

Episode-209

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Joining me today is Naomi Wright. She's the founder of beEmboldened Ministries, and today we're going to be talking about the topic of spiritual abuse. Naomi has a testimony of how the Lord has brought her through some experiences that enables her to speak on these issues in a very informed basis. So this is a question that we get a lot of people contacting us about, had bad experiences in church, people who are involved in cults, people involved in spiritual abuse of families and so forth. So I wanted to have Naomi come and just speak to some of these, some of the frequent questions we receive. So Naomi, welcome to the program.

Naomi Wright

Thanks so much for having me. Yeah, I'm glad to be here.

Shea Houdmann

Naomi, first tell our audience a little about yourself, how the Lord has moved and worked in your life, and then what led you to start beEmboldened Ministries?

Naomi Wright

Oh, for me to have started beEmboldened Ministries, he has had to move in some really big ways because that definitely was not my plan. It was not my radar to do. I was born and raised in what I refer to as a pseudo-Christian cult, and I call it that because I was raised to believe that I was Christian. I was the true Christian. I was the chosen, the remnant, all of those kinds of references that are common for cults. And we believe that. My dad was the founder and leader of what was a pretty extreme splinter group of something else. He had been excommunicated because of some quote unquote new revelation he had had. And part of that at least connected with basically bringing polygamy back. And so I did grow up in a polygamist family, so I was not a fundamentalist Mormon or anything like that. People tend to think that, but the rest of the theology did not match. It's just one component that would overlap.

Naomi Wright

So coming out of that kind of environment, I still went to public school. I led this very kind of duplicitous life where I had to keep a lot of secret because

we're in New York State. It's definitely not legal to have more than one wife and have families kind of all over the country. And so I grew up just really keeping things a secret and really filtering what I would say about my life and about my family. My mom worked for the school, which definitely made it even more difficult. And coming out of that, going to college and marrying outside of the group, ultimately I realized that I had been a cult when I was 28, which is 11 years ago now.

Naomi Wright

I started coming out in different kind of phases, again, marrying outside of the group, going to a college and getting a degree and things like that, which women were encouraged to do. But that was when it fully clicked with me that it had been a cult. And from there, I ended up going to seminary to get another master's degree because I learned well that way. Certainly not everyone has to, but I learned well in the classroom. And that is what really started to get my feet under me on how do I read the Bible? How do I apply scripture? How do I weed through? How do I know what's true and what's not true? And God moved so much through that education, which ultimately then led into feeling like it was time to share what He has done for me. And that was the start of beEmbodened about four years ago.

Shea Houdmann

So what is the mission and vision for beEmbodened Ministries?

Naomi Wright

Sure. So our mission is to come alongside people who have a knowledge of spiritual abuse, whether they are desiring prevention for themselves, their children maybe who are off to college. That tends to be a less rooted time in a child's life where they might be more apt to be victimized. All the way from that prevention side to people who have experienced abuse, they're seeking to heal, they're seeking to rebuild, they're seeking to figure out things like I did, like what is actually true and how do I know it? And how do I also deal with all the stuff going on internally? Because depending, it can be a real traumatic experience to live through, and I use that in a legitimate way, not just throwing around the word trauma. And also preventing re-victimization, because re-victimization unfortunately is very real. People can end up hopping from one pot of boiling water into another one because they don't really get their feet under them. They don't find resources like Got Questions or like

be emboldened first, and then they wind up in something else. And so I meet people who have multiple experiences of abuse.

Shea Houdmann

Let me go to a question that I've seen several times that gets into a good introduction to the rest of what we talk about. So for someone like you said, who you didn't realize you had been in a cult until you were around 28 years old, what are signs that people need to look for that the group that they're involved in is either a cult or at least spiritually abusive?

Naomi Wright

Sure. So we're actually, we just started what's to be a two-part series on what are some cautions to look out for in regards to character of leadership and theology doctrine of leadership. So we sort of have these two different categories, so they certainly can overlap. They don't always overlap. We can see people with really bad theology who have good character. They're otherwise like nice people and aren't doing any of the other character issues that we find kind of over in that section. And then again, sometimes we see both overlapping.

Naomi Wright

But one of the key markers that people tend to recognize when they're within the group is when someone else is leaving, how they're treated when they leave. And that can be a really big tell. If we are not blessing others on their way out, if they're moving from one congregation to another for whatever that may be, that's something to really consider because we are all a part of the greater body of Christ and the big C church. And so if someone is relocating or if someone is needing to make a change for some reason, it's indicative of a very kind of controlling culture if we're not able to wish someone well as they're making that transition and recognize we can still get together with them because we're still all a part of the family of Christ. So that's one that definitely stands out to me. But if I were to list, as we're going through this curriculum, we're writing, there's probably going to be 10 to 12 in each category. So there's a lot that we can keep our eyes out for.

Shea Houdmann

Maybe the most frequent question that we receive in this area would be, how do I recognize a Christian leader, a spiritual leader who's being abusive in how

they use authority? What would you say the specific signs for that side of this issue?

Naomi Wright

So there's different markers for that that people will reference, but I would say probably the most widely accepted currently is what's called the bite model. And so I'll define that a little bit for anyone who's unfamiliar. So Steve Hasen is the one who created it. He's not Christian. He had an experience himself back when he was a teenager, slash early 20s, somewhere in that range, and has gone on to really build his career on cults specifically. But there's an overlap here between cult abuse and spiritual abuse at large.

Naomi Wright

I would say there's a spectrum to it. I mean, we can have church hurt, where it's more of a microaggression. So it doesn't constitute abuse. And then we have abuse, which is more so where being emboldened hangs out. And then that goes all the way to cult abuse, or could be a compound, off the grid, something like that.

Naomi Wright

So when I think about cult specific, I think about the bite model. And again, there's some overlap with spiritual abuse too. It doesn't really have to be a cult. And the letters stand for B is behavior control, I is information control, T is thought control, and E is emotional control. And so if we're seeing control in any of these areas, we potentially have an abuse situation. We could have an accidental abuse situation. We could have someone who is needing further character development. They're not where we need them to be yet in their sanctification process for them to have that position of leadership. And they could be very open to feedback and wanting to make reparations and apologize and make changes. So that's always something for us to navigate as well.

Naomi Wright

If it really is falling into the abuse category, and there isn't an opportunity, doesn't mean the person's still staying. But if someone is not interested in making a change, then we start to see other areas of control come into play where they're also controlling the narrative. So we're getting into information control, we're probably getting into some thought control, some information.

And so it can build from there. So referencing back to that bite model, again, the B-I-T-E, we don't necessarily have to have all four in order to constitute spiritual abuse. And if we're thinking of a cult, we would be looking for examples from all four of those, the B, the I, the T, and the E.

Shea Houdmann

Well, that's very helpful. I had not specifically heard the bite model outlined in that format, but I would definitely agree with all four of those points would be definite warning signs, not necessarily that you're in a cult or that the person is spiritually abusive, but red flags, if nothing else, for you to be aware of. I know you love studying the Bible. You love theology, as do I. What are some of the biblical or theological beliefs that you would say are very common in a cultic or spiritually abusive environment?

Naomi Wright

I'm seeing right now, if I think about the audience that we're serving and different conversations I'm having, I'm seeing a lot of confusion in regards to words of faith, kind of the name it and claim it. A lot of confusion in regards to prosperity, for sure, with the prosperity gospel. And a lot of confusion in regards to hyper-focusing on the end times and what that's supposed to look like. And I tell people, we can absolutely look at eschatology and have those conversations, a kind of a hyper-focus on it where we're trying to figure it all out. And people claim that they know things that we know in scripture they don't know, and we see the false prophecies and things like that. Okay, now we've crossed into a problematic area. Just talking about it and staying within biblical bounds, that's great. But now we've gone too far. So I see a lot of that too.

Naomi Wright

And a lot of confusion in regards to Holy Spirit and relationships with Spirit. That is a very confusing area for people. It is so commonly twisted and connects again with that word of faith movement too, where it's like, well, you're just not believing enough, or something's going on between you and your relationship with the Lord in some form.

Shea Houdmann

No, for sure. Those are definite markers, especially the end times one. I mean, I've always been interested in the end times. I love studying it. I love reading the Book of Revelation and books written on the end times. But thankfully, the

Lord has never allowed me to become so obsessive about it or so laser-focused that I don't pay attention to other things that are equally or more important. So no, I get that. And like you said earlier, being interested in the end times is not the sign of a problem, but once you get into the date setting, once you get into, oh, if you don't agree with me on this very obscure end times belief, there's something wrong with you, that's when it becomes abusive and dangerous for sure.

Naomi Wright

Right. Well, and you're kind of connecting to something else too that would be more of like a character flag that's concerning. And that's when someone just doesn't allow people to ask questions. And I love, I mean, you literally are here representing Got Questions. Like, hey, people do have questions.

Shea Houdmann

We allow people to ask questions. That is for sure. Yeah.

Naomi Wright

Right. And that's important. And so when we don't see that, we start to see that control. Like, don't question me. Like, I'm the leader. And the leader doesn't necessarily have to be the senior pastor. The leader could be over the volunteers. It could be a mentor who has just looked up to. It could be a spouse in a household. I mean, this can look like different things. It can be a missionary organization. So it doesn't necessarily mean the senior pastor. It could be anyone that we're looking up to who is in some kind of position of spiritual authority in our lives. And so, yeah, when they're shutting down the opportunity to question and to wonder and to get curious, that can be a sign of control that can lead to other forms of abuses as well.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely. Well said. Next question. For someone who's maybe seen these red flags that we've discussed up to this point and said, I'm in a spiritually abusive situation, what sort of advice do you give of how someone can extricate themselves from a situation like that and do it safely?

Naomi Wright

It is. I would say that it would be more nuanced to if someone is basically someone's kind of living situation. What kind of group are they a part of? Is it more enmeshed versus, okay, this is a place where yes, I volunteer and I

attend on Sundays versus no, like for me, like my dad was the leader of it. So I mean, I live with the guy. I mean, so it can look different.

Naomi Wright

I would definitely recommend that you reach out for help, reach out to someone outside of that community. Maybe you still have the information of someone else who has left. And as scary as I know that can be, because you've likely been told not to talk to that person, maybe as far as it would be sinful to talk to that person, or at least know culturally, it's just, it's a no, no. So I know there can be a lot of anxiety and a sense of risk that feels like is going into making that call, but it can provide a sense of solidarity as well as just give us some information. We may still not choose to believe everything, maybe we shouldn't believe everything, but it starts to give us an alternative view that we can at least consider, begin to weigh, see if it's aligning with some of what we're seeing and kind of validate some of those concerns. And then again, reaching out for some support as you're able.

Naomi Wright

I think there's so much to weed through and depending on where you kind of get connected, even on social media, on the internet, we can wind up in other problems by accident. I know I already mentioned that, but one that people might not have on their radar who are trying to step away is the deconstruction movement and how that can lead people into trying to deconstruct their faith in totality versus giving a real view of the evidence for scripture and how massive our evidence pile is at this point. So again, trying to reach out and find someone who could kind of walk alongside of that with you is absolutely a gift. It's something that was really difficult for me to find during certain periods of my life because people doesn't really get my context and so that made it more difficult, but that's why we found it beEmboldened. That's why we've got resources, Got Questions so people have a place to start, so they're not journeying it alone.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, that's so true. Whether it's a cult or just a super controlling authoritarian family member or all situations can vary greatly what the best way to get yourself out of the situation can be. BeEmboldened has more resources for that as well, but maybe these next two questions to me and what I know about beEmboldened and the research I've done, the questions we received

are probably the two most practical questions. First, for someone who knows someone who is in the midst of leaving or has left a spiritually abusive situation, how can we come alongside such a person and encourage them and point them in the right direction so to speak?

Naomi Wright

I love this question so much. I so appreciate people who are wanting to know more because they want to come alongside others because again, it can be hard to find and it can be hard to be that person, so I also want to empathize with anyone who's trying to come alongside someone. It's something that we probably haven't experienced before and we're trying to figure it out as we go along and first of all, inevitably, you're going to step on some things by accident. You're going to accidentally say something that's upsetting and so I highly recommend when you're wanting to connect with someone, you're wanting to offer that love and support and that care to just start with, I don't really know what I'm doing and I recognize I don't really know what I'm doing and I can ask you but you might not really know what you need either, so I just want you to know that my heart's in the right place and I'm going to try and please know that the communication is fully open. If I say or do something that was like, please tell me because I would want that feedback because I want to be helpful and maybe we can kind of learn through this together in our friendship and our relationship, so I would just set open that up, be like take the pressure off you, take the pressure off the other person, you two are going to do your best here and inevitably again, some stuff's going to get tripped along the way, so that would be my first step.

Naomi Wright

And then from there, I would caution against a couple of things and I would say this because I always say this in regards to grief and grieving is a big part of someone's journey who's experienced spiritual abuse and so some of what I say may make you think of grief if you're familiar with the grieving process, but there's an overlap because any of us have experienced spiritual abuse, we've experienced loss, whether it's a loss of what we thought someone was, it's a loss of community, it's a loss of our worldview to some extent depending on what kind of changes we're going through, maybe it wasn't really Christian like in my story and so grieving is definitely going to be a part of that journey.

Naomi Wright

So when someone's grieving, we really want to be cautious about offering platitudes like it's all going to be okay or saying I'm going to pray for you if you're not, so please make sure if you say I'm going to pray for you, really do it because that person does need your prayer, prayer is huge and they're going to need it and then don't worry about bringing it up and kind of quote unquote sort of like reminding them of the experience. I hear that a lot and I understand people can be like well, if they don't bring it up, maybe they're not thinking about it, I don't want to bring up something bad, I don't want to bring up something that I know hurt them, I promise you they have not forgotten, they're not going to forget period and so you don't have to worry about bringing it up, it just helps to let them know it's okay that they're thinking about it and it's okay that they're still feeling it and so you have the freedom unless the person has said hey, could we just not today, I'm trying to take a break, think about something else, I want a distraction, I want a healthy distraction, that's all well and good but in general, go ahead and bring it up and again, you can learn along the way.

Naomi Wright

I think the last comment I'll make Shea, if I can add one other thing to this is people have experienced spiritual abuse, this is something that's so tragic about it and I think it's just one of the most evil aspects about spiritual abuse is it twists and it creates a trauma and it can be a nervous system actual like triggered response to what actually does help and heal, which is Jesus and God's word and a good healthy church community and so it can be natural for us to want to encourage someone who has experienced spiritual abuse to get back in the Bible because we know that God will meet them there or for them to get back in a church community because we love our church community and we know how beautiful that can be but those are the very things that they thought were good before that went wrong and went very wrong and so it's typically going to take people some time to be able to do those things again and I would let people know don't get too worried, it's going to be okay.

Naomi Wright

It took me a while, I remember I realized I had been a cult four years into my marriage with my husband or sorry, not four years, four months. We were just newlyweds and he's like and all of a sudden I was really struggling to go to

church and I was struggling to read my Bible and he got really concerned, he's like oh my goodness, I married this woman and like is she going to leave Christ like what's happening and understandably he was pretty stressed about that and so in response he's trying to push things and it just scared me even more and so I really needed to slow things down and I remember telling him I promise you I am seeking the Lord. I want to know who he really is and I know that he's real. Not everyone does. Some people question that. I knew he was real and like just trust this relationship with him. I'm not leaving, this isn't me leaving. I just can't do some of those things today but I'm moving towards it and I want it and I'm not going to give up and sure enough I'm able to be part of a church community and able to go to seminary and love reading my Bible and all of those things and so while those are absolutely the person who wants to offer those is correct, the body of believers and God 100% is the Lord is the only one who can truly heal someone and so he can meet us though as we go for a walk too if that's what we can handle at that time and I've seen him show up for people so take some of that pressure off, it's going to be okay.

Shea Houdmann

Naomi, I love that. I love how especially you express the coming at it, the humble spirit even admitting to the person, look, I've never done this before so I apologize in advance if I say anything offensive or dismissive or just demonstrating my poor understanding of what you've been through and I think that right there can open doors in so many areas where you're trying to help someone who's like, I've never gone through this, I don't know what your experience but I'm here to help, how can I help, that sort of thing. Like I said, can really take the edge off of anything that bad or not ideal that happens from that point forward so I think that's excellent advice.

Shea Houdmann

The other question that we get from people, it's slightly from the other side for someone who's experienced spiritual abuse and never wants anything to do with any form of church or organized religion or anything like that, how we come across someone like that, how can we minister to that person who has that mindset?

Naomi Wright

I think of it this way, so pulling from my education as a mental health professional, kind of coming alongside people with that lens too, I know that when someone has experienced something like spiritual abuse, they're going to require a few things and one of those things is what's called a corrective experience and that's not meant like a disciplinarian kind of thing, it's meant as an experience that is contrary to the abuse that they experienced. So I can tell someone all day long that the church isn't all like that, there's really incredible churches and it's true and I know it's true and I can tell people that and they can even know, okay yes, I understand that yes, that is true, like I'm sure there are and that makes sense but if they don't have an experience of it, it's going to be a lot harder for them until they do and so those of us who have the opportunity to meet someone who is struggling in the way you just described, we have the opportunity to be that corrective experience for someone.

Naomi Wright

So we can, the best that we're able, love them as Christ does and so we get to show them that outside of the four walls of the church building, we can show them that as the body of Christ in our day-to-day and through that relationship of showing up, of hearing what they have to say, even though hearing what they have to say may really hurt our hearts and like I said, may also like cause us some concern for their future, just showing up and continuing to be there and having that steadfast like perseverance of I'm going to be here and I am going to love, I'm going to seek to understand, I'm not going to agree with things that I don't agree with but I'm still going to be here and I'm going to be a friend and that offers someone that again, that corrective experience because it's like, wait, this person's different. I think we hear that a lot in people's testimonies of how they came to Christ, right? I know that's part of my husband's testimony is those people are different and I'm curious about that and I think for someone who's experienced spiritual abuse, they can see a God-honoring Christian as different and that can be very healing.

Shea Houdmann

I find that to be very true. Whether it's the hands of feet of Jesus ministering and kindling like that or even speaking the truth in love, so few people have experienced that, that all of their experiences with Christians in the past were

someone who was unloving, uncaring or wow, they really knew the Bible well but they had no ability to communicate it with any love. So seeing how Christians are supposed to be, how we're supposed to be followers of Christ, how the Holy Spirit is supposed to be empowering us to minister in the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit, those sorts of things, representing true biblical Christianity can really open eyes because it's different. It's different than what people who've been involved in spiritual abuse have ever experienced but it's also different than what most of the world has ever experienced. It's definitely not what most people think of when they think of Christians or those outside the church.

Shea Houdmann

So Naomi, thank you for your insight.

I would just love to give you a moment or two to share if our audience, someone who's experienced spiritual abuse or wants to minister to someone, wants to just learn more about it, how can they find out more about you and the ministry God's called you to at beEmboldened ministries.

Speaker 1

Absolutely. So yeah, if you're falling into any of those categories, if you just want to learn more, which is wonderful, we need all the people out there possible who know more about this issue because ultimately what can and does happen is people can walk away from the faith. And so it's a big deal. There's a lot at stake and so us being informed is huge. And so yeah, I love to help educate. You're welcome to find us at beEmboldened.com. So just beEmboldened.com. And from there, you can find us on social media, you can find our YouTube channel, you can reach out, you can see the services that we offer.

Naomi Wright

And we have a wide range of services. So we mentor people, we come alongside those who have suffered or those who are loving someone who is maybe suffering and needs that help in supporting someone else. So we offer those kinds of services. We have our BE Plus, which is a month-to-month subscription service where you get different benefits, different gatherings and discounts and things like that.

Naomi Wright

We also have a growing digital course library that where you're adding our next two digital courses actually just got the edited files back yesterday. So those are coming later this year. And all of these resources are designed to help, again, from those different perspectives of prevention, as well as the healing and the rebuilding for someone who has suffered.

Shea Houdmann

Fantastic. So we'll include links to where you can learn more about Naomi and beEmboldened Ministries in the show notes for this episode at the description on YouTube and also at podcast.gotquestions.org. So Naomi, thank you again for joining me and may the Lord continue to abundantly bless what you're doing through beEmboldened Ministries. It's much needed. I'm a big fan. I love it when I see God using experiences that he's brought people through and out of and then them using that to minister to people who are still in those, recovering, struggling, etc. So keep doing what you're doing and allowing the Lord to use you.

Naomi Wright

Thank you so much, Shea. Yeah, it's amazing what he can and will do. And right back at you, GotQuestions.org is an incredible resource, so very grateful to be here.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you for that encouragement. So this has been the Got Questions podcast with Naomi Wright of beEmboldened Ministries on spiritual abuse. Great topic, much needed. There's a lot more of that out there than we're aware of. So I highly recommend if you want to minister to someone or you yourself are struggling with a spiritually abusive situation, beEmboldened Ministries would be one of the first places I'd recommend for you to go. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.