

Flying Free Podcast



Episode 21

The Role of the Church in Emotional Abuse

I work with women of faith in destructive marriages because I have a high view of women, a high view of Jesus, and a high view of marriage. Intimate partner abuse tells a lie about women, a lie about Jesus, and a lie about marriage. These lies need to be exposed. For the sake of the Gospel, these lies need to stop. Where you find the true gospel, you find love, hope, and healing. You find compassion, truth, and humility. Where you find the anti-gospel, you find hate, hopelessness, and destruction. You find apathy, lies, and pride. With Jesus there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). With Satan there is accusation (Revelation 12:10). Where you see

Jesus working, you see good fruit. A bad tree, on the other hand, cannot bear good fruit (Matthew 7:18). A large portion of the organized conservative Christian church has bought into Satan's lies about women (they are less than men), about the Gospel (it is only for the perfect or near-perfect), and about marriage (it is more important than human lives). They spiritualize these lies to make them appear righteous, but these dressed-up lies hide dead men's bones

(Matthew 23:27) and bear nothing but rotten fruit. This rotten fruit is prolific across the years of history and across this planet. Only God knows the full devastation of these lies, but here are just a few over-arching examples of the horrific damage these lies have caused: Half the church (the female half) is maligned and disempowered in spreading the Gospel. Children grow up immersed in the lies and hypocrisy of their parents and the church and throw it off in disgust as they reach young adulthood. The culture views the church as "that crazy group that eats its

own" (actual quote from an unbeliever who grew up in the church and now wants nothing to do with Jesus because he associates Jesus with hateful, judgmental human beings). Marriages are held in revered esteem regardless of whether they are toxic or healthy. The marriage itself is worshiped while the human lives and souls within the family are disposable. While the Bible teaches that marriage should tell a story of Christ and His bride, the Church—toxic marriages tell a story about Satan and the bride. The enemy accuses and condemns and defeats the child

of God. Abusive marriages tell a lie about God, and the name of God is blasphemed in the world. The lives of women and children are covertly and systematically destroyed from the inside out. The church misses out on a beautiful opportunity to minister to the oppressed and

bring glory to God by humbly learning and growing in the love of Jesus Christ. Many women of faith in toxic marriages are afraid to tell people at church. They don't want to embarrass their husbands or be seen as a bad wife who is "tearing down her husband." However, when they get to a place of utter desolation and desperation, their church is often the first place they turn to for help. Within their churches they have invested their time in ministry, their financial resources, their emotional energy, and their love. They want to believe their church represents the loving body of Christ, and though they are usually fearful, they faithfully trust that if anyone might be able to help them, the church will. If only the church could be trusted to do this. Instead, when the hurting woman finally puts herself in the vulnerable position of reaching out for help from her church, she often experiences one of the most egregious, shocking, and damaging phases of her journey: rejection and vilification from her church family. Why? Why

does the very institution that claims to represent Jesus Christ in this world not only walk past a woman who has been emotionally and spiritually beaten over the course of decades, but actually kicks her in the back while she is down on her face in fearful supplication, begging for mercy and help? I've seen this over and over again. If it hadn't happened to me, and if I hadn't heard countless testimonies of the same from women all over the world, I would not have believed it was possible. Even now it is difficult to wrap my brain around this. I used to have a naive view of the organized church, projecting my own passion for unity and peace on them. This is a perfect example of cognitive dissonance. We believe our church is good and loving, but when a revered idol like marriage is threatened, their behavior is shockingly hateful. In talking with others about this ironic phenomenon, I've come up with some theories for why this is a common experience for emotional and spiritual abuse victims who are just waking up and trying to get to a place of safety. One theory is that the leaders in the church have a savior complex. This happens when people have a deep need inside of themselves to find their identity in rescuing others. You would think this would be a prime reason for helping an abuse

target who comes forward. And sometimes they will try to help—at first. But here's the catch: in many conservative Christian churches, the institution of marriage is treated as if it is a living, eternal soul that must be protected at all costs. So it isn't actually the real living eternal soul they are interested in protecting as much as it is the marriage itself. They are invested in being the savior of the marriage. This presents a serious problem when the victim is looking to get out of the marriage to a place of safety in order to build a new life of peace—free of abuse. As long

as she agrees with the church that the ultimate goal is to salvage the abusive marriage, they will help her toward that goal. But only that goal. Because the marriage is what matters to them—not her or her children. Often what happens is that the abuse target, being the agreeable and conscientious woman that she is, will go along with the church's agenda in the hope that perhaps the church can help her abusive husband change. So the secondary goal of the self-appointed church savior is to change the abuser. They have a high view of their ability to convince the abuser of his wayward ways and a low view of the fact that his intimate partner

has been praying and trying to do this for decades already. Right from the beginning they've put themselves in the position of the wise and all-knowing savior while putting the survivor in the position of failing in her duties to save and change her abuser. She might try to send them articles or books or information she has learned in her quest for answers, but they won't be interested. They believe they already have the answers, and they don't need to learn anything more, at least not from a woman like her. She might try to offer them her own insights based on years of living with him and studying every nuanced thing about him to try to figure out how to make him happy and solve the puzzle of her painful relationship. But again, they aren't really

interested in her input. In fact, she begins to annoy them after a while. Do you see how this is eerily starting to feel like life with her controlling husband? I point this out again because it is so important to remember what drives this kind of behavior: a misogynistic view of women coupled with a fundamental belief that men should have a power-over position in relation to them. This is the very root of abuse and re-abuse, and it bears repeating. In trying to save the abuser from the error of his ways, the church takes on the role of God in his life. This is ignorance at best and arrogance at worst. Always remember that their reason for wanting to change the abuser is to achieve their number one goal: save the marriage. If he changes just enough to convince his emotionally unstable wife, maybe she'll settle down and get back to the business of servicing him the way good wives should. Of course, the abuser usually responds to the church's intervention by putting on a big show of how he has started to have a change of heart and now wants to save the marriage. This plays right into the church's number one priority, so they jump on that (as the abuser knows they will) and then turn to the wife,

expecting her to trust his sudden change and get back in bed with him (literally and figuratively speaking), which is exactly what the abuser wants. So let's review the order of priority here. A victim comes forward for help. She needs to be emotionally and spiritually and physically safe. That ought to be the number one priority, but the number one priority of the church is to save the marriage, and the number two priority is to change the abuser in order to achieve the number one priority. So the abuser puts his energy into performing an act for the church,

making it appear he has changed so he can regain his control over the woman, and while he is doing this, he is also covertly planting seeds of doubt in everyone's minds about her, paving the way for the future smear campaign he will need to launch in case his plan doesn't work, and she leaves him anyway. The important point to remember here is that the abuser is almost always the one who wants to save the marriage. Think about it. Abusive men need to maintain control over their targets. It is a private and public affront to him to have his wife slip away, and he is all about image management and control. His agenda to hang onto his victim ("save the

marriage") appeals to the church's number one priority, which automatically places him on the side of righteousness in their viewpoint. His goal and their goal are the same. Then, when they compare this seemingly noble goal of saving the marriage to the wife's goal, which is to stop pretending, stop covering up, walk in truth, set healthy boundaries, get away from the abuse, and pursue healing—they side with the abuser. In order to justify their abandonment of the victim, they need to do exactly what her abuser has done for decades—control and shame her. So that's exactly what they do. This scenario plays out over and over again in churches all over

the world. You need to know this in advance so you won't be shocked and traumatized when it happens to you. Instead, you will be forewarned and prepared to make the hard decisions that come from being forced to stand alone while your church joins forces with your abusive spouse in demonizing and rejecting you. "Can you imagine being on fire and having no one to help put out the fire? Instead of helping to extinguish the flames, they throw gas on the fire by denying its existence and telling you, as you burn alive, that you are not really on fire, and it can't hurt that bad. Or if they acknowledge any fire, they say you did it to yourself, so you deal with the flames. That's what this feels like—begging for help and having someone who says they love

God throw gasoline on you when you're already on fire." —Emotional Abuse Survivor Another theory for why the church rejects the victims while helping the abusers is that the church has invested a lot of time, emotional energy, money, prayer, and effort into creating what they believe to be a warm, inviting church atmosphere. When people within the church get messy

and have out-of-control problems, the people who have worked hard may have a sense that they've failed others and even God. There is a tangled web of confusion and shame around abuse, and it takes time, humility, education, wisdom, skill, and experience to gently untangle the threads and bring hope and healing to victims and their families. I believe the church of Jesus Christ should be the ones leading the way in this area, and I pray God will turn this around one day. But for now, the church is the most dangerous place for a victim to try to find hope and help. When a church's agenda for this process of helping a victim has to end with an intact

marriage and a happily-ever-after testimony, the process is doomed right from the beginning. So if the underlying motivation is warm fuzzies and a success story, then taking the time, energy, and humility required to unravel abusive homes is not going to appeal to many churches. If emotional abuse is crazy when it stays hidden within the family, then it borders on totally insane when we bring an ignorant (though perhaps well-meaning) religious community into the mix. The web is larger and more impossible to figure out at that point because now the abuser has a growing number of actors in his drama, and the victim gets to play the role of

scapegoat over and over again, experiencing re-abuse that spirals her further down into a pit of total despair and agony. She has two choices at that point: go back to living a lie and suffering under oppression, or divorce her husband and suffer excommunication and religious shunning. This is a dark time in a victim's life, and it causes some to even see death as the only way out. That's how vile and harmful the church's re-abuse is, and it can't be sugar-coated. It is my personal opinion that underlying all of that mess lies a theology rooted in the original sin of trying to be god-like over accepting our human limitations and resting in our Father's love just

as we are. Good works over grace. Control over trust. Pride over humility. People who believe they are flawed and unlovable and need to be perfect in order to win God's approval tend to lay that burden on others. They see others as flawed and unlovable and in need of being perfect in order to win God's approval as well. Groups like this are a breeding ground for dysfunction. The gospel holds out a different option—the option to receive the love and acceptance of Jesus regardless of our weakness, sin, and mistakes. Then we can extend that same love to others, believing God is big enough to work in individual lives, and He doesn't

need us to act as Holy Spirits in the lives of others. When a woman comes forward needing help in a healthy, Christ-centered church, she will be loved and accepted right where she is. She will be believed and supported, regardless of what her decision about her future may be. She will be honored as a precious human being with rights to her own life and her own safety. Her boundaries will be respected. She will be directed to skilled, experienced, and licensed therapists to help her recover from trauma so she can be whole again—able to make her own

good choices for her life and the lives of her children as well as lovingly serve others in the way she has been lovingly served. She will not be condemned, suspected, silenced, blamed, or excommunicated should she make the painful, last-resort decision to divorce her chronically abusive spouse. I've noticed that when survivors get divorced and then excommunicated, they often find another church similar to the one they were kicked out of. The new church will

embrace and help her. Why is this? Why does a church excommunicate a faithful member while embracing a new woman who shows up already divorced for the exact same reasons? I believe it is, in part, because of the two dynamics I just suggested: the savior complex and the feeling of failure when they couldn't save a marriage. When a couple gets divorced, it means all of the church's teaching and effort didn't work. It wasn't effective. They interpret the divorce to mean

the church failed, and that's embarrassing. They fear it is contagious. If this couple gets away with divorce, it will set precedence, and everyone will be wanting a divorce for frivolous reasons. Why, some women might even claim abuse just to get divorced and find a new man!

But if a woman comes in already divorced, the savior complex kicks into gear, and they can reach out and love on her because she doesn't represent failure to them. In fact, they can feel good about what an awesome church they are while the church that kicked her out is the one in the wrong. Yes, apart from the radical gospel of Jesus Christ at work in our lives, this is how human nature plays itself out, even in the church.

Hoffman, Natalie. Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage: A Christian Woman's Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse (pp. 150-159). Kindle Edition.