "feed my lambs".

In Revelation 2 verse 6, Jesus talks about the Nicolaitans and that He hated them. I understand that is the only time that Jesus said he hated anything and it's mentioned twice in Revelation 2, again in verse 15. This speaks of the control the leaders had over their people and the abuse they used. A very interesting and enlightening chapter and a warning for today. It's being exposed as the same Nicolaitan spirit right here and now.

I have spoken to many Christians over the last 6 months or so, who have left churches and I have asked them the reason why. Some of the answers follow: 1) There was so much spiritual abuse/ control over us. If we did not conform to the Pastors & leaders' wishes (even if they were contrary to Scripture) then we were ignored or ostracised. We dared not question anything. 2) If we didn't tithe according to their perception of our income then again we were ignored or ostracised. They were only interested in our money. 3) It was all about the Pastors. They tried to be "superstars" and if you ran around pleasing them and agreeing with them, then you were promoted or used in ministry. They only seemed to use the ones that crawled up to them. We treated them nicely but didn't go out of our way to suck up to them or allow ourselves to be controlled by them. That meant we just sat in the pews and kept them warm and were never used in ministry at all. After a while we left. We wanted to be used by God - not just sitting in the pews. The Pastors played favourites. (-Quote from a close friend who left a church after 10 years faithful service). 4) The churches speak about getting out and being active in the community (being Jesus to the world) but it ended up being a "bless me" club. Lots of talk about taking the gospel to the community in practical ways but nothing ever happened. 5) Our needs were never met. We were expected to be available to work for the church whenever they required us. But we never felt that they cared about our needs. 6) Each week was just like a performance. The Pastor up there performing to keep us coming back and keep taking our 10% income so he could keep his job. No Spirit of God anywhere.

-I will finish there, I have a book full of them...

From: John (-USA):

I have been in churches that emphasize "God's man of the hour" and the expected awe that was supposed to be accorded "the anointed". I heard one sermon of a renowned prophetic minister who preached that if someone served and attended to "the man of God" then the anointing of the man of God would eventually fall on the servant as in Elisha-Elijah. And there was a lot of reference to this anointed and that anointed minister, where they were held in superman status. I'm not being irreverent here because I agree with Paul on giving due respect to those who have Labored in the Lord. However some things began to stand out.... I was sensing pride, boastfulness and self glorification and not a sense of God's awe and presence.

I have heard ministers use the Scripture "Touch not the Lord's anointed" to mean that "common" Christians as well as the world had better watch the way they treat the minister. God most certainly does watch out over his own- I have seen it personally. But Christianity is not "treat me right - or else!" That is witchcraft.

God wants power and purity. If you were to have only one, purity would be it! Power without love and purity produces tyrants and despots intoxicated with power.

From: Mike (-USA):

I have recently read several books concerning the early church and what Jesus left for us, in comparison to what we call "church" today. There doesn't seem to be any Scripture supporting a pastor driven, pastor run, pastor supported Church in the New Testament. Paul suggested a 5-fold ministry, also mentioning something about "every joint supplying..." The pastor was never intended to do "it all"!!

Others who wrote to me told of the bad experiences they had personally had with church leaders. Sadly, this is somewhat common amongst Out-of-church people. One cannot help but wonder how many Christians are being virtually driven out of churches because of terrible experiences such as these:

From: Tina (-USA):

As a new believer in 1979, without any prior church background, I was led to a charismatic church with a new pastor starting out (with a Pastor's heart) and was part of that fellowship for 15 years. It was a family. I was taught the Bible. There was love... there was God in the midst of us. In 1997, without going into details... this Pastor resigned his position and moved on. A Word of Faith pastor came and took over the church and has been building a 'big ministry'... a lot of hype replaced what we had. We received a lot of teaching about honoring the 'man of God', being an Armour-Bearer, etc, etc.

My husband and I resigned our positions there and left without 'taking anyone with us'. Today, almost all of the original group is gone and not attending 'church' anywhere. Won't go into all that transpired over the three years we stayed there, but to sum it up, as I was driving down the street trying to figure out what happened, the Lord said: "You were spiritually raped."

We have tried to find different places to attend but can't seem to plug in... just can't/won't 'play the game anymore'. It gets lonely at times... you know, the Body being a many-members type of reality. No unforgiveness, resentments or bitterness in my heart... pretty sure all that has been dealt with... just a longing for pure fellowship with a community of Believers without agendas and with Jesus as the only King.

From: Larry (-USA):

I came out of such a church as described in your article, very authoritative, almost dictatorial. I was in this environment for 15 years. I ended up getting excommunicated for leaving this church and nearly had a nervous breakdown in the process. In the church's view, I did not leave them, I left God, and they made that plain to me. Overcoming this, and the years of mental abuse that I received was very difficult. This took me years, so I can understand why people are conscious over a strong church authority in their lives. How many churches are Christ-like anyway? I see more of sin and the world in the church than I do of Christ. I guess I feel more comfortable guiding my own life than to have a bunch of busybodies, who are on a power trip, try and tell me what to do and how to live life. I hope you can understand that. Sometimes I think only a person who has gone through something like this can understand what it's like to be under the authority of an abusive pastor for a long time.

From: April (-USA):

I am an "out-of-church" Christian; part of a charismatic fellowship for 13 years that was heavily into "reconstructionist theology" including worship of leadership as "God's anointed" and required "discipleship/submission to authority" (which amounted to slave-labor for all authority figures and things like having to ask permission to visit my parents or friends outside the church).

I finally left that church in 1987 and, believe it or not, came away with a few good things: scholarly inductive Bible study habits, spiritual warfare skills, intercessory prayer and body ministry practice, and contemplative worship.

I didn't join another fellowship until about 1990, when my husband and I joined an Episcopal church whose priest was charismatic... Eventually, church politics (people being motivated by greed and selfish ambition rather than by the Spirit) led me and my husband to leave this fellowship in about 1995. I no longer attend a church, though my husband now attends a Vineyard Christian Fellowship.

For the first few years "out of church" I felt like I was doing something wrong, but every time I asked the Lord if I should be attending somewhere else, He said no. So, for the past 8 years I have been cultivating relationships with my neighbors and loving and praying for them. I have had many opportunities to share the love of Jesus with them.

When I feel safe enough, I want to resume fellowship with a local body of believers.

From: Sherril (-South Africa):

I love the Body of Christ but I have become so disillusioned with leaders. I am praying for God to place me in a Body where the leaders have integrity.

My recent experiences have been with men who are not interested in the "sheep" at all. They have been left to fend for themselves. The pastoring has been left to lay people like myself. Three pastors that I know have been involved with dishonest money dealings.

I cannot tell you how this has distressed me. These men are all still in the ministry and I just see more brokenness and scattering of the sheep. I have even considered starting my own church. I have a Bachelors Degree in Theology and will start work on my Masters shortly. I know that I would have to have very clear leading by the Holy Spirit, but that is how desperate I have become.

From: Dennie (-USA):

I worked in a Christian store and what I saw there broke my heart. I tried really hard to remember that Christians are still works in progress but my heart became so heavy I had to quit or be consumed with brokenness. My church is wonderful but it is filled with factions with different visions who want their way. For 5 months I have withdrawn from contact with church and Christians and my heart hurts.

From: Nate (-Australia):

My wife and I were in the band and leadership of a 200-strong Pentecostal church. My thoughts at the time and afterward are that the pastors were very controlling. We were encouraged to play and speak in a way which appealed to people's emotions - this was interpreted as being Spirit-led. I (personally) felt that I was being manipulative, and manipulated. My wife and I felt rather disillusioned by the fact that the pastor's focus seemed resolutely on increasing numbers, and finding the "perfect" building. Time and again the preaching centred around this topic. Other things were preached, but the sole purpose of the Sunday service seemed to be (in my eyes) to manipulate people into becoming "passionate" about the "building" and whatever the latest "move" was.

My wife and I felt so compromised and time-deprived, so we finally went to the pastors and said we wanted to take a break from the band and leadership. This wasn't taken as we'd hoped, and we got into a big fight where words such as "deceived" and "divisive" were thrown at us.

I think at this stage I became dispensable. The pastors concentrated their efforts on my wife, trying to "win" her back. They told her that I was just rebelling and other things - that they'd had dreams, etc. - which made me even more angry when she told me. I was resolute in my decision, which made my wife feel like she was being pulled in two directions. (At this stage we were still going to the church, and everyone was pretending that nothing had happened). Finally we moved town - which cut our ties with the pastors...

From: G.F. (-Location unknown):

I long for discipleship, accountability, loving correction, and meeting together more than just Sundays... But my ability to trust my leaders also was so maimed by my vulnerability over issues in my personal life and resultant rejection, not once but repeatedly... then severely taken advantage of by another highly visible "Man of God". So I have opted out of the system... I desire to know the Lord, but I don't know if I will ever be willing to risk the BIG Church again. Fortunately, I have friends in the same boat and we gather to love The Lord and each other.

From: Lynda (-USA):

Our story.... We helped build and pay for a church building. Laid our lives down for over 20 years, serving in every way.... Led with a team for a while (though not papered). After 20+ years we brought in a pastor and his wife from a local "denomination" - they annihilated us - slander - railing - spiritual abuse... Almost everyone that was there when they took over was forced out - one man tried to commit suicide over the horridness of their actions toward us all.... long story short - took 2 years - in a cave - to heal. We thought the Lord was finished with us.... and I personally was afraid to ever see another "Christian" - they had slandered me so badly.... Then - the Lord started over... and we realized it was HIM all along... He drop-kicked us over the goal post of the religious system - we died and then we were resurrected.... NOW we are living - really living in FREEDOM - no abuse or religious programs and control - no hierarchical / political garbage... Being Jesus on the earth... loving, honoring people.... not building for the glory of man.... But to glorify Jesus. We are a safe place!!

Our new ministry... We started in our home - outgrew it and now meet in a conference center for worship.... We are so thankful that the Lord got us out of that system - men building kingdoms for their own name and glory, etc... And just in case you are wondering - we have forgiven and rejoice in our beloved enemies that were used by God to bring us deliverance.

One woman who wrote to me put it very eloquently when she posed a series of questions aimed at the very heart of the modern church:

From: Lynnette (-USA):

When did we stop being a hospital for sinners? When did we become a sanctuary for saints? When did the spirit of control become the head of the church? Where did the Spirit of the Lord go?

How long Oh Lord must this go on? A fire burns deep within those that are wandering outside the church. When God? When?

I am wandering in this place like an outcast, but I remember, Oh dear Lord I remember when You moved. I pray for the day when I can see You move again in the places that are Yours. Church as usual has become a very cold, dead, dry place no matter what the title of the church is. When do we stop playing church and start being the Body and Bride?

