

Toxic Faith

1. INTRODUCTION

A. The following is a summary of the book *Toxic Faith* by Stephen Arterburn & Jack Felton (Oliver-Nelson, 1991)

B. I wrote this during the most trying time of my life when the issues raised by Arterburn and Felton came as a godsend to me. They apply the insights of family systems theory and religious addiction to life in the church. I helped to father a church in Indianapolis that had aspects of toxicity and these principles and truths enabled me to understand and explain much of my history in both my family of origin and the church

{mospagebreak title=Introductory Issues
Religious Addiction}

2. INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

A. Religious addiction

1. Definition of addiction: when a person is excessively/compulsively devoted (sacrificing family, job, economic security, relationship with God, their bodies or mental health) to a substance, relationship or behavior

2. When people suffer from not knowing they are secure and significant, things which should be learned from one's family of origin and ultimately from a relationship with God in Christ, they have a vacuum in their soul that demands to be filled

3. The pain in our souls was intended to drive us to God who, alone, can meet the deep longings of the heart. Instead of getting the message, we pridefully fight relying on God alone to meet our needs. We avoid listening to the pain by playing self-protective games. Along the way, we often find patterns of behavior that dull the pain, thus making it easier to live with. These pain medications can be virtually any substance, relationship or behavior that provides relief. When a person develops a pathological (abnormal) relationship to a mood-altering experience or substance that has life-damaging consequences, addiction exists

4. Addictions can be divided into three basic types: substance addiction (e.g., alcohol), emotional addiction (letting an emotion run your life e.g., depression), process addiction (e.g., work, religion)

5. Addiction is ultimately idolatry, that is, the worship of a relationship, substance or behavior instead of God

6. Religion becomes unhealthy when our attendance and service flows, not out of faith in God who has loved us in Christ and given us opportunities to serve out of that place of rest, but out of a need to be loved and find worth. Religious addiction is hard to spot because it has to do with motive. Two people could be serving side by side and one is doing it by faith in God for an eternal reward (gold, silver and precious stones; 1 Cor 3:12) while the other is doing it by faith in the behavior for a temporal reward with no eternal dividends (wood, hay and straw). Religious addicts are also usually the best workers in the church so their dysfunction is not only overlooked but rewarded. Meanwhile, their lives head for disaster.

{mospagebreak title=21 erroneous beliefs that can fuel toxic faith}

B. 21 erroneous beliefs that can fuel toxic faith (various forms and degrees of unhealthy Christianity)

- Security and significance with God depend on my behavior
- When tragedy strikes, true believers should have a real peace about it
- If you had real faith, God would heal you or the one you are praying for
- All ministers are men and women of God and can be trusted
- Material blessings are a sign of spiritual strength
- The more money you give to God, the more money he will give to you
- I can work my way to heaven
- Problems in your life result from some particular sin
- I must not stop meetings other's needs
- I must always submit to authority
- God only uses spiritual giants
- Having true faith means waiting for God to help me and doing nothing until he does
- If it's not in the Bible, it isn't relevant (all truth is in the Bible)
- God will find me a perfect mate
- Everything that happens to me is good
- A strong faith will protect me from problems and pain

- God hates sinners, is angry with me, and wants to punish me
- Christ was merely a great teacher
- God is too big to care about me
- More than anything else, God wants me to be happy (free from pain)
- You can become God

{mospagebreak title=Irrational thinking patterns common in religious addiction}

C. 7 irrational thinking patterns common in religious addiction

- Thinking in extremes: driven by an all or nothing, black or white mentality (no gray; my way or the highway) that causes the addict to be very hard on himself/herself and others
- Drawing invalid conclusions, not based in reality; global thinking i.e., using words like "never, always."
- Filtering out the positive and distorting reality. These people selectively hear only the negative and are consequently negative about everything, especially themselves; in response to positive input they say, "yes, but ..."
- Filtering out the negative and distorting reality. These people selectively hear only the positive to shield their already low self worth. They allow in themselves what they would condemn in others. A lot of relational wreckage; the weight of restitution can be crushing when they finally see it
- Thinking with the heart; feelings become the basis for reality because I think my perception is "certainly accurate."
- "Should, ought" thinking; constant self condemnation of not being able to measure up
- Codependency; egocentric feeling of being responsible for everything; must be in control; eyes always on the needs of others at the expense of their own.

{mospagebreak title=Toxic Religious Systems}

3. TOXIC RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS

A. 11 Characteristics of a toxic faith system

1. Religious addiction is developed in a toxic faith system. The following characteristics differentiate it from systems, churches, and ministries committed to growing people in faith and developing their relationship with God
2. "Special" claims a. The leaders of toxic faith systems claim a special pipeline to God which places them at a level above all the others in the church which creates an atmosphere of unapproachability. The leader can use this superiority to manipulate the followers who either believe and obey or suffer the consequences b. In the toxic system, the minister will set him/herself up as having a special destiny or mission that can be performed by no one else. This special anointing or calling many times is nothing more than the pathological need to be valued or esteemed. He/she can also posture special powers from God like the ability to supernaturally heal c. The victimized followers, seeking a closer relationship with God but focusing more on the addicted leader than on God, lose contact with God and often fall away from faith permanently. Misguided loyalty allows the delusions of the leader to grow and destroys the faith of the loyal

The only hope for everyone involved is for the leader who claims to be God's special officer to be forced into accountability or dethroned to protect other potential victims.

3. Authoritarianism a. Churches and ministries are started and grown through the vision of a strong leader. The authoritarian leader comes to power because a driven personality accompanies talent and charisma. A toxic system arises when that leader moves into a free rein style with no real accountability. Often, this ministry is the first experience of authority for the leader b. Those who work in this setting find themselves either agreeing with the direction of the ministry or leaving. There is no room for compromise since the dictatorial leader believes that everyone should submit to his rule without question. Those who fear for their jobs or feel they may not be able to find similar jobs will comply with the leader rather than challenge certain decisions or actions that appear to be wrong. The leader and the people, therefore, mutually deny their accountability structures and wave the option of having safeguards in the system
4. An "Us Versus Them" Mentality a. Religious addicts are at war with the world to protect their terrain and establish themselves as godly persons who can't be compared to other persons. They see themselves in the cutting-edge ministry and other people need to come into the light b. Those in the exclusive society believe they are serving God but they are serving a person, and that person's concept of what should be and should not be c. Any scrutiny of the ministry is seen to be an attack from the enemy
5. Punitive in Nature a. The minister addicted to power punishes and purges the system of anybody who would upset the status quo b. To outsiders, the whole ministry appears negative and punitive, out of balance, and distorted from the love, acceptance, and forgiveness freely given by God and his Son
6. Overwhelming Service People get burned out by the service demands of the system which feeds on compulsive personalities

7. Followers in Pain Many religious addicts in the system are physically ill, emotionally distraught, and spiritually dead because they are looking to the leader and ministry to give them what only God can give
8. Closed Communication a. Communication is from the top down or from the inside out. Those at the top no longer hear the perceptions and needs of the people. The addicts on the inside no longer care about the needs of the people on the outside b. Someone in the system has the job of shielding the leader from the truth by placating those who disagree and satisfying those who want a direct voice to the leader. The lieutenant is never to tell the leader anything but what he/she wants to hear c. The organization eventually becomes ineffective because it loses touch with the people it is designed to serve, just like a father loses touch with his children
9. Legalism What you do is more important than who you are. Performance is everything.
10. No Objective Accountability a. This is the key to a toxic faith system. If religious addicts were in healthy, accountable relationships with others, toxic faith would not be allowed to flourish b. A person accountable only to God is a person out of control
11. Labeling a. Labeling attempts to dehumanize persons so that dismissing them or their opinions is much easier. Rather than say that John Doe has made a negative comment, the addict proclaims that they are "traitors" or have a "critical spirit." The labels become rallying points under which the other followers can be moved to action to squelch a revolt. Once the label is in place, it becomes more difficult to see that person as a human with real needs and the potential for good judgment b. Because it is difficult to rally against rational, thinking people who have different views, labels must be used to polarize the opponents and energize the followers to fight against those opponents. The enemy is "shot" so the underlying issues that need to be considered can be avoided

{mospagebreak title=The Roles of Toxic Faith}

B. The Roles of Toxic Faith

Introduction

- a. A healthy system is made up of individuals with a full range of emotions, intellect, free will and the ability to function independently. In a dysfunctional system, each individual plays out a role needed for the system to function. Since individuals lack the ability to function independently, they depend on one another to play out their roles and allow the system to continue. Those roles have to be played so that those in the system can remain in their denial and avoid the overwhelming fear of insignificance
- b. In a dysfunctional system, roles evolve to support the system. Each person must be willing to play the roles which become more keenly defined as the addiction intensifies. Individuals become trapped in predictable behaviors that remove God and faith, replacing them with a dependency on a set of rules. As a person's behavior lines up with one of these predictable roles, any deviation from that role is a sign of rebellion from the system and is dealt with quickly through shaming and rejection. Although each role is difficult to maintain, it is even more difficult to leave the safety and predictability of the role and act independently. A person who takes this step back toward reality becomes an outcast of the system
- c. In a toxic faith system, be it family, church or ministry, the person with the role of persecutor heads the group. The persecutor is supported by coconspirators, enablers, and victims. These people have one primary function: allow the persecutor to function, insulated from reality. Each person in each role believes the organization must continue, and it is each person's job to distort, manipulate, hide, or deny reality so the toxic system can go on. Each person in a different way protects the persecutor from outside disruptions that could stop the achievement of the persecutor's vision
- d. These people create a false reality by distancing and isolating the persecutor from contact with the real world. As they grow more committed to the persecutor and the toxic ministry, they become addicted to the behaviors of the role and the feelings derived from participating in the false reality of the toxic system. Once they stop supporting the false reality that allows the persecutor and the ministry to continue, they are no longer needed by the system and are thrown out The roles a. The Persecutor The persecutor plays the role of the father in the family. In the church this person is the one with the vision that es the organization must continue, and it is each person's job to distort, manipulate, when they were younger and, therefore, don't want to risk rejection as an adult. Rather than trust God and risk being rejected or betrayed by God, they focus on what they do in the name of God and what they perceive are the instant rewards sent from God. In this way they lose all faith in God and rely on their own abilities to find God's favor. The fulfillment of the mission becomes everything for the wrong reason and they surround themselves with people willing to say that the progress toward the goal is outstanding b. The Coconspirator For every persecutor, there is at least one co-conspirator who manipulates, plots, and plans to keep the persecutor in power and position. The persecutor and coconspirator work as a unit; they operate as one. Both are addicted to religion as the means by which they es person is the one with the vision that he/she and the others find meaning in fulfilling. Persecutors have often been rejected Several work together to form a team of "yes-men" that will do anything to protect and defend the persecutor. They feed into the persecutor's ego and

further blind him/her from reality. When there is conflict, they usually find a way to agree with the persecutor and support his/her position. They are loyal in every way. In a toxic faith system, these are the most dangerous followers because of their proactive commitment to keeping the system intact. Their undying faith in the persecutor is the reason so many will continue to support that person when trouble, rumor, or admission of wrong surfaces c. The Enabler While the coconspirator actively connives to keep the persecutor in power, the enabler's role is more passive. They allow, more than promote, victimization. They are not active in the decision-making of the organization but willingly support those decisions made at the top. They know something fishy is going on but they don't want to rock the boat by calling attention to it. They are getting their worth serving something "significant," therefore, they purposely don't "see things," thus justifying their enabling activities The fearful enabler will wait until someone else intervenes. They hope for but are afraid to work for change. Instead, they work like beasts of burden because they feel responsible for everything d. The Victims Victims place their complete trust in the leaders of the toxic faith system and become silent victims of something they don't understand. They fear rejection and abandonment so much that they would rather be exploited members of something than be on their own and be part of nothing. Theirs is a blind allegiance e. The Outcast This is the only role in the toxic system that is not driven by addiction. In any toxic system, there is usually someone who can see the problem and confronts it. In a healthy system, individuals serving in that organization have respect for the person and position of leadership. For it to remain healthy, there must also be respect for the workers. When there is no respect, the "hired hands" are not allowed to disagree. If they don't like something, they are labeled complainers, negative thinkers, and not team players. The toxic system has no place for anyone who challenges the integrity or disagrees with the methods of the leader. The person who is unwilling to play the games of the persecutors and coconspirators, becomes the outcast. They lose their friends and church because they stood for their convictions

{mospagebreak title=10 Rules of a Toxic Faith System}

C. 10 Rules of a Toxic Faith System

- The leader must be in control of every aspect at all times
- When problems arise, find a guilty party to blame immediately
- Don't make mistakes
- Never point out the reality of a situation
- Never express your feelings unless they are positive
- Don't ask questions, especially if they are tough ones
- Don't do anything outside your role
- Don't trust anyone
- Nothing is more important than giving money to the organization
- At all costs, keep up the image of the organization or the family

{mospagebreak title=Characteristics of Healthy Faith}

D. Characteristics of Healthy Faith

- Focusing on a personal relationship with God in Christ, not religion
- Looking to God to meet the needs for security and significance
- Growing in faith as evidenced by walking into pain
- Respect for the personhood of others
- Serving others for their sake
- Being vulnerable
- A trusting atmosphere
- Celebrating uniqueness by recognizing people's spiritual gifts
- Relationships being the heart of everything
- People being taught to think
- Balanced thinking rather than extremes in black and white
- Non defensive
- Non judgmental
- Reality based
- Able to embrace our emotions
- Able to embrace our humanity as evidenced in the ability to allow for mistakes
- The ability to laugh

{mospagebreak title=My Response}

4. MY RESPONSE

A. I think that each of the toxic roles is actually a counterfeit for genuine gifts and roles in the kingdom of God:

a. A person receives a vision from God to start a certain type of ministry, be it church or Sunday school. They articulate that vision and impart it to a group of people who partner with them to fulfill it, not to gain identity but as an outflow of the gifts of the Spirit exercised in faith. The difference between the persecutor and the true godly leader is motive and degree

of control. The true leader obeys by faith and is secure enough to not be controlling. He/she does not lay down in front of the people and do what they say because of being afraid of them (cf. 1 Sam. 15:24), nor do they lord it over those they lead. The leader definitely leads but as a servant and an example to the flock

b. True leaders gladly submit themselves to a group of people with whom they can know and be known. They trust their council and value relationship with them above pursuit of the vision. They wait for them so they can walk together

1. The persecutor is the counterfeit for the real gift of leadership which God gives to a man or woman by the Holy Spirit
2. The coconspirator is the counterfeit for true eldership and government
 - a. Leaders need an accountability and decision-making structure around them. They (leader and eldership) function together as coequals with different functions based on giftedness. Those who serve the leader who is serving them do so as those who already have an identity in God and are merely walking out their response to God's grace according to the measure of their faith. They are "elding" for the right reason
 - b. They are not "yes men" but neither are they of an interdependent spirit. They recognize the leadership gifting on the point person and trust in what God has put on him/her. They also trust that the leader understands how the elders complement that leadership and know that he/she will listen and heed their council. While the leader leads by giving direction and going first, they govern the church together
3. The enablers are the counterfeit for the true servant workforce in the church
 - a. Jesus told us to pray for laborers in the harvest, for the harvest was plentiful but the workers were few. Nehemiah saw to it that it was the people's job to build the wall around Jerusalem, not his. He saw to it that they had whatever they needed, training, supplies, etc.
 - b. The true workforce of the church is serving according to their spiritual gifts by faith and not for a sense of belonging and worth. They are not passive codependents who would enable the sickness of leadership because they need the sick system for their pain medication. They know they are not gifted in government so they trust that gifting on the eldership. But they also know that if they had a question, even a hard one, that the leaders would be open to their concern and make proper adjustments when necessary. They serve God, not the leader or vision, with joy in their hearts
4. The victims are the counterfeit for the godfearer fringe
 - a. These are those that attend the larger meetings and are trying to decide if they want to give themselves to the local church. Many are Christians who have had bad experiences in the church and are hesitant; some are frightened "pew sitters" who need to be loved into the family and joyful service, others are non Christians who are checking out the faith
 - b. Whichever category, they are the fishing pond out of which disciples are made. Jesus chose 12 then 70 out of the crowd that followed him. What makes the difference whether these people become disciples or victims? Everything depends on the actions and motives of the group they are walking among. Is it healthy, glorifying Jesus and honoring personhood or is it toxic, glorifying the leader and denying personhood? Motive is everything
5. Outcasts are the courageous detractors in the toxic system who are trying to bring health to something sick

Just as God will try to heal something that is sick, Satan will try to destroy something that is healthy. In the healthy system will be found both rebels and wolves

- a. Rebels are Christians who for whatever reasons have enough wounding to create problems for members in the flock because of their sin. They are good people who are just not conscious of what they are doing and why. They may be caught in a sin and need to be restored gently (Gal. 6:1). They may be acting out congregational pain that they have not been able to understand. Whatever the case, the flock is called to a process of lovingly winning these rebels through ardent pursuit outlined in Matthew 18. This passage begins by talking about true shepherds who make lost sheep their priority. It then says we are to go to our brother who is in sin and try to win him. We are to offer numerous opportunities for repentance, each with a higher relational price. If losing relationship is worth something to the rebel (this is what separates rebels from wolves), then he/she will eventually repent and have a genuine heart change. The key to this process is love. The parable of the unmerciful servant which follows in the text highlights how the atmosphere needs to be permeated with forgiveness
- b. There is a difference between the rebel and the wolf. Rebels are good people with wounds who need to be loved back to health. Wolves are divisive people with hardened hearts who the enemy has planted with a strategy to destroy the fellowship. Titus says, "Warn a divisive person once, then twice, then have nothing to do with him" (3:10). Paul told the Corinthians to expel a wicked man from their midst (1 Cor. 5:13). Discerning rebels from wolves and treating them accordingly is one of the jobs of eldership (even wolves are to be treated lovingly and with respect as human beings!). The difference is in the heart and the heart must be discerned

{mospagebreak title=Conclusion}

B. Conclusion

1. If Jim Jones was a 10 and totally healthy is a 0 then most families and churches would fall somewhere on the spectrum. Healthy would go from few to some toxic behaviours, unhealthy from frequent to compulsive toxic behaviours. How toxic we were is a matter of debate. There is no question that I/we had dysfunction. How much is (in my opinion) a fruitless sidetrack. Whether it is one cancer cell or a thousand, let's call it cancer and ask God to root it out

2. This book was extremely helpful to me because it gave me crucial insight into what was happening to us. If we

understand what toxic faith is and what drives it, we can recognise it and choose never to walk in it in any degree

Condensed by Bill Jackson