



DWELL COMMUNITY CHURCH XENOS CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

exploring how well-meaning individuals cause significant abuse through religious dogmatism

Abstract

Numerous claims have been brought against Dwell Community Church - formerly known as Xenos Christian Fellowship - throughout the years related to various forms of abuse including high levels of control, violation of privacy regarding intimate personal details, and emotional and psychological abandonment. Despite these accusations, church leadership maintains that there exists no systemic issue of control, manipulation, or ill intent towards current or former members of the organization. Indeed, a careful review of church responses to allegations of abuse indicates that members and leaders themselves may be largely unaware of the origin and causes of such claims. Church leadership asserts that Dwell Community Church is an organization which adheres to mainstream biblical doctrines but with an emphasis on lay ministry and content-rich, biblical conviction. Members and leadership alike have defended their intentions as fundamentally positive and loving, though marked by the failures common to all imperfect people. Through God's redemptive grace, individual members continuously strive towards a self-motivated spiritual life. How then do we reconcile the significant claims of abuse with the apparent, sincerely held belief that members and leadership have acted with the best possible intentions and – insofar as their imperfect humanity allows – have a clear conscience regarding their organization and actions? This question constitutes the central theme of this article in which I will seek to outline the systemic structures and endemic belief system which engenders an environment organically resulting in significant incidences of trauma with little sense of guilt or responsibility on behalf of church members themselves and without reliance on corrupt or evil intentions.

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We feel free because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom.

Slavoj Žizek

Note: Dwell Community Church, formerly Xenos Christian Fellowship, is a non-denominational evangelical church located primarily in Columbus, Ohio. The church changed its name in December 2020 as a part of a rebranding effort. The church operates a variety of offshoot organizations in the Midwest including [Freedom Fellowships](#) in Kent, Ohio, and [East End Church](#) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

STATING THE PROBLEM

Numerous claims have been brought against Dwell Community Church throughout the years related to various forms of abuse including high levels of control, violation of privacy regarding intimate personal details, and emotional and psychological abandonment. Despite these accusations, church leadership maintains that there exists no systemic issue of control, manipulation, or ill intent towards current or former members of the organization. Indeed, a careful review of church responses to allegations of abuse indicates that members and leaders themselves may be largely unaware of the origin and causes of such claims. Church leadership asserts that Dwell Community Church is an organization which adheres to mainstream biblical doctrines but with an emphasis on lay ministry and content-rich, biblical conviction. Members and leadership alike have defended their intentions as fundamentally positive and loving, though marked by the failures common to all imperfect people. Through God's redemptive grace, individual members continuously strive towards a self-motivated spiritual life. How then do we reconcile the significant claims of abuse with the apparent, sincerely held belief that members and leadership have acted with the best possible intentions and – insofar as their imperfect humanity allows – have a clear conscience regarding their organization and actions? This question constitutes the central theme of this article in which I will seek to outline the systemic structures and endemic belief system which engenders an environment organically resulting in significant incidences of trauma with little sense of guilt or responsibility on behalf of church members themselves and without reliance on corrupt or evil intentions.

MY EXPERIENCE

I was a member of Dwell Community Church from approximately 1998, when I began attending middle school bible studies with a close friend who grew up in the church, to 2006 when – as a freshmen in college – I decided to move out of the ministry house that I had been living in. My story has many of the hallmarks that have become widely known throughout the Columbus area in regard to ex-members of the church: my life within the church was highly structured, requiring significant demands on my time, and my mentality was marked by the full zeal of many initiates. I joined the church, not looking for friends – as is the case for some – but out of a desire to understand the truth about existence and spirituality which I had been unable to find in the traditional churches I belonged to as a child. Even as a middle school student, the bible study leaders at Dwell Community Church treated my questions with a seriousness that I had never experienced before in religion. Moreover, the emphasis that Dwell Community Church placed on biblical knowledge as an intellectual pursuit that could result in understanding, meaning, and fulfillment in my life was deeply appealing to me. It is no surprise that this core drive to understand and grow my knowledge of the world and human experience still forms a fundamental part of who I am today.

Indeed there existed a largely unspoken value system within Dwell Community Church which rewarded individuals like me who had the capacity – or in church terms, the spiritual gift – for intellectual understanding of scripture and the corresponding ability to communicate that understanding to others. In the years since my departure, I have often described Dwell Community Church as an intellectual church, with a heavy emphasis on biblical interpretation and teaching beyond that of its contemporaries. In fact, this is one of the elements that leads to a sense of superiority within the church. It then is not surprising that I was easily identified as having significant leadership potential even as a high school student within the organization. I affiliated with other members my age who were also being groomed for leadership. It was well known who commanded significant spiritual authority within the organization, and consequently, there existed a corresponding desire to be recognized and even mentored by those individuals. By the time I was a freshmen in the college ministry, I had taught Central Teachings – the large group meetings combining many home churches – at both the high school and middle school level. I was mentoring a high school girl in a discipleship relationship, attending up to five different meetings per week, living in a ministry house, pursuing a degree in chemical engineering, and working part-time to pay my rent. My spiritual credibility within the organization was well recognized.

Leaving Dwell Community Church was a complicated and painful decision for me, one which could form the subject of its own essay or even book. It has been almost exactly sixteen years since I exited the church, but the marks that the organization left on the deepest parts of myself are impossible to deny, and my experiences within the church during my formative years unquestionably left their imprint on the way I view the world, relationships, and my own personal value. Fundamentally, I left Dwell Community Church due to sheer exhaustion, both physical and spiritual, and left feeling broken and like a failure before God for being unable to meet the bar that was set out for me. Though part of this is undeniably an aspect of my own personality, much of it was also inherent in the culture of the home church that I



belonged to and reflected in the attitude of my leaders and my personal mentor at the time. To meet the obligations of the church, along with my obligations to school and work would have been impossible for anyone. I was rebuked for going to sleep without meeting the needs of my roommates in the ministry house, despite having difficult exams to prepare for in engineering. I was taught to believe that my pride in my intellect or success in college classes was compromising my relationship with God, that school was my idol, and I should expend energy within the church at the expense of my classwork and grades. I was admonished for staying on campus late into the night to study with classmates, with the irony being that my classmates were accommodating my inflexible schedule which required me to be at church meetings nearly every evening. In fact, the entire reason that I was studying at Ohio State is that it was explicitly understood - rarely stated outright - that a commitment to God within the church meant pursuing my studies in Columbus. I did not even apply to any other colleges. Ultimately, I broke. In fairness to my mentor, when I met with her for the last time, I was probably already at the point of leaving. However, there was little recognition of my concerns or encouragement to stay – only a black and white attitude: if I refused to submit fully to God, then there was no place for me in his church. I moved out of the ministry house that same day.

I knew that my decision represented *de facto* excommunication. The insidious part is that I even believed and agreed that I deserved excommunication. I was in mourning over my failure before God and my failure before the only true friends that I had ever had. I burned with the conviction that I had expelled myself into a cruel world where no one would ever love me truly or understand me. Perhaps if my story had ended here, I might not have gone on to consider the truly damaging structures within the organization that had brought me to this point. I may have even returned to Dwell Community Church in the future or to another Christian church – as the prodigal son – repented, acknowledged my pride, and re-submitted my life to God. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to repent before my faith was dealt a death blow. On July 1, 2006 – mere months after leaving the church – I was in a major car accident caused by a drunk driver. In the car with me were two new friends and fellow engineering interns, one of whom died on impact. I sustained critical injuries including a skull fracture and a shattered pelvis.

This information circulated widely and rapidly in the groups that the three of us had ties to – family and friends, the company we were interning with, Honors Engineering at Ohio State, and – in my case – Dwell Community Church. What ensued was a veritable outpouring of love, compassion, and support – with one notable exception. Though some of my former friends from Dwell Community Church came to the hospital in the immediate aftermath, I later learned that members of my home church had been specifically counseled by church leadership not to contact me or to provide any support to me. It is my understanding that a prayer meeting was held to seek guidance from God on how to handle the situation related to my accident. The decision was taken to explicitly withdraw the support of the community from my life because I was in active rebellion against God in having left the church. Again the horrifying psychological reality about all of this is that I even understood the decision despite suffering a crushing blow as a result of it. To this day, no one from the leadership of my home church has ever reached out to me to explain their decision or to apologize for the damage it caused me. However, friends who eventually left the church as well did reach out to apologize, shouldering the burden of a deep sense of shame that they had complied with such a mandate.

This came to be perhaps the formative experience of my life, the experience with which all other experiences are in reference to. I am deeply indebted to those who graciously supported me in this most difficult period of my life, a period made far more difficult by the unseen, non-physical trauma inflicted by my former church. I learned several essential truths from this experience. First, real love requires no source – it is born of human nuance, empathy, and conviction to act, and its only source is inside each of us. Second, the purest intentions in the world can inflict deep wounds that may never heal. And third, that earnest supplication to God on behalf of the faithful may not be the infallible font of truth that those in my church had believed it to be. It is this final recognition that eventually would be the death knell of my belief in God. I never wondered why I had been in a car accident or the classic - why do bad things happen to good people. What I wondered for years – and still ponder to this day – is how a group of well-meaning, loving Christians who hold as the cornerstone of their belief forgiveness, community, and personal communion with God, could earnestly ask God for guidance – guidance which once enacted – would result in the most damaging thing any person or group has ever done to me in my life. The only rational answer I was ever able to come up with is that there was no God to answer back.

My purpose for explaining all of this is two-fold. First, the responses by leadership to recent allegations brought against the church appear to rely largely on the assertion of an inability to respond adequately to individual claims due to lack of familiarity with the specific allegations. Well, let me be clear, members at the very highest levels of current church leadership know my name and know exactly how the church handled my situation. In fact, many of these individuals are my contemporaries who were being groomed for leadership right alongside me. It does not come as a surprise to me to hear that over fifteen years later ex-members are being deeply damaged in the same ways that I was. My second purpose is to underline that it is not just weak, vulnerable individuals that are deeply harmed by this organization, and the abuse is not generally a result of miscommunication or simple failures of leadership. The abuse documented extends to strong, capable individuals as well and is a result of systemic practices within the church, practices either largely unrecognized by leadership to this day or sanctioned as biblical. It is my intention to lay bare the structures that enable Dwell Community Church to cause significant trauma in the lives of numerous ex-members without resulting in feelings of remorse or accountability on the part of leadership within the church that might otherwise be expected by the surrounding community.



INTRODUCTION

The majority of the articles and news reports exploring Dwell Community Church have focused on the more readily sensationalized aspects of the church that feel *cultlike* to the general public but do not actually reach the heart of the issue. Though aspects of these claims may be factually true, a disproportionate focus on certain issues permits ready dismissal by church leadership and neglects the more widespread problems that have plagued the church for years. Moreover, the concerns of the wider community go far deeper than messy college houses or members occasionally providing beer to minors. The parents, friends, and lovers of affected ex-members are all too familiar with the actual effects on individuals – a psychological toll that may vary from isolation to post traumatic stress to depression. In fact, Dwell Community Church is never there to pick up the pieces of the people that they have damaged in real, dramatic ways. Parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, therapists – the whole community – these are the people who have the responsibility for helping and loving the members that Dwell Community Church has cast out of its system. Consequently, church leadership within Dwell Community Church is unable to even bear witness to the damage that they inflict since they isolate and shun ex-members justifying their decision as a withdrawal of community as the righteous consequence for sin.

Investigations of Dwell Community Church throughout the years have necessarily sought to explain the actions of members and church leadership by assigning negative motivations for those behaviors that seem disparate from the culture of the surrounding community. It is natural to seek out interpretations for the motivations of others that allow us to process and understand the world around us. In the words of the late Joan Didion, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live... We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of multiple choices.” This is what many have done to explain the actions of Dwell Community Church leadership and to cope with and heal from the trauma sustained by the organization. When examining the stories of the suffering and isolation inflicted upon ex-members of Dwell Community Church, it feels like the most workable of multiple choices is to conclude that church leadership secretly intends to be corrupt, cruel, manipulative, and controlling – perhaps they even thrive on the suffering and control of others. The leadership within Dwell Community Church has been accused of being motivated by money, power, or sexual control as an explanation for those behaviors which seem strange to the average non-member of the organization. We seek these types of explanations in an attempt to reconcile the immense trauma incurred with the intentions behind it – for how could a group of well-meaning Christians inflict so much damage if there was not at least some evil intent at play?

I certainly do not mean to dismiss claims of bad intentions or negative behaviors related to Dwell Community Church members or leadership, but I do want to suggest that this is perhaps not fundamentally at issue. Church leadership has been quick to acknowledge that they are imperfect individuals attempting to follow God in an imperfect world, and that they are subject to the same failings as everyone else. Of course this is the case. Rather, I suggest that Dwell Community Church fundamentally maintains a strong hold on its members, as well as its leaders, precisely because the intentions of leadership are not obviously corrupt in this manner. In fact – the complex motivations for church leadership are perhaps not even evident or transparent to the leaders themselves.

Fundamentally, there exist two, major structural problems within Dwell Community Church that lead to allegations by ex-members of control, manipulation, and abuse. These structural problems are not instigated using a top-down, authoritarian approach, nor are they explicitly stated or propagated by members of the church leadership. Indeed, church leadership appears to be largely unaware of precisely where the allegations stem from structurally within their organization given that they preach actively against control of individuals and advocate for mainstream biblical doctrines. This may be explained by highlighting that the reward and power structures likely evolved organically over many years within the organization and are nowhere explicitly codified or acknowledged. They form the fundamental basis for the belief structure and culture of the group itself. The two key structures that cause problems within Dwell Community Church are as follows:

- 1) A demanding, inflexible model of submission to God
- 2) Withdrawal of the community as a consequence of failure to submit to God

Both of these are nowhere stated but everywhere implied. Since they deeply infuse the culture of the organization, it is not necessary to outwardly control or manipulate members into engaging in particular behaviors. Individuals either feel pressure from the system to engage or willingly do so of their own accord. Of course this is nothing new – as governments, corporations, and religious groups have understood for thousands of years that the most effective form of control is from within, a control imposed on the individual by himself without any need for an exterior authority to force his hand. Though the precise look and feel of these particular structures is unique to Dwell Community Church, they have their parallels in many groups that are more readily recognized as cults.

To properly articulate what is so dangerous about Dwell Community Church, it is crucial to understand the structure, beliefs, and intentions of the group from within. To this end, I will first address the historical basis for the structure and core beliefs of the church as they grew out of the Protestant Reformation and compare those structures and beliefs to systems of totalitarian thought. The basic idea of radical submission has its roots in Reformation Era theology as does the structure of individual spiritual authority which is used as the primary means of enforcement of submission within Dwell Community Church. Following this discussion, we will explore the structure of the belief system itself and compare the model to other organizations that are more readily recognized as cults by the wider community. We will see



how control within Dwell Community Church is mediated entirely within the internal structure of punishment and reward, without any necessity for outward displays of control by church leadership. Moreover, we will see how the actual or threatened withdrawal of the community as a consequence of failure to submit to God is a natural outcome within the belief system and is exacted upon struggling or former members without any affliction of conscience on behalf of leadership. Such actions on the part of the church lead directly to the significant allegations of abuse and even robust psychological trauma expressed by so many former members.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In his 1941 book, *Escape From Freedom*, Erich Fromm – German Jewish social psychologist who fled the Nazi regime – wrote expansively on the historical and psychological roots of totalitarianism that facilitated the rise of the Third Reich. In his seminal work, Fromm posits that humans have a contradictory relationship with freedom which, rather than encouraging ability to exert independence and individuality positively upon the world, leads instead to a deep anxiety and a desire to *escape from freedom* into a system of structure and authority. Fromm traces the rise of this anxiety to *escape from freedom* from medieval feudal society – under which individuals had very low levels of personal freedom but high levels of authoritarian structure – to the beginning of the twentieth century when individuals enjoyed a level of personal freedom hitherto unknown in human history. He concludes that it is this extraordinary level of freedom in every area of life from religion to career to love that generates a deep uncertainty and anxiety in modern man, often leading to a renunciation of the freedom so long strived for in favor of a structure of authority which – in exchange – provides certainty. It is precisely this craving for submission as an abdication of freedom that, Fromm concludes, fomented the rise of totalitarianism under Nazi Germany.

Perhaps most interesting to the case at hand is that Fromm traces the model of totalitarian submission to its ideological roots in the particular theology of the Protestant Reformation. Fromm argues that increasing levels of capital and socioeconomic freedom during the sixteenth century resulted in a greater cultural awareness of the importance and autonomy of the individual, thus generating implications for the conception of God and church in relation to man. Enter Martin Luther – of 95 theses fame - who offered a theology stressing the centrality of the individual and his direct relationship and access to God, rather than a relationship mediated through existing church structure and authority. Salvation is the result of grace – not works – freely given directly to each individual without the necessity of a complex church structure, priesthood, or papal authority. Despite offering what appears on the surface to be an even higher level of freedom in spiritual experience, Luther's theology was saturated with an almost manic aversion to authority combined at the same time with a deep longing for submission. Fromm argues that totalitarianism has this mentality at its core – a craving for submission as a relief from the powerlessness, fear, and uncertainty of the individual – and that radical submission to authority opens the door to extraordinary danger within society.

Following in the grand footsteps of the Reformation Era thinkers, Dwell Community Church rejects many of the established authorities that were set up before it, enabling the group to teach its own brand of radical submission in concert with the primacy of the individual in relation to God. In fact, the non-denominational movement within Christianity today can be viewed as its own microcosm of reformation within Protestantism, representing a further rejection of the church authority and structure that grew out of the sixteenth century. Whereas Catholicism maintained a relatively confined identity via a centralized system of authority and a clear distinction between laity and clergy, the radical freedom of direct, individual access to God granted by Protestant dogma resulted in the myriad denominations and sects of Christianity that we observe today. Papal authority – or the more dramatic doctrine of papal infallibility – is substituted in Protestant theology by the authority or – in extreme instances – infallibility of the individual in direct communion with God. As evidence of this proliferation of individualized authority, consider that Catholicism comprises some eight distinct variants despite existing for nearly two millennia, whereas in a few hundred years there have blossomed over 40,000 denominations of Protestantism, most of which believe that they have a specific monopoly on truth to the exclusion of all other groups. The case for Dwell Community Church is no different, as church leadership maintains that they preach, if not the only, then at least the best model for Christianity available today, a belief that is fundamentally underpinned by Luther's theology.

Consequently, the primacy given to the individual in relation to God over and above external structures of authority, enables Dwell Community Church to exact a demanding, inflexible model of submission to God on par with the strictest of religious sects. The home church system embraced by Dwell Community Church, which seems to baffle critics, is merely another manifestation of the emphasis placed on the individual's relationship with God which is not required to be mediated by a strong hierarchical system. Whereas the Catholic Church has a singular voice with divine authority – currently Pope Francis – Dwell Community Church has several thousand mouthpieces spread across hundreds of small groups sanctioned to speak on the basis of their direct access to an infallible God. Indeed the emphasis placed on discipleship/mentorship within Dwell Community Church is evidence of this structure, allowing a mentor to speak with the force of divine inspiration directly into the life of a mentee, thereby personalizing the model of submission for each individual. Furthermore, it is not surprising that Dwell Community Church largely lacks systems of oversight to mitigate abuse, given that hierarchical structures are viewed with suspicion and priority is given to individual conscience. Depending on the rapidity of growth and the turnover of existing members and leadership, this can result in groups or individuals within the organization being led by those with scant qualifications. Indeed, this is not unique to Dwell Community Church but is a common issue faced by much of the corporate world. What is unique to Dwell Community Church – perhaps – is the specific nature of the consequences resulting from underqualified leadership with little ability to navigate sophisticated moral and emotional decisions that are ordinarily reserved for senior church leadership in comparable organizations.



Moreover, the dogmatic authority granted and exercised by even highly-qualified individuals within Dwell Community Church inherently lacks the nuance or uncertainty that might otherwise be expected in less dogmatic religious groups.

Consider my particular situation within Dwell Community Church: I had a mentor who was presumed to be highly qualified within the church, whom I met with on a regular basis to receive personalized spiritual support, guidance, and instruction. This mentorship was given priority in certain terms of leadership and authority due to its intimate nature. The assumption being that the mentor knows the mentee more deeply than others and is therefore able to provide guidance in the proper submission to God's will. Depending on the mentor's particular personality, theological knowledge, and personal background, the mentor may believe that submission to God's will takes on any number of requirements particular to the mentee. None of this is explicitly stated or required by church leadership, it is a result of a prioritization of close relationships within the church coupled with the Protestant theological notion of individual access to an infallible God. My mentor within Dwell Community Church had a personality much like my own, strongly idealistic and driven, but crucially she had never attended college, let alone undertaken a particularly difficult college regimen such as engineering. In retrospect, it seems obvious that the *spiritual truth* that she spoke into my life at the time resulted largely from her personal life experiences rather than from the mouth of God. However, the primacy given to individual spiritual authority enabled by personal communion with God is largely immune to these considerations, and the expectation that I submit to her guidance was indistinguishable from my love for God himself.

The immense individual authority enabled under this system combined with the call for full and complete submission is the great paradox of Luther's theology and shares its fundamental nature with systems of totalitarian thought. The individual is both powerless and wicked but by elimination of his own individuality joins in the power and certainty of the collective. Fromm writes:

*If you get rid of your individual self with all its shortcomings and doubts by utmost self-effacement, you free yourself from the feeling of your own nothingness and can participate in God's glory. Thus, while Luther freed people from the authority of the Church, he made them submit to a much more tyrannical authority, that of a God who insisted on complete submission of man and annihilation of the individual self as the essential condition to his salvation. **Luther's faith was the conviction of being loved upon the condition of surrender.***

It is not surprising that – in an era marked by a level of personal freedom that even Luther would find to be unfathomable – Dwell Community Church calls its members to surrender incomparable levels of personal freedom in submission to God. Absolute surrender is foundational to the mentality at Dwell Community Church as the level of submission to God is inversely correlated to the conviction and certainty gained from the system itself. This call to submit to God is particularly extreme in comparison to modern day cultural norms and is one of the most notable aspects of the church. It includes adherence to a set of moral standards, including strict rules regarding sexuality and relationships, but extends fundamentally to every area of life and may vary from person to person as God *reveals* his plan to the individual as well as the group. As a result of the power granted by personal communion with God, submission of an individual may take on virtually any form whatsoever limited only to the imagination of individual conscience, peers, or the community as a whole. As such, we find members of Dwell Community Church submitting to God in a manner that appears drastic to even the most devout religious communities and includes extreme practices such as public shame and de facto excommunication. Students of history will readily recognize this political psychology as that underpinning communism, especially in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. Adherence is monitored by the entire community through personal relationships, group meetings, and households, all without the interference of the state. Given the similarities to totalitarian systems, it is no wonder that allegations of control, manipulation, and abuse are common against Dwell Community Church.

On condition of this submission comes the full conviction of community, purpose, value, meaning, and – perhaps most importantly of all – certainty. These are the foundational needs of every person, religious or otherwise, the quest for which constitutes the greater part of human life. The real allure of Dwell Community Church is not inherently cultic or manipulative – it is the promise of access to many of the deepest human cravings, further validated and codified by the dramatic sacrifice of one's individual life to God. There is no ill intent here on the part of members or church leadership – no desire to corrupt, manipulate, or control – and each conscience within the church remains, not only clear, but bolstered by its own spiritual success.

STRUCTURAL ISSUES LEADING TO ABUSE

Dwell Community Church believes in a demanding, inflexible model of submission to God. Church leadership has routinely denied that members are controlled in an overt manner such as forcing individuals to donate money to the church, live in a ministry house, or attend a large number of meetings. However, the unspoken structure of the Dwell Community Church belief system holds that these behaviors are required and synonymous with increasing spirituality. The basic model is relatively inflexible and a majority of allegations against the church involve some conflict with the rigidity of this structure. The following are core tenets of submission to God within the system and increase in intensity proportional to an individual's spiritual credibility:

- A spiritual person will attend all three levels of meetings within the church structure whenever possible.



- An unmarried spiritual person, particularly of college age, will live in a ministry house associated with a home church group as a recognition of the importance of community and accountability.
- A spiritual person will meet high standards of sexual purity including abstaining from sex before marriage, as well as abstaining from masturbation and pornography regardless of marital status. Dating relationships prior to marriage are subject to strict implied morality including discouragement of spending extended periods alone and overnight stays regardless of physical intimacy. A spiritual person will often consult a mentor/discipler prior to entering a dating relationship or pursuing marriage.
- A spiritual person will desire to date or marry a likeminded individual of the opposite gender within the organization since this dating pool represents those who understand the true meaning of a relationship with God.
- A spiritual person will actively engage friends, relatives, and acquaintances in an attempt to convert them to believers. It is a requirement of leadership that an individual has aided in at least one conversion or has engaged in significant efforts.
- A spiritual person will be actively involved in a discipleship relationship in which they are being mentored by a more senior member of the church.
- A spiritual person will be actively involved in a discipleship relationship in which they are mentoring a more junior member of the church.
- A spiritual person will be asked to teach at some level within the church structure, either to their peers or to groups within the junior ministries.
- A spiritual person will attend structured, classroom training offered by the church and may ultimately attend seminary at very senior levels within the organization.
- A spiritual person will accept the admonishment with regards to spiritual issues and will adequately repent for actions that are deemed to be sinful by leaders or peers. This may include dissent within the organization itself.
- A spiritual person will give away as much money as possible to the church or other charitable organizations, keeping only enough money to live on.
- A spiritual person will not seek to spend significant time with those in active rebellion from God. This applies specifically to ex-members, rather than to the general population that needs to be saved.
- A spiritual person will submit to the will of God as determined by individual conscience, peers, mentors, home church leadership, or senior church leadership. There exists virtually no limit to what an individual may require of oneself or be required to do by any other member or leader.

If this list feels exhaustive, that is even more to the point. The reason so many ex-members express feelings of control or manipulation or pressure is because they are coming into conflict with this structure of thought that suffuses Dwell Community Church from within. None of these elements are specifically required or stated aloud by leadership. However, if you want to feel validated that your relationship with God is growing, you will increasingly do all of these things. The more of these things that a person engages in, the more the internal structure of Dwell Community Church will reward that individual with authority. This is the first half of the problem which leads to a deep confirmation bias within the organization itself. Senior church leadership submitted to God in each of these ways and continues to promote those within the organization who perform similarly, thereby ensuring that the culture becomes even more endemic. Indeed, a mainstream management consultant in the corporate world could point out this obvious issue – it's just an exercise rarely applied to religious groups.

Dwell Community Church, no doubt, maintains that this model of submission to God is based in scripture and underpinned by mainstream biblical doctrines. This may even be the case, but I do not wish to dispute any of the core beliefs in terms of validity under a particular belief structure. Moreover, it is unnecessary to do so. My aim is simply to make clear the structures which enable and result in allegations of abuse. Fundamentally, the issue is not with any of the individual beliefs about spirituality or the specifics of what full submission to God looks like. Abuse results not from belief in any of the specific statements listed above; it is a consequence of the rigidity and inflexibility of the model of submission itself, with ex-members expressing that they were simply overwhelmed by the exhaustive standards placed upon them. The very nature of which results in allegations of control and manipulation.

Moreover, there is little ability within the system to question the particular standards set as the bar for spirituality and full submission to God. This is readily evident in the allegations which complain of everything from lack of privacy to pressure to attend meetings to inappropriate rebukes for sinful behavior. In my own situation, I was often rebuked for focusing on school and was counseled to either allow my grades to suffer or change my major entirely in order to submit to God. This was something that I personally disagreed with strongly. At the time I believed that God had called me to pursue a challenging, science-based major to be his voice within a demographic that was relatively inaccessible to non-denominational Christianity. I felt like I had no avenue to question my spiritual leaders within my home church, so I decided to try to meet all of their demands and succeed in school too. I believed that the leadership would eventually understand and agree. Instead, I became deeply exhausted, was continuously rebuked for prioritizing school, and ultimately left the organization with a crippling sense of shame and failure.

Dwell Community Church uses withdrawal of the community as a consequence of failure to submit to God. As church leaders will readily acknowledge, a deep, meaningful community of fellowship and shared support forms the backbone of the organization. Indeed, this may constitute the primary attractive feature for countless members who join and remain in the church for many years. Having belonged to and benefited from this community myself, I can attest that the claims are true – the strong sense of support, friendship, and care is



certainly a wonderful and unique feature of the church which surpasses in many ways the type of community available in some other religious or secular organizations. Consequently, the structure of the organization organically results in increasing isolation from the wider community and non-church relationships – as has been reported by numerous ex-members – largely as a result of significant membership demands and a belief in the superior benefits experienced within the community. Connections with those outside the group are maintained with the singular goal of evangelism, rather than for any intrinsic value in the relationship itself. Members become increasingly dependent on the church community and may have no relationships of consequence outside of the organization. It is no surprise then that the restriction of access to such a community necessarily results in the traumatic psychological distress which forms the bedrock of the claims of abuse against Dwell Community Church.

The internal structure of control is quite simple and no different from most other cultic organizations or authoritarian systems of thought: if members are seen to willfully refuse to meet *criterion x* which is considered essential to the core beliefs of the church, then the benefits of the community are withdrawn from that member. There is no need for this to be explicitly stated out loud as *criterion x* will be valued and known by every member of the organization as a part of the embedded culture. Every reward, every position of leadership, every rebuke is intrinsically linked to this single criterion that forms the cornerstone of belief within the group. The nature of the trauma within these cultic organizations is a result of the unique flavor applied to this formula within any particular group, but the ultimate source of trauma is in the structure represented by the formula itself. To state it plainly: *If a member is seen to willfully refuse to meet the demanding, inflexible model of submission to God which Dwell Community Church teaches, access to the community is withdrawn as the natural consequence for sin.*

There is no difference in other cultic organizations. Take for example the late Gwen Shamblin Lara's Remnant Fellowship, subject of a recent HBO Max documentary, and – most interestingly – acknowledged by Dwell Community Church leadership as deeply traumatic and abusive. Lara's particular flavor of inflexible submission to God involved a belief that excess weight was evidence of a soul in rebellion to God, that obesity represented a misplaced enslavement to food which had as its rightful object God himself. If members failed to lose weight (*criterion x*) they were believed to have refused to fully submit to God, and as a consequence for their sinfulness and rebellion, they were excluded from the church community. In this case the core belief of *criterion x* feels obviously ludicrous and abusive to the wider community – not to mention the blatant authoritarian structure of the church itself with Lara as its figurehead, figurehead being an understatement given her equally ludicrous hairstyles.

Despite these obvious signs of corruption, the insidious structure goes much deeper than what appears to be a blatantly ridiculous demand on the faithful. Lara was successful because she spoke to people – especially women – who harbored a deep shame regarding their weight, a shame codified by the surrounding culture which in many instances blamed these women for their failure to maintain a healthy weight. Again, these individuals were not inherently weak, they were just people with the desire to address their deep-held fears within a community that supported them and answered them. Lara's claims that they were enslaved to food spoke to their deepest feelings of fear, and the corresponding call to enslave themselves to God provided a relief from blame, a sense of community, and an underlying hope for the future. However, as is typical of systems of totalitarian thought, they were not freed in actuality but traded their enslavement to one master for enslavement to God via full submission to his will. In Lara's church full submission to God's will necessarily implied that members would maintain a healthy weight. Of course, Lara did not provide her members with the proper medical support or advice to lose weight but rather encouraged – at best, portion control and at worst, eating disorders. Naturally, many members did not lose weight – by no real fault of their own – but under the constructed system of belief, they were rejected from the community as a natural consequence of their failure to submit to God. This is a particularly twisted form of psychological abuse as otherwise faithful congregants are abandoned by their community and led to believe that they are entirely to blame.

The case with Dwell Community Church is more subtle than that of Remnant Fellowship, but the internal structures leading to abuse are precisely the same. A particularly demanding criterion is set – in Lara's case weight, in the case of Dwell Community Church a rigorous definition of submission – and members who fail to meet these criteria or disagree with the criteria are viewed as being in rebellion against God. In response, believers are obligated to withdraw the benefits of the community from the individual in active rebellion, both for the safety of the community and as the natural consequence for sin. The particularly demanding and inflexible model of submission to God taught by Dwell Community Church is no different than Lara's call to dramatic weight loss. Just as some members of Remnant really did lose weight thereby evidencing their devotion to God, some members of Dwell Community Church are capable of meeting the particular demands of the rigid model and their success bolsters their own sense of spiritual superiority. Indeed these are the members who are promoted through leadership and further perpetuate the model itself.

It may seem contradictory that these structures enabling abuse could develop within an organization that – recognizing the inherent sinful nature of humanity - stresses the power of forgiveness and grace to provide for personal growth. We may wonder how this fits into a system which practices withdrawal of the community as a consequence for failure to submit to God, which may seem to the non-initiate like any other type of sin. However, commensurate with its position as the cornerstone of belief within Dwell Community Church, submission to God represents a larger, overarching ideology than any individual sin. In fact, members of the organization can and do commit sins of every variation as will readily be acknowledged by members and church leadership, but repentance in the form of a renewed submission to God is fundamentally required to maintain membership. Again we are reminded of Luther's faith in "the conviction of being loved upon the condition of surrender." When an individual refuses to surrender to God, whether in repentance for an actual sin, a



perceived sin, or in any other form that submission takes on within the structure of Dwell Community Church, it indicates a rejection of God that is untenable within the community and will lead to rejection. It is precisely within this context – the demanding, inflexible model of submission to God practiced by Dwell Community Church – that many members will leave and suffer rejection either intentionally or as a result of a basic inability to conform to these overwhelming and sometimes contradictory standards. Those who leave are viewed as weak and rebellious against God – akin to the fat-shaming of Lara’s Remnant Fellowship – and those who remain are encouraged by the accomplishment of their own steadfastness.

The withdrawal of community plays a crucial role within the maintenance of the authoritarian structure of these organizations, and it has several key consequences. First, the withdrawal of the community often constitutes the abuse itself as former members struggle with feelings of shame and confusion regarding what has happened to them along with being isolated and cut-off from their entire support network. Second, the isolation of the ex-member shields the church from bearing witness to the consequences of their decision to withdraw access to the community, allowing members remaining in the organization to view the ex-member as truly rebellious against God rather than as a victim of psychological abuse. This explains the disparity in perspective between ex-members and those remaining within the organization, including church leadership. Former members and the wider community become acutely aware of the damage caused as individuals are forced to recover within the context of support existing outside of the church. Within the church, ex-members are viewed with pity and sadness as those sheep who have been led astray by the corrupt world or by Satan, rather than individuals who confronted an inflexible structure of belief that was in many cases impossible to accommodate. Allegations made against Dwell Community Church are viewed by members and church leadership as spiritual persecution, brought by broken individuals in rebellion from God.

How can it be that Dwell Community Church leadership is so unaware of the abuse that it is responsible for? De facto excommunication of former members has the further damaging effect of increasing the confirmation bias within the church and leads to church members and leadership being completely unaware of the incredible damage that they have inflicted upon individuals. The demanding, inflexible model of submission to God is perpetuated by the very fact that some individuals fail while others succeed, and those who fail are pruned from the church thereby encouraging organizational growth in the direction of pruning. This engenders an environment whereby members and leadership alike feel confident in the very model that they have created and succeeded within, and over time the internal culture becomes less and less aware of the reality experienced by the pruned individuals. Church leadership and members truly believe that they have acted in accordance with God’s will and that no actual abuse has occurred. This reality constitutes the actual danger of Dwell Community Church – a danger that extends not just to former, current, and future congregants, but includes senior leadership as well. Indeed, this is the paradox of good intentions, that significant and radical damage may result from intentions that are, at the core, reasonable and understandable - or even good. This paradox has as its roots the most subtle realms of human culture and experience but is most evident in closed systems of totalitarian thought.

Hannah Arendt, political philosopher and Holocaust survivor, wrote extensively in the post-World War II Era regarding what she termed the *banality of evil*, specifically in her coverage of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the infamous Nazi desk-bureaucrat responsible for organizing and executing the Final Solution. At his trial in 1961, Eichmann defied the expectations of the global community which desired to see – if not evil on the stand – at the very least, a man deranged and maniacal; however, Eichmann displayed neither and rather had the composure of a man simply trying to perform his job well and support his family. Arendt writes:

For when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all... He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing... It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, this is still far from calling it commonplace... That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.

I certainly do not wish to indicate that a Columbus megachurch is in any manner of speaking on par with the Third Reich but rather seek to illustrate the similarities and dangers of closed, dogmatic systems of belief. Dwell Community Church has a closed culture of good intentions supported by dogmatic religious authority and a significant confirmation bias that prevents members and leadership alike from recognizing the real harm that they inflict on others. This results in a system that inherently lacks inner plurality down to the individual level. This is not to say that members and church leadership do not entertain lively theological debate, questioning specific biblical interpretations or practices. In fact, Dwell Community Church is a highly intellectual church, and most members have an understanding of theology that readily exceeds that of nearly all lay congregants in other organizations. Indeed, this fact serves to further obscure the critical lack of thought regarding the inflexible model of submission to God and corresponding withdrawal of the community, as church leadership feels that they engage in regular and sincere critical thought regarding virtually every aspect of biblical teaching. However, the church does not question the key structures that we have highlighted herein: *if a member is seen to willfully refuse to meet the demanding, inflexible model of submission to God which Dwell Community Church teaches, access to the community is withdrawn as the natural consequence for sin.* In this realm, there is no plurality of thought within the organization; it is, as Arendt puts it, a matter of “sheer thoughtlessness.”



The fundamental reason that Dwell Community Church leadership cannot acknowledge allegations of abuse that seem obvious to the wider community and to ex-members, is because their system of values truly does not recognize it as abuse, resulting in a clear conscience. To that end, Arendt says of Eichmann:

His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which 'good society' everywhere reacted as he did. He did not need to 'close his ears to the voice of conscience,' as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a 'respectable voice,' with the voice of respectable society around him.

Whereas the totalitarianism that existed in the Third Reich relied upon corrupt intentionality at the highest levels in order to maintain a functioning system, this is largely absent and unnecessary in the modern church, providing for a clear conscience and the best of intentions all the way up to the most senior levels of authority. This is because the system itself is not necessarily dependent on an individual – the totalitarian – to engender the closed, dogmatic system of belief; in fact, the totalitarian leader in most religious groups is God himself. And thanks to Luther's theology, the individual has direct access to communion with God and the potential to wield the full force of totalitarian authority. This provides for an interesting psychological maneuver within the organization, where the accountability and responsibility for particular decisions is placed directly onto God as the absolute arbiter. Whatever God asks of the community is given absolute authority, the sanction of dogma. In fact, Dwell Community Church is quick to defend its church structure as anti-authoritarian given that the organization boasts two co-pastors, a group of elders which form a corporate board of directors of sorts, and some 800 deacons – akin to shareholders – comprised of individuals serving as leaders of the diffuse network of small groups. However, this structure is largely irrelevant since God represents the termination of all authority, and what God wants is readily discerned by even a large group of like-minded individuals who have been pruned for compliance to a certain set of institutional beliefs. Indeed, modern corporations strive to avoid this precise problem by maintaining a board of directors which consists of individuals external to the organization itself.

Consider again, my personal experience with Dwell Community Church after my car accident: a group of senior leaders within my home church – some of whom make up the highest levels of leadership in the church today – agreed on a deeply destructive course of action that resulted in psychological trauma that altered the course of my life. Within the Dwell Community Church framework of belief, this was not a consequence of their actions but rather a result of my own decision to walk away from God. I withdrew myself from the community and suffered as a result of my own choice. Every believer, non-believer, therapist, friend, acquaintance, and stranger that I have shared this story with since unequivocally recognized this as abuse, and many went so far as to assert that those within Dwell Community Church must not even practice authentic religion. However, whether or not any particular God does or does not speak directly to the initiates of Dwell Community Church is rather aside from the point. The point is that the system is provided with the full force of unconquerable certainty and absolute truth from the highest possible level of authority. Moreover, the endemic confirmation bias within the organization all but blinds members and leadership from the actual consequences of their actions that are so obvious to everyone else. This is no different from the case of Eichmann and is precisely the result of a closed system of dogmatic belief.

To further illustrate this point, consider the following parable taken from a speech given by David Foster Wallace to the 2005 graduating class of Kenyon College:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

Surely this is an amusing anecdote with which to begin a commencement address, but here again we confront the banality, the commonplaceness of our value systems and set of beliefs which can serve to render them all but undetectable to the initiated. Wallace goes on to exhort the graduates of Kenyon College to engage in a lifelong pursuit of active thought identifying, questioning, and – if necessary – redefining the water around them, because the reality of adult life is an ever evolving creation of meaning, whether we are aware of it or not. Worship is at the heart of the human experience, and we all worship something and define our value against it – whether it be kindness, intelligence, beauty, money, success, or power. Salman Rushdie described meaning as “a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved.” Most often we create these systems without intentionality, with a thoughtlessness that combines past experiences with the culture immediately surrounding us, while rarely examining their veracity. Against these constructed frameworks of meaning, Wallace goes on to caution:

But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

Just as the young fish of the parable are unaware of the water that surrounds them, Dwell Community Church is unaware of its structures which lead to abuse, and Eichmann was unaware of his violation of widely-held, basic human morality. This is what Arendt warned is the critical danger represented by the *banality of evil*. We are all fish surrounded by water – water that varies slightly in temperature, salinity, and viscosity. In life we group ourselves with other fish that enjoy the same type of water that we do until we all but forget about its feel and composition. This is where dogma is born. Dogma is born when we forget what pond we are swimming in and assume that it is the



ocean. Of course Eichmann's pond was revoltingly acidic and difficult for the modern person to comprehend – and yet this episode outlines in bold relief that evil intentions are not required to perform evil actions. That an ordinarily respectable intention to perform one's job duties in a diligent and efficient manner can intersect with genocide, demonstrates the extreme end of the *banality of evil*, that which we may call *the danger of water*.

Dwell Community Church represents a highly specialized pond with a carefully curated composition for its fish. It is evident to many in the wider community that its particular culture and system of values stand in stark contrast to many sets of modern cultural norms today. That is not to say that the system of values endorsed by Dwell Community Church is inherently wrong, evil, or corrupt. That its culture is dramatically distinct from the surrounding community is precisely the point – as church leadership is quick to acknowledge – just as first century Jewish and Christian practices were radically distinct from their Roman contemporaries. What is at the heart of the issue is whether or not members and church leadership at Dwell Community Church can see the water that surrounds them on all sides.

MOVING FORWARD

It has been sixteen years since I left Dwell Community Church, but the guilt still murmurs in the back of my mind – the suspicion that what happened to me was entirely my fault. I turned away from God and failed to submit to his will thereby deserving rejection and isolation from the community. Of course, survivors of all different types of emotional or physical abuse will recognize this logic and at least be able to intellectually identify that it is false. For a long time, I thought that only the most serious or senior members who left the church would experience the type of trauma that I endured, that this type of withdrawal was reserved for the most serious cases only. I see now that this same thing has happened to hundreds of former members, regardless of seniority in the organization.

I wrote this article with a hope to give voice and validity to the pain suffered by each of these individuals. For so long in Columbus, the community has known that there is something special – or something strange – or something damaging about Dwell Community Church, but no one has quite put their finger on it. The church leadership does not seem to be overly corrupt, the theology is largely mainstream, and many members cite positive and meaningful experiences with the organization. None of this, however, precludes or invalidates the instances of abuse. In the words of Slavoj Zizek with which I opened this essay, "We feel free because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom." I hope that I have been able to provide some of that language to those who have been deeply damaged by Dwell Community Church.

I don't particularly care about the doctrines of Dwell Community Church or whether their church leadership enjoys divine inspiration. I am not overly concerned with the particular systems of belief or their validity. I am concerned with the significant damage inflicted upon particularly ex-members in the form of emotional isolation and abuse, as well as the recruitment of vulnerable individuals and minors who may later become subject to such cases of abuse. Whether or not many people have had positive experiences with the church is beside the point. At risk of taking the comparison too far – we are not interested in whether or not the Third Reich enjoyed a universal or divine endorsement, nor are we interested in whether its members led meaningful and fulfilling lives. We are interested in the danger represented by closed systems of totalitarian thought to individuals and the surrounding community, regardless of good intentions, positive experiences, or divine inspiration.

I do, however, have hope that members and leadership at Dwell Community Church desire to bring good into the world through their particular belief system. I think a place to start would be to actually acknowledge the allegations of abuse as valid. These are not instances of miscommunication, peer-to-peer conflict, or improperly trained leadership. These are real traumatic events in people's lives that have resulted in intense suffering, whether intentionally inflicted or not. I would like to imagine that Dwell Community Church leadership can understand the validity of the allegations and make significant structural changes to prevent damage to its members in the future.

I will leave you with a quote from Bertrand Russell that has provided me with much comfort over the years.

Science tells us what we can know, but what we can know is little, and if we forget how much we cannot know we become insensitive to many things of very great importance. Theology, on the other hand, induces a dogmatic belief that we have knowledge where in fact we have ignorance, and by doing so generates a kind of impertinent insolence towards the universe. Uncertainty, in the presence of vivid hope and fears, is painful, but must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales. It is not good either to forget the questions that philosophy asks, or to persuade ourselves that we have found indubitable answers to them. To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it.