

What Language Does Your Church Speak?

The Language of Abusive Churches and Groups

by Bill Newcomer

Please read this first: This list is a compilation of words and phrases used by abusive churches and religious groups. Please note that this list is *not* about how these words and phrases may be properly used, but it *is* about how these words and phrases are *misused* by abusers to manipulate and control in an un-Biblical manner. *How does your church or group use these words and phrases?*



Accountable: Members of the church or group should be "accountable" to the pastor or elders, and get "godly counsel" on all personal and family decisions even when those issues are (1) none of their business and (2) the pastor or elders have zero competency in the area involved. Also see "oversight".

Angry: What a person is deemed to be when they tell the truth about something that has happened. Because you are "angry" and have a "bitter spirit" your legitimate concerns and issues can be written off and ignored. After all, "you are the one with the problem", not the actual offender, especially if the offender is a pastor or elder.

Apostate: A derisive comment made about anyone who will not swallow the party-line hook, line and sinker. Often used when speaking of those who have left the church or group. In some churches or groups this word is to be said in a manner that reminds everyone of the "fact" that even the devil himself is less evil than an apostate.

Backslider: (1) Someone trying to be active in the church but just can't seem to get it together... through no one else's fault but their own, of course! (2) A person who has left the church or group. Also see "apostate". (3) Someone who finds it impossible to keep all the man-made rules peculiar to the church or group.

Bad Attitude: (1) "This was usually the first step to "disfellowshipping". If we didn't agree with the minister, we were classified as having a bad attitude. If we didn't repent and agree with the minister we would be likely disfellowshipped. Also see "Critical spirit". (2) People who have left the church or group left because they had a "bad attitude" and were "troublemakers".

A Bitter spirit (variation "Don't be bitter"): (1) The charge made against a person because that person still stands by what they first said. (2) Former members who say anything negative about the church or group are charged with having "a bitter spirit", so what they say is not given any credibility and ignored even though it is factually true. (3) **"Don't be bitter."** Said by the truly unkind in order to deeply wound, for (spiritually abused) survivors aren't bitter--we just *hurt*... a lot! Said to shame, usually in a very public venue and/or in front of other kind people or,

worst of all, in front of the "Undecideds" who, upon hearing this condemnation, decide that yes, the (spiritually abused) survivors are indeed "bitter", when all we are doing is *hurting*... a lot! 😞

Black sheep: see Apostate

Congregationalism: "Congregationalism" is the thing in which you are guilty of in an elder-ruled church when you try to hold an elder (or elders) accountable for how they are lording it over and abusing the sheep. For you to be guilty of "congregationalism" means that the elders can ignore and dismiss your legitimate concerns regarding how they are ruling the church.

Critical spirit: If you think about the pastor's sermons to see if they line up with Scripture, you have a "critical spirit". "I was approached by an elder who said, "You're thinking about the sermons I preach, aren't you?" When I replied that I was just doing what Paul commended the Bereans for doing, he told me I totally misinterpreted that passage, and I was not to "judge" his sermons." Also see "Divisive".

Disfellowshipping: (1) "This was the very last thing any of us wanted. It meant that we were now in jeopardy of losing our Eternal Salvation. Only those who were part of the "Only True Church" would be given Eternal Life. It was like a death sentence to us and the ministers knew that and always hung this over our heads like the sword of Damocles' if we didn't agree and obey them." (2) What in some churches is called "excommunication".

Dissident: A term for someone who was against us. It was the old "them against us" attitude. See also "circle the wagons".

Divisive: (1) What a person is called because some people actually realized what that person said was the truth so the church is split. (2) A term used of someone who doesn't swallow the party-line hook, line, and sinker. See "Apostate".

A Family matter: When the church leadership doesn't want the embarrassment of public disclosure in the community at large regarding a scandal in the church, that scandal becomes a "family matter" and is not to be discussed with people outside of the church or group. That the community at large has a vital and legitimate interest in the matter is ignored, even when the matter involves wrong-doing such as criminal sexual conduct, child or wife abuse, a suspicious death and so on. In such cases the primary reason for something to be "a family matter" is so the leadership or church can "save face". See also "Tell it not in Gath".

Free Will: (1) Everyone has it, everyone knows that everyone has it, so why can't you stop eating that entire carton of ice cream? Why can't you just put it back in the freezer? All it takes is "Will Power". (2) Said from the pulpit: "You're well taught and you know what to do, so WHY DON'T YOU DO IT!"

"Because I'm the pastor, that's why!" (Variation: "May I remind you I am the pastor!")
"How dare you doubt me!" "Are you questioning my authority?" "Don't be a troublemaker."
"Keep the peace." "Submit to your elder."

This type of thinking is a symptom of living under leadership that legislates and demands obedience to their authority. It rests upon a false basis for authority. The sole basis on which they grasped this authority was because of their rank as ministers alone. In other words, their authority was NOT founded on the fact that they were wise, discerning and true. It was based solely in the fact that they were in charge.

In the new covenant, we see that Jesus established a new basis of authority. It was no longer age, gender, or race. It is now based on the evidence of the Holy Spirit within you. Attributes like maturity, wisdom, genuine holiness, and real knowledge are required in order to evidence Jesus' brand of authority. "Because I said so" does not work anymore. "Because I'm the pastor" does not cut it. So if my basis for authority is solely that I hold an office, I have a false basis for authority.

We do not have authority in God's eyes simply because we are named the pastor, the elder, or the chairman. We are going to have to speak the truth to have real authority. We are going to have to be sensitive to the Spirit to have authority. We are going to have to be wise, and seek to know and say what God says clearly and accurately." (Excerpts from the book *"The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse"*.) (See also "Touch not the Lord's anointed.")

A Jezebel Spirit: (1) A term used specifically to describe a woman who is "unteachable". See also second entry for "unsubmissive". (2) Also used to describe a woman in the congregation or group who has the audacity to seek to publicly expose the unwanted and unasked for sexual harassment she received from the pastor or other prominent male church member. Such harassment usually fits the definition of a criminal sexual offense as defined by statute law, and exposure would result in negative publicity in the community at large. (See "a family matter")

"Lord's Day Bible Institute Classes" (also known as "Sunday School", in some groups and churches called "Sabbath School"): "Mandatory meetings where attendance is strictly recorded and the peculiar doctrines held by the church are repeated numerous times over many years until your brain is numb with boredom and you are thoroughly convinced that there can be no other truth and you have begun to lose the ability to think for yourself. To miss one of these meetings is a grave sin and indicates that you may be 'apostate'."

Love Gifts: (1) TV Preachers remind us to send in them "LOVE GIFTS". I can feel the "Anointing" now! Something's got a hold on me! (2) You've given the first tithe. Many of you have given the second tithe. Some of you have even given the third tithe. Now, on top of all the tithes, prove how "spiritual" you really are, and support "the work" by giving those "love gifts".

We are a "nondenominational" church: So we're not accountable to anyone and if you don't like the way we run roughshod over you and your family, that's tough. After all you need to be "submissive" and "accountable". Also see "We are an independent church".

Oh, they just use the doctrine of men: Used to disparage other churches or groups that don't dot all your "I"'s and cross all your "T"'s. Of course only your church or group has it all together and has the "full truth".

You need to be "Open and transparent": (1) ...and tell the pastors what you're thinking or struggling with so they can jump down your throat, and berate and scream at you for not "measuring up", especially during "oversight". (2) What the leaders publicly berate the congregation about while at the same time withholding from the congregation relevant information regarding church matters or problems in the personal lives of a leader that would actually disqualify said leader from his leadership position.

Oversight: Mandatory meetings where an elder or elders come to your home and ask you personal and intimate questions about things that are not really any of their business in the first place. (Example: How often do you and your spouse have sex?) Oversight is also used as a time for incompetent pastors or elders to give incompetent and bad advice that causes disruptions in family relationships, most often between spouses, but also parent-child relationships, and extended family relationships. Refusal to have, or a negative attitude regarding "oversight" is sign of being "rebellious", and an indication of "backsliding" and "unsubmissiveness", and may lead to "apostasy".

Don't be Petty: A phrase used to effectively dismiss your legitimate concerns regarding issues in the church as they relate to the heavy handedness of the leadership or imbalance in the ministry. By this phrase you are being told you are being "selfish" and you need to have a bigger vision of "the work". A variation of this word is used very effectively in public prayer. "Lord, deliver us from pettiness... yada, yada, yada..."

Prodigal son/daughter: see Apostate

Rebellious, as in "a rebellious spirit" or "a rebellious heart": (1) When a young person in the congregation or group asks the pastor or leader an honest question about the justification for a peculiar practice or belief of the church or group, and the pastor is unable to answer the young person's question with an open Bible, then that young person has a "rebellious spirit" or heart. (2) Also used as another term for anyone, who is "unsubmissive", most especially a wife who is "unsubmissive". See also "a Jezebel Spirit". (3) What a person is when they are "unwilling to reconcile". (4) Anyone who doesn't get with "the program".

Singleness: (1) "An undesirable temporary state, not conducive to "spiritual growth" or "church fellowship". People who choose to remain in this state for an "unnatural" length of time are likely "rebellious" and in a "dangerous spiritual condition", not to mention just plain "strange" and unworthy of "fellowship". (2) The state of a young person after they grow up seeing so many unhappy marriages in the church, including his/her own parents, that were aggravated by the inept counseling and meddling of incompetent pastors whose struggles in their own marriages was carefully hidden from the congregation.

Slander: to say anything negative about the church to anyone outside the church. "I asked a Christian friend I respected for a recommendation for a church I could attend. The only words I said to her about my previous church was, "Something awful happened at my church and I had to leave." My friend asked a deacon's wife what was going on that I would leave the church, the deacon's wife reported it to the elders, and I got a visit from the elders of my former church that evening. I was accused of slandering the church."

The Truth is here: ...and nowhere else, so if you leave and go to another church you are leaving the "truth".

This is a safe church: But then you find out it's not safe. That was just the pastors trying to convince themselves or someone else. It means they are too lazy to make sure it's safe. A place that is really safe doesn't have to spend a lot of time talking about it trying to convince people it is.

Teachable: You are "teachable" when you passively accept what you are taught without questioning the exegesis or logic. (See "unteachable")

Troublemaker: (1) Someone who has the audacity to think the elders should be effectively accountable to the congregation. (2) Anyone who had the nerve and gall to see through the pastor's slipshod exegesis and pseudo-scholarship, and as a result refuse to accept the pastor's interpretation and application. (3) People who have left the church. They were just "troublemakers" so we don't have to give any serious thought or care as to why they left. (4) Anyone in a business meeting who asked critical questions the elders didn't really want to have to deal with even though the questions were very relevant to the issue at hand. (5) Anyone who voted "no" on a proposal or matter the elders favored. (6) Anyone who said anything that was in any way negative about the church. See also "slander".

Unteachable: (1) You are "unteachable" when you have the audacity to go home and study an issue for yourself from the Bible, and come to a different conclusion than what you were taught. The sin in doing this is you're exposing the teacher or preacher's flawed exegesis and sloppy scholarship. (See "teachable" and "unsubmissive") (2) Also used to describe "not getting it". "I was supposed to "get it" when the elders asked me to "resign" from being deacon. I am guessing that what I was supposed to "get" was that "it was all my fault", and the actual offending party had no responsibility whatsoever. In that group of churches to be labeled "unteachable" is equivalent to a "death sentence". Someone who is "unteachable" is on the road to excommunication; they have committed the highest offense a Christian can commit." (3) Also used to describe those who visit the church for a period of time, but then cease coming and go to another church.

Unsubmissive: (1) When you follow your own conscience in the light of your own understanding of Scripture instead of doing what the pastors or elders told you to do, you are "unsubmissive". (2) When a godly Christian wife refuses to tolerate the outrageous, dictatorial overbearing abuse of her husband, then she is an "unsubmissive" wife. See also "a Jezebel Spirit" and "Rebellious".

Unwilling to reconcile: What a person is when they will not accept the pastor's non-negotiable version of what took place and agree to back his version.

The "Work": (1) "This was the Ultimate goal of all of the church members; to back the leader with our tithes, offerings and time. We were to sacrifice to keep the TV show, radio program, college and all the things considered part of "The Work". There would often be sent out a members letter asking us for a special emergency offering because of "The Work". We would be

asked to sacrifice and even take out loans if we didn't have anything to send in. Some people mortgaged their homes and delayed some necessary purchases such as new car so that they could give. As a result, some lost their homes and drove wrecks. This caused a huge financial burden for many." (2) The pastors' or elders' agenda for making a name for themselves in the particular movement, association, or denomination they are a part of. This agenda is often fueled by a certain degree of megalomania that is not satisfied with controlling and abusing one's own people, but wants to also control and exert power over other pastors in a wider sphere of church relationships . Also see "Protestant papal syndrome". If you do not wholeheartedly support "the work", then you are being "petty" and lack "kingdom vision".

The "World": "The classic, them against us attitude. It was often used when we would do something that some took as "worldly"; watching certain TV programs, or too much TV, buying an expensive car, suit etc. The lists could go on and on, and it was always up to those in authority to interpret it the way they wanted to. We were never totally sure what was worldly or not. Usually, it was the unspoken rule that we should all know. It led to a lot of conformity to this image of what was part of the "World" and what was part of the "Church". So we were always second-guessing all the things we did. It left one with a certain uneasiness, knowing that we were always wrong in certain areas and slipping up. Kept us on the endless treadmill of perfectionism to work at our own salvation. This contributed to never measuring up and was the cause of depression and in rare cases, leading to suicide with a few. I know personally one of my friends who committed suicide. He was always going over the deep end in this area."

"We Don't" phrases:

- **We don't do things that way:** So stop rocking the boat and upsetting the "status quo". Besides, we don't want to change our leadership style, even if you think the Bible is clear we should. You're just being a "troublemaker".
- **We don't want to overreact:** So we will not act at all to correct the excess or extreme.
- **We don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water:** So the dirty bath water will never get thrown out at all.
- **We don't want to take sides:** This phrase is used to avoid making any decision at all which would deal with the abuse which was taking place in the situation.