How to Recognize & Respond to Spiritual Abuse in the Church with Anna Kitko

(May 30, 2025)

FRANK:
Spiritual abuse, cults, people that try and take control over your life in a way that is illegitimate and immoral. Does that happen? Yeah. Does it happen in the church? Unfortunately, it does. What can we do about it? How do you get out of it if you're being spiritually abused? How do you get out of a cult?

Well, I've spoken at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville a couple of times, and the head of the Ratio Christi group there, her name is Anna Kitko, does real dynamic work as the head of the Ratio Christi group. But she does a lot more than that.

She holds two undergraduate degrees, one in philosophy from, the University of Florida. She also has two master's degrees, one from RTS, Reformed Theological Seminary, and she has a master's in the psychology of coercive control from the University of Salford in Manchester, UK.

She's right now under supervision for getting her license as a clinical pastoral therapist. It takes 3,000 hours of being under supervision before you get your license. And check this out. Her expertise focuses on spiritual abuse, cultic and coercive control, brainwashing, domestic violence, human trafficking, terrorism, complex PTSD, narcissistic personality disorder, dissociation, and spiritual pathologies, and also very practical theology and culturally taboo subjects.

So, she really can't help us at all in this subject? No, she can. And here she is, the great Anna Kitko, ladies and gentlemen, all the way from Knoxville, Tennessee. Anna, we had a great, fun time at UT Knoxville about a month ago.

And I just wanted to have you on because I learned so much just talking to you offline about the work you're doing. Give our audience here kind of an overview of the work you're doing with

regard to cults and getting people out of situations, spiritual abuse situations. Tell our listeners a little bit about that. Yeah.

ANNA:
Well, first let me say it's really a privilege to be here, so thank you for the invitation. I love talking about this stuff as you know. Yeah, there's a great deal of spiritual abuse going on in our nation. I think it's coming to the fore. And we kind of see that with all of the cult documentaries coming out on, you know, Amazon Prime and on Netflix.

I think, this issue and how vast and how rampant the problem of cult leaders and their abuses is really coming to the fore in as far as the cultural mindset of Americans. So, I'm thrilled to be able to do this work. It's very sad how much work I have on my plate.

So, this is-- There's a negative to this. But treating spiritual abuse and treating what happens when you abuse a spirit, it ends up being a much deeper wound than your average trauma. And especially when somebody is wielding, say, the scriptures, the Christian scriptures in particular, speaking on behalf of Christ and then doing so abusively. It ends up forcing the individual to walk away from what they think is Christianity.

And in reality, all they were doing was walking away from a narcissist who was trying to use Christ to gain credibility, and traction, and celebrity, and all those things. So, I thoroughly enjoy my work, and I love talking about it. So, that's why I'm excited about today.

FRANK:
Now, on our program, just like in the Bible, we're fine with naming names because Paul did. He named people who were false teachers. Do you want to name anybody, or you just want to give us an example of what a false teacher is and what he or she does?

ANNA:
I can say as a blanket statement, what's going on with the New Apostolic Reformation, I think is really troubling, really deceptive. I would be very careful with people who claim to be a part of that movement or present that way. We've seen that come out in the news recently with Mike Bickle, for example, at the head of the International House of Prayer.

This is a rampant problem. I really hope that our seminaries start teaching how to identify it when it occurs, how to protect our flocks from ourselves.

Being really, really critical about the, the fact that our, our field even, even Apologetics can call people to it because of the amount of attention you get for answering questions and the fact that you sound very intelligent and academic and you can get a lot of attention.

And so, it's like lighting a beacon for folks who struggle with narcissistic personality disorder and amongst, amongst other things. So yeah, we can talk. I mean, obviously they are the really obvious ones that we all study in school, like Jonestown. Right? But then you get the smaller ones, and these are the ones that I find the most nefarious.

These are the little standalone guys that are Bible based. So, like The Message with William Branham and his followers. Those are, those are people that you see on the regular that you may not realize are in a cult. You of course have the governing body of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Those guys are cult leaders, and they know what they're doing. And of course, the largest cult in the US as far as the continental US is concerned would be the Latter Day Saints. Any of those prophets, bishops, they know what's going down and they know how deceptive they're being.

FRANK:
When you say Latter Day Saints, Mormons, in other words, a lot of people go, well, they're such nice people. And they are in most cases, and they make great neighbors and all that. But why are they classified as a cult? Because when people think of a cult, they think of coercive control from the top. Does that happen in the Mormon Church?

ANNA:
Absolutely. Oh absolutely. Anytime when you're looking at a framework or a church polity that is top down or pyramid shaped, we're looking at a level of deception just in that framework because you answer to the person above you and the person at the top, is one person.

So, in the case of the Latter Day Saints, you have the prophet who is in charge of receiving new prophecy directly from God and then relaying it to the rest of the congregants amongst the

Latter Day Saints. So yes, really lovely, nice people. And usually when I'm talking about these things, I'm being critical of the leadership.

The scriptures say that we hold people who claim to be leaders to a double standard, especially teachers and—

FRANK:
To a higher standard. Yes, yes, of course.

ANNA:
So, I'm going to focus on the people who are doing the deceiving as opposed to the people who are being deceived. And I think that's only fair. The people who are coercively deceptive have to know what they're doing in order to wield the manipulation. So, it's not like they're blind to it. You can't accidentally, coercively deceive. So, yeah, I'm going to call out all of the prophets in particular.

FRANK:
What are some of their claims and techniques that they use to keep people fearing that if they were to disagree with church doctrine, or the bishop's doctrine, or the head doctrine, that they would somehow be hurt? What do they do to hurt people?

ANNA:
Yeah, in the case of the Latter Day Saints, for example, that framework is an exclusive theology. And by exclusive theology I mean that they believe that they are not simply an iteration of Christian thinking amongst the freedoms of the rest of the denominations, but that they are the exclusive.

And this is in secondary and tertiary theology. So, this is like all of their personal preferences with theology are in themselves salvific. And that to disagree with the prophet is tantamount to disagreeing with God directly. And to do so would put you outside of the camp of Christ, meaning you are definitely no longer saved.

So, leaving Mormonism is tantamount to accepting an eternal, state that's outside of salvation. So, not only will you not receive your own planet, you will not be exalted to godhood under their theology, but also, you'll spend your days in what's called the outer darkness.

So, that's a particularly brutal end for that. To take issue with your leadership is tantamount to taking issue with God. You can't question them, and that's a really, really horrible thing. Christianity, as far as orthodox Christianity is concerned, you can question anything.

The Lord himself invites questioning in Isaiah. We do this all the time, you and I, as apologists. We are inviting questions. We're inviting scrutiny. Truth doesn't flee from scrutiny. If we claim to have the truth, then we should be able to be scrutinized. But in these coercive environments, scrutiny is not permitted. And that's one of the first signs, and basically a tell that you're dealing with a damaging cult.

FRANK:
And if you leave the Mormon Church, not only are you not going to be saved, although they have a different view of the afterlife, they have these, I guess, three levels.

ANNA:
Yes, right.

FRANK:
But you're going to be disfellowshipped from your community, are you not?

ANNA:
That's correct. You will lose everything. It's not simply that you have to go find another church to attend. You will actually lose your entire identity, your community. If you live and work in Utah or Northern Arizona, you'll lose your job. You lose different privileges in your community. You're effectively ostracized, which again is another sign that you're under force of control, in that there's like an end justified means sort of situation with it.

FRANK:
We're talking to Anna Kitko. She has some great insights and great expertise on cults, and spiritual abuse, and how to be treated for it, and get out from under it. We've got a lot more with Anna. She's also the Ratio Christi director at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. She does a great job there. We're back right after the break. Don't go anywhere.

Spiritual abuse, how do you identify it? How do you get out from under it? What is it? Who does it? Did it actually exist in Bible times? We're going to talk all about that with my guest today, Anna Kitko, who is also the UT University of Tennessee at Knoxville Ratio Christi director.

She has a ton of young people who she mentors right on that college campus, in addition to counseling people individually who are trying to get out from under spiritual abuse situations. In fact, Anna, please tell our viewers and listeners, if they're in that situation, where can they go to get some advice, get some counseling?

ANNA:
Sure. If you're here locally, you can head to Full Circle Counseling and Wellness or Integrated Wellness to find me, and to book an appointment in order to get spiritual abuse after care, or to help, or advice on how to get out of a controlling environment. From there you can also go to bemboldened.com which is an international mentoring service run by Naomi Wright.

I'm one of the mentors there, so you can access me in that capacity. And that's just for if you just need somebody to speak with, to have someone who understands who's been in that type of environment so that you don't feel like, gosh, I'm just odd.

This was too weird. I don't even know how to articulate what happened to me. Is this even real? All of the very normal emotions that happen after you've been in a spiritually abusive environment. We have lots of availability for those things. So, please reach out.

FRANK:
So, people can actually get counseling remotely if they go to bemboldened.com is that right?

ANNA:
That's correct. Not only in group sessions, if you'd like to just be in groups of other folks just like you, but also one on one. You just have to pick your mentor and go from there.

FRANK:
Please cover some of the features that are regularly present in the spiritual abuse environments. You mentioned a few with, with LDS. But give us a complete list or at least a bigger list, Anna, if you could.

ANNA:
Sure. Spiritual abuse is marked by an environment in which you start to realize that the person who's claiming to be an authority or speaking on behalf of God or running the ministry or whatever they're claiming to be, is treating themselves as an authority or as a mouthpiece for God but then neglecting every single one of the frameworks that would identify them as authentic.

So, things like actual care of hurting people, are they more interested in advancing themselves as a celebrity? Are they using you? Are you becoming more of a slave and turning into less of a person? That matters. Is your acceptance contingent upon your performance?

How much are you being served by your leadership? Are they kind of treating themselves like a God in and of themselves, like a mini G God? Are ends justifying the means? Like, are you being asked to lie or misrepresent theology in order to advance a certain goal, or to garner traction, or to recruit people for example? Are you manifesting emotional and psychological distress?

Things physically, like, do you look haggard? Does anybody care? Are you exhausted? Are you sleep deprived? Are you food deprived? All those things. What actually is your existence like? Many times, these guys will prey upon the fact that Christians are very grace oriented.

They understand mistakes, they understand the reality of sin, they wish to work hard on behalf of the kingdom. And so, they'll utilize all of those beautiful virtues in order to advance themselves. And you, know, are they bullies in the background? Are you expected to do things like sign NDAs?

That's really strange. Why that? Is there a brand? You know, those-- That's not automatically a problem, but it is a problem if the brand comes against Christ. And in Bible based cult groups, which are the vast majority of the ones here in the US, very often the person who is coercive in their intention is trying to advance themselves as opposed to Christ.

FRANK:
A lot of meology rather than theology, ladies and gentlemen. It's all about me. Follow me. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. [Laughter]

ANNA:
That's right. Right. No double checking, no Googling, yeah.

FRANK:
Well, that's certainly true of Jehovah's Witnesses. When they come to my door and I talk to them and I say, if I give you a book, will you read it? They won't. They won't even take it.

ANNA:
That's correct.

FRANK:
They can't get any information outside of what the Watchtower will tell them.

ANNA:
That's right. And they're treated as though they don't have enough faith. If they do go and test for, you know, being a Berean, for example. That's considered a lack of faith. And they're taught that they're inauthentic as a believer if they don't just blindly trust. And Christ has never asked for blind trust.

FRANK:
You know, if you're ever in a church, ladies and gentlemen, and you hear the pastor or somebody defending the pastor say something like, "Don't touch the Lord's anointed," you might be in a spiritually abusive situation.

Because that phrase actually comes from the Old Testament, I think having to do with Saul. It has nothing to do with pastors today.

ANNA:
That's correct.

FRANK:
And obviously you do want to give honor where honor's due. But that doesn't mean the pastor can't be criticized. Especially if they're going against the scriptures. And they should be called out if they are.

But this don't touch the Lord's anointed seems to be the catch all phrase for these kinds of folks to prevent them from any kind of correction or any kind of sin. Hey man, I'm doing the Lord's work. Get out of my way. You can't in any way criticize me. I mean, how prevalent is that in the situations you've seen, Anna?

ANNA:
Oh, tons. All over the place. I would say nearly constant. And there is a lack of accountability in a lot of these environments where the individual sought their own individual celebrity and control over an area or a group of people. And so, there's nobody over him to which, or her, to which they can, the people can go to say, hey, this is happening.

Hey, I actually was abused by this person physically. You know, they hit me and this is a problem. They have a temper issue. They're behaving in a way in private that is not even remotely Christian, and I'm expected to hold all those secrets for them.

That's completely inappropriate. Completely inappropriate from any type of leader. Yeah, they're more concerned with building up themselves than building up the kingdom. And they expect you to continue to work for them as opposed to the kingdom. So, you cease to kind of be a person. You cease to be someone sacred and treated that way in these environments. And that's a huge red flag when that happens.

FRANK:
That's one of the problems with these non-denominational churches that have no sort of accountability to anyone. Sometimes the pastor is the pope. Right? And you can't-- There's nothing. There's no elder board, there's no you know, there's no church governance that can, you can appeal to. It's just your word against the pastor.

ANNA:
Right. You can't even-- Half the time you can't even-- There's no one to go to for to look at their ordination oversight. What exactly--? Who are these people who said that this person is good to represent us or did they self-elect to do that? That's already a problem.

FRANK:
Yeah, it certainly is. What are the different kinds of cults, Anna? I mean, I know there are-- There's probably a number of different kinds. Why don't you give us a few of them?

ANNA:
We tend to differentiate. So, there could be anything from say like from, in my field, psychology cults. So, this is kind of some of the stuff that you can see on TikTok come out periodically. There are multi-level marketing cults, very, very common. Political cults, cult of personality. We tend to differentiate between damaging cults and cults of personality. Just to, you know, there's a cult around Donald Trump, for example.

FRANK:
Yeah.

ANNA:
That doesn't always mean it's damaging. Sometimes it can. There are damaging cults though that are actively lying and deceiving people. The Hari Krishnas for example. Right? Come to our yoga class. It's not a yoga class. Right? They're about to present you with something you did not consent to.

These things matter in our differentiations, but for the most part we have to remember that cults usually just means, at least historically means a spin-off of an existing religion. So, at one

time, even Christianity was considered a cult of Judaism. Once you get into the cult environment, you can have cults that are positive, you have cults that are negative.

You can have cults of different iterations. And it depends mostly on the coercive, deceptive element to their success as opposed to the open element and the informed consent element of say true Christianity. You never have to be deceived. You don't need to be lied to.

Everything's accessible. You don't have to have some secret knowledge. You don't have to be a Christian for a certain duration of time before you get the secret knowledge like in Scientology for example, where you have to be kind of eased into it over time and with a certain amount of money. You don't have to invest money in order to know Christ in authentic Christianity. All these things really matter.

And it's really the informed consent element to what you're being offered by way of theology is a distinctly important thing to keep in mind as you're considering what church to go to. Are they open and up front, or do you have to figure it out over time?

FRANK:
Give us a-- Obviously, since you're a professional, you won't use a name but give us a situation that you've counseled somebody through that might be a common situation.

ANNA:
Certainly. Okay, I'll use one. An individual who considered himself particularly, capable spiritually. He had an edge that he could talk to God in a way that he believed was profound, dare I say prophetic. And so, he was counseling marriages.

And so, the marriages that he was counseling, if they ended up deriving any benefit from his care, he would invite them to join his church, where he would continue to give new prophecies that he was coming to terms with the end of the world, how things were going.

And the more that you were kind of sucked into the group, the more he would separate you from your household. So, hey, these people don't like that you're coming to this exclusive

group. It's probably because they're demonic. And so, you need to separate from them because the demons are not something that holy people tolerate the presence of.

And so, further and further and further exclusivizing them until he bought a compound in which everybody could move onto the compound. And Covid locked down that compound pretty well. They were all stuck there. He controlled everything from what they ate all the way to how they prayed.

And then he dropped the bomb that he was the manifestation of-- I think it was Elijah, on Earth, and that he was going to reign in the eschaton. And they were there to help him as the exclusive remnant, the witnesses to the end. And by God's mercy, Covid killed the man in his compound. And the only reason why these people got out was because they had to go in his room to figure out how to unlock the bars on their windows.

FRANK:
Wow.

ANNA:
Yes. So, talking about a great mercy in Covid.

FRANK:
Where was this?

ANNA:
This was in Southern California. I know about the case because the main-- The survivor, the one who was the most high up in the eldership of that compound, got in a car and drove until the gas money ran out. And the car lost its gas in my city. And the people heard her story. She was looking for food and said you need to talk to Anna Kitko, and the rest is history.

FRANK:
Wow, she got all the way to Knoxville, Tennessee?

ANNA:
She did, yep. She had just enough. She just kind of drove until she felt like she needed to stop driving and the car ran out of gas here.

FRANK:
Well, that's one way God does equalize things. Everyone dies at some point. Right? [Laughter] The trial period's over.

ANNA:
That's right. Well, there was an easing in with it. Right? He came in as a counselor and then continued to consume each family. Right? To work for him and to do his bidding.

FRANK:
A lot more with Anna Kitko, who has several degrees and counsels people all the time on spiritual abuse. She's also the Ratio Christi director of University of Tennessee at Knoxville. We'll give her website again right after the break, so don't go anywhere. We're back with a lot more.

Do you know how to defend the faith and also engage the culture? Well, if you're anywhere near Tupelo, Mississippi, I'm going to be with my friends at the American Family Radio network at the AFA Activate Summit. That's June 13th, next Friday. Hope to see you there.

Go to our website, CrossExamined.org for more. You can go to the American Family Association website and get information there. Also, don't forget about CIA, the CrossExamined Instructor Academy. That is going to be held in Charlotte for the 18th year or 18th annual CIA.

That's where you're going to learn how to be a better apologist. And if you don't want to present, you don't have to. You can take the non-presenter track. We have a presenting track and a non-presenter track. Just go to Crossexamined.org, click on events. You'll see, what is CIA there? You have to apply. It's not free, but it's well worth it.

We have people that come back five, six, seven, eight times because they get so much out of it. So, check out CIA, the CrossExamined Instructor Academy. Let me go back to my guest, the

great Anna Kitko, who's doing some great work not only as an apologist for the University of Tennessee at Knoxville at the Ratio Christi.

She directs the Ratio Christi group there, but she counsels people on spiritual abuse who have been involved in spiritual abuse. And Anna, before the break you were talking about kind of an extreme example of people actually being seduced to move into a compound.

But I often hear of this happening in what appear to be normal churches, spiritual abuse. Not that they're moving off to a compound. Can you give us an example of that and how you've dealt with it.

ANNA:
Yeah. I'll give you some generic iterations now that I see a lot. So, very deeply, these are Christians who are really wanting to study the Word and be serious about their faith.

And so, they get sucked into environments that are a lot more controlling and authoritative than they would normally tolerate for the reason of serious discipleship. That's what they're looking for. And so, they tend towards, you know, theologies that-- They're the ones listening to John MacArthur sermons on the regular.

Right? Very deeply serious. And these are people who are going to read material from, like, Doug Wilson's side of the things where it's going to be serious, but it's a little bit-- It's almost creepy in how authoritative it is. There's a subordinating element to it, and we're not sure how that's going down.

And Doug Wilson might get in trouble here pretty soon, I think, given the amount of things that are coming out about his little compound in Moscow. But these-- these Christians are serious, right? They want real theology. They're authentic. They want to move forward in maturity. And so, what happens is they then get sucked into whatever the local iteration of somebody claiming to be serious and really offering their own version of slavery, legalism, pietism, asceticism.

There are a lot of these individuals. And narcissistic personality disorder, as a disorder from a psychological perspective, does tend towards very legalistic. They're looking for compliance. They're looking for uniformity as opposed to unity. And those two things can be conflated really, really rapidly.

So, these individuals go into these groups where you've got a leader who has taken a mode that they would say is just really serious Christianity, and they've made themselves the standard of holiness. And they're getting away with it because they are simply presenting an air of I'm deeply holy.

Sin is apart from me. Right? They start saying things like, well, I'm not saying I don't sin anymore. But also, the congregation is saying they don't sin anymore, and they're not correcting them. Or they're inserting themselves as leaders into the lives of the individuals of the congregation in a way that is a massive overstep, like commenting on the privacy of a marriage bed, like inserting eldership protocols into, like, how a kid is raised without the consent of the parents.

Right? It's like. It's too far. It's too controlling. It's too preference oriented. Right? You can start to kind of tell what the preference of the leadership are based on how the women dress. Right? There are certain things that are okay. Like you walk in and all the women have Kavu backpacks, and it's like, where did that come from?

That's kind of weird. Why are--? Or everybody's dressed as a Puritan, and it's like, well, that you're free to do that, but also why? That doesn't seem like the natural extension of freedom in the lives of independent human beings. That's more like somebody somewhere implied that this is the standard of holiness.

And now if you don't look like this, you're under suspicion that you're not really holy anymore. The word we use for this, or at least the word that I use for this, is pseudodoxy. These are the unspoken norms that go uncorrected by the leadership because it works for their ability to continue to control people.

Very subversive, very nefarious. It turns into abuse nearly immediately. We see this a lot in marital problems. So, even as things as dark as marital rape, for example, in the case of, like, the Doug Wilson iterations of things, where it's completely-- It turns into like a master slave element for the men and women of the congregation, and it goes uncorrected. That's a huge deal.

FRANK:
Are you saying that that's going on in his compound or there's been accusations of that?

ANNA:
No, no. I'm absolutely saying that that's going on in Moscow, Idaho. Yep. I will stand by that. There are too many victims of this nonsense that I've taken care of.

FRANK:
Oh, so they've come-- They've come to you for counseling?

ANNA:
Yes.

FRANK:
Okay.

ANNA:
Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah, he's got-- I hope he takes this all very seriously and does something quickly because this nonsense can't keep going on.

FRANK:
How do you treat somebody who has been in this abusive situation? First of all, let me ask you this, because when somebody's in that situation, they probably fear. They're conflicted. On one hand, they are attracted to what is being done. On the other hand, they're repulsed by it.

And they feel that if they leave, somehow, they're going to be-- They're going to be maybe damned forever? You know? Or they're going to be ostracized? So, how do you--? How do you

counsel them? What do you say to them? How do you bring them out and make them whole again?

ANNA:
Yeah, we focus on the fact that spiritual abuse physiologically will shut down 2/3 of a nervous system. So, you cease to be able to have any trust in any of your feelings or the sensations of your body anymore. It's very similar to how the military teaches you to be extremely controlled and to only operate with cognition. Very similar. And so, when I deal with somebody who's come out of a recently spiritual abusive environment, they often feel crazy and like they don't know who they are.

And the initial impact of saying to the person who's been in that type of environment, I see you. You're not crazy. You're allowed to say what your eyes saw because very often they just, they will gaslight. Gaslighting is like, maybe I didn't see what I saw.

Maybe I didn't hear what I heard. You know, maybe I misunderstood, and you didn't misunderstand. Like your brain was operational. You had eyes that functioned. It's okay to say that out loud and just to begin there to get them to begin to trust again the way that a nervous system operates, and that feelings oftentimes, you don't want them to drive.

Right? But feelings are not nothing. They very often that deep sinking something's wrong is your spirit. And you're allowed to focus on that for a minute. Go, stop. I'm going to stop. I'm not going to move forward. I'm just going to investigate. I'm unnerved. Right? I need to stop. And it's okay to do that. You actually are valuable. You are not just a toy in someone else's game.

FRANK:
And what have you seen that--? What's the tipping point that causes people to say I need to get out of this? I need counseling.

ANNA:
They normally have a mental breakdown of sorts. After you put somebody under that much pressure and scrutiny and that it's God who is doing the judging of the person. Right? The person who's representing God has set themselves up as God's mouthpiece.

And so, now the fact that you're not performing for the ministry, the way that the leader thinks you ought to be is now tantamount to you losing your salvation as opposed to you needing a sabbatical, or you needing a spa day, or you need to just work somewhere else, or take a break because you matter.

And it's okay to like have needs to take care of your family, to not forfeit your marriage covenant on behalf of whatever the ministry leader wants for you. Those things are all critical components to the life of a Christian, and they're not at odds with one another. You don't have to-- You don't have to put yourself aside in order to serve in a way that's healthy in the kingdom of God.

And so, when somebody has been put under so much pressure, something breaks. Anything from even an aneurysm. I've seen, you have physiological reactions. You can have what's called idiopathic diseases show up. The idiopathic in clinical terminology means we have no idea where this came from.

A lot of times that's a psychological crush point. It's your brain going, I'm in so much distress, I'm going to make it physically impossible for you to go to work. And it's those places that, where nobody can help them anymore and they would rather be in hell than to continue in the ministry, that they show up at the door and say, I, don't know what else to do.

This is why that work is so important, is because these beautiful individuals have been horribly abused and they are not in hell. They are just authentically telling the truth and unwilling to continue to lie to themselves about it anymore. It's wonderful. It's a virtue.

FRANK:
You also point out, and I'd like you unpack this for us, that there were people saying they spoke for God even in the Bible, and they didn't. Can you unpack that for us?

ANNA:
Yes. Jeremiah, chapter five. One of my favorite moments in Scripture because Jeremiah says that the Lord refers to the people who are doing this, who are behaving as though they are prophets, speaking as on behalf of God.

But they're actually talking about themselves. He calls them fat and sleek, their dispositions. They're fat and sleek in their dispositions. And I think that's such a good way of describing precisely what narcissistic personality disorder looks like in real time.

Right? Their headspace is fat and sleek. They're gluttonous in what they're willing to consume from the people around them for their own gain. And that's what these prophets were doing, and that's what Jeremiah was warning against, is that they're making things up to gain clout, power, money, any of the things that you would gain nowadays by doing the same thing.

And we need to be really mindful of the people who claim, in fact, even with the NAR, which I mentioned earlier. People who are regularly claiming to be prophets who are prophesying falsely. And we know because you tweeted it and wouldn't you-- Wouldn't you note it like the person you said was going to be president isn't.

And that makes you a false prophet. And we don't need to listen to your prophecies anymore. God doesn't need these prophets. He can handle it himself. So, once they've messed up, I think it's time for, bye. We don't need to listen to you anymore.

FRANK:
Yes, as John says in 1 John 2, all that's in the world, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life. Those three things, ladies and gentlemen, sex, money, and power, can cause any of us or influence any of us to sin. And, we have to check ourselves by those three: sex, money, and power. Because especially if you're in a situation where you have power over people, you might tend to use that for your own selfish desires.

And that's what happens in cults. And it gets to the point that it gets so far out of control that many people are abused by it. And my guest today, Anna Kitko, deals with people who are

coming out of these situations. And give the website again, Anna, in case people are just tuning in.

ANNA:
Certainly, if you're local to the Smoky Mountain area, it's Full Circle Counseling and Wellness as well as Integrated Wellness Tennessee. And then of course, if you're global and you want access, Beemboldened.com.

FRANK:
Beemboldened.com. We'll put that in the show notes. If you're listening to this on radio. Find the I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist podcast or YouTube channel, CrossExamined YouTube channel. You'll see all the notes in the show notes. And we've got another segment with Anna, so don't go anywhere. We're back right after the break.

Spiritual abuse, how do you identify it? How do you get out of it? How do you recover from it? My guest, Anna Kitko, who's counseled a lot of people who have been spiritually abused can give us some insights and also some resources that we can go to if we think we have been spiritually abused or we know people that are in a situation right now. In fact, Anna, I'd like you to unpack for us, the things someone needs to look for if they're in a situation that may signal that they're in a spiritually abusive situation. What would they be?

ANNA:
Yeah, so the number one is you can't ask questions. You can't question the authorities. There's something about the expectation that you're just supposed to obey, that there's a compliance type protocol, and that scrutiny is not welcome. Huge red flag. You want to scrutinize away, and you want to have leadership that is open to them being tested, that really matters.

You want to look for an accountability framework. Beware of a place that has no oversight for the leadership that really matters or if the leadership themselves are their own oversight. Really problematic, turns into cultishness very quickly. Make sure you pay attention to any type of performance being a part of the acceptability of you in the congregation.

You're there to receive the comfort and the knowledge of God as you move through your life in the sanctification process and as to be introduced to the Lord Jesus Christ if you haven't been introduced yet. You are not there to perform for a bunch of elders.

You're not there to do anything but be served. And if in turn you desire to serve others, praise God. But the leadership should be servant oriented. So, any type of leadership that wants you to do all of the work and for them to sit back and enjoy all of the work that you're doing, that's a problem.

Then of course looking for any type of bullying, that's another one of the big ones. If the elders or the pastor are different in staff meetings or in their home life than they are in the pulpit or on the stage, you have a major problem. They are two-faced and that's a huge deal.

FRANK:
I haven't asked you this, so I don't know if you've looked into this. I listened to one episode of the Mars Hill podcast.

ANNA:
Oh yes, Mark Driscoll.

FRANK:
--with Mark Driscoll. Have you looked into that? I haven't. So, I don't have a strong opinion on it. What's your view?

ANNA:
Mark has a lot of problems. My view is that Mark really struggles with narcissistic personality disorder himself. He did not take seriously what happened at Mars Hill and set up shop in Arizona and is trying to do it again. I'd be very careful with him.

I think this is one of those cases where you have an individual who is wielding Christianish things in order to garner clout, and power, and have you pay for their lifestyle for the rest of their lives.

I'm not a huge fan. I don't like that he did not show any humility or repentance. I think I would love to see that from him in the future. You know, the same thing is true with the stuff that's coming out on Sons of Patriarchy, for example, which is a podcast documenting what's going on with Doug Wilson's stuff.

So, if you want to-- You want to kind of do the same thing as Mars Hill, you can do that with that podcast there. I would love to see Doug actually address some of the stuff. I come from the same tradition that Doug claims to hail from. And I've got a lot of questions, because John Calvin never taught half the things coming out of his mouth. So, this is a huge problem. Huge, huge problem. Where is his oversight exactly?

FRANK:
Well, here's the interesting thing. So many of these guys say so many things that are right that it confuses people. It may have been Chesterton. I don't know if he said this, but it sounds like Chesterton. He said that discernment is not being able to tell the difference between true and false, but to be able to tell the difference between true and almost true.

ANNA:
Right.

FRANK:
And that is true discernment. And there are, obviously, there are a lot of distinctions and nuances in theology that if you're untrained, you might miss. And that's where charismatic leaders can take advantage of people.

ANNA:
Absolutely, absolutely. Because when you're going to church, going to go to church, you're not there to fight a war against coercion. That's not why you showed up. Most of us have lives, and families to raise, and things to be concerned with, and businesses to run, and any of the other things you've been designed by God to do for the body of Christ, and praise God for that.

So, when you walk into the church doors and they're designed to hide from you in a coercive environment, what is actually going on, that can be shocking. You did not, you know, this is

supposed to be the safest place in the world. This is supposed for kids are, you know, going to Sunday school, and where you're building community.

So, for that space to be "almost right", right? Satan can creep in in a heartbeat, and he will. And so, we need to be mindful of that, unfortunately. That's just the reality for the US right now, as well as abroad, but very much so in the US.

FRANK:
What else would be helpful to our listeners to know about this, Anna?

ANNA:
Yeah, if you could come alongside those who have been spiritually abused, they're a great deal. It's terrifying to the high degree that it is, of how many people-- I think the last poll that was done, it was something in the 80's.

It was like 80% of Americans claim to be both Christian and having experienced spiritual abuse in Christian settings. We now have frameworks clinically to measure those things. I'm one of the authors of one of them. Especially in like, deliverance settings.

I'm noticing there's a great deal of abuse going on in these. In SOZO sessions, for example. I do not recommend going to any of those. Be very careful in any type of exorcism setting, especially if they're charging money. Any type of prophetic room sort of situations where you're going to receive your prophecy for the day, I would very much avoid that.

That's if they're charging for it, that's simony, which is warned against in the scriptures. They're already breaking every protocol in the scriptures they could to warn, to warn you that, hey, this is not a safe environment. Don't go in there.

This is not Holy Spirit run. This is somebody trying to get your money. So, please be careful and come alongside those who have been taken advantage of and let them know that they're seen and they're not crazy.

FRANK:
Yeah. So, many people want to get a word from God every day when the word of God is sitting on their bookshelf, and they ignore that but want some sort of special revelation from God.

Ladies and gentlemen, if God was going to tell you what to do every day, why would you even have a Bible? Why would you have a book of Proverbs? What's the point? You know? Not that God can't communicate with you directly if he wanted to. Of course he could. But is that the normative way God works? I don't think so.

I don't think he works that way normatively. And he gives us a word so we can study the word and know what we ought to do. And this word everyone has so we can study it together and learn from one another. But if God were to communicate with us every day uniquely, how would we even test that?

ANNA:
Big deal. But for the most part too, God doesn't charge. He doesn't charge money. That's all of the fraudulent gods. So, as soon as that happens, just run. You have plenty of other options. Just run.

FRANK:
What kind of recommendations do you have for apologists to help their communities when they see people have been spiritually abused?

ANNA:
Yes. Yeah. Make sure that you're not belittling them. Make sure that you're not, you know, being like, well, you were really dumb, like you didn't see this coming. That's not the case. Most people do not join cults. They just postpone leaving them.

The whole design of a coercive environment is that you won't see it coming. And if they were effective, no one would, including apologists. They would be walking in. In fact, I've got two cases where really good apologists didn't see that they were actually teaching an apologetics class in one of the coercive control environments and being wielded as an emblem of, look how serious we are.

Look how effective we are. We're teaching apologetics. Who else is doing that? And they were using the apologist to hide behind.

FRANK:
Wow.

ANNA:
Yes. So, we need to be really, really humble about how effective these brain spaces are and that they're designed to be that way, and if we can study what that looks like and there are many ways to do that. Then we can identify them faster, become immune to them.

FRANK:
Are there any books you'd recommend?

ANNA:
Yes, there is.

FRANK:
What would you recommend? I know there's probably not one but just give us one of your top recommendations.

ANNA:
Right. The quickest one, the easiest one. This is really good. Right? This is 'Understanding Spiritual Abuse: What it is and How to Respond.' That's Karen Rutkovsky.

You can get it on Amazon. It's quick, it's easy. If you're on my end of the spectrum with training, and you're deeply serious in the Reformed camp, necessarily, stuff, that kind of stuff. Michael Krueger did 'Bully Pulpit.' And that's for Christian leaders in that setting to be mindful of how quickly that Reformed theology and its caveats can be wielded in a way that's narcissistic and damaging.

There are lots. But if you want-- If you are ex-military, some of the stuff that you can look at is the Korean War and what happened with the POWs post Korean War. And some of those

studies, just Google them. Wonderful. You get an idea. Because the way we know about how coercive control works and the nervous system impact it has is by studying POWs from that war who endured it when it was being designed.

FRANK:
Wow.

ANNA:
Yes.

FRANK:
Well, Michael Krueger is very good. He's here in Charlotte at RTS Reformed Theological Seminary, your alma mater. And he's not only good on this, he's good on the canon. That's kind of his focus. You know, what book should be in the New Testament or in the Bible. So, he's got a-- I think he's got a blog called 'Cannon Fodder.'

ANNA:
That's right. It's excellent. That's right.

FRANK:
Yeah. So, Krueger's good in a lot of things, so yeah. Look him up, ladies and gentlemen. Anna I, you know, when my wife and I first became Christians, we got invited to an International Church of Christ Bible study. You know who they are, right?

ANNA:
Yes, yes. Out of Orlando.

FRANK:
Yeah, well, at that time, they were out of-- They were the Boston movement.

ANNA:
Okay, yes!

FRANK:
Yes. And same thing. They would kind of love bomb you. You know, like, they would come over to the house, and we had a baby at that point and one on the way. And they'd bring three people. One person-- Or four people. One person would sit down and do a Bible study with you.

You know, their Bible study. Another person would watch the kid, another person would cook dinner, and another person would clean the house. And you'd go, wow! This is such a good deal. [Laughter] Right? And, before you know it, they started making demands on you.

ANNA:
Yeah.

FRANK:
And we started reading the scriptures for ourselves. And we're going, this is bizarre.

ANNA:
Yeah.

FRANK:
This is-- You know, they would tell you, you know, you can't buy that car or you can't go out for dinner, or you-- And we' going, what? Are you kidding me?

ANNA:
Yeah. The personal preferences is like, why are you commenting on that?

FRANK:
Right.

ANNA:
It's an odd thing to go after.

FRANK:
Right, yeah. You love that car more than God! You know, that kind of stuff. [Laughter]

ANNA:
We need it. Yeah. Give it to us. Yeah. We'll use it better than you.

FRANK:
That's right. That's right. [Laughter] So, it's just-- The stuff you were saying-- I go, yeah, I can remember that. We were fortunate enough not to get deeply involved in that. And shortly after that, went to seminary. But, yeah, there are cults out there.
So, Anna, thanks so much for all your expertise and doing this podcast. If you would, give the website again both for Ratio Christi and for Embolden.

ANNA:
Yes. So, ratiochristi.org, that's an international apologetics ministry campus apologetics alliance. Highly recommend. Love working for them. And then of course, BeEmboldened.com for international spiritual mentoring.

FRANK:
Beemboldened.com and you can see all those links in the show notes, ladies and gentlemen. Look for the I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist podcast, or the CrossExamined YouTube channel. Two words, Cross Examined with a D on the end of it. All right, see you next time. God bless.