

EXCHANGING AN ABUSIVE FAITH FOR A TRUE AND SIMPLE FAITH

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: I recently spoke at a conference, and two of my talks were on reclaiming our faith. I had mostly positive feedback, but I also had a bit of kickback from those who weren't ready to hear some of the things I had learned in my spiritual journey with Jesus. They wondered if I was throwing out the Bible. Because after all, if you believe submission is for all people – or if you think it's okay to break the Sabbath or get a divorce, then surely you are a heretic who no longer believes the Bible?

I work with emotional abuse survivors – but more specifically women – and even MORE specifically – women of FAITH. Now this niche of women are also dealing with spiritual abuse and brainwashing around the issues of God and the Bible and Church and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in our culture.

So there's a lot of tangled up knots here, and it's hard to know which came first – the spiritual abuse or the emotional abuse? I think they are all wound up with one another, and to wake up to one is to wake up to the other one eventually.

I've talked about this elsewhere, so I don't want to go into a whole lot of detail here, but I grew up in a conservative Christian home. We were into the Bill Gothard thing – and I was a people-pleasing, good girl who felt guilty if I had an angry thought.

I went to a Christian college, taught in a Christian school, went into full time ministry, got married and was a stay-at-home, I had nine kids, homeschooling mom who had long hair and wore skirts and baked whole wheat bread. When Doug Phillips rose to power among the homeschooling folks, I bought every single teaching they sold.

I was a member of John Piper's church and read every book he ever wrote.

I was as brainwashed as they come.

Waking up to all that abuse and getting out took many years. There was a lot of pain and mistakes and uncomfortable feelings and loss. And it was inevitable that I would take a hard look at the beliefs that had informed my worldview and my decisions up until that point. Because those beliefs had created a life that was really screwed up.

And I didn't want to live that way anymore.

I've watched people go through this experience and make the decision to walk away from God. I get it. I mean, if God is really powerful and loves us – but He just lets all this crap happen, then He isn't very good. And who wants to be friends with someone like that? No thanks. Too much cognitive dissonance there.

I thought about it. I thought about walking away from God – but then I realized that I didn't really believe in that God anyway. Not really. The God I had spent my life loving and knowing wasn't anything like that. That's where all my own confusion came from. The God I loved – the God who loved me – I KNEW He didn't approve of what my ex husband was doing or what the church was making it mean.

My problem wasn't God. My problem was the trauma I carried around inside me that caused me to believe I needed the approval of PEOPLE TOO. I had God's approval. I wanted people to love and appreciate me too. So my healing was mostly in that area of learning how to love and appreciate myself – how to take care of myself and let others do and believe what they wanted to. To be okay with that.

So for me – I couldn't walk away from God. I had too many incredibly inexplicable experiences with Him – very personal experiences with Him – that I couldn't just deny. To deny that would be to deny part of who I was. And I was no longer going to throw myself under the bus.

So I kept God – but now all the people were telling me the Bible says this and the Bible says that.

And I knew what the Bible said. But if it said what I knew it was saying – then why did it seem to contradict itself in other places?

Why were there female leaders in the NT church, for example – but it also said women were to be silent in church? There are actually answers for that, I've discovered. I just wasn't aware of them. We don't know what we don't know. That's why one of the most important things we can do for our personal development is to be open minded and willing to learn new things. It doesn't mean we have to believe them, but we may change our minds about a lot of things when we educate ourselves. Nobody knows everything – so let's not pretend that we do – or that someone else does. We don't – and neither do they.

I had to boil my faith down to something simple. A grid I could filter EVERYTHING ELSE

THROUGH in order to help me make sense of things. I decided that grid for me wasn't the Bible. It was Jesus Christ.

The Bible says HE IS THE WORD OF GOD. He is the embodiment of God and the will of God and the love of God. He IS LOVE. He IS TRUTH. He IS the Path.

Now things began to align themselves again with what I had experienced of God my entire life.

And BONUS I discovered there was a world of research and scholarship that had been kept from me in the cult-like environment I had been immersed in my entire life. When the cult excommunicated me (that's what cults do with people who don't obey at all costs – it's a fear and control tactic), I was set free to explore this research and scholarship, and I discovered more of the heart of our Savior.

And now I talk about some of that in my podcast, on my blog – and in public. So I'm going to naturally get some kick back from those who are still immersed in the kind of thinking I've walked away from. And that's okay. It's totally okay.

I think there are two common errors to fall into for those of us on this crazy journey of healing from emotional and spiritual abuse. One error is the error we are coming out of. The error of black and white thinking. Of walking by site and by rules and by man-pleasing and by works instead of by faith and love. The error of believing that God is an abuser – and calling Him a God of love even while He abuses. That's one error. And I think it's lazy thinking and lazy living. It's slapping a list of rules on the wall – and rigidly living according to the rules. That requires no faith, no love, no flexibility, and no effort internally.

But the opposite of that is throwing the entire thing out all together, which I also think is lazy thinking and lazy living. It's saying, "The way I viewed God was all wrong – and I have no answers that makes sense to me – so I'm going to abandon it completely rather than be open to wrestle, lean into the painful process, and grow."

It's taking the list of rules and throwing it out the window.

So it's interesting because those with the list of rules accuse me of throwing the rules out. And those who have thrown the rules out accuse me of keeping the rules. I don't fit in much of anywhere these days. Well – that's not true. I think there is a growing number of us misfits – and so we fit in with the misfits.

I have a piece of paper on my wall. I have my grid. It's got one word on it. LOVE. Why? Because Galatians 5:14 says "The entire Law is fulfilled in a single decree: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

I have seen Christians at times breaking the Law of God – in the name of keeping the Law of God.

We all love to draw lines. It makes things so easy. I've read this, actually: "But where do we draw the lines? What about the lines? WE NEED LINES!" What we need is to resist the urge to have every jot and tittle compartmentalized in neat little files. Got a problem? Simple. Just find the correct file drawer and folder, follow the instructions on the report, and TA DA! Problem solved.

Does that require wisdom? Does that require a day by day walk of faith with a Holy. Dangerous. Gargantuan. God? Whose job is it, anyway, to make all the files (and adjust them occasionally depending on the whims of whoever is in charge at any given moment?) The Pharisees took that job upon themselves, and look where it got them.

Let's imagine we are sitting in a room drinking coffee together and carrying on polite conversation. In the middle of the room is a woman and child covered with black and blue marks. The child's arm is broken. The woman is staring off into space. They are dirty and scared. They are silent. But we all sit and sip, softly and gently discussing our goodness amongst one another. Resting. Just resting. Enjoying our Sabbath resting.

So what I'm trying to do is grab that woman and child and wave my hands in front of the group and say, "YOOO HOOO! See this? See what's going on? AWK!! We've got to HELP these people! Something about the bunch of us sitting here resting while these two suffering souls are in our midst – seems off kilter. Am I high on drugs here? Hello?"

All the ladies stop and stare with wide eyes and veiled annoyance. Some get up and walk out with a sniff. And then someone quietly murmurs, "Don't you know? It's the Sabbath. Let God take care of the poor dears today. We know He loves them." Murmurs of approval ripple through the quiet crowd. Faces soften and relax. Sipping begins again.

"Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, 'Come here.' And he said to them, 'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of

heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." (Mark 3:1-6)

This is powerful. First of all, the Pharisees obeyed the law to the letter, but you can see they do not have love. They are looking for a way to trap God and destroy Him. They did it back then, and they do it today. They have the appearance of godliness, but they deny its power. God tells us to AVOID THOSE PEOPLE. (I Tim. 3:5)

Notice God's reaction? He is angry. He is angry and grieved at the hardness of their hearts. Have you ever seen injustice and felt angry because it was approved of by all the Pharisees around you? Because the perps had hard, unrepentant hearts with no evidence they were going to change in your lifetime? I've seen victims of abuse told that they shouldn't be so angry. "Why the deep anger? That's not very loving and forgiving. Maybe if you were a better Christian, your abuser would leave you alone."

If Jesus were in the room with those quiet, gentle, Sabbath-keeping women, what would He do? I think it is obvious from His Word. And I can safely draw the conclusion that His emotion would be anger, because that's what the Bible teaches us. So when His children, made in His image and desiring to imitate Him, feel a sense of anger stirring in their hearts over the abuses of theology that keeps women and children in abusive homes, I don't believe God is wagging His finger at them in disapproval. I believe He wants us to apply a heart of wisdom. Sometimes that means questioning what we've been taught by other human beings.

Is our anger mixed with sin? Of course. We are tainted creatures. But that doesn't mean we should never feel that emotion or let that anger put feet to our conviction in order to set captives free. Do you think those that fought against the atrocities of slavery or genocide or the murder of pre-born babies did/do so with smiles on their faces and warm fuzzies filling their souls? C'mon folks. We're not in heaven yet. Life is messy. Throwing a floral rug over it won't make the mess go away.

So for me – I refuse to betray myself and my Creator by aligning either one of us with abusers, lies, and stupidity. I will work to learn who I am and who my Creator is by being open minded, studying, listening, and selectively choosing to focus on Truth that aligns with my new, very simple grid of LOVE.

I will also accept that I will never get it all right. I'm not meant to. I'm meant to embrace my humanity and let God be God.

I'm also meant to embrace the humanity of others and let them be who they are. Let them make their own choices and respect their right to do so.

I'm also meant to take on the responsibility of making my own choices and respecting this body, mind, and spirit my Creator has given to me to steward. This means I can say "no" and not have to feel guilty. This means I can and will honor my body and my resources of my brain, my thoughts, my time/money/relationships, and my work.

I'm not meant to manage or take responsibility for the emotions and choices of others. They need to manage their own emotions and choices.

You guys – this is love. This is the kind of love Jesus had for Himself and others. It involves freedom and joy and peace. And this is what I want for each one of you.

Until next time, fly free.