

3-28-2024

## Understanding Spiritual Abuse: Incentives to Preserve Spiritual Power & Reducing Abusive Experiences

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Miami, Florida

UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL ABUSE: INCENTIVES TO PRESERVE  
SPIRITUAL POWER & REDUCING ABUSIVE EXPERIENCES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES

by

Eric Isaac

2024

To: Dean Shlomi Dinar  
Green School of International and Public Affairs

This thesis, written by Eric Isaac, and entitled Understanding Spiritual Abuse: Incentives to Preserve Spiritual Power & Reducing Abusive Experiences, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL ABUSE: INCENTIVES TO PRESERVE  
SPIRITUAL POWER & REDUCING ABUSIVE EXPERIENCES

by

Eric Isaac

Florida International University, 2024

Miami, Florida

Professor Jose Miguel Cruz, Major Professor

Purpose: While the definition of spiritual abuse is still being refined in psychological contexts, more research is needed to explain why the phenomenon occurs in faith communities. Therefore, there is limited understanding of how to identify systems or cultures that may perpetuate or encourage spiritual abuse. Likewise, with limited understanding of the motivating factors in the perpetuation of spiritual abuse and how those factors inform the intensity of spiritually abusive experiences, it is impossible to create policies for preventing the phenomenon. This research seeks to discover how incentives for preserving spiritual power by Protestant leaders affect experiences of spiritual abuse in faith communities. The research hypothesizes that as incentives for Protestant authorities to preserve spiritual power decrease, so does intensity of spiritual abuse. The study found data that supported the proposed hypothesis. Also, I proposed a new theory explaining the phenomenon as well as a new definition for spiritual abuse.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This paper proposed research into the realities that exist in Protestant faith communities to discover how incentives for power preservation relate to experiences of spiritual abuse in South Florida, in a primarily Latiné context. The research relied on multiple academic disciplines and included qualitative and quantitative research methods to achieve this end. Triangulation of disciplines, research methods, and instruments are necessary for the research as little is understood about what factors contribute to the phenomenon being experienced. This triangulation was necessary to collect reliable data for future research and study.

This paper will begin by first providing background information on spiritual abuse. It will first argue for the significance of studying the phenomenon, defining spiritual abuse, and defining conceptions of power in Protestant faith communities. The paper will continue providing background information about the scope of research, a disclosure about myself, and finally present a general research question. Second, the paper will transition into the literature review. The literature review will first address the relevant theoretical frameworks necessary for the research. Then, the paper will review any relevant literature discussing spiritual abuse. Following this, the literature review will end with a description of the research context. Third, the paper will describe the research design by explaining the reasoning for the research question, a general description of methods, and finally presenting the reasoning for the hypothesis. Fourth, this paper will describe the research methods including the desired subjects, the methods for selecting subjects, limitations of the study, measurements, and finally instruments. Following this, results will be presented, and finally conclusions will be drawn.



## Background Information

Spiritual abuse is a form of abuse that is not commonly recognized or understood by parishioners, clergy, or the public. An early use of the term spiritual abuse appears in Johnson and VanVonderen's book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, in 1991.<sup>1</sup> With spiritual abuse being a recent development in the literature it is a phenomenon that presents significant gaps in its understanding and analysis. Since spiritual abuse is a form of abuse, understanding the entirety of the phenomenon from multiple academic perspectives is critical to its identification and prevention. Spiritual abuse is also more difficult to combat while researchers, therapists, parishioners, faith communities, and those curious about them remain unaware of the term. Spiritual abuse is uniquely destructive both to individuals and entire faith communities, as it not only has all the qualities & consequences of emotional or psychological abuse but also carries the notion that God, (or gods depending on context), is complicit in the abuse.<sup>2</sup> This results in a form of trauma that blends both theological and psychological realities into an immensely destructive force in individuals and faith communities that damages a victim's ontological view of their personhood.<sup>3</sup> These twin realities not only distinguish spiritual abuse from other forms of abuse but also complicate both treatment and recovery after the abuse occurs. The significance of this study is that its data and conclusions would help scholars,

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, David. VanVonderen, Jeffrey. *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* Winnipeg: Media Production Services Unit, Manitoba Education, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Oakley, L., Kinmond, K. and Humphreys, J. (2018), "Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: definition, policy and practice guidance", *The Journal of Adult Protection*, Vol. 20 No. 3/4, pp. 144-154. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JAP-03-2018-0005>

<sup>3</sup>Maxwell, Paul C. "Betrayal Trauma and Covenant: Theologically Understanding Abuse Trauma and Traumatically Reforming Theological Understanding." *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 19, no. 4 (2016): 241–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2016.1260514>.

therapists, religious and political policymakers, institutions that train clergy, and the laity in faith communities identify, respond, and hopefully design systems that prevent spiritual abuse. The study is significant because it offers a perspective into both the lives of those who've been victimized by spiritual abusers, as well as those perpetuating spiritual abuse to form a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, and most importantly, the study is significant so that those individuals who have lived through spiritual abuse; so that their pain can be conceptualized properly, defined properly, identified properly, and so that their experiences may be met with understanding instead of puzzlement and confusion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to spiritual abuse only being recently identified and still not clearly defined in any form of academic literature few scholastic sources are available for direct theoretical discussion of this unique form of abuse. Visser, and Dreyer attempt to understand the sociological dynamics of spiritual abuse using social constructionist theory.<sup>4</sup> Social constructionist theory was first presented by Berger and Luckmann whose central thesis is that the individual is a producer of meaning in society, and social structures have their beginnings when at least two people are shaping concepts and rules of and for each other.<sup>5</sup> Social constructionist theory has its foundation in symbolic

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<sup>4</sup> Visser, R.A. & Dreyer, Y., 2013, 'Abuse in the church? A social constructionist challenge to pastoral ministry', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1), Art. #1939. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1939>

<sup>5</sup> Berger, P.L. & Luckmann, T., 1967, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, Doubleday, New York.

interactionism.<sup>6</sup> Symbolic interactionism explains behavior in a society framed through how people interact with symbols, therefore, symbolic interactionism contends that structures in society can most clearly be understood through individuals interactions.<sup>7</sup> Visser and Dreye posit that the church functions to institutionalize spiritual symbols. They contend that since the church gives meaning to spiritual symbols, individuals in the church may institutionalize symbols in an abusive manner. While this is certainly an explanation, Visser and Dreye offer no observable qualitative or quantitative evidence to support their theory. They only posit that the theory could explain abuse dynamics in the church from a sociological perspective. The limits of this theory are evident in that it has never been tested. However, Visser and Dreye do connect a clear and concise theoretical framework from which research can be conducted.

Social constructionist theory has been chosen as the governing theory for researching spiritual abuse as it most clearly frames the variables that will be presented in this paper. As the variables are individuals interacting with other individuals over and through an agreed system of meaning social constructionist theory offers a theoretical framework that supports the entire method and design of this study. Most importantly, social constructionist theory has its roots in individuals shaping meaning for each other. While this does not say anything on the topic of consent in these systems of meaning, it does allow a theoretical framework to potentially give the benefit of the doubt that the

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<sup>6</sup> Fairhurst, Gail T., and David Grant. "The Social Construction of Leadership: A Sailing Guide." *Management Communication Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2010): 171–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318909359697>.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, Peter M. "Symbolic Interaction." *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, January 2016, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeoss310.pub2>.

victims of spiritual abuse at least consented to what they were led to believe was a positive or beneficial system. Social constructionist theory also potentially allows for a future midrange theory to be proposed that articulates the relationship between spiritual abuse, the symbolism of spiritual power, and the incentives to preserve spiritual power.

### **Defining Spiritual Abuse**

Differentiating and defining spiritual abuse in contrast to emotional or psychological abuse is critical to its understanding and identification. Emotional and psychological abuse is noted as the cause of, “mental distress, humiliation, blaming... threats of harm and being deprived of social contact,” by the Social Care Institute for Excellence.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for understanding and defining emotional and psychological abuse are well documented in psychological, sociological, and other forms of academic literature. However, should spiritual abuse be considered a form of emotional or psychological abuse? Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys employ both qualitative and quantitative psychological research methods in the form of surveys to attempt to define Spiritual Abuse.<sup>9</sup> Using the responses of survivors of spiritual abuse they conclude that while elements of emotional and psychological abuse are present in spiritual abuse, spiritual abuse is unique in their understanding as it includes the assertion of God as complicit in the control, manipulation, and spiritual consequences levied by the perpetrator who is often appointed by God and therefore, above questioning. Oakley,

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<sup>8</sup> “Safeguarding Adults: Types and Indicators of Abuse.” Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE). Accessed February 1, 2020. <http://www.scie.org.uk/safeguarding/adults/introduction/types-and-indicators-of-abuse>.

<sup>9</sup> Oakley, L., Kinmond, K. and Humphreys, J "Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: definition, policy and practice guidance", *The Journal of Adult Protection*.

Kinmond, and Humphres go on to define spiritual abuse as, “a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context...[under] the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position.”<sup>10</sup> Though the authors state that the definition needs to be refined through further research, the significance of this research merits immediate study. Therefore, a secondary function of this research will test the above definition for spiritual abuse.

The findings of the Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys article raise more questions than they do answers. This is not due to any failure of the authors to prove their theory, or issue with research methods employed, but due in no small part to the vastness of the phenomenon. Therefore, this distinguishing factor of the divine being presented as complicit in spiritual abuse should be a focus of research, as it is the least understood and is what distinguishes it from other forms of abuse. While spiritual abuse could be a form of emotional and psychological abuse and those facets will be included in the research, the research will seek to study observable instances of the divine being presented as complicit in any coercion or controlling behavior. This can be observed in the interpersonal dynamics of the communities, the ecclesial structures, and forms of power that perpetuate and enable the abuse and how they relate to the severity of instances of experienced spiritual abuse.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. For brevity the full definition was edited. The full quote reads: “Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.”

The literature reviewed in this section shows that due to the ontological, spiritual, and symbolic nature of spiritual abuse demands analysis from multiple academic disciplines. Namely, the anthropological and sociological disciplines as what sets spiritual abuse apart are its symbolic, structural, and functionalist nature. Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphres data suggest that over four years in the United Kingdom, little has changed, and little has healed in their research subjects. Therefore, research must be done to implement policies, treatment, practice, and intervention that can serve survivors of spiritual abuse regardless of underlying theory. This data also begs for further understanding of the implications of spiritual abuse in other cultural contexts to observe if the implications change across cultural groups.

### **Defining Power**

Understanding power is critical to the study of the interpersonal dynamics, ecclesial structures, and severity of abuse experienced in faith communities. Dean Pielstick helps begin the discussion of the definition of power when he states that spiritual power is “the energy and the influence derived from living in sync with a higher purpose, often based on a worldview of an ultimate transcendent reality”<sup>11</sup> This differs from traditional definitions of power in some significant ways. Seka Ojdrovic-Phillips argues that spiritual power is not primarily concerned with obtaining material in a purely transactional sense, but is rather concerned with increasing the influence of individuals and that spiritual power increases the agency of the holder by increasing their ability to

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<sup>11</sup> Pielstick, C. Dean. “Teaching Spiritual Synchronicity in a Business Leadership Class.” *Journal of Management Education* 29, no. 1 (2005): 153–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562903260027>.

resist the power of others over them.<sup>12</sup> Sonia Goltz notes that spiritual power is distinct from other forms of power as it is not bound to limitations of physical resources or capital like other forms of power.<sup>13</sup> Goltz argues that spiritual power is limitless and generated by individuals. These three distinctions of spiritual power have some critical implications for defining power in spiritual abuse. First, while traditional conceptions of power focus on material resources provided by money and social status, spiritual power stems from the symbolic use of the divine. Second, while other traditional forms of capital are bound by laws and regulations like taxes, criminal and civil laws, and systems of social accountability, spiritual power by its nature gives the holder the ability to resist the power of others over them allowing them more agency in this transcendent space. Finally, unlike other forms of power that are limited by physical resources, spiritual power has no limit other than the individual's ability to generate it. Considering these factors, the understanding of power must have a qualitative element, as how can one solely rely on quantitative measurements of something that is not limited by resources, resists the power of others, and is not concerned with physical transactions?

Though spiritual power contains an intangible element, this is not to say that spiritual power is never wielded to obtain ordinary monetary, social, and positional resources, or to coerce and control the behaviors of others. The reality of spiritual abuse does not only exist in a transcendent immaterial sense, even if the source of its power

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<sup>12</sup>Ojdrovic-Phillips, Seka. 2016. "Dimensions and Measure of Spiritual Power." Order No. 10255167, Adler School of Professional Psychology. <http://ezproxy.fiu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.fiu.edu/docview/1875591258?accountid=10901>.

<sup>13</sup> Goltz, Sonia M. "Spiritual Power: the Internal, Renewable Social Power Source." *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 8, no. 4 (2011): 341–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2011.630171>.

might. The implications of the abuse of this spiritual power manifest themselves in concrete ways in the lives of the perpetrators and victims. While spiritual power might itself be intangible, the financial, social, and positional incentives for preserving that power are not. Therefore, this research will primarily be concerned with the quantitative study of those incentives, while simultaneously describing the qualitative reality of spiritual power in the lives of abusers and victims.

### **Limitations of Theory & Definition**

All the theory and definition presented in the literature review section is limited by its context, scope, and previous application. Social constructionist theory has not ever formally been applied to spiritual abuse research contexts in the way this research proposing. Testing it in this context will also not guarantee that the theory is the best framework from which to understand or research spiritual abuse. As there are gaps when considering the agreed definition of spiritual abuse within any form of literature, the definition that this research is relying on could shift. The definition of spiritual abuse, taken from a word study done with spiritual abuse victims comes from a study done within the United Kingdom, a society with different linguistic, cultural, and ecclesiastical traditions even within Protestant populations. The definitions of power are also limited by their context, scope, and previous application. None of the definitions or conclusions cited are directly referencing Protestantism or spiritual abuse, nor are the definitions formulated in the context of South Florida.

However, this study seeks to overcome the limitations of the limited literature on spiritual abuse within and outside of its scope. The study will overcome the limitations of social constructionist theory never being applied to spiritual abuse research contexts by



operationalizing variables and instruments that are informed and supported by the theory. Testing it in this context will not guarantee the theory is the best framework from which to understand spiritual abuse, but the quality of the data will hopefully lend it some credibility in the area. The same can be said for the definition of spiritual abuse, as data will be collected directly from victims in South Florida that could verify the definition presented by the researchers in the United Kingdom. The definitions of power could likewise be bolstered by the research done in South Florida, within a primarily Latiné context. Despite this, it is still clear that there is a need for expansion or creation of a midrange theory of spiritual abuse to explain the phenomenon.

### **Expanding on Established Theory: Isaac Theory of Spiritual Abuse**

It is clear considering the literature that there is a need for research and theorization concerning spiritual abuse. The gaps in understanding, identifying, explaining, and defining the phenomenon all call for more attention from the academic community. This need is partly due to its recent acknowledgment in scholastic literature and the lack of clarity on whether it is its own form of abuse. While social constructionist theory has been relied on in other religious contexts, it has not been consistently tested in the context of spiritual abuse. However, the theory is still worth testing as spiritual abuse may not function like another religious phenomenon. Regardless, social constructionist does at least give the framework for a potential explanation of spiritual abuse.

Therefore, I posit the following theory as a potential explanation of spiritual abuse: The Isaac theory of spiritual abuse. Isaac theory is a midrange theory that relies on social constructionist theory which posits that an individual is the producer of meaning and that structures have their genesis in as little as two people sharing concepts and rules.

Spiritual power within social constructionist theory would be the product of individuals producing religious meaning and rules that others agree to by aligning themselves with religious symbols. When two or more gather around this produced social construction, a social system built around agreed upon symbols is created. Within this system, imbalances occur as some individuals may be able to align themselves with agreed upon religious symbols better than others, or at the very least present themselves as more aligned with than those symbols than others. Sometimes this occurs because certain individuals are allowed to define those religious symbols, (preachers, pastors, priests, etc.). This results in some individuals having more spiritual power than others. Since spiritual power naturally resists the influence of others and seeks to increase an individual's influence over others once an imbalance occurs the gap between those with more spiritual power and those with less spiritual power grows exponentially within these socially constructed systems.

Broadly, the Isaac theory theorizes that spiritual abuse occurs when an individual or individuals within these socially constructed systems misuses the spiritual power previously legitimized, or currently legitimized within a social system to coerce or manipulate another in order to control them. The Isaac theory more specifically posits that spiritual abuse occurs when individuals employ emotional, psychological, or other forms of abuse to coerce or control others in a socially constructed system justifying their actions using agreed upon ideas of God or the sacred. This dynamic is damaging as it presents God or the sacred as complicit in various forms of abuse used to coerce or control others. The Isaac theory could frame spiritual abuse as a violation of the agency and trust that the victims had to first exhibit to create or join the established system of

meaning. Spiritual abuse could further be theorized to stem from an imbalance of spiritual power that allows one individual or group of individuals to continuously grow their influence at the expense of those with less spiritual power. Isaac theory presents spiritual abuse its own umbrella category of abuse that presents itself in a variety of ways. Any form of abuse-sexual, emotional, psychological, vocational, or other-can fall under the category of spiritual abuse if God or the sacred is presented as complicit or used to justify abuse by powerholders through attempting to coerce or manipulate others for the purposes of control. The effects of this unique form of abuse can create unique theological or ontological trauma that can leave a lasting abusive construction of the sacred long after individuals have removed themselves from the abusive environment. Spiritual abuse can also inform and create entire faith communities and institutions that are built on abusive manipulations of the sacred. Finally, Isaac theory posits that spiritual abuse is the misuse spiritual power that allows one individual or group to gain or monopolize creating religious meaning, rules, and rituals over another, at the expense of that other, for the purposes of coercion, manipulation, or control.

While this study may support or oppose this theory, much more testing would have to be done to formally propose or discard it. This theory was included to offer some sort of explanation based on the amalgamation of literature due to the lack of academic writing on the subject matter. In addition, the potential theory was primarily included to show the theory did, in fact, offer an internally valid explanation of the spiritual abuse phenomenon. This could be an opportunity for future study within Protestantism in South Florida, abroad, or even across different religious systems.

## **South Florida as a Cultural Part of Latin America and the Caribbean**

Miami is the city with the highest foreign-born population in the world as recognized by the United Nations Development Program with 59% of the population being born outside of the United States; of the foreign-born population, 94.5% were born in Latin America.<sup>14</sup> Miami-Dade County is also the largest county by population in the state of Florida.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it can be easily surmised that immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean has had a massive impact on the cultural dynamics of South Florida as a region. However, South Florida's place as a part of the region of Latin America is harder to define due to the enigmatic nature of both Florida and the region of Latin America. These realities raise the question of whether Latin American and Caribbean Studies scholars should consider South Florida a part of Latin America or not. Determining South Florida's taxonomical place as either a part, or not a part of, Latin America is critical to the Latin American and Caribbean regional studies field, as it deals with the very nature of what Latin America and the Caribbean are and the nature of whether the region can expand beyond historical and political definitions of itself. Latin America has historically been defined based off a couple of strata, this section will first define those strata in the historical literature about Latin America, to make a case that South Florida is a part of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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<sup>14</sup>U. S. Bureau of the Census, "Origin's and Language: Miami, FL 2017 American Community Survey," under "Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations," (accessed November 6, 2019)

<sup>15</sup> "Florida Counties by Population," Florida Demographics by Cubit, accessed March 28, 2022, [https://www.florida-demographics.com/counties\\_by\\_population](https://www.florida-demographics.com/counties_by_population).

In 1932, Dr. Herbert E. Bolton, presented his essay ‘The Epic of Greater America’, for the very first time during his president’s address for the American Historical Association. As Bolton presented his essay he introduced what would later be known as the Bolton Theory of the Americas, which argues that it is not possible to adequately analyze or understand the history of the United States isolated from the history of the rest of the Americas.<sup>16</sup> Applying his comparative theory of analysis was significant for the field of Latin American and Caribbean Studies as it emphasized the necessity of research aimed at developing an understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean to properly understand The United States. Bolton argued that if one cannot understand or analyze Europe by reading books about one country in isolation, (England, France, or Germany in isolation), one cannot understand the Americas by only reading books about one of the Western Hemisphere countries in isolation, (The United States, Brazil, or Mexico in isolation). Bolton’s Theory of the Americas framed conceptual analysis and understanding of Latin America in contrast to the United States and Canada emphasizing their unique qualities, while simultaneously contending that the entire western hemisphere had one ‘common history’. Bolton argues in ‘The Epic of Greater America’, “It is time for a change. The increasing importance of inter-American relations makes imperative a better understanding by each of the history and the culture of all. A synthetic view is important, not alone for its present-day political and commercial implications; it is quite as desirable from the standpoint of correct historiography.”<sup>17</sup> Bolton was

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<sup>16</sup> Bolton, Herbert E. “The Epic of Greater America.” *The American Historical Review* 38, no. 3 (April 1933): 448. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1837492>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

contending that without acknowledging, assessing, and understanding the distinctions of both the region of Latin America, as well as the United States and Canada, while simultaneously acknowledging the greater narrative epic of the Americas one cannot properly write, (or come to correct conclusions), about their history.

Bolton's use of the term 'common history,' was not without issue in Western academic understandings of Latin America. Dr. Lewis Hanke, a well-known historian who's interests focused on colonial Latin American history collected and edited the text *Do the Americas Have a Common History? A Critique of the Bolton Theory*, in 1964. The text, which is a collection of essays was edited and arranged by Hanke. This collection of essays all review Bolton's writings and present new information to come to more nuanced conclusions about the nature of Latin America using historical analysis methods. Hanke divides the book into five parts. Part three begins discussing Bolton's essay 'The Epic for Greater America.' It's there that Hanke's collection contains seven essays discussing Bolton's essay, where four of the writers agree that there is a common history among two distinct regions, but the other three writers disagree that one can say that North America and Latin America share a common history.<sup>18</sup> The three writers that disagree, Whitaker, Mosk, and O'Gorman, all state that while there are common historical events, (colonization mainly), the religious and cultural differences from the European colonizers in the United States and Latin America led to two completely different cultural and economic patterns. All seven writers in section three of the Hanke text all point to Latin America being influenced mainly by Iberian culture and religious

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<sup>18</sup>Hanke, Lewis. *Do the Americas Have a Common History? A Critique of the Bolton Theory*. Ed. with an *Introd. by Lewis Hanke*. New York, NY: Knopf, 1966. P. 101-10

realities while North America was influenced primarily by Protestant religious realities alongside Germanic, French, and English cultural realities. This places the Rio Grande as the modern dividing line between the two regions in the writings of all seven authors. Part five of the text ends with an essay from Griffin who states that the “Americas do have a common history, but it is only a part of their history.”<sup>19</sup> In the Hanke text, we discover another two of the strata that have defined Latin America as its distinct region. First, an Iberian influence religiously and culturally that shape Latin American society socio-culturally. Second, Latin America is located geographically South of the cultural reality of the United States.

Discussion of the nature of Latin America, North America and what their histories may or may not have in common has continued into this century, and along with it has come a new understanding of what strata should be used to determine the nature of Latin America. Dr. Marshall Eakin authored an article titled, ‘Does Latin America Have a Common History?’ in 2014, where he attempted to define the nature of the region in response to Hanke’s collection of essays. Eakin contends that one cannot define Latin America based on linear political strata alone, but rather based on, “a common process of conquest, colonization, resistance, and accommodation across the region provides the unity that allows us to speak of something so mislabeled as “Latin” America.”<sup>20</sup> Eakin’s use of both sociological and historical analytical tools allows him to come to the nuanced conclusion he arrives at, by allowing

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P. 200

<sup>20</sup> Eakin, Marshall C. “Does Latin America Have a Common History?” *Vanderbilt e-Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies* 1 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.15695/vejlhs.v1i0.3179>.

him to look at factors other than just political or geographic factors. The process that Eakin describes is primarily cultural, as it involves culture moving through the lanes of society and social institutions to create a new Latin American reality. The process that Eakin describes is ongoing, and being a part of the process determines whether a group is in or out of Latin America. Eakin describes this process as Iberian culture moving through political traditions forming nation-states forming new realities, and the movement of culture through romance languages in interpersonal and business communication to create a new Latin American communication norm. Eakin further explains the process as the movement of religious culture through the preeminence of Christianity mainly in the form of Catholicism to create Latin American religious identity, as well as the movement of economic culture through the integration of states and communities into the capitalist system of the North Atlantic to usher in a Latin American economic reality. What Eakin adds to the historical discussion of what strata should be used to define who's in or out of Latin America is unique in the literature this paper has presented. Eakin does not simply present another static stratum by which one can define Latin America such as a geographical boundary in his article. Eakin instead offers dynamic strata by which one can define Latin America in pointing to an ongoing, common process where culture intersection is creating new realities through social institutions.

Therefore, considering relevant literature, Latin America has historically been defined based on the following strata: First, according to Bolton, Latin America and North America are two distinct regions, and within that distinction, the strata by which one can define Latin America is in its contrast to North America. Second, considering



Hanke, an Iberian influence religiously and culturally shapes any Latin American society socio-culturally. Third, also considering Hanke, Latin America is located geographically South of the cultural reality of the United States. Fourth, considering Eakin, to be a part of Latin America is to have a place in the ongoing common process of culture moving through the rails of social institutions to create Latin American identities and realities. Considering the identification of those four strata, South Florida's place in or out of Latin America can be more easily assessed.

In 2012, historian Colin Woodard published, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. In the text, Woodard begins by reminding readers that there is a difference between the terms nation and state. Woodard defines a state as a sovereign political entity and power, while a nation is defined by Woodard as a group of people who, "share a common culture, ethnic origin, language, historical experience, and symbols."<sup>21</sup> Woodard then goes on to state that some nations can form into states creating nation-states, but many nations are unable to form formal state power, such as the Kurdish; simultaneously, Woodard states that many states are not dominated by a single nation like Malaysia.<sup>22</sup> Using the comparative method culturally and politically, Woodard explains that the North American cultural region is made up of eleven unique nations ruled by three states, Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Woodard argues that ten of the eleven share very similar western and northern European cultural, religious, and political settlement histories, with cultural and migration histories

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<sup>21</sup>Woodard, Colin. *American Nations: a History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2012, p. 3

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

stemming from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the Netherlands.<sup>23</sup> Woodard explains that all ten of the settlements share similar religious principles & histories as Protestants, similar cultures politically, and economically. Woodard also explains that those ten nations all shared similar processes in creating their own identities in the new world.<sup>24</sup> The one exception to these shared nation formation stories of the eleven regions is what Woodard calls ‘El Norte,’ which occupies the region one hundred miles north and south of the Rio Grande, or the border between the United States and Mexico. El Norte’s history is distinct in that its historic and cultural origins are Iberian, (Spanish), and its primary religious influence is Catholicism. El Norte draws its initial economic system from Spanish colonialism which was distinct from other European forms of colonialism.<sup>25</sup> El Norte is included in the eleven American nations, despite its Iberian heritage by Woodard because he writes, ‘Few Americans realize that among Mexicans, the people of Mexico’s northern border are seen as overly Americanized... the northern Mexican states have more in common with the United States-historically, economically, and gastronomically-than they do with the rest of Mexico.’<sup>26</sup> Woodard also explains that the region had never been ‘properly colonized,’ by the Spanish and that the influence of Texas as a state, and later as part of the United States, has always served as more of a colonizing force than the Spanish who had arrived first.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 4-8, 11-19

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 10, 22-30, 280-287

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 214-220, 259-262

Woodard extensively describes the history and formation of the eleven nations of the Americas in his text from pre-colonial times, to the modern era. However, he makes a special note that there is one nation that is not in the scope of his text because it is not a part of the North American region in terms of nations. That nation is South Florida, and on the map, Woodard provides is noted, ‘part of the Spanish Caribbean.’<sup>28</sup> This stands in stark contrast to El Norte, which he chose to include in his list of North American nations, despite half of it being located in Mexico. Woodard explains his reasoning for not including the South Florida nation throughout the text and his reasoning reveals that in his historic understanding, South Florida should be considered part of Latin America. Woodard explains that the core of South Florida’s cultural, economic, religious, and political history resides in Latin America, specifically mentioning, “Cuban dominated South Florida is the financial and transportation hub of the Spanish speaking Caribbean.”<sup>29</sup>

In Woodard’s choice to exclude South Florida, one can conclude that South Florida meets all four of the strata previously identified. First, Woodard acknowledges that South Florida is not part of the North American region, but part of the Latin American and Caribbean region in his purposeful omission. Second, Woodard points to Iberian influence linguistically and culturally shaping South Florida socio-culturally. Third, by excluding the region and naming it what he does on the map Woodard places South Florida in the ongoing common process of Latin American identity and reality

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p, 10

Eakin presents. Fourth, Woodard asserts that the core of South Florida, cultural reality is located south of the North American region.

Considering the above historic and academic literature and Woodard's analysis, South Florida can be considered a part of Latin America and the Caribbean. This is significant as this study is most likely one of the first to assess and understand Spiritual Power and Abuse within the region, particularly considering its demographics. This positions this study as one of if not the first study to include Latiné survivors of spiritual abuse voices. This has significant implications for research, as up until this point, the definitions of spiritual abuse have only focused on Protestants in Anglo spaces, like the United Kingdom, and the rest of the United States. Perhaps this is why the definition offered by Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys of spiritual abuse limits itself to only psychological or emotional abuse, and no other forms of abuse. Perhaps including Latiné voices would demand broadening the definition to include other experiences and forms of abuse that present God as complicit in, or use God to justify abuse.

### **Spiritual Abuse in South Florida Protestantism**

This section will provide some examples of spiritual abuse within Protestantism in South Florida. The first example is ex-pastor Bob Coy, who resigned after allegations over him molesting multiple minors and cheating on his spouse were made public. When questioned about the allegations Coy was quick to attempt to control the behavior of the interviewer stating, "If you're foolish enough to go through with this story... it would hurt

a lot of people."<sup>30</sup> The culture of abusing spiritual power within Calvary churches-Coy's denomination-was put on clear display when the piece stated:

[Calvary founder Chuck Smith stated]  
"Moses was the leader appointed by God we are not led by a board of elders."

"Calvary used a management style... called the 'Moses method'... the pastors Smith installed in his hundreds of megachurches... had nearly unlimited power over budgets, personnel, and message. And even if complaints arose, Smith's answer was often to give wayward preachers second and third chances."<sup>31</sup>

In this example we see an agreed-upon system of symbols creating unequal spiritual power dynamics. We also see the manipulative nature of one high profile pastor who was acting with perceived divine authority. Furthermore, we see a system that was put in place based on spiritual power that drew influence onto one individual, repelled the power claims of other individuals meant to keep that individual in check, (the board of elders), and finally, that was only limited when Coy's ability to produce spiritual power was impeded by public disclosure. We see ideas rooted and distorted from sacred texts being used to give unqualified preachers chances they did not deserve.

Another example of spiritual abuse from a high-profile Protestant leader comes from ex-Presbyterian minister Tullian Tchividjian. Who admitted to having an affair and was fired from his mega-church, only to be rehired immediately at another large church in the state, to get one year later fired again for another affair he failed to disclose.<sup>32</sup>

While having an affair alone does not meet the definition of abusing spiritual power

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<sup>30</sup> Elfrink, Tim. "Founder of Florida's Biggest Megachurch Accused of Molesting a 4-Year-Old." Miami New Times. New Times, November 29, 2017. <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/bob-coy-founder-of-calvary-chapel-fort-lauderdale-accused-of-molesting-child-9827948>.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Shimron, Yonat. "Tullian Tchividjian Is Back. So Is Scrutiny About His Past Infidelity." CT. Christianity Today, September 11, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/september/tullian-tchividjian-infidelity-pastoral-abuse-metoo-church.html>.

constituting spiritual abuse, the context of Tchividjian’s affair certainly does. As the author of the publication states:

“The more complicated problem is that he had at least one sexual relationship with a congregant a transgression that is increasingly understood... as an asymmetrical power dynamic. Because the pastor has significant moral authority over congregants... it is difficult to establish whether genuine consent has been given.”<sup>33</sup>

[The publication later reveals that one of the women Tchividjian had an affair with stated he] “groomed her and abused his position of power over her.”<sup>34</sup>

The publication was written in 2019, even though Tchividjian left the spotlight in 2016 because Tchividjian was starting a new church and that had garnered national attention. The publication details Tchividjian’s justifications despite his public scandal:

Tchividjian: “I don’t care what role a person has, a consensual relationship between two adults is not abuse... I was not abusing my authoritative role to try and find women.”

“He said he saw his goal as helping churches transform “from a castle of purity where only the morally fit feel comfortable to a basement of grace where broken sinners are embraced and forgiven.”<sup>35</sup>

In this example, we see the unequal spiritual power dynamic that led to the abuse in the form of grooming of one congregant. Tchividjian leveraged his asymmetrical spiritual power to coerce and control behavior in one of his congregant's lives. In this case, it was sexual and romantic behavior, which brings into question the ability of congregants to give consent. According to the woman, he abused his position of spiritual power and groomed her into performing sexual acts and even into a relationship.<sup>36</sup> Again, we see even the justification for Tchividjian’s new church plant is rooted in symbolic

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

language, and that he is leveraging his waning spiritual power to preserve his new position, in a new system of symbols he created.

While the two prior examples provided were both sexual in nature, it is important to remember that a large proportion spiritual abuse cases are not sexual. While not all spiritual abuse cases involving sexual abuse are reported, some protections for minors and vulnerable populations exist in the State of Florida, and therefore can be reported, prosecuted, and disclosed at least in the case of minors.<sup>37</sup> None of these protections exist for spiritual abuse in the form of vocational abuse and labor exploitation. Ex-pastor Anthony Spallone penned this confession years after he was suddenly fired from his office after confiding in another higher-ranking pastor that he was going to resign in a few months. While Spallone was not the top-ranking pastor, he did lead his own satellite campus one tier under the upper echelon of leadership. Spallone's story details both spiritual vocational & labor abuse as well as emotional abuse. His story also displays that pastors can be both spiritual abusers and spiritually abused. Spallone writes:

“Pastoral abuse is horrific... It is manipulative and controlling... It is abusive. The reason it isn't just abuse, but spiritual abuse, is because God's name is being tied to it through the under-shepherd(s) doing it in the name of Christ for the sake of reaching people.... It is something that I eventually committed myself... So, I want to state publicly that I became the very thing I hated. [names redacted], I want to apologize to you for treating you as if you existed to serve me and 'my ministry.' You didn't deserve that, and I am sorry for the example that I set. Please forgive me. [names redacted], please forgive me for not caring for you two and getting mad when you left 'my ministry' and this church. [name redacted], please forgive me for firing you for placing unrealistic expectations on you. I was trained to use spiritual language to try and control you when I wanted you to obey me.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “FL Statutes & Constitution: Mandatory Reporting.” Statutes & Constitution: View Statutes: Online Sunshine, April 10, 2020.  
[http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&URL=0000-0099/0039/Sections/0039.201.html](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0000-0099/0039/Sections/0039.201.html).

<sup>38</sup>S., Tony “#churchtoo – Making Sense of Rick Blackwood's Retirement &#38; a Megachurch I Once Loved”, September 20, 2019.

Spallone's story and stories like those he abused may be less documented by media, but also qualify under the definitions offered earlier in this paper. Spallone details how he was trained by his leaders from the time he was a teenager to use spiritual language to control the behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of others. This is a direct admission of abusing symbolic spiritual power to coerce and control others in vocational, emotional, and social spaces. Spallone explains that he became the evil that was done to him and laments that reality. Spallone describes his fear of speaking out considering the treatment others received.

The reality of spiritual abuse in South Florida can therefore be concluded to be publicly acknowledged at least in its legal presentations, in the sense that spiritual abuse that has illegal or taboo sexual implications has been well documented by media outlets amongst prominent figures. Yet, the level of awareness of the occurrence or experience of spiritual abuse that does not have illegal or taboo sexual implications remains elusive within, and outside of Protestant populations.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

### **Scope of Research**

The scope of the research is amongst Protestants in the South Florida area, (Miami-Dade, Broward, and West Palm Beach). The reasoning for the strict limitations of this scope of research is twofold. First, it somewhat standardizes conceptions of God, salvation, sacred power, and ecclesiology. While not all Protestants uniformly agree on those distinctives, all Protestants included in this study will be monotheistic, Trinitarian, believe in salvation by grace through faith alone, and have a shared church history in the



reformation. This allows for control of differing conceptions of meaning and spirituality, which could be extraneous variables. The diversity within Protestant communities and denominations still allows for the desired diversity considering the variables.

Second, this scope is directly tied to the issue of access. Accessing survivors of spiritual abuse is not something the public, scholars, or researchers can easily achieve. This is due to the closed nature of leadership positions in most religious communities Protestantism included. The same issue with access presents itself with spiritual abuse survivors. Many spiritual abuse survivors are unaware that they have lived through spiritual abuse. Many that are aware are unsurprisingly unwilling to share their experience due to issues with exposure, understanding, or out of fear of future retaliation. The scope is limited to Protestantism in South Florida because I hold unique access to both populations and can, therefore, access, subjects and communities that otherwise would be difficult to access.

Third, this scope presents a unique periscope into the experiences of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation migrants, particularly those from Latiné backgrounds, and those from other minority groups as they experience spiritual abuse. This provides a unique insight into Protestantism in a Latiné context, and how spiritual power, at least when it is abused, is used in this context. This is important to the discussion of abuse, spiritual power, and contemporary understandings of Latin America.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In light of this unique access and in good faith the I found it appropriate to disclose that I have been both a Protestant leader and a victim of spiritual abuse that has

been publicized.<sup>39</sup> While readers may consider this a risk, the unique access to Protestant leadership circles, as well as the empathy I can display while communicating with victims allows this research to be conducted given the personnel, time, and financial limitations.

### **Research Question**

Considering relevant theory and study the following research question was proposed:

How do incentives for preserving spiritual power by Protestant leaders affect experiences of spiritual abuse in survivors?

### **Description of Methods**

To respond to the research question, the following methods were pursued.

- A quantitative electronic survey amongst individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse. To understand the intensity of spiritual abuse and their perceptions of how incentives to preserve power affected their abusers behaviors.
- A qualitative in-depth interview amongst individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse. To understand their perception of the unique nature of spiritual power, their perceptions of how incentives to preserve power contribute to those experiences, as well as gather non-numeric data on the consequences of spiritual abuse.

### **Hypothesis**

In light of the research question and description of methods, the following hypothesis will be tested.

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<sup>39</sup>Disclosure of the spiritual abuse experience:  
<https://oneletter848684176.wordpress.com/2019/09/06/example-post/>

As survivors perceive a decline in the incentives for religious authorities to maintain their spiritual power, they believe that the intensity of their spiritually abusive experiences would decrease.

## **Subjects**

### Individuals who've experienced Spiritual Abuse in South Florida

To better understand spiritual abuse, the scope of events studied must be clearly defined and limited to a manageable size. Therefore, this study will limit itself only to the population of protestants who have experienced Spiritual Abuse in South Florida. While spiritual abuse certainly happens in other faith settings, this allows a control for the impact of different religious systems and isolate the variables of incentives to preserve power and experiences of spiritual abuse. Therefore, the sampling frame will be as follows: any individual who identifies as a Protestant, and who states that they experienced spiritual abuse while living in South Florida. This sampling frame will allow the sample for the research to cover anyone who is a part of the accessible population of those who have experienced spiritual abuse in South Florida in Protestant settings. Respecting the agency of the individuals and the sensitive nature of what they've experienced is critical in research design. Furthermore, not exposing or coercing any individual to participate is equally critical in the ethics of research design.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Many issues must be addressed with selecting a valid sample population of individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse. Namely, those who have experienced spiritual abuse often are not aware that they have been abused or are often unwilling to discuss the phenomenon for various reasons. Therefore, the precise population of

spiritual abuse victims is nearly impossible to precisely measure, and the accessible population is extremely difficult to interact with. Considering these realities, how can these generalizations apply to the larger population? Furthermore, how can this study ensure external validity given the shrouded nature of the population?

The target sample size for the proposed research was 100 adult individuals who meet the sampling frame requirements. Though the target was 100 individuals, if more than 100 individuals were willing to participate the study will attempt to survey all willing participants. In terms of the in-depth interviews the goal was 15 individuals. The minimum target sample size allows the qualitative research to be both diverse, as well as achievable for the study over time research would be conducted. The target sample size also allows the results of the quantitative portion of the research to produce more statistically significant results. Data was collected between November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Since the actual number of Protestants who have experienced spiritual abuse in South Florida is impossible to measure, enough participants must participate so that the research can produce results comparing participants to one another. This would allow the study to measure spiritual abuse on a scale and compare it to perception of levels of incentives to preserve power amongst Protestant leaders. This form & number of non-probability purposive sampling ensures that the research can generalize about the population as accurately, and validly as possible, and would allow for easy retesting for further research efforts. Respecting the agency of the individuals and the sensitive nature of what they've experienced is critical in research design. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Florida International University on November 12<sup>th</sup>,

2022.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, not exposing or coercing any individual to participate is equally critical in the ethics of research design. Therefore, research participants were collected by posting on social media, and announcing that the research was taking place via word of mouth. Individuals who wanted to participate in the quantitative survey would then make contact via email indicating they'd like to participate. The individuals would then receive an informed consent form explaining further the research being conducted. Upon completing this informed consent form and sending a signed copy back, a link would be provided for individuals to complete the survey on their own time. Within that survey, the final question asked if participants would like to participate in an in-depth qualitative interview to share their experiences.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the research include the lack of funding for the research. On one end, this complicates things less with spiritual abuse survivors as I can state that my motivations for inquiring about their experiences are not tied to finances. Should they articulate that their abusers were incentivized to abuse them using spiritual power to preserve their incomes, this limitation would serve as a strength. However, the lack of funding does limit the time and number of surveys possible to distribute, as well as the potential time spent on interviews. This is in no small part due to limitations of time.

While the sampling hardly will lead to truly statistically representative samples of spiritual abuse within Protestantism at a regional or national, the proposed research aimed to discover if incentives to preserve power for protestant authorities will lead to

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<sup>40</sup> FIU IRB Approval Designation: IRB-21-0429. FIU IRB Reference Number: 110275

experiences of spiritual abuse. Even with that research aim, sampling still is limited by its internal logistics. Since sampling relies on spiritual abuse survivors referring the study to other spiritual abuse survivors many of the connections could lead to dead ends and therein waste time. The spiritual abuse survivor could recommend an individual who does not believe they've been spiritually abused, or who is unwilling to complete the survey. At any point before publishing, any of the participants in the survey can ask to have their data pulled from the set, changing the data even in the slightest way.

Furthermore, the above means that establishing a true correlation between incentives to preserve power and experiences of abuse would be very difficult to achieve. In order to establish this correlation, I would have to, at a minimum, survey two groups of spiritual abuse subjects: one belonging to churches with high and clear incentives to preserve spiritual power, and another with little or no incentives to preserve spiritual power. Then, to establish the relationship I would have to find that in the first group individuals report more abuse than in the second. Considering all the limitations of this survey and study, this was impossible to accomplish, instead, I asked survivors their opinion about my hypothesis.

A further limitation is the reality that a majority of the sample surveyed and interviewed comes from a Latiné background. On one end, this provides readers with insights into how spiritual power and spiritual abuse manifest themselves within Latiné social institutions, and how they are experienced and remembered by Latiné survivors. Also, some may say that the sample is not representative of Protestant survivors of spiritual abuse, due to the Latiné majority in the sample. The aim of this research is not to generalize about Protestantism, but rather to demonstrate that there may be some

relationship between incentives to preserve power and experiences of spiritual abuse. That stated, a Hispanic or Latiné identity affects many of the symbols used and experienced by the sample. One example of this is the language in which some of the accounts of abuse were experienced. Spanish is of course a different language than English. Another example could be that being a first- or second-generation immigrant is of course different than having multiple generations of family in the United States, and could affect many factors, which therefore could affect survivor perception. The same generational reality could have occurred within the faith tradition itself, perhaps there is a privilege that is experienced by non-Hispanics who have had multiple generations of parents and elders within Protestant denominations. While these are all fair points, and of course a minority identity has major effects on individuals and communities, I do not believe that it affects the generalization of results concerning Protestantism in a broad sense, even if that was an aim of the study, as the results pertain to spiritual power, abuse, how and why those behaviors occur and ultimately the affect they have on individuals and communities. I do not believe that the high levels of Latiné or Hispanic identifying individuals in the sample inhibit in any way the ability of the research to be generalized to Protestantism, or incentives to preserve power at large any more than other identities would. This is especially the case if having a Latiné or Hispanic identity is claimed by anyone to be an intersectional, or marginalized identity within the United States. If anything, that would only serve to limit the ability of those Hispanic or Latiné individuals to gain power within their faith context, making them more vulnerable to abuse. That premise, if claimed by critics of this research serves not as a limitation but as a strength of this sample's ability to generalize about the hypothesis.

Another potential limitation is the positionality of myself, as I conduct interviews. A portion of population of protestant leaders knows of my experience with spiritual abuse. This could limit their responsiveness and honesty when discussing incentives for preserving power. The population of spiritual abuse survivors may also know that I am a Protestant leader in Miami. This could limit their willingness to interact truthfully with me and the survey. Conversely, these same factors could increase the willingness of either population to engage honestly with the study.

### **Measurements**

1. Hypothesis: As survivors perceive a decline in the incentives for religious authorities to maintain their spiritual power, they believe that the intensity of their spiritually abusive experiences would decrease.

2. Variables:

2.1. Independent Variable: Incentives for abusers to preserve spiritual power.

Incentives can be understood as material resources that encourages Protestant leaders to preserve spiritual power. This includes financial benefits, religious benefits, and social realities set up inside and outside of their churches. This data will be collected both from the interviews and the survey to compare perceptions.

2.2. Dependent Variable: DV: Perception of the intensity of spiritual abuse experienced by survivors.

Survivors can be understood as anyone involved in protestant communities who indicates they've experienced spiritual abuse. Intensity can be understood qualitatively and quantitatively by asking survivors if their experiences would've been more or less severe or intense.



3. Indicators:

3.1. Independent Variable: The qualitative and quantitative measurement or observation of the existence of the following incentives that authorities may be preserving will serve as indicators of incentives for preserving spiritual power:

a. Salary/Benefits packages received by church authorities.

b. Social & institutional status of authorities or bystanders within their particularized church

c. Social & institutional status of authorities or bystanders churches within the South Florida church community.

d. Social & institutional status of authorities or bystanders within the national church community.

e. Religious incentives (rewards in heaven, a interpreted command from scripture etc.) for preservation of authorities power

f. Religious incentives (rewards in heaven, a interpreted command from scripture etc. (for the silence of bystanders

g. Religious incentives (rewards in heaven, a interpreted command from scripture etc.) for the mistreatment of the abused

The quantitative observation of the use of symbols to exercise spiritual power will serve as indicators for defining spiritual power.

a. The use of sacred texts to build, and preserve influence.

b. The use of sacred texts to reduce the power others have over the leader.

c. The use of a 'divine' position to build and preserve influence.

d. The use of a 'divine' position to reduce the power others have over

the leader.

e. The observable influence an individual leader has.

f. The observable ability of a leader to limit the power of others over him or herself.

g. The ability of a leader to create more spiritual power.

3.2. Dependent Variable: The quantitative self-observed intensity of occurrences of spiritual abuse an individual has experienced as well as the qualitative indication of the intensity of each of those experiences determines the operationalized severity of spiritual abuse.

Indicators will be the following.

- a. Mental Distress through the use of sacred texts or/and justified by spiritual power.
- b. Humiliation through the use of sacred texts or/and justified by spiritual power.
- c. Threats of harm (social, physical, spiritual) through the use of sacred texts or justified by spiritual power.
- d. Deprivation of social contact through the use of sacred texts or justified by spiritual power.
- e. Censorship (silencing) through the use of sacred texts or justified by spiritual power.
- f. Coercing and controlling behavior through the use of sacred texts or justified by spiritual power.

## **IV. RESULTS**

### **Participants**

A sample was collected of 106 individuals who participated in and completed the quantitative survey. These individuals indicated that they experienced spiritual abuse in a Protestant setting in South Florida. Of those individuals, 77 elected to potentially participate in an in depth zoom interview. Of the 77 who indicated that they would like to participate in the interview portion, 20 interviews were conducted. Individuals were selected first based on IRB guidelines, and second based on availability. The strategy for sampling was aimed at achieving at least 100 participating individuals, with the hope of having at least 15 of the participants in the survey elect to participate in the interviews. The strategy for recruitment relied on social media posts, and word of mouth. These posts were shared by and in a few online survivor communities with none of my prompting or influence. This strategy allowed survivors of abuse to elect to reach out to me via email and indicate that they would like to participate in the survey, and potentially in-depth

interviews. This ensured that survivor’s agency was respected, along with reducing potential risks to them in accordance with IRB guidelines. The total sample consisted of individuals between 18-79 years of age, who mostly identified as minorities. The demographics of the sample were as follows.

*Figure 1. Demographic Data: Age and Race/Ethnicity*



Figure 1 shows 76.41% of the individuals that participated were under the age of 39, with 58.49% of the total individuals participating being 30 years old or younger. Within the sample, 81.13% of the participants identified as non-white. With 64.15% of the participants identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 6.60% identifying as two or more races, 3.77% identifying as Asian or Asian American, and 6.60% identifying as Black or African American. The sample produced a population of individuals who were mostly non-white but had experienced spiritual abuse in a Protestant setting. This is at least in part due to the geographic scope of the survey being limited to individuals who experienced spiritual abuse in South Florida, due to the demographics of South Florida.

Figure 2. Demographic Data: Migrant Status and Household Income

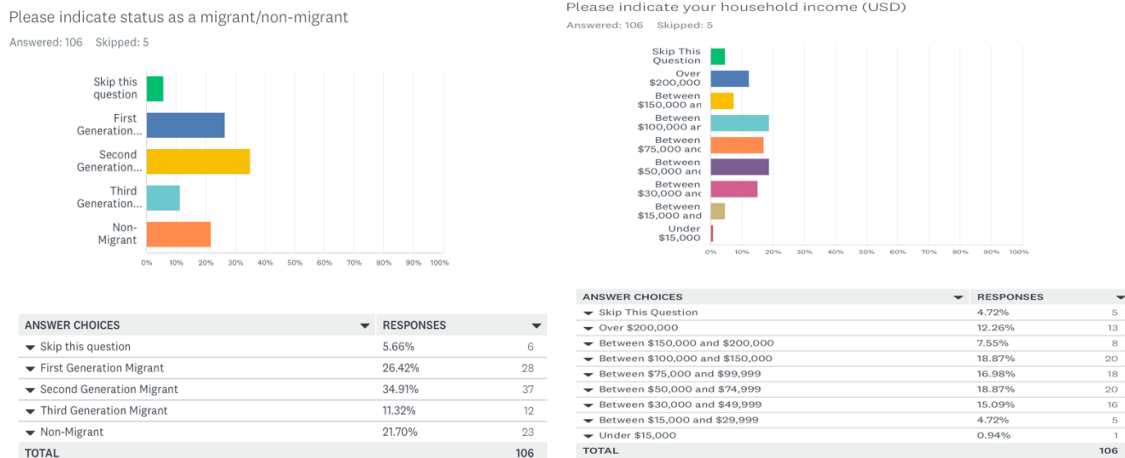


Figure 2 shows, 61.33% of the sample were migrants or the children of migrants, while only 21.7% of the sample that participated identified as non-migrants. While I do not believe that the non-white nature of the sample affects the ability of this research to be generalized in a broad sense, I do believe that it does affect how abuse is experienced, and access to support in recovery. As almost two thirds of the sample are migrants or the children of migrants, this almost certainly affects survivors’ ability to access psychological services which can be cost prohibitive. Furthermore, I do speculate that as these religious institutions, communities, and abusers, existing or operating in a space that could be primarily or at least in part using the Spanish, Portuguese, or Hatian Creole language, accountability from authorities such as denominations or State and Federal oversight groups who may not be able to understand or operate well in languages other than English may be hard to access. If anything, it is due to these factors that this research is even more profound as it brings visibility to a subset of spiritual abuse survivors who may be overlooked.

*Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Qualitative Participants*

Number	Participant Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Racial Identity	Sexual Orientation	Educational Attainment	Grew Up	Current Location	Gen Status	Role in Faith Community	Denominational Affiliation
1	Vanessa	18-25	W	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Bachelor's Degree	Venezuela	Miami	1 <sup>st</sup>	Volunteer	Pentecostal
2	Cristina	18-25	W	Black	Bisexual	In college	Miami	Miami	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Attending	Non-denominational
3	Joe	18-25	M	White	Heterosexual	High School	Miami	Miami	3 <sup>rd</sup> +	Volunteer	Presbyterian
4	Ashley	31-39	W	Mixed Race (White & Hispanic)	Heterosexual	Master's Degree	W. Palm Beach	W. Palm Beach	2.5	Attending & Employee	Baptist
5	Danielle	51-59	W	White	Heterosexual	Master's Degree	W. Palm Beach	Broward	3 <sup>rd</sup> +	Pastor/Director (not lead)	Presbyterian & Baptist
6	Kevin	31-39	M	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Doctorate	Puerto Rico	Miami	1 <sup>st</sup>	Volunteer	Pentecostal & Baptist
7	Robert	40-49	M	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Master's Degree	Broward	Miami	1 <sup>st</sup>	Pastor (not lead)	Baptist
8	Dylan	51-59	M	White	Heterosexual	Bachelors	Miami	Miami	1 <sup>st</sup>	Pastor (not lead)	Presbyterian
9	Paul	31-39	M	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Masters' Degree	Miami	Miami	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Attending /Volunteering	Baptist
10	Rebecca	31-39	W	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Doctorate	Cuba	Miami	1 <sup>st</sup>	Attending /Volunteering	Pentecostal

11	Martin	18-25	GF	Hispanic	Gay/Queer	In college	El Salvador	Broward	1 <sup>st</sup>	Attending	Pentecostal & Presbyterian
12	Marcos	70-79	M	White	Heterosexual	Doctorate	Orlando	Miami	3 <sup>rd+</sup>	Pastor (lead)	Pentecostal
13	Rosemary	31-39	F	Hispanic	Bisexual	Master's degree	Miami	Miami	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Attending	Baptist
14	Frank	18-25	M	Multiracial, Hispanic	Queer	In college	Guatemala	Miami	1 <sup>st</sup>	Attending	Presbyterian
15	Beatriz	51-59	W	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Bachelors	Brazil	W. Palm Beach	1 <sup>st</sup>	Attending /Volunteering	Baptist
16	Obel	18-25	M	Hispanic	Heterosexual	In college	Miami	Miami	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Attending	Non-Denominational
17	Samuel	18-25	M	Hispanic	Heterosexual	In college	Lima	Miami	2 <sup>nd</sup>	On Staff-Non-Pastoral	Baptist
18	Kristine	18-25	F	Hispanic	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	FL	FL	1 <sup>st</sup>	Attending	Pentecostal
19	Allan	70-79	M	White	Heterosexual	Doctorate	L.A.	FL	3+	Pastor (lead)	Pentecostal
20	Ruth	31-39	F	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Highschool	FL	FL	1 <sup>st</sup>	Music Director	Baptist

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*Note.* W = Woman, M = Man, GF = Gender Fluid. Educational Attainment: Current, Gen Status = Generational Status: 1<sup>st</sup> = Born outside of the U.S., 2<sup>nd</sup> = Both parents were born outside the U.S, 2.5 = one parent was born outside of the U.S, 3<sup>rd+</sup> = Neither parent born outside the U.S.

## Potential Positive Correlation: Incentives and Intensity of Abuse

I hypothesized that survivors may believe there exists a positive correlative relationship between incentives to preserve power in the clergy and experiences of spiritual abuse in the laity. Where, survivors believe as incentives to preserve power decreased amongst abusers, experiences of spiritual abuse decreased amongst survivors. To establish and test if the perception of a positive correlative relationship existed, a question in the quantitative survey asked the following:

*Figure 3. Incentives to Preserve Power Contributing to Experiences of Spiritual Abuse*

This study is attempting to get a sense of the relationship between incentives to preserve spiritual power, and experiences of spiritual abuse. The researchers hypothesize that as incentives to preserve power increase, so does the intensity of spiritual abuse. In other words, the more abusers have to protect, the more they'll use their power to abuse individuals. Do you believe that incentives to preserve power such as income, status, religious reasons, or other incentives contributed to your experiences of spiritual abuse? (i.e. The abuser abused their spiritual power to protect their income, preserve their reputation, protect the church's reputation, etc.)

Answered: 104 Skipped: 7

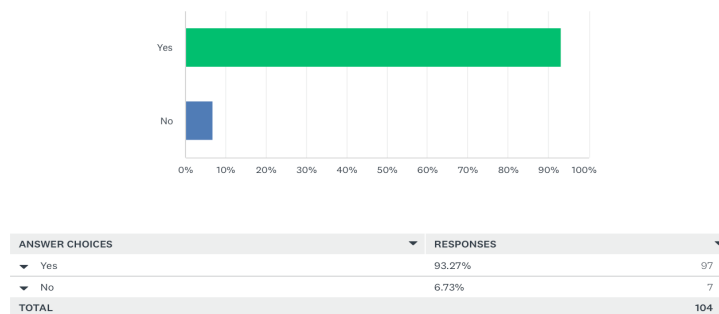


Figure 3 shows that 93.27% of the of the sample of individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse indicated that they believe that there exists a correlation between abuser's incentives to preserve power, and their experiences of spiritual abuse. Specifically, that the more incentives to preserve power an abuser or group of abusers has, the more intense the survivors spiritually abusive experiences will be. While this is the contrapositive of what I hypothesized, the question was asked to collect data for future research, and to

observe if the relationship between incentives to preserve power and intensity of spiritually abusive experiences worked in both increasing and decreasing means.

In the eyes, memories, and experiences of survivors of spiritual abuse this positive correlation exists. Again, this does not establish a positive correlation, though it does reveal that survivors of abuse believe it exists. While this reality might seem obvious to those who have not experienced spiritual abuse, or those unfamiliar with religious organizations, these incentives alongside the abusive behaviors they correlate with are often hidden and difficult to detect for survivors. Whether the abusive behavior is masked behind religious language, or outright hidden behind duplicitous policies or practices abusive behavior is not so simple to identify. The same can be said of incentives to preserve power, if not more so than the abusive behavior. Churches for instance, have no duty to publicly report their finances. Pastors and other ministerial leaders by nature tell the congregation who God is, or at the very least have a strong influence on conceptions of God as a part of the role of a church leader is to interpret and teach the meaning of sacred texts.

Initially, I considered, as is demonstrated in previous survey question, that as incentives to preserve spiritual power increase, experiences of spiritual abuse intensified. While the data presented previously does support this, another explanation that is more clearly supported by the data that will be presented. However, it is hypothesized that as survivors perceive incentives to preserve spiritual power decrease, they posit that their experiences of spiritual abuse would decrease in intensity. This new hypothesis more clearly reflects the data and underlying theory framing this research. Furthermore, this new hypothesis centers survivors' experiences and voices in order to propose real world

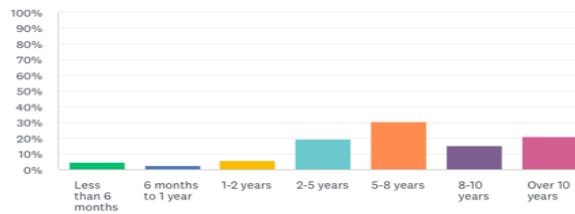


solutions to the phenomenon of spiritual abuse. Considering how difficult it can be for survivors to detect abusive behavior alongside incentives to preserve power, I found it important to collect data relevant to the amount of time survivors spent in faith communities they discovered were abusive, alongside data that reveals how long they remained involved once they determined a faith community to be abusive. While this data does not directly relate to the research question, it does help paint a more holistic picture of the participants realities, and it lends context to some of the quantitative and qualitative data that this study will present later.

*Figure 4. Length of Attendance where Spiritual Abuse was Experienced.*

Please indicate how long you attended the church/organization where spiritual abuse was experienced

Answered: 106 Skipped: 5

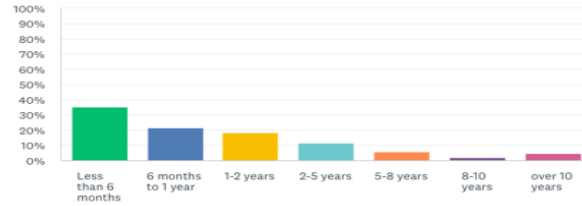


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Less than 6 months	4.81% 5
6 months to 1 year	2.88% 3
1-2 years	5.77% 6
2-5 years	19.23% 20
5-8 years	30.77% 32
8-10 years	15.38% 16
Over 10 years	21.15% 22
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>104</b>

Figure 5. Timing of Spiritual Abuse Beginning

How long after attending the church/organization did the experiences of spiritual abuse begin?(Please count the date beginning from your first day of attendance)

Answered: 106 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Less than 6 months	35.29% 36
6 months to 1 year	21.57% 22
1-2 years	18.63% 19
2-5 years	11.76% 12
5-8 years	5.88% 6
8-10 years	1.96% 2
over 10 years	4.90% 5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>102</b>

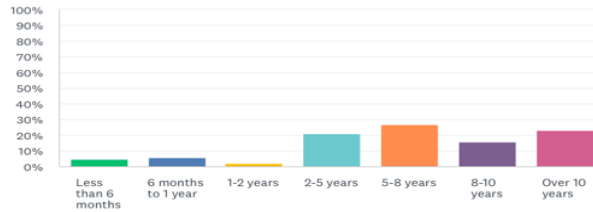
As figure 4 reveals, 13.5% of the sample attended the church or organization where abuse was experienced for less than 2 years, 19.2% of the sample attended for 2-5 years, 30.8% of the sample attended between 5-8 years, and finally, 36.5% of the sample attended more than 8 years. 67.3% of participants are attending these organizations or churches for over 5 years, this reveals that the participants mostly are not attending a church or religious organization for a few months and leaving. They are remaining at these churches for whatever reason, for years at a time. This data when paired with the question in figure 5, ‘How long after attending the church/organization did the experiences of spiritual abuse begin?’ reveals a terrible reality. While 67.3% of participants are attending these churches or organizations for more than 5 years, 56.7% of participants report they began experiencing spiritual abuse within the first year, with another 18.6% of participants reporting that they began experiencing spiritual abuse before year 2. This data points to survivors experiencing spiritual abuse for years before most of them ever decide to remove themselves from the space where spiritual abuse occurred. In fact, the

data shows a trend of survivors remaining in abusive spaces for years after the abusive behavior begins.

*Figure 6. Realization of Spiritual Abuse Occurring*

At what point during your attendance of the church/organization did you realize that you were experiencing spiritual abuse? (Please count the date beginning from your first day of attendance)

Answered: 106 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Less than 6 months	5
6 months to 1 year	6
1-2 years	2
2-5 years	21
5-8 years	27
8-10 years	16
Over 10 years	23
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>

The true reasoning behind survivors remaining in these abusive spaces for years, despite recalling experiencing abuse very early on could be due in part to many things. One contributing reason that this survey identifies is a gap between the average time of survivors experiencing spiritual abuse, and them realizing that the behaviors or realities they were experiencing were indeed spiritually abusive. Figure five shows 75.49% of the sample report experiencing spiritual abuse sometime before 2 years of attendance at the organization, while only 13% of the sample report realizing that those behaviors were abusive in the same time frame. In fact, while figure five shows that 75.49% of the sample report experiencing spiritually abusive behaviors in the first 2 years, figure six shows that 87% of the sample report realizing they were being spiritually abused sometime after 2 years. 21% report realizing that they were experiencing spiritual abuse

between years 2-5 of attending the organization, 27% report realizing the same between years 5-8, 16% report realizing the same between years 8-10, and 23% report realizing they were being spiritually abused sometime after 10 years of attending.

This paints a dark and sad picture of years of enduring a reality survivors might not even realize is abusive. The average member of the research sample is experiencing spiritual abuse within the first year, yet not realizing they are being abused until sometime between five and ten or more years of participating in their communities. Despite this, the average member of the research sample does not exit the space they were abused until well after 5 years of attendance or participation. For a significant portion of the sample, years are spent suffering abuse but not knowing it, which according to the reviewed literature represents God being presented as abusive and used to justify this horrendous reality. The above gives witness to the need for increased awareness and the need for further clarifying the definition of the term spiritual abuse, as well as increased access to resources to aid those surviving abuse. This phenomenon can be observed in a participant in the qualitative interview. Marcos, who was a pastor, was swept up in a narcissistic system that overlooked his families' medical issues, claims they covered up the sexual abuse of a friend, and it took him years to remove himself from this community. When asked, 'what was the most difficult part of all of this,' by the interviewer Marcos responded:

Marcos: The abuse took multiple forms, the hardest part about it looking back was that I did not have the language for it, so I couldn't really think about it or even know what was wrong or talk about it. For sure, the leader was a narcissist, and his whole life was wrapped up, family, friends, money, everything, in the movement. But back then... we didn't have language of abuse, or narcissism.

Another example of a lack of language leading to not realize spiritual abuse was occurring around them comes from Dylan's account. Dylan was not the lead or main

pastor at the church he experienced abuse at, however, once he opposed the lead pastor by disagreeing with him, he was socially attacked, his reputation destroyed, and was handed a non-disclosure agreement that was tied to a severance package.

Dylan: Like I had no concept of spiritual abuse, narcissism, or anything before I experienced it. Like I didn't have any idea what those words were, so as I experienced it, I couldn't even hope to realize what was happening. Then I learned the language and I looked back like, 'oh my God, this happened to me, I did this to others.' It broke me.

These examples demonstrate how important defining language is for survivors of abuse, and how critical it is to have a clear definition that is widely known so that survivors can conceptualize the phenomenon earlier, have language to communicate their experiences to other survivors and their communities, and hopefully get out of these abusive environments faster and with less harm done.

While interviewers believe that there exists a positive correlation between incentives to preserve power in the clergy and experiences of abuse in the laity, some questions remain unanswered. First, how did survivors rank factors they believe incentivized their abusers to preserve their spiritual power through abuse? Second, if those incentives were removed or reduced do survivors feel that their experiences of abuse would have decreased? Third, does the type of incentive that influences those with power have any impact on the type of abuse experienced by survivors? Finally, what constitutes spiritual abuse in the minds of survivors, is it simply emotional or psychological abuse as Oakley Kinmond and Humphres argue or is it more?

### **Ranking Incentives to Preserve Power that Contributed to Abuse**

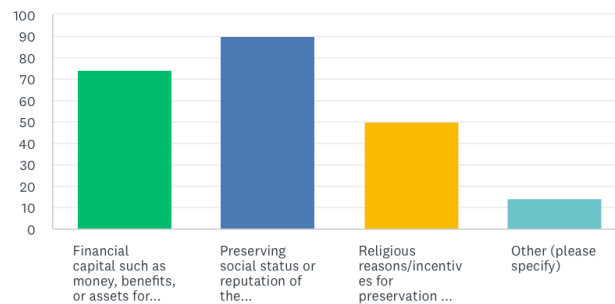
Incentives to preserve power were categorized into 3 sections, with participants also being able to write in their own answers. The categories were financial capital, (such as money, benefits, or assets), preserving social status or reputation, and religious

reasons/incentives (benefits with God, rewards etc.). Survivors were allowed to select multiple options, and the following was the result.

*Figure 7. Identifying Categories for Incentives to Preserve Power That Incentivized Spiritual Abuse*

Please indicate below which factors you believe incentivized your abusers to preserve their spiritual power through abuse.

Answered: 97 Skipped: 14



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Financial capital such as money, benefits, or assets for individuals, the church, or the denomination	76.29% 74
Preserving social status or reputation of the individual/those in leadership	92.78% 90
Religious reasons/incentives for preservation of authorities power (Benefits with God, rewards in heaven etc.)	51.55% 50
Other (please specify)	Responses 14.43% 14
Total Respondents: 97	

Figure 7 shows that preserving social status, or social capital was the highest ranked incentive to preserve power through abuse at 92.8%, with financial capital second at 76.3%, and religious incentives third at 51.5%. There was a category labeled ‘other,’ where respondents were able to write in and specify what they believed incentivized the preservation of power through abuse. 14.4% selected this option as at least one of their selections. Their selection may have been in addition to other selections, or it may have been their only selection. Below their responses are listed:

1. Pride: they never wanted to be wrong even at the cost of their closest relationships.
2. They believed they were doing the right thing.
3. They used God as a justification for shaming me for who I am (Bi-sexual man).
4. Theological arrogance.

5. Thinking that being Gay was something they could force me to change. So, they manipulated me. This could be religious reasons, but it was a main part. Because if people found out the pastor's son was gay and practicing, or stayed gay and did not pray enough then our family would be out of a job and home.
6. To cover up my sexual abuse.
7. the whole family was on staff, so they were protecting their family due to nepotism.
8. Preserve the "look" of their family.
9. Forced resignation because the employee would not comply with the loyalty standard. To hire a compliant replacement.
10. Maintaining control of the members of their church and their respective nuclear families.
11. they seemed to as a family be happy humiliating me for being autistic and gay.
12. Using me as the token minority to show "diversity" to get money from donors.
13. familial issues.
14. in the case of the members/leaders who were not the pastor - they were being abused, as well, and the only way to survive was to perpetuate the abuse (though they didn't recognize it as such).

While each of the responses stands on its own as a survivor's perception of what incentivized those with power to preserve it through abuse, one could see many of their responses neatly fitting into the categories presented in the questionnaire. For example, responses 2, 3, 4, 5, and 11, could fit into religious incentives to preserve power through abuse, responses 1 and 8 could fit into social incentives to preserve power, and responses 9 and 12 could fit into financial incentives to preserve power through abuse. Despite this, we cannot be sure if survivors would categorize their experiences this way. So, I have chosen to simply allow these responses to stand on their own, and not categorize them into the presented categories, as survivors did not.

The data from this quantitative question may be surprising to many readers. When one thinks of spiritual abuse, it is very easy to assume that since it is a form of abuse associated with religion, religious incentives to preserve power must be the primary motivating factor for abuse in the minds of survivors. The data above upends this, by demonstrating that even in exclusively religious contexts social and financial incentives to preserve power are reported at much higher rates than religious incentives to preserve power in terms of what survivors perceive incentivized their abusers to abuse them.

Social incentives were selected at a rate of 1.8 to 1 over religious incentives to preserve power, while financial incentives were selected at a rate of 1.48 to 1 over religious incentives to preserve power. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the different types of incentives to preserve power and how they impact survivor's perceptions of why they experienced abuse. However, it is important to not minimize the impact of religious incentives to preserve power, as figure 7 shows 51.5% of the sample reported religious incentives to preserve power as a reason they believe contributed to their abuser's motivations. Also, these were not exclusive selections as was previously noted. It is the case that respondents could have selected one, some, or all four options presented, so, it is reasonable to assume that religious incentives were selected alongside the other options. That being understood, social and financial incentives to preserve power stand well above the other options.

This trend, towards financial and social incentives to preserve power through abuse is revealed further in the follow up question to the one above. The following question asked respondents to rank each of the categories that they selected from what they believed incentivized their abusers the most, to what they believed incentivized their abusers the least.

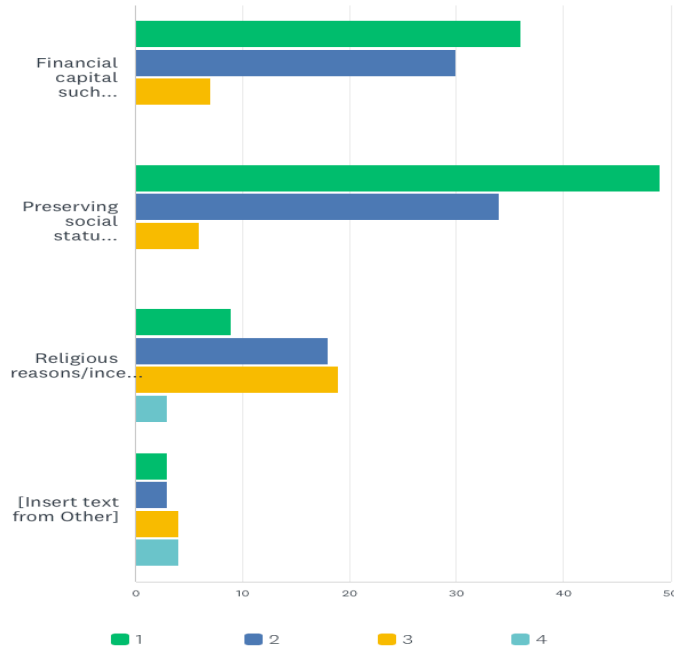


Figure 8. Ranking of Categories for Incentives to Preserve Power Incentivizing Spiritual Abuse

Abuse

Please rank your indicated answers from what you believe incentivized your abuser to preserve their spiritual power, leading to your abuse from the most to the least. With one representing the thing that MOST incentivized your abuser to preserve their power, and the highest number representing the thing that LEAST incentivized your abuser to preserve their power.

Answered: 97 Skipped: 14



	1	2	3	4	TOTAL	SCORE
Financial capital such as money, benefits, or assets for individuals, the church, or the denomination	49.32% 36	41.10% 30	9.59% 7	0.00% 0	73	3.40
Preserving social status or reputation of the individual/those in leadership	55.06% 49	38.20% 34	6.74% 6	0.00% 0	89	3.48
Religious reasons/incentives for preservation of authorities power (Benefits with God/rewards)	18.37% 9	36.73% 18	38.78% 19	6.12% 3	49	2.67
[Insert text from Other]	21.43% 3	21.43% 3	28.57% 4	28.57% 4	14	2.36

Figure 8 shows that preserving social status was not only the highest selected incentive to preserve power, but also, when compared in terms of ranking from what most incentivized abusers to what least incentivized abusers it places first. A close second is financial incentives to preserve power, with religious incentives clearly in third place.

The data presents a clear picture of how survivors understand what they believe incentivized abusers to preserve power through abuse when the data is presented in terms of what they ranked highest to lowest against one another. Religious incentives to preserve power, even amongst those who selected that as a relevant incentive to preserve power for their abusers, had the lowest rate of being selected as the most incentivizing factor to preserve power. Religious incentives tended to be selected as the second or third highest motivating factor in the memories of survivors, revealing a relationship where religious incentives are relevant, but they are not the most relevant in terms of what survivors perceive incentivized their abusers. Financial or social incentives to preserve power followed similar data trends in terms of the above ranking, they both consistently ranked as the most incentivizing, or the second most incentivizing factor of those presented.

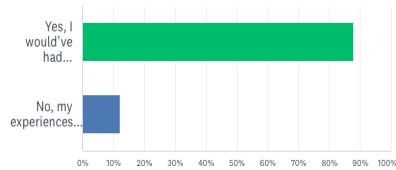
### **Reducing Incentives to Reduce Intensity of Spiritual Abuse**

To test if survivors believed that reducing incentives to preserve power led to less intense or severe experiences of spiritual abuse each respondent was asked, based on which category they selected for what incentivized their abusers whether the reduction of that incentive would've reduced their spiritually abusive experiences, and whether the reduction would've led to the abuse not occurring. Below the categories, questions, and answers will be presented before analysis.

## Figure 9. Reducing Financial Incentives to Preserve Power to Reduce Intensity of Spiritual Abuse

Do you believe you would've had less severe experiences of spiritual abuse if the incentives you indicated above were less present, or were reduced? (I.e. my experience of spiritual abuse would've been less intense if my abuser had fewer financial incentives to protect?)

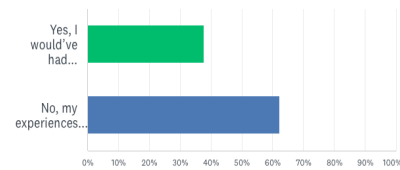
Answered: 74 Skipped: 37



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I would've had less severe experiences	87.84% 65
No, my experiences would've been just as intense	12.16% 9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>74</b>

Do you believe you would've experienced any spiritual abuse at all if the incentives you indicated above were less present, or were reduced? (I.e. my experiences of spiritual abuse would've not happened if my abuser had fewer financial incentives to protect!)

Answered: 74 Skipped: 37

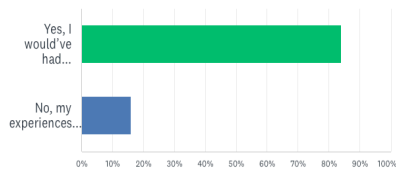


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I would've had no experiences of spiritual abuse	37.84% 28
No, my experiences would've still occurred	62.16% 46
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>74</b>

## Figure 10. Reducing Social Incentives to Preserve Power to Reduce Intensity of Spiritual Abuse

Do you believe you would've had less severe experiences of spiritual abuse if the incentives you indicated above were less present, or were reduced? (I.e. my experience of spiritual abuse would've been less intense if my abuser had less social capital/a reputation to protect?)

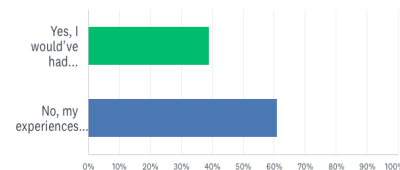
Answered: 87 Skipped: 24



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I would've had less severe experiences	83.91% 73
No, my experiences would've been just as intense	16.09% 14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>87</b>

Do you believe you would've experienced any spiritual abuse at all if the incentives you indicated above were less present, or were reduced? (I.e. my experiences of spiritual abuse would've not happened if my abuser had less social capital/a to protect!)

Answered: 87 Skipped: 24

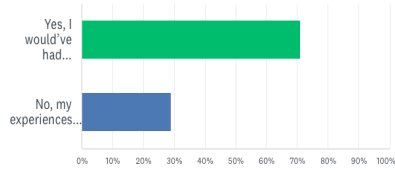


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, I would've had no experiences of spiritual abuse	39.08% 34
No, my experiences would've still occurred	60.92% 53
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>87</b>

*Figure 11. Reducing Religious Incentives to Preserve Power to Reduce Intensity of Spiritual Abuse*

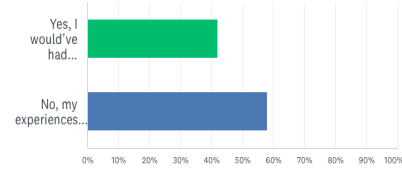
Do you believe you would've had less severe experiences of spiritual abuse if the religious reasons/incentives you indicated above were less present, or were reduced? (I.e. my experience of spiritual abuse would've been less intense if my abuser had fewer religious incentives to protect their power?)

Answered: 62 Skipped: 49



Do you believe you would've experienced any spiritual abuse at all if the religious reasons/incentives you indicated were less present or were reduced? (I.e. my experiences of spiritual abuse would've not happened if my abuser had fewer religious incentives for protecting themselves!)

Answered: 62 Skipped: 49



In each of the three categories present in figures 9, 10, and 11, relating to incentives to preserve power, when asked if their abuser's incentives to preserve power (financial, social, and religious) were less present or reduced would their experiences of spiritual abuse have been less intense most respondents answered yes. The highest rate of respondents answering 'yes, my experiences would've been less severe' for the three incentives was figure 9, which covers financial incentives for abusers to preserve power with 87.8%. The second highest rate was figure 10, covering social incentives with 83.9% indicating that their experiences would've been less severe. Finally, the lowest rate of those who indicated their experiences would've been less severe were those who indicated that religious incentives to preserve power played a role in their abuse in figure 11 at 71%. It should be noted that due to a higher number of individuals indicating that social incentives to preserve power played a factor in their abuse than financial incentives, (87 indicated social, 74 indicated financial), the total number of individuals who indicated that reducing social incentives to preserve power would decrease the intensity of their experiences is about the same size of the sample who indicated that

financial incentives played a role in their abuse at all. This demonstrates that in each category most, (somewhere between 71%-87.8%), of all respondents believe that if the incentives to preserve power were removed or reduced, they would've had less intense, (or severe), experiences of spiritual abuse. From the highest rate of the positive correlative relationship demonstrating a reduction in intensity to the lowest rate being the following, in order: Financial incentives, social incentives, and finally religious incentives. That said, all the incentives had a large response rate from respondents in the affirmative, that a reduction or elimination of the incentive would've led to reduced intensity of their spiritual abusive experiences.

However, when survivors were asked if they would've experienced any spiritual abuse at all if the incentives that they indicated were less present or were reduced the order of the positive correlative relationship between incentives to preserve power and intensity of spiritual abuse was reversed, though the difference in the responses was not much, (less than 5%). 41.9% of respondents who indicated that religious incentives to preserve power played a role in their abuse indicated that if financial incentives were reduced or not present, they would've not experienced abuse at all. While 39.1% of respondents who indicated that social incentives to preserve power played a role in their abuse indicated that if social incentives were reduced or not present, they would've not experienced abuse at all. Finally, 37.8% of respondents who indicated that financial incentives to preserve power played a role in their abuse indicated that if financial incentives were reduced or not present, they would've not experienced abuse at all. Even though the rate is opposite of the previous set of questions, I do not believe that rates of less than 5% merit in depth analysis. What is significant is that in around 40% of all

responses, it was indicated that if these incentives were removed or reduced survivors believe that they would've not experienced any abuse at all.

Both sets of questions are extremely significant data in relation to the research question being asked: "how do incentives for preserving spiritual power by Protestant leaders affect experiences of spiritual abuse in survivors?" An average of 80.9% of respondents across the three categories indicated that if the incentives to preserve power for their abusers were reduced their experiences of spiritual abuse would've been less intense. Also, an average of 39.6% of respondents across the three categories indicated that if the incentives to preserve power for their abusers were reduced their experiences of spiritual abuse would've not occurred at all. It seems that both results support the hypothesis that contends that: as survivors perceive incentives for protestant authorities to preserve spiritual power decrease, survivors posit that their spiritually abusive experiences would decrease in intensity. This data helps bring clarity in part to a very common question which is why do these spiritually abusive behaviors occur, and what can people, institutions, clergy, and laity do to stop them? If survivors are to be believed and taken seriously then reducing incentives such as financial capital, social capital, and religious capital, is one way that spiritually abusive experiences could be reduced, or even prevented entirely.

#### *Qualitative Data: Incentives & Intensity of Abuse Analysis*

In addition to the quantitative questionnaire, qualitative data collection also occurred through interviews that were conducted where survivors were asked similar questions about what incentivized abuse in their faith communities. The questions sought to discover survivor's perceptions about the incentives to preserve power in their

experiences as it related to the intensity of the abuse they experienced. Specifically, the follow up question sought to discover what survivors' thought was being protected through abuse. The following section will cover participants responses to questions that were answered after disclosing what they felt comfortable sharing regarding their abusive experiences.

### *Interview 1: Vanessa*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Vanessa: For sure, I feel like he had so much to protect, which only grew as his social power and money increased.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting?

Vanessa: They were protecting their influence first. Second, they were trying to protect their family giving units, they saw people as dollar signs.

Interviewer: How big of a role do you think those things played in their treatment of you?

Vanessa: The social influence would be the main thing; they saw us as an influence threat. They didn't want anyone around them that could challenge them or stand up to them. All the people near him and that led never pushed back against him. So, when we came out against him, we were entirely blacklisted.

### *Interview 3: Joe*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Joe: Yeah, I think it would've been less abusive if that was the case.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting?

Joe: The youth pastor was a vehicle to their families. This wasn't about religion; they even twisted God to suit their goals. All of it, entirely was about reputation. I feel like the whole thing even the money they coveted so bad was about their reputation.

### *Interview 8: Dylan*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Dylan: Yes, it would've happened less or not at all, my experiences would have been less severe. The system made the man I looked up to into a monster. Because only a monster could lead the monstrous system. And once he was a monster, he did monstrous things. he ate me alive and burned my life to the ground.

Interviewer: What do you think he was protecting?

Dylan: I think he was protecting his power, and his influence. It's why he fired me because he needed yes people. They can't have honest people around them that challenge them. I just don't think that he does the narcissistic abuse consciously, I think he justified it... [pause] because they're building something, worthy of protection. I think that it's primary social influence secondarily financial preservation. The idea is, it's ok to run people over as long as I get my vision to happen.

*Interview 9: Paul*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Paul: Yes, I believe so. I think my abuser was a deeply sick man, and so I believe he would've been abusive. But I do believe if it was a smaller church, if he didn't have the allure of money and position, my experiences would've been less extreme. That being said... I don't think I would've gone if it was a smaller place, with less money, and less social clout.

Interviewer: So why what was he protecting?

Paul: Money. He wanted a job at the church that was full time and more prestigious. So, that he could have more money. Also, Social Clout: advancing in his career, up the hierarchy would get him more social status.

*Interview 12: Marcos*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Marcos: I believe it would've been a lot less intense if he and others weren't incentivized to preserve his reputation and his brand. I don't even think I would've been abused, but that is a life I never got to live.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting then?

Marcos: The leader was protecting his entire life, his social life, and his money. It wasn't about money, it was about his brand, his image, his charisma, his gifting... him! Him! Him! His followers however... they were about the money, so they protected him. They manipulated God to bless all the evil they and he did.

In the five above excerpts from late in the interview process, each of the individuals identify social incentives to preserve power. Reputation, brand, 'social clout,' personal power, and influence are all used to refer to the social incentives that exist to preserve power. A few of the above participants also identify finances as an incentive to preserve power as well. Each of these individuals also state that their abuse would've been less intense. Participants Dylan and Marcos both state that their abuse would have not occurred had there not been these incentives. As in the survey we do see the positive correlative relationship between decreasing incentives to preserve power and survivors believing that their experiences of abuse would have been less intense or not occurred at all. In these examples, social incentives and in a lesser sense, financial incentives display this relationship. This is strong evidence in favor of the hypothesis of this research.



Interestingly, some of the above participants identify a system or allude to one in their responses. This will be further explored in future chapters.

*Interview 2: Cristina*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Cristina: Yes, they would've been less intense, at least I believe so.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting?

Cristina: Their view of God! To them God was this way.

Interviewer: How big of a role do you think their view of God played in their treatment of you?

Cristina: Massive, I think without this they wouldn't've abused me.

*Interview 6: Kevin*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Kevin: Absolutely! If my dad hadn't been told so much that God wanted him to raise me that way, or if one person ever told him what he was forcing me to do was wrong I would've experienced less intense or no experiences of abuse at all. But all he got was positive feedback, and all I got was used. He had huge religious reasons to do this because all of his leaders pressured him to raise me this way. He was striving for validation from God and from the people around him because he believed he should've groomed me to be a pastor and have massive influence.

*Interview 10: Rebecca*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Rebecca: It explains the events entirely. For the full-time pastors establishing meaning was their full-time job. Youth pastors were middle management, the full-time exploiters exploiting the youth pastors exploiting us. There was 0 accountability, they were the supreme authority.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting?

Rebecca: I think partially, this is what they believed about God. I don't think they were malicious... They weren't corrupt people. Of course, there was some pride things built into it. But the biggest part was their erroneous understanding about Christianity.

*Interview 11: Martin*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Martin: I genuinely think if they didn't believe being gay was wrong, that I wouldn't have been abused... so sure. But also, if they didn't have a church filled with people that believed the same and if one hundred percent of their income didn't come from those people I wouldn't have been abused either.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting?

Martin: I think they were protecting their God who gave them power. I think they were protecting their God to protect their conservative platform and the money they were making.

In these four examples, the primary incentive for preserving power that led to abuse was religious, or some sort of religious belief. This took the form of a doctrinal,

theological, or even ontological view on sexuality in the case of Martin, an erroneous understanding of Christianity leading to abuse in the case of Rebecca, and a young man's father pressuring him to be a minister as a child because people told the father that is what God wanted in the case of Kevin. Sadly, in the case of Cristina this was a belief that God wanted a form of sexual abuse and silencing to occur, as we'll later learn. Something to note is that financial incentives did play a role in some of these examples, though they were not named in these sections of the interviews. As with social incentives to preserve power, these religious incentives to preserve power displayed in these qualitative interviews display the same positive correlative relationship between reducing incentives to preserve power and the perceived intensity of spiritual abuse. As incentives to preserve power decrease in the minds of survivors, the perceived intensity of their abuse also decreases. In this section of the sample Martin states that they would've not been abused had the religious incentive been removed. Rebecca states that it explains her abuse entirely, though we cannot rely on this as sufficient to state that she would have the same position as Martin. That all said, this data supports the hypothesis, by giving clear examples of a perceived decrease in incentives to preserve power leading to a reduction in the abuse's intensity, or outright eliminating the abusive experiences all together.

#### *Interview 4: Ashley*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Ashley: It definitely would've been less intense and less frequent, if the reinforcer wasn't as valuable. If the incentives weren't as frequent and present and valuable the abuse would be less present in frequency intensity and magnitude.

Interviewer: How big of a role do you think those reinforcers you mentioned played in their treatment of you? What were they?

Ashley: Huge. Absolute, they were the reinforcing principles. If there was no reinforcement of the abuse. If they stopped getting the money, stopped getting the social clout. Stopped getting the religious reinforcement... the abuse would stop. Some people are just sick, but that's the minority. That's the

exception. Most in general, and all of my pastors would've not abused if they didn't have the reinforcer. The abuse would be less present in frequency intensity and magnitude.

Interviewer: So, what were they protecting you think?

Ashley: I think it differs on denomination. They're not all protecting the same thing. Church A: SBC megachurch for them? social clout and money for sure. They would do anything to protect their ability to protect the enormous amount of money they would make. They were transparent. 10% of their income for a tithe would be more than I made in a year Church B: Baptist Fundamentalist circle they really genuinely believe they're defending God's word and its religious reasons.

### *Interview 5: Danielle*

Interviewer: We talked a lot about their incentives for preserving their position, status, and power. Do you think your experiences of abuse would've been less intense if they had less power, status, or position to protect? Or do you think it would've been the same?

Danielle: Yes. It would've been less. But it was fertile ground. PASTOR 1 is a narcissist flat out and because of the social and spiritual incentives, he sought that place out. If PASTOR 2 didn't have power or finance, what happened to me wouldn't have happened. Honestly, if there wasn't social or financial incentives I don't know if I would've even gotten abused. My femininity threatened their social power, because I broke up their male social hierarchy even in a system that was egalitarian. PASTOR 2 particularly loved that I was a woman in power, but only as much as it supported his social power and financial study.

Interviewer: What do you think they were protecting?

Danielle: I really believe they were protecting the patriarchy; it was not conscious. They were protecting their male social hegemony. PASTOR 1, he was protecting his social platform. He needed no chinks in the armor, or it would collapse PASTOR 2? He was protecting his position, personal financial security. He could never make as much anywhere else.

Ashley and Danielle are of particular interest to the study as they both display all three incentives to preserve power. Ashley directly names them when she states, 'If they stopped getting the money, stopped getting the social clout. Stopped getting the religious reinforcement... the abuse would stop. Some people are just sick, but that's the minority. That's the exception.' Danielle names social incentives, spiritual (religious) incentives, as well as financial incentives, and states that abusive Pastor 1 sought out the position due to at least two of them. These interviews, along with those before them demonstrate how multiple incentives can be present in one symbolic system of social power. Despite this, survivors are mostly able to point to one main incentive with some other secondary or tertiary incentives supporting the primary one. In these two interviews, evidence is present to support the hypothesis, that as incentives to preserve power decrease, survivors believe that they would have less intense experiences of spiritual abuse.

## Categories of Incentives and Abusive Behaviors Experienced by Survivors

### *Quantitative Results*

While data has been presented to support the hypothesis, a secondary finding of the research was that the incentive that preserved power also influenced the types of abusive behaviors experienced by survivors, regarding perceived severity or intensity. A question in the quantitative questionnaire asked participants to rank 16 abusive behaviors identified in the existing literature in order from what affected them the most to the least in terms of intensity. In this case, participants were not aware that this type of analysis would be done when they ranked these behaviors. Then the results were filtered according to what survivors indicated was the incentive that they felt most motivated spiritual abuse. Below, three tables will show the top six behaviors survivors reported most affecting them assigned in groups of financial, social, and religious incentives to preserve power.

Abusive Behaviors Experienced by Those Indicating Primarily Social Incentives to Preserve Power

Ordered from most to least severe	Abusive Behavior Most Affecting Survivors
1	Required Loyalty to the Abuser
2	Required Loyalty to Church/Brand
3	Suggestion that the Abuse is Glorifying to God
4	Suggestion that the Abuser has a Divine Position
5	Required Obedience to the Abuser
6	Enforced Accountability

Abusive Behaviors Experienced by Those Indicating Primarily Financial Incentives to Preserve Power

Ordered from most to least severe	Abusive Behavior Most Affecting Survivors
1	Required Loyalty to the Abuser
2	Required Loyalty to Church/Brand
3	Suggestion that the Abuse is Glorifying to God
4	Required Obedience to Abuser
5	Censorship of Speech
6	Exploitation

Abusive Behaviors Experienced by Those Indicating Primarily Religious Incentives to Preserve Power

Ordered from most to least severe	Abusive Behavior Most Affecting Survivors
1	Required Obedience to Abuser
2	Suggestion that the Abuser is in a Divine Position
3	Censorship of Speech
4	Superiority of the Abuser Over You
5	Enforced Accountability
6	Required Loyalty to Church/Brand

There are some notable similarities and differences in the top behaviors experienced across different incentives to preserve power. Among the similarities in all three are required loyalty to the church or brand and required obedience to the abuser. The two categories that seem to present the most similar are financial and social incentives to preserve power. Some notable differences do occur, such as loyalty to an individual not appearing in systems reliant on religious incentives to preserve power, and exploitation only appearing in systems reliant on financial incentives to preserve power.

The study asked survivors to indicate whether abusive behaviors involved open attempts at control, hidden manipulative tactics, or coercion. Survivors were asked to choose between three options per behavior, manipulative, coercive or both. There is a

plan to publish another research document discussing the manipulative or coercive behaviors as survivors report them. For the purposes of this document, the study aggregated the top 6 behaviors as were reported and compared the sum of behaviors reported to be manipulative or coercive alone. Those numbers were added up, and a ratio of coercive to manipulative experiences was calculated for each of the three categories of incentives to preserve power. The results have been arranged into the table below.

Ratio of Manipulative Incidences of Abusive Behavior vs. Coercive Incidences of Abusive Behavior

Type of Incentive	Reported Manipulative incidences of Top 6 Abusive Behaviors Experienced (ratio)	Reported Coercive incidences of Top 6 Abusive Behaviors Experienced (ratio)
Social Incentives to Preserve Power	2.5	1
Financial Incentives to Preserve Power	1.5	1
Religious Incentives to Preserve Power	1.1	1

Those survivors who reported social incentives to preserve power as the highest presenting factor motivating their abusers reported a ratio of manipulative behaviors to coercive behaviors of 2.5 to 1, where for every single coercive incidence of reported behavior they experienced they experienced 2.5 manipulative behaviors. Those survivors who reported financial incentives to preserve power as the highest presenting factor motivating their abusers reported a ratio of manipulative behaviors to coercive behaviors of 1.5 to 1, where for every single coercive incidence of reported behavior they experienced they experienced 1.5 manipulative behaviors. Finally, survivors who reported religious incentives to preserve power as the highest presenting factor motivating their abusers reported a ratio of manipulative behaviors to coercive behaviors of only 1.1 to 1, where for every single coercive incidence of reported behavior they experienced 1.1 manipulative behaviors.

This data indicates that while there is some difference in the type of abusive behavior experienced between different categories of incentives to preserve power, there is significant difference in how those behaviors are experienced. A survivor reporting social incentives to preserve power is far more likely to experience the same behaviors in a manipulative fashion, where it is far harder to detect the ill intents of an abuser. Those reporting financial incentives to preserve power as the primary motivating factor in their abuse are less likely than those reporting social incentives to preserve power to report manipulative experiences, meaning that they experience more coercive presentations of those same behaviors. Overall, though, they still experience more manipulative experiences than coercive one. Those reporting religious incentives to preserve power as the primary motivating factor in their abuse are the least likely to experience manipulative experiences of those same behaviors, (though they still experience a touch more manipulative abusive behavior than coercive abusive behavior). This is significant because it suggests that while the most intense abusive behaviors and realities across the three incentives are similar, with some notable exceptions, the way these behaviors are experienced and remembered has significant variation between coercive and manipulative presentations. This could be evidence for different abusive models of churches or faith communities. Perhaps the incentives contribute to or have some sort of correlative relationship with a system organized around that incentive to preserve power? This could follow if those with significant spiritual power are shaping the sacred, (God, Jesus, etc. in Christian faith systems), into a system of symbols that justifies their accumulation of that incentive. For example, a system organized around financial incentives to preserve power would shape or present God or the sacred as viewing their

organization, mission, or metrics as the vehicle by which the sacred of God accomplishes its ends, therefore making its organizational goals those of God. This would have significant power in the lives of those under that system of religious symbols and would be a leveraging of spiritual power to build a system of religious symbols that is used to exploit free labor. That system, (and/or individuals in that system), would then use a blend of manipulative and coercive behaviors to achieve those goals, thereby presenting God or the sacred as complicit or used to justify those behaviors. Identifying those systems could be done from numerous indicators, and perhaps a ratio of manipulative to coercive experiences could be used in such a model.

### **Qualitative Results**

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data was collected through the in-depth interviews where participants shared their experiences, as well as the behaviors they experienced. This periscope into the data is visceral and could be triggering for some readers. This is a caution to readers that the following portions are graphic and disturbing. However, these are survivor's real stories, and capture the behaviors they experienced in their own words and are arranged in relationship to the incentive they indicated in earlier questions was most motivating to their abusers.

#### *Qualitative Results: Financial Incentives to Preserve Power*

The following are excerpts from an in-depth interview with 'Paul.' Paul is currently in his 30's is a heterosexual married Hispanic male with a master's degree. Paul is a second-generation immigrant, who identified the incentives to preserve power of her abusers as financial incentives.



Interviewer: “I’d like to understand a bit more about your experience of spiritual abuse. Would you mind sharing that with me?”

Paul: Memories are hard to recall... When I try to tell people what it was like, all I can say is it was terrible, terrible, terrible! A higher up pastor had recruited me, and placed me at a campus under my abuser, who was the youth pastor. I was 18 when this all happened. I feel important because I’m useful. I struggle with self-esteem. I am autistic; therefore, I am too trusting. I also have issues with my father. My abuser preyed on this. I remember really wanting to impress him, partly because I want to impress him. Partly because he built a system where impressing him was pleasing God. I wanted the respect he had. I was forced to wake up at 5 am for church on Sunday and throughout the week. I was leading two small groups, going to a third, working forty plus hours a week for free.

Paul: I remember my father told me I was in a cult. I was exploited, humiliated, I was forced to work for free. I was verbally emasculated and manipulated, I was shamed in front of my peers, often.

Interviewer: That’s really terrible, it’s horrific. I’m so sorry that you went through that. If you can, would you mind telling me what were some of the worst things you experienced?

Paul: I was exhausted. I was forced to do two weeklong work camps where we would have students work for free to serve other charities in the city. I was on three to four hours of sleep for about ten or more days, I had been working non-stop. Because of this, I forgot to do something because I was working over 168 hours.

Interviewer: What happened?

Paul: I was asked by my boss, the youth pastor to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I made it, but I forgot to put the jam on it. He bit into it, screamed at me in front of everyone, threw the sandwich on the floor. My Abuser never apologized. I was brutalized. I remember crying for hours, it’s all a blur of pain. Everything was like that, all the time, for any task I missed, messed up on, or turned in late.

Paul: I remember another time; I preached a bad sermon. My abuser said, “If you preach like this, you’ll never preach again, suck it up and do better pussy.” If I didn’t serve him, if I wasn’t loyal to him, I wasn’t pleasing God.

Paul: The hardest part was that he made God seem like a bully to me. That affected me in ways I can’t even begin to say. I still fight that conception of God in my mind. My abuser had to put on a production so the organization could financially survive, and so he could too. He was a middle manager; he was being abused too. He would manipulate me, by demeaning my masculinity to get me to be productive to meet organizational goals. He’d always say, ‘you weren’t a man, you weren’t man enough to get this ridiculous task done.’ I never was super masculine because I’m an autistic kid. I’ve always had these issues around my masculinity, and he preyed on it. My abuser became arbiter of masculinity speaking on behalf of God, he used that to control, and force me to do things. He shaped Jesus in this way through his speech. That made up fake Jesus was stuck in my mind, and I have to actively fight against that.

Here, in Paul’s retelling of his experience, it was observed that this survivor recalls his experience in an abusive system built around financial incentives to preserve power. He experienced wage theft in the form of unpaid labor, verbal humiliation, and other behaviors all under what he describes as a system of religious symbols that his

abuser built that involved pleasing the abuser to meet financial or organizational goals. Paul describes his abuser as the arbiter of masculinity speaking on behalf of God, which he used to control him. Paul also describes his abuser shaping Jesus, (who Christians in the sample believe is God), in that same way, which leaves a lasting impact on him to this day, (sometime over 10 years later). Paul's account details how God is presented as complicit and used to justify labor exploitation, verbal abuse, and other forms of social manipulation and coercion. There are parts of the account where the coercive nature of some behaviors is evident such as the peanut butter and jelly memory, and the sermon memory. However, there are also other parts of the account that seem to be much more manipulative in nature, such as the abuser preying on his issues with his father. What is also of note to the study is the unique ontological and theological trauma experienced by Paul, that despite being removed from this system for over 10 years he still reports struggling with the theological trauma of a 'made up fake Jesus' at the time data was collected. It seems that the entire system was organized around these financial incentives for the abuser and those higher than him in the organizational hierarchy to preserve power. This presented God as complicit in Paul's exploitation, humiliation and other forms of abuse that resulted in negative economic implications alongside the psychological fallout.

#### *Qualitative Results: Social Incentives to Preserve Power*

The following are excerpts from an in-depth interview with 'Vanessa.' Vanessa is currently in her 20's and is a heterosexual married Hispanic woman with a bachelor's degree. Vanessa is a first-generation immigrant from Venezuela, who identified the incentives to preserve power of her abusers as social incentives.

Interviewer: “I’d like to understand a bit more about your experience of spiritual abuse. Would you mind sharing that with me?”

Vanessa: There were red flags from the beginning. They did not ever define their beliefs, the Pastor was very concerned with his image and brand, the biggest red flag was that they didn’t have membership—they had a dictatorship, where all power was based on one person’s abilities and feelings that day. The Pastors elders were not elected, they were all family connections and rubberstamped everything, so it was all him. The pastors didn’t have any other pastors he networked with. I remember when I first got there, leadership bad mouthed everyone around me two weeks after I first arrived. The abuse really began when they needed money from a denomination. The denomination ordained women, but he had been against it before that. One day, the pastor met with everyone and changed his mind on the issue, which changed church policy. There was massive church growth at this point with new believers, and a lot of returning people who left the faith and came back. This led to the creation of a very vulnerable impressionable group. One day, after one of our bible studies he sent the church WhatsApp, (everyone who ever visited), with new rules. It was a code of conduct that included: 1. No theological conversations unless a leader is present. 2. Imposing a dress code for women. If you broke it, you would be shunned.

Vanessa: Then the pandemic hit, this was the catalyst for shit hitting the fan. Three months in, they started church 2.0, which was a digital resource to supplement what was missing. They bought production equipment and were transmitting things 24 hours a day 7 days a week. The way it worked was, if you were loyal to him, you would get screen time, so this created a dependence on him.

Vanessa: I remember some time passed, my husband and I began dating at the time. They offered my husband a position, even though they didn’t know him. They tried to get him to leave his church, to keep me and gain him.

They had a massive following in Latin America and needed trained speakers from different regions. I believe they capitalized on the lack of resources in Latin America and became the church people would go to online. They developed a policy of anti-other local churches and pro their online presence, which led to the neglect of people. The social harassment began the moment my husband declined the position with the online program, we were both shunned, ignored, and pushed out. The abusive pastor attacked my reputation. My closest friends were instructed to ignore me. My spiritual mentors were instructed to ignore me. They told everyone we were no longer welcome. They create a new WhatsApp group, where the pastor stated in early 2021: “You all are ungrateful for asking to meet in person, and just like the Jews rejected Jesus you reject this new thing. If you saw how appreciative the people online were, you would understand how deeply you should feel shame.”

Vanessa: Everyone who shamed and now ignored us started reaching out to my husband to help them form a response. This made us feel used and objectified. My husband formed a response that said, “You will have to give account to God for the shame you’re putting on your church.” My husband put the pastor and the people who reached out to him in one big group message to send it. The pastor responds, ‘Wow I really cared a lot about what you thought’ and left the message. The other Elder, pastors who are all brothers and cousins begin to debate and shame and attempted to coerce my husband with legal action. Then he spun this narrative that ‘we were snakes who always had the intention to divide.’ This conspiracy still exists today years later.

Vanessa describes her encounter with a system that she earlier identified as organizing around social incentives to preserve power. She begins by recalling how there were no theological or doctrinal standards, such as statements, creeds, confessions, etc. simply those with spiritual power dictating what this church believed. Vanessa continues

describing a spiritual community completely isolated and separated from other church communities, (therefore, cutoff from the spiritual power or influence of other faith leaders). The consequences of opposing those with social incentives to preserve power was forced isolation and shunning. If an individual was supportive of the abusive leaders, they would be included and get screen time in a new online venture. When her husband did not fall in line with the whims of those with spiritual power who were seeking to preserve their social status, that is when the social attacks began for Vanessa. She describes being shunned, and ignored, and the pastors and leaders used spiritual language and their position to achieve this, presenting God as complicit in socially bankrupting Vanessa and her husband. Here, we see a faith community organized around those with social incentives to preserve power. The faith leaders wield their spiritual power to preserve the social incentives to preserve power within the faith community, and in its online presence. The abusers in Vanessa's account use social rewards and punishments to reinforce the behaviors they approve of or disapprove of. Here, we see the unique nature of faith communities organized around social incentives to preserve power, the amount of manipulation in a system organized around social incentives to preserve power is very evident throughout the account. It is only at the end of abusers being able to extract value through spiritual language that coercion is relied on, and in this case, the coercion is instructing others to shun or ignore those who have fallen out of their canopy of influence.

### *Qualitative Results: Religious Incentives to Preserve Power*

The following are excerpts from an in-depth interview with 'Cristina.' Cristina is currently in her 20's and is a bisexual single black woman in college. Cristina's father is a pastor, and Cristina is a second-generation migrant, who identified the incentives to preserve power of her abusers as religious incentives.

Interviewer: "I'd like to understand a bit more about your experience of spiritual abuse. Would you mind sharing that with me?"

Cristina: I grew up in a patriarchal, Latino context. Most of the abusers in my life were male. First was my dad: when I wouldn't do what he wanted faith wise he would beat me. He would squeeze me or pinch me when I wasn't perfect in my faith. It was weird being disciplined. The second was two young boys, about five years older than me, my dad adopted him. The third was one of my dad's best friends.

Cristina: We'll start with my peers, two older than me, I was nine, they were fourteen. My dad took them in to be a father figure to them. They molested me. They sexually abused me repeatedly. The first time they were playing popcorn on a trampoline, when I lost balance, he picked me up, carried me to a spot where my mom couldn't see, told me that because I was disabled no one would ever want or love me. My adopted brother told me I was punished by God because of the evils that my parents did, so I had a disability and was unattractive. He then said, 'Don't you ever want to know what it's like to be with a guy and be married?' I said I don't know if I want to be, I was little girl. He got mad at this and said God would punish me again, and he covered my face/mouth. He raped me by using his hand. After that I kept my distance from him. I cried all the time not because of the rape but because of him telling me that God was against me and was punishing me.

Cristina: The next time I really experienced this was my dad's best friend. I was fourteen now, I looked older. They were drinking together. I was in my room minding my business, I heard my dad say, 'ok have a nice night.' And my dad's friend was supposed to sleep on the couch. The guy snuck upstairs when he wasn't supposed to. He was drunk, I told him to get out. He did not. I tried to leave the room because he was being weird and wouldn't get out.

I left the room and went to another room because I didn't want to have anything happen. An hour went by, he picks the lock to my now other room. He gets in the bed with me, I'm half-asleep half awake. I curse at him to get out of my bed. He gets angry and says no man of God is going to want a demon possessed, sinful, cursed woman like you.

So, I say, "If you were a man of God, you wouldn't be in bed trying to sleep with a fourteen-year-old. He slapped me. I was scared. He slapped me again, said 'you don't know how to be quiet.' He put my hand over my face to keep me quiet. This caused me to shut down, because I felt like the little girl who was spiritually abused at church. And "God was punishing me." He raped me. He forced me to make out with him. He wanted the intimacy.

Cristina: It stopped when my dad came upstairs, drunk, he ran out the room. he lied to my dad and said, 'I was up here to use the bathroom.' My dad comes into my room, there's blood on my sheets, he asks me if I got my period. My dad told me to get up, but I was in shock I couldn't move. I covered it up by saying "I had bad cramps" My dad carried me to my original room. I tried to get to bed, I couldn't. It's hours later into the night, the guy comes back upstairs and asked why I didn't tell my dad. I just sat in silence, what could I have said or done? The guy said, "I bet you didn't tell him because you have the spirit of jezebel, you're a whore. No one at church would believe you because you're possessed and call it a disability. A woman of God would've never spoken to me that way." I said: "God hates what you did." He slapped me. I jumped up, grabbed a knife and said, touch me again and I'll kill you. It doesn't end there. The guy 4 days

later tells my dad that I seduced him by walking up the stairs inappropriately dressed in little pajamas, tells him I slept with him.

Cristina: My dad believed him, came home, blamed me. “What is wrong with you, you seduced a man of God. I knew something was wrong with you because we couldn’t heal your disability. You seduced a man who’s trying to start a ministry.” My dad told me I was even more demonically possessed than he thought. He turned out my purse and the knife from earlier fell out. He held the knife up to me and told me to get the demon out of me. This was my own father. I started shaking out of fear and that’s my tic, he said, this is finally the moment where God will humble you. The church covered all this up. No one believed me (weeping). They prayed over me to not be a whore. My dad preached about his rebellious daughter. I was brought into the church, into my dad’s office, all the elders told me I was leading people away from God, and shaming my father, and ruining the guy. In front of everyone my dad hits me with a drumstick. No one says a thing. My mom holds her hand up. My dad hits me next with his belt to get the demons out. He hits me with the buckle. I bleed and scream. No one says a thing.

Cristina: The whole time I’m wondering why a bunch of Christians aren’t standing up for a disabled girl getting abused by her pastor dad after being shamed publicly. I was literally bleeding from my hip, my white dress was red. The abuse isn’t the worst part, everyone ignoring me is. Everyone treating me like I was less than a person is why I left the faith and the church. This is what caused me to leave the faith. As I started to get older, they got a divorce. I started to rebuild my relationship with my mom at 20. But this is what gets me, the most painful part were the lines that kept getting repeated. I should feel lucky that a man would even want me, because what man of God would ever want me... that I was a whore and a jezebel.

Cristina describes three scenes. First, and throughout the account is a neglectful and abusive father with spiritual power in her life because he was a pastor. Throughout the three scenes in the account, this man utilizes his spiritual power to manipulate and coerce this young woman into submission by using spiritual language and presenting God as complicit and using God to justify abuse and neglect. Second, when she was a child, she describes the scene with her older peers who sexually abused her. Of note is that Cristina was adamant about pointing out the fact that her abusers stated that God was the one who made her ‘disabled and unattractive,’ stating later that no man would ever want her, and finally stating that God would ‘punish her again.’ It is such that in this religious system, even 14-year-old male abusers presented God as complicit in their sexual abuse of another minor. Cristina noted that this dynamic had lasting impact on her, as this reality about God being presented as complicit in her sexual abuse caused her to cry often. The final scenes in Cristina’s account occur when she is a little bit older, but still a

minor. She is sexually abused by her father's friend, who presents God as complicit in the abuse by stating, 'no man of God is going to want a demon possessed, sinful, cursed woman like you.' Following this the friend of the father invokes spiritual language to coerce her to silence, by stating that her disability is an act of God, that she has 'the spirit of jezebel,' which would lead no one in her faith community to believe her. Following this, he shifts the blame onto her which her father believes. Her father then presents God as complicit to preserve his religious incentives to preserve his spiritual power through abuse in his faith community. He places the blame on her, for 'seducing a man of God,' then he proceeds to use spiritual language to diminish any influence or spiritual power she has by stating that she is demon possessed. Following that, he brings her before the church where they pray for her not to be a 'whore' and proceed to shame her publicly for being a victim of sexual assault. Cristina ends her account by recollecting the phrases, all of which were told to her by abusers acting on their religious incentives for preserving power, that presented God as complicit in her horrific abuse. Here, we see a system organized around religious incentives to preserve power. Her father, her adopted brothers, her father's friend, and even the broader faith community all had some religious incentive to preserve power that she believes led to her abusive experiences. Throughout Cristina's account, it can be observed how there is a higher instance of coercive behaviors, alongside manipulative behaviors. She was physically, sexually, and socially abused and God was presented as complicit in those behaviors.

A secondary finding of this study is that the type of incentive to preserve power does have an influence on the type of abusive behavior and reality experienced by survivors in addition to the intensity of the behavior. First, the type of incentive that

abusers protect by using their spiritual power to present God as complicit or use God to justify shapes God in that way. This is evident in the God that was presented to Paul being concerned with organizational goals representing financial incentives to preserve power, the God that was presented to Vanessa being concerned with social dynamics representing social incentives to preserve power, and the God that was presented to Cristina being concerned with purity representing religious incentives to preserve power. As observed in both the qualitative and quantitative data collected, the primary incentive to preserve power present in the system does seem to have some relationship with the manifestation of abusive behaviors as manipulative or coercive, respectively. Third, these communities that are formed by shared agreements of the sacred seem to be organized around the incentives to preserve power. This reality creates a faith community that organizes around incentives to preserve power that is maintained at least in these instances by abuse that presents God as complicit or uses God to justify the abuse.

### **Isaac Model of Faith Communities Organized Around Incentives to Preserve Power**

Considering the data and conclusions drawn from it, I propose a model of how faith communities organize around incentives to preserve power when abuse is present. There is evidence in survivor testimony that as God is complicit in abuse, a form of theological trauma forms where God being presented as complicit in abuse repeatedly shapes an idea of God in that fashion in survivors' minds. This lasting abusive shaping of God seemed to still be present in many survivor's conceptions of God, and as much has already been stated in previously analyzed interview excerpts. Survivor interviews also revealed language and words that were repeated that correlated with incentives to preserve power that led to experiences of spiritual abuse. It was also discovered that



while loyalty to a church, brand or individual appeared in all incentive categories top six experienced behaviors, the qualitative interviews revealed a more specific reality. The qualitative interviews revealed that the direction and aim of the forced loyalty coincided with the incentive to preserve power. If survivors identified social incentives, forced loyalty typically extended to an individual or small leadership group. In cases of financial incentives, loyalty was directed toward the brand and image of the church or faith community. For religious incentives, loyalty was typically directed towards specific doctrines, such as the purity doctrine in Cristina's account. The above dynamics can be found in the following survivors' testimonies.

#### *Social Incentives*

Dylan: The Pastors vision, which was about him, was from God. He was the vision, but it was God's vision. His personhood tied to God was the vision, so God was cool with his abuse. But behind the scenes, it was always manipulation, the pastors would triangulate this relationship, or coerce people to get what they wanted. I eventually recognized my complicity in the abuse, but because I didn't want to lose the seat at the cool kids table... Having been bullied, I didn't want to lose what I always wanted. So, I stated going along to get along, as long as Jesus was preached on Sunday, the abuse stayed behind the scenes.

Joe: After a while, I thought they were making God look like them, but I was a kid how was I supposed to know? They presented God as: Chauvinistic, non-compassionate, not caring about feelings, and toxically gracious, absolving others without holding them accountable for like rape legally. God was basically them. They projected themselves on to God, made me think God didn't care about my abuse, they made me think that God wanted to protect my abuser at my expense, they didn't ever deal with it. My abuser used God. The people who were around didn't believe what the leaders said about us, but they saw what happened when you disagreed, so the ones that would be friends with us would never speak up or support us. The leadership called us wolves going against God's divine plan for the church for opposing them, they used God to pressure us to be loyal to them even over my own health.

#### *Financial Incentives*

Robert: The duplicitous exploitative hierarchical nature, that uses God to control people I eventually realized was designed to keep two old men in power. Their incentive to do that was financial. They demanded my social abilities and charisma, even at the expense of my health, all in the name of God. The one thing that wasn't treated well was me, in the name of God.

Danielle: I was fired... and forced to sign NDA.... The worst part was having no control, the betrayal, the humiliation, and the confusion. They told me I was family, they told me I was loved. Now God and the scriptures were wielded as tools against me. Signing NDA... I immediately regretted it. It crushed me. Spiritual abuse in the form of an NDA which said I resigned (I wasn't-I was fired), it made me go against my highest value. It crushed me to not tell the truth, to live a lie. I was living cut in half. It's hard in the moment because you're thinking about your future ministry, and they're threatening you by threatening that which is your entire investment, identity, future, your career, and if you say one thing wrong, they'll use their influence to crush you. I was fired by my pastor; I don't know how much more traumatic that could be. He told me I made an idol of transparency, I was not well, and my theology was wrong. When a pastor says something like that, they're speaking for God, that's what made it spiritual abuse. It was like God himself was telling me I was hysterical, crazy, and punishing me for addressing financial impropriety. My boss was gaslighting me, but he was my pastor too so he spoke for God... can you imagine God gaslighting you for your virtue? Or God shaming you for exposing financial exploitation? I think this was the most painful part. I haven't healed from this after 10 years. It follows me everywhere I go.

### *Religious Incentives*

Kevin: So, I grew up in this church, started being in ministry when I was ten. My dad was also pushed towards this too, but he ran from it because of trauma. I did it at ten because it was a way for my dad to live out his dream through me... I was groomed from a young age to perform and be loved for the show, not for who I actually was. This toxic system stole my youth, and it kept me from being able to be myself.

Ashley: Coercion in the name of God was the springboard for my current weakness. Strongest feelings I feel are fear, shame, and guilt. Even though I've been gone for 20 years, the conception of God complicit in my coercion is almost unbreakable. It is the gift that keeps on giving. Of all the different abuse I've endured spiritual abuse is the most dangerous, and the most horrific for me. The two reasons for this are that 1. It's done in the name of God. 2. That conception of God is built into my mind. 3. And if God is real, how could he allow this to happen in his name, in his house.... The oppression is so hard to deal with, between the words, the free labor, the guilt. It never ever left me. It lives in my head... So, the way these churches work is that they twist you and your values so badly that you never fit into the real world. So, you're stuck going back to the well of abusive fundie churches, because you dress different, speak different, do everything different. They literally pressured me to get a home making degree at university, so that I was useless. It created a system that kept me trapped. So, I took a job in a school in a fundamentalist church. And that job kept me stuck in that control system. Can't go to movies, can't drink, can't wear pants, boys can't talk to me. Because then God would hate me.

In each of these accounts, there seems to be a system built around the incentive to preserve power that leverages spiritual power by presenting God as complicit in abuse aimed at keeping survivors loyal to various realities as described earlier. Ashley and Kevin are forced to adhere to religious dogma and doctrine, by presenting God as a controlling, isolating, deity intentionally keeping them away from any semblance of 'normal' life, in order to protect religious incentives to preserve power for their abusers. Their worth and value are tied to their ability to adhere to a strict set of requirements that God is used to justify and presented as complicit in by those with spiritual power. The

entire system revolved around those religious incentives to preserve power and presented as a fundamentalist system that twisted God into its own image. Therefore, loyalty to a particular set of lifestyle doctrines was required. Danielle and Robert who identified financial incentives to preserve power were forced to be loyal to the institutions, experienced exploitation, and silencing in the name of God in order to protect financial incentives to preserve power for their abusers. Their worth and value were tied to their ability to be productive within these financial systems, and when they stopped being able to, they went against a God that was made complicit in a financially exploitative system by those with spiritual power. The entire system revolved around those financial incentives to preserve power and therefore manifested as a corporatist system which twisted God into its own image. Therefore, loyalty to the institution was required. Dylan and Joe indicated social incentives to preserve power, experienced individuals who either tied God to their own personhood by presenting God as such, or by presenting their vision and attributes as God's attributes to protect social incentives to preserve power. In this system, spiritual power was used to project abuser's personhood and goals onto God, and loyalty to the individuals was required, or else the victims would be hated by God for opposing the avatar of His will and person. Dylan and Joe's worth and value was tied to their ability to garner the approval of the individual who twisted God into his own image. The entire system revolved around those social incentives to preserve power and therefore manifested as a corporatist system which twisted God into its own image.

Considering the above qualitative accounts, and the rest of the data presented I have created a chart which presents three different models of systems of religious symbols that organize around incentives to preserve power, fundamentalist, narcissistic,

and corporatist. The models track the incentive to preserve power and how that incentive causes God to be presented or made complicit in abusive behavior. Then the model displays theological or ontological trauma that results from that abusive behavior, while also offering keywords present in these systems, and an indicator of what loyalty is aimed at in these systems. Since I am arguing that those abusing their spiritual power are using religious symbols to present God or the sacred as complicit in their abusive behavior to protect their financial, social, or religious incentives to preserve power, and that in doing so they construct a religious system around that incentive; I propose that the entire community is involved in enforcing, reinforcing, and supporting the abusive social construction of that God or the sacred. Since spiritual powerholders are defining or constructing the sacred, and the community is formed around the sacred, the entire system and therefore community is part of presenting God as complicit or using God to justify the abuse, as well as creating the resulting theological or ontological trauma for survivors. Therefore, I propose that the model of church, or abusive faith community resulting from this phenomenon should be identified by what is being preserved which are the religious, social, or financial incentives motivating abusers of spiritual power. If the incentive to preserve power is social, and the entire community is organized around a God presented as complicit in abuse to preserve those social incentives for those with spiritual power, with the main indicator of this being loyalty to an individual, then it can be reasoned that the entire community or system is narcissistic, as it organizes around a God presented as such. If the same pattern of reasoning was be applied to religious incentives, where spiritual power holders have presented God as complicit in their abusive behaviors to protect their religious incentives for preserving power, primarily

through forced loyalty to doctrine, then it can be reasoned that the entire community or system is fundamentalist, as it organizes around a God presented as such. Likewise, in the case of financial incentives to preserve power, if spiritual power holders have presented God as complicit in their abusive behaviors to protect their financial incentives for preserving power through forced loyalty to the institution, then it can be reasoned that the entire community or system is corporatist, as it organizes around a God presented as such. This explanation gives clarity and a valid logical reasoning behind the experiences reported by survivors, especially all the accounts that present the community, institution, bystanders, and others as complicit in the abuse they've experienced. These communities are informed and bent towards protecting an incentive to preserve power by abusers, whether or not individuals in the community realize it. The communities themselves reinforce these values, leverage punishments, and are the vehicle and the vessel where abuse is experienced. Members of the community are often simultaneously victims of, perpetrators of, and enablers spiritual abuse as abuse occurs within and through the community.

Isaac Model of Faith Communities Organized Around Incentives to Preserve Power

<b>Incentive to Preserve Power</b>	<b>Religious</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Financial</b>
	↓	↓	↓
<b>God presented as complicit in abuse by holders of Spiritual Power</b>	<p>We are the only ones who understand God.</p> <p>Loyalty to our theological dogma is faithfulness to God. If you are not pure you are not a true believer. Your entire life must occur within our religious construct or God is displeased. God is for us and against everyone else.</p>	<p>The leader is the vessel of God's will. Loyalty to the leader is faithfulness to God. The leader is always right. If you get in the leader's way you get in Gods way. The leader's reputation must be protected at all costs. All the leaders' enemies are God's enemies.</p>	<p>The institution is the vessel of God. Loyalty to our goals is faithfulness to God. Disturbing the mission is disobeying God. Failing to meet organizational goals and produce is failing God. The boundaries of God's kingdom on earth are this church and its mission.</p>
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Resulting Theological or Ontological Trauma</b>	<p>If I do not obey these strict rules, then God will hate me. My worth and value are tied to my adherence to this strict set of requirements.</p>	<p>Unless I am loyal to this avatar of God's will then God will hate me. My worth and value are tied to the approval of an individual.</p>	<p>Unless I am loyal to this church brand and mission God will hate me. My worth and value are tied to my ability to be productive.</p>
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Loyalty Indicator</b>	Forced Loyalty to Doctrine	Forced Loyalty to an Individual	Forced Loyalty to Institution
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Keywords:</b>	Countercultural Lifestyle, Us vs. them.	"Family" and "Vision"	"Mission" and "Brand"
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Model of Abusive Community</b>	Fundamentalist	Narcissistic	Corporatist

## **Defining Spiritual Abuse: Issues with Current Definitions and a New Proposal**

Researching spiritual abuse is difficult for many reasons, one of which is that there is still no consensus on how the phenomenon should be defined. As was discussed in the literature review, researchers Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys categorize spiritual abuse as, “a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context...[under] the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position.”<sup>41</sup> In light of the data, I will argue that Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys definition is inadequate to conceptualize the phenomenon. Particularly, categorizing Spiritual as only a form of emotional or psychological abuse. Notwithstanding all the prior data presented, there is a theological or ontological trauma present in each of the accounts presented thus far in this document. Should it be agreed that ontological and theological trauma can be categorized as emotional or psychological realities then this would seem adequate. Though I imagine that would be a difficult reality for any monotheistic individual to accept, which in this case is most of the sample. However, in each of the qualitative narratives there seemed to be a system of symbols that formed a faith community organized around incentives to preserve power, presenting itself along the lines of the incentives, social, financial, and religious. Corresponding to these incentives, a community that presented itself as narcissistic, corporatist, or fundamentalist emerges and sustains itself. This would mean that an entire community with a corresponding social and/or religious hierarchy has emerged from these ontologically and theologically traumatic realities. That community

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<sup>41</sup> Oakley, L., Kinmond, K. and Humphreys, J. (2018), "Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: definition, policy and practice guidance"

then leverages itself and those realities to financially exploit, sexually abuse, and socially isolate individuals, (in addition to other abuses done in the name of the sacred/God).

There seems to be entire abusive systems and faith communities that have emerged that would indicate that spiritual abuse, (in so much as these systems or communities can be considered abusive), is not exclusively emotional or psychological. In addition to emotional or psychological spiritual abusive individuals have organized spiritually abusive faith communities and institutions that embody those values. Such as in Cristina's account with her teenage abusers, the older friend of her father, or the bystanders in her account of being humiliated in church that cause her to state:

Cristina: The whole time I'm wondering why a bunch of Christians aren't standing up for a disabled girl getting abused by her pastor dad after being shamed publicly. I was literally bleeding from my hip, my white dress was red. The abuse isn't the worst part, everyone ignoring me is. Everyone treating me like I was less than a person is why I left the faith and the church. This is what caused me to leave the faith.

In Cristina's account, the system and organization that formed around religious incentives to preserve power through abuse was an entire faith community, as well as a core part of her own family. These social institutions that are abusive, or at least use spiritual abuse to preserve spiritual power due to incentives to preserve power are more than emotional or psychological realities, they are entire systems, and they permeate social institutions with legal, sexual, and financial implications. Another account of note that also shows spiritual abuse not being exclusively emotional or psychological is the account of Rebecca, a first-generation immigrant from Cuba, she is a Hispanic woman in her thirties, who holds a doctorate degree. Rebecca experienced spiritual abuse in the



form of labor and wage exploitation. She was forced to work multiple nights a week in a system that she stated exploited her between the ages of 16-20.

Rebecca: I started at university, and I told them I had trouble keeping up with my classes. They didn't like this. I pulled back. I was their kid's ministry director for free. I was at their band practice twice a week, I was singing on Sunday, playing guitar at youth group on Friday. I was mentoring 7-8 middle to high school girls. 2 years into me at university I told them I'm pulling back from everything to focus on school and do university campus ministry. My youth pastor told me "I disagree with you, God is not telling me that this is good for you, don't do this you're in Sin." The church had a catch phrase they'd say, 'el que no sirve no sirve' or, those who 'don't serve don't have value.' They had a slur for people who only went to church on Sundays 'Domingeros' people who only went to church on Sunday. Now I was both. They stopped talking to me and cut me out. They treated me like I was not a Christian.

Interviewer: What were the worst things you experienced?

Rebecca: The exploitation and the gaslighting. It was the way they manipulated the texts to control me. The labor exploitation and the manipulation of God to control me.

Interviewer: How did that impact you long term?

Rebecca: It made my faith a source of pain, and a burden.

In Rebecca's account, she details her experience of spiritual abuse where her worth was directly tied to her ability to perform tasks assigned to her. She mentions how she was working hours for free. Rebecca also mentions that she did not ever get compensated for this labor, and when she indicated some stress or struggle with all her assignments and her classes at university, she was told she was in sin, and spiritual power was wielded against her to coerce and manipulate her into continued labor exploitation. In Rebecca's account, we also see how a system of religious symbols, such as phrases and slurs can be used to create abusive paradigms within faith communities that are then socially enforced by people at multiple levels of the community that isolate survivors. Again, in this account we see spiritual abuse in the form of manipulation and coercion used to control an individual by presenting God or the sacred as complicit or used to justify the abuse in ways that are beyond emotional or psychological abuse. Labor exploitation, social isolation, and reducing someone status in a community is not only emotional or psychological, but financial, spiritual, and social as well. In addition to that,

it transformed Rebecca's faith into a source of pain and a burden to be carried, which speaks to the theological and ontological nature of this form of trauma.

Another point of data that causes doubt related to the adequacy of Oakley, Kinmond, & Humphreys definition are the other forms of abuse present in the quantitative and qualitative interviews such as sexual abuse, labor exploitation, the legal reality of concealing or failing to report the sexual abuse of a minor, non-disclosure agreements legally coercing victims of abuse to silence, and the corresponding slander and libel that go along with many forms of spiritual abuse. All these behaviors present God or the sacred as complicit or use God to justify these abusive behaviors and are therefore a part of survivor's spiritual abuse. While emotional or psychological abuse is certainly a part of each of these behaviors, they are distinct from emotional or psychological abuse. Therefore, I contend that spiritual abuse must not be categorized exclusively as emotional or psychological abuse. God or the sacred can be, and certainly has been presented as complicit in or used to justify other forms of abuse such as sexual abuse, labor exploitation and wage theft, and even physical abuse. These instances of abuse can cause a distinct form of trauma where God and other things that are sacred are tainted with abuse.

### **A Working Definition to Conceptualize Spiritual Abuse**

As was stated earlier in the document, this paper posits that spiritual abuse should be defined as follows: Spiritual abuse is its own umbrella category of abuse. Any form of abuse-sexual, emotional, psychological, vocational, or other-can fall under the category of spiritual abuse if God or the sacred is presented as complicit or used to justify abuse by powerholders through attempting to coerce or manipulate others for the purposes of

control. The effects of this unique form of abuse can create unique theological or ontological trauma that can leave a lasting abusive construction of the sacred long after individuals have removed themselves from the abusive environment. Spiritual abuse can also inform and create entire faith communities and institutions that are built on abusive manipulations of the sacred, perpetuating abusive conceptions of the sacred alongside abusive behavior by institutionalizing that conception of the sacred.

The above definition is proposed first because it adequately categorizes the experiences of those survivors in the sample of this document. Unlike the definition given by Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys, the proposed definition allows survivors to define any form of abuse, such as sexual abuse, labor exploitation, social isolation, or any other manifestation of abusive behavior as spiritual abuse so long as God or the sacred is presented as complicit or used to justify the abuse. This allows Cristina, Paul, Vanessa, Ashley, Danielle, Martin, Rebecca, and any other survivor of spiritual abuse to categorize their experiences as what they identify them as they already do: as spiritual abuse. Furthermore, this ability to categorize spiritual abuse as any form of abuse that God or the sacred is presented as complicit in or used to justify allows existing treatment options for sexual abuse, labor exploitation, or even physical abuse to be expanded and evolved to include instances where God or the sacred is presented as complicit or used to justify. Second, unlike Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys definition the proposed definition allows the lasting theological trauma that is described by many of the participants in this study to be acknowledged and therefore researched. Hopefully this can allow therapists and psychologists alongside those who do not abuse spiritual power or who use it judiciously to bring healing, hope, and peace to those tormented by theological and

ontological trauma resulting from spiritual abuse. Third, and maybe most importantly, this definition is hopefully simple enough to teach to lay people and those that attend faith institutions alongside those in ministerial schools so that spiritual abuse can be recognized earlier and addressed. Finally, the proposed definition unlike Oakley, Kinmond, and Humphreys definition allows faith leaders, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and others who are interested in religious communities, institutions, and hierarchies to consider how spiritual abuse has manifested, informed, and in some cases even created some of these communities or institutions.

## **V. Conclusion**

It is clear from the data collected and the analysis presented in this study, that the answer to the research question proposed: How do incentives for preserving spiritual power by Protestant leaders affect experiences of spiritual abuse in survivors? Is that as survivors perceive incentives for Protestant authorities to preserve spiritual power decreasing, survivors posit that their spiritually abusive experiences would also decrease in intensity. This shows that there is support for my hypothesis, at least in the minds of the survivors in the sample. It should also be noted that a significant number of survivors responded that their spiritual abuse would've not even occurred had the incentives been reduced or not been present. The implications of this are clear and simple, if incentives to preserve power are reduced, survivors believe their spiritually abusive experiences would decrease in intensity, and in some cases could be avoided entirely. This is sensible as removing or reducing the incentives to preserve power removes or reduces the reason why abuse may occur. If a person with spiritual power is abusing that spiritual power to preserve their income, social status, or some religious reward, the abuse is no longer

necessary or worth committing if the incentive is no longer available or obtainable. An exception to this may be an individually pathological or predatory person, however, it could be argued that a reduction or elimination of incentives to preserve power by the community would make these spaces less vulnerable to predators, or at least less attractive to certain types of individual pathology. Practically, this reduction can take many different forms. In the case of forms of abuse that have legal implications such as physical or sexual abuse, or perhaps wrongful termination, even contractual issues like a non-disclosure agreement, a lawsuit could serve as a good way to remove or reduce financial or social incentives to preserve power. However, while a lawsuit may be able to reduce ones social or financial incentives it can do little to remove immaterial incentives to preserve power like religious incentives. Of course, there are other ways to achieve reducing incentives to preserve power. First, establishing corrective systems of accountability, I suggest that members of faith communities not contribute financially unless they know how much their faith leaders are receiving as a salary or benefits package. A second approach could involve providing survivors a safe space to report abuse through religious institutions like denominations to tell their stories, and having those denominations act to remove abusive individuals from formal positions of power. Though, I admit that this seems unlikely as denominations are incentivized in similar ways to individuals and local faith leaders with financial incentives to preserve power. Denominations are also often made up and led by those with spiritual power and are oftentimes themselves guilty of perpetuating abuse. These suggestions could reduce financial incentives to preserve power making the space less attractive to those who would abuse power to preserve their financial interests. Perhaps denominations and other

ecclesial structures should institute a policy that involves referring investigation of abuse to a third party, paid in advance, this way no one with incentives to preserve power who may have compromised intent is involved in truth telling and manipulating narratives for control. Denominations could also implement a policy on publicly publishing the findings, as the public could serve the function of accountability in this sense. Reducing social incentives to preserve power may prove more difficult, as social incentives to preserve power are only limited by abusers' ability to generate spiritual power according to the literature and data. In the same vein, reducing religious incentives to preserve power may prove difficult to approach through legal or other formal means. In the case of religious and social incentives to preserve power, I suggest comprehensive education regarding spiritual power and abuse in higher education and in faith communities. Perhaps, if more people were aware of these phenomena and how they present themselves individuals could protect themselves better from the abusive individuals and systems that rely on them by removing themselves earlier or altogether avoiding these communities and leaders. I also feel it is important to educate those pursuing positions with implicit spiritual power as well as those licensing those with spiritual power like ordination committees on the dynamics of spiritual power and the potential issues with incentives to preserve power. There seems to be a gap in this form of literature and training, which could contribute to a lack of understanding by the well-intentioned individuals within these communities who hold spiritual power. This lack of education could lead some to abusive behavior out of ignorance, and simultaneously create a vulnerability those with sincerely harmful intentions could knowingly exploit.

A secondary finding of this research was that the type of incentive to preserve power creates abusive experiences that manifest as different behaviors expressed in different ratios of coercion and manipulation. The variety of abusive experiences presenting as manipulative or coercive can aid those seeking to identify the system that has organized around a particular incentive to preserve power. Armed with this data, survivors, and current victims within these systems alongside therapists and advocates now have data to support their retelling of their experiences so that they can be understood better and identified more easily. Of particular interest is the distinction in the ratio of coercive versus manipulative experiences in the three identified incentives. If lay people, therapists, and concerned clergy can identify the manipulative and coercive behaviors more easily action can be taken earlier to protect survivors and remove abusers. Now that there is data supporting the three models, a formal charge within a denomination or larger organization could be brought against individuals abusing their spiritual power appealing to this data and the suggestions in this study.

Third, I proposed differing models of organizations and faith communities that organize around these incentives to preserve power. The implications of this finding are significant for lay people, psychologists, those in the legal field, and well-intentioned clergy and faith leaders. Most importantly, lay people and survivors now have language and a model supported with qualitative and quantitative data that might help them discern these systems and give language to their pain. In addition to this, the included key words, loyalty indicators, and framework for how God or the sacred is presented as complicit in abuse can help survivors and lay people quickly identify the systems, incentives, and therefore the twisting of the sacred that led to their unique theological and ontological

trauma. Hopefully, this can increase the pace at which they receive and seek out treatment and help for these terrible things they've experienced. This framework also benefits psychologists and therapists as they receive clients that present with these narratives of abuse. The Isaac model presented in the table can be referenced with clients and therapists can aid survivors to place their stories into a framework that brings clarity to their experiences. This aids therapeutic practice by reducing the amount of time needed to identify these experiences, as well as quickly identifying how the sacred may have been presented as complicit in abuse. This aids therapists by simplifying religious realities they may not be familiar with. The models proposed also assist those in the legal field with presenting their findings and establishing why an abuser may have committed heinous, (and often illegal), acts to juries, judges, and the public. Well intentioned faith leaders and denominational leaders also benefit from the Isaac model because they are often some of the first to receive these accounts of abuse. The Isaac model helps faith leaders and denominational leaders point survivors to legal and psychological help. The Isaac model can also help those using spiritual power to bring healing to specify how God or the sacred was presented as complicit in abuse and know exactly what needs correcting theologically.

Finally, a new definition of spiritual abuse that includes realities outside of emotional or psychological abuse was proposed considering the data. This definition is inclusive of Latiné and other Caribbean voices in South Florida that experience what they call spiritual abuse that goes beyond previous definitions of the phenomenon. These Latiné survivor voices state that the labor, sexual, and other physical types of abuse they experienced all are spiritual abuse. Therefore, I proposed a new definition that includes



their experiences and voices alongside thousands of others who consider spiritual abuse to be more than emotional or psychological abuse. This new proposed definition allows any form of abuse to be considered spiritual abuse so long as God or the sacred is used to justify the abuse, or if God or the sacred is presented as complicit in the abuse. This may be the most significant contribution should further research determine it to be reliable. This new definition is validating for survivors who may have experienced physical abuse, labor exploitation, sexual abuse and other forms of abuse that might not be categorized under emotional or psychological abuse to have a definition that aligns with their own statements. This new definition is also refined and simple enough to be taught to lay people, university students, and those training to be clergy. With a definition that is both operable and simple more research can be done on the phenomenon. The new definition also makes education easier as the phenomenon is easier and clearer to identify. These suggestions if followed may reduce abuse done to preserve spiritual power due to incentivizing factors, but more likely, they will lead to increased resilience and avoidance of abusers, their systems, and their manipulations of God or the sacred.

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