



## Church Abuse Questionnaire

*Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, by Ronald Enroth, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1994.

How can we discern an unhealthy, abusive Christian church or fellowship from one that is truly biblical, healthy, and worthy of our involvement? LaVonne Neff states that it is important to examine the effects that groups have on the people who join them. “Good results will not sanctify bad doctrine, but bad results can serve as warning lights, even where [the] teaching appears sound. ... What happens to members’ personalities, relationships, job commitments, community involvement? Is the group’s overall effect on those who come in contact with it—members and nonmembers—positive or negative? Is it an agency of healing, restoration and reconciliation?”<sup>1</sup>

To distinguish between healthy and unhealthy churches, Neff poses eleven questions. Each question points to conditions that make it difficult for people like Carlos to put their lives back together upon leaving an abusive church situation.

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### **Does a member’s personality generally become stronger, happier, more confident as a result of contact with the group?**

In an abusive church, the use of guilt, fear, and intimidation to control members is likely to produce members who have a low self-image, who feel beaten down by legalism, who have been taught that asserting oneself is not spiritual. A leader in one group mentioned in this book used to tell members, “God never meant for you to be happy in this life.” This is not to say that all members of authoritarian churches are unhappy, guilt-ridden people. However, one of the first disturbing characteristics to be reported by relatives and friends of members of these churches is a noticeable change in personality, usually in a negative direction.

### **Do members of the group seek to strengthen their family commitments?**

Nearly all unhealthy churches attempt to minimize commitments to family, especially parents. Young people may be told that they now have a new “spiritual” family, complete with leaders who will “re-parent” them. Church loyalty is seen as paramount, and family commitments are discouraged or viewed as impediments to spiritual advancement.

### **Does the group encourage independent thinking and the development of discernment skills?**

Control-oriented leaders attempt to dictate what members think, although the process is so spiritualized that members usually do not realize what is going on. A pastor or leader is viewed as God’s mouthpiece, and in varying degrees a member’s decision making and ability to think for oneself are swallowed up by the group. Pressure to conform and low tolerance for questioning make it difficult to be truly discerning.

### **Does the group allow for individual differences of belief and behavior, particularly on issues of secondary importance?**

A legalistic emphasis on keeping rules and a focus on the need to stay within prescribed boundaries is always present in unhealthy spiritual environments. Lifestyle rigidity in such groups increases a member’s guilt feelings and contributes to spiritual bondage. This rigidity is often coupled with an emphasis on beliefs that would not receive great attention in mainstream evangelicalism.

### **Does the group encourage high moral standards both among members and between members and nonmembers?**

In intense, legalistic churches and religious organizations, the official, public proclamations usually place special value on high moral standards. In some instances, however, there is a double standard between those in leadership and those in the rank-and-file membership. For example, abusive churches tend to have incidents of sexual misconduct more often than most conventional churches; leaders sometimes exhibit an obsessive interest in sexuality. Unhealthy relationships and confused thinking often result for the members.

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<sup>1</sup> Lavonne Neff, *Evaluating Cults and New Religions*, in *A Guide to Cults and New Religions*, ed. Ron Enroth et al (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1983), 196.



**Does the group's leadership invite dialogue, advice, and evaluation from outside its immediate circle?**

Authoritarian pastors are usually threatened by any expression of diverse opinions, whether from inside or outside the group. Displaying an attitude of spiritual superiority, they will reject any invitation to genuine dialogue and will often make a conscious effort to limit influence from outside the church. When outside speakers are given access to the pulpit, they are carefully selected to minimize any threat to the leadership's agenda. Coercive pastors are fiercely independent and do not function well in a structure of accountability. For the sake of public relations, they may boast that they are accountable to a board of some sort, when in actuality the board is composed of "yes-men" who do not question the leader's authority.

**Does the group allow for development in theological beliefs?**

Another hallmark of an authoritarian church is its intolerance of any belief system different from its own. I am not referring to clearly heretical teachings and doctrines that contradict the historic Christian faith as it is expressed, for example, in the Apostles' Creed.

Indeed, abusive churches are usually very orthodox in their basic beliefs. The problem is that pastors in such groups are likely to denounce and discredit other Christians' beliefs and their expression of them. Authoritarian pastors tend to be spiritually ethnocentric-that is, they tend to measure and evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own carefully prescribed system, adopting an "us-versus-them" mentality.

**Are group members encouraged to ask hard questions of any kind?**

A cardinal rule of abusive systems is "Don't ask questions, don't make waves." A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions. In an unhealthy church, disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is tantamount to disobeying God. People who repeatedly question the system are labeled rebellious, unteachable, or disharmonious to the body of Christ. Persistent questioners may face sanctions of some kind such as being publicly ridiculed, shunned, shamed, humiliated, or disfellowshipped.

**Do members appreciate truth wherever it is found, even if it is outside their group?**

Whether they admit it or not, abusive churches tend to view themselves as spiritually superior to other Christian groups. This religious elitism allows little room for outside influences. There can be no compromise with external sources, who, the leadership will really don't understand what is going on in the ministry anyway. The only way to succeed in an abusive organization is to go along with the agenda, support the leadership, ignore or remove troublemakers, and scorn detractors and other outside critics who seek to attack the ministry.

**Is the group honest in dealing with nonmembers, especially as it tries to win them to the group?**

Sometimes abusive groups illustrate what I call "split-level religion." There is one level for public presentation and another for the inner circle of membership. The former is a carefully crafted public relations effort, the latter a reality level experienced only by the "true believers." Recruitment tactics are usually intense; even if they are not actually deceptive or fraudulent, they can be manipulative or exploitive. Sometimes high-pressure religious groups are evasive about their true identity: "We really don't have a name; we're just Christians." A healthy Christian group should have no qualms about revealing who it is and what its intentions are.

**Does the group foster relationships and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving?**

Sometimes it is difficult to discern the motives of a pastor or church group upon the first encounter. As in all of life, first impressions are not always correct. Sustained contact with an unhealthy church, however, will usually reveal a pattern that is consistent with the characteristics we have identified. Members will be requested to serve, to become involved, to sign up for a variety of activities that, upon closer inspection, appear designed to maintain the system and serve the needs of the leadership. Abusive churches thrive on creative tactics that promote dependency. Emphasizing obedience and submission to leaders, these churches often require a level of service that is overwhelming to members, resulting in emotional turmoil and



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spiritual breakdowns. Instead of serving God and their neighbors, members are robbed of relationships with family and friends, which hinders rather than nurtures their emotional and spiritual development.

*The full text of [Recovery from Churches that Abuse](#) can be found online [here](#).*