



STATEMENT DS481

BOOK REVIEW

Recovering from Churches That Abuse by Ronald Enroth

Review by Francis J. Beckwith

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AS THE SEQUEL TO HIS BEST-SELLING *CHURCHES THAT ABUSE*. Ronald Enroth's *Recovering from Churches That Abuse* is a book dedicated to describing "the process of recovery [from abusive church leadership], the obstacles encountered on the way, and the factors that inhibit or retard a successful recovery" (p. 10). While addressing these concerns, Enroth makes serious charges against several Christian fellowships in the United States, including the widely respected Jesus People USA (JPUSA).

This is a book of mostly first person accounts of alleged abuse, though in some cases the author "merged the experiences of several former members and present[ed] a composite picture" (10). It is lightly sprinkled with commentary by Enroth and quotes from different abuse "experts."

The issue of abusive church leadership is a legitimate concern and deserves serious attention. Enroth is to be commended for broaching the topic, and for attempting to point out patterns of abuse and steps that can be taken on the road to recovery. Some of his information and observations surely have merit. But the problems with this book as a whole are so fundamental that it should not be considered reliable.

A Flawed Starting Point. The chief problem here is Professor Enroth's methodology. Consider the quote from Helen Ebaugh which Enroth cites in support of his book's life-history approach of permitting alleged victims to simply "tell their story":

The basic assumption behind the life-history method is that every person defines the world differently. In order to explain these definitions and relate them to social behavior, sociologists must understand what events mean to the people experiencing them. The subject's definition of the situation takes precedence over the objective situation since, as Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) have argued, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." This means, in essence, that the way an individual perceives an event or situation impacts his or her situation (138).

As applied by Enroth, this approach replaces objective truth with subjective perception as the primary arbiter of interpersonal conflict and the primary criterion for discernment ministry.¹ If "every person defines the world differently" and "the subject's definition of the situation takes precedence over the objective situation," then there can be no such thing as an objectively *false* or *true* accusation. The subjective perception of the alleged victim is simply taken at face value. The "victim" says it, the sociologist believes it, and that settles it.

"Victim" Authoritarianism. Enroth's flawed starting point thus leads to the espousal of "victim" authoritarianism, the view that whoever believes herself or himself to be a victim is always correct. Consider Enroth's response to criticism of his depiction of JPUSA (which is a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination): "There

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has been much correspondence between leaders of the Covenant Church and JPUSA and me since I began to do the research of this book. They have questioned the integrity of my reports, the reliability of my respondents, and my sociological methodology, but I have conducted more than seventy hours of in-depth interviews and telephone conversations with more than forty former members of JPUSA” (150). Notice that Enroth expresses no concern about *objective* truth. He recognizes no obligation to interview the people accused of committing spiritually heinous acts. All Enroth needs is his sociological methodology and the testimonies of the “victims.”

In one place Enroth writes that “authoritarian pastors are usually threatened by any expression of diverse opinions...” and, while “displaying an attitude of spiritual superiority, they will reject any invitation to genuine dialogue...” (29) It is ironic that, in not permitting the groups he indicts to tell their side of the story, Enroth’s behavior emulates the authoritarian pastor he so accurately and eloquently critiques throughout this text.

The reader should understand why Enroth sees no need to dialogue with the accused: he is committed to the starting point that “the subject’s definition of the situation takes precedence over the objective situation.” If truth can adequately be determined by the subjective definition of the “victim,” it is not necessary to probe deeper for what really happened.

It is one thing for a social scientist, such as Enroth, to collect and publish the first-person accounts of people who claim to have been abused by the leadership of a church or parachurch organization. There is no doubt that such an academic study has its place as an aid to identifying unhealthy patterns in church experience. It is quite another thing, however, for the author to use these first-person accounts as a basis for branding certain known groups as “churches that abuse” — without at least inviting the accused to tell their side of the story.² If Enroth thinks that such a courtesy would have been harmful to the “victims,” then he should not have mentioned the names of the accused organizations or their leaders, a kindness he willingly provided to the “victims” (10). He does write that “with one or two exceptions, I use the real names of the churches involved” (10), but he doesn’t tell us what criterion he used to make this decision.

Lack of Background Knowledge. Another consequence of Enroth’s starting point is that background knowledge about both the alleged victims and the churches they accuse of abuse becomes irrelevant. That is, once one is committed to the belief that the “subject’s definition of the situation takes precedence over the objective situation,” questions about the character, accuracy, past history, and personal moral integrity of the alleged victims as well as the general quality, reputation, and substance of the accused congregation’s leadership are of little consequence.

Consider one example: Enroth records the testimonies of the former JPUSA members who claim to have been abused by the church’s leadership. First, we are told nothing about the backgrounds of the ex-members except what they tell us about themselves. Perhaps they were engaging in behavior that was harmful, not only to themselves, but to the moral and social stability of the JPUSA community. Perhaps some of the stories are true and some are false and/or an aberration from the JPUSA norm. Or perhaps the church’s demographics, membership size, nearly 25 years of existence, and communal lifestyle are bound, due to sheer statistical probability, to produce a number of disgruntled former members who, for personal reasons, perceive ordinary church discipline and communal living standards as oppressive. After all, a generation raised on the belief that the unrestrained self is the path to happiness is ill-prepared to appreciate the values in discipline, sacrifice, and obedience. Enroth provides nothing that would help the reader come to an informed decision as to whether JPUSA is indeed a church that abuses.

Second, JPUSA has an impeccable reputation in both the Christian and secular worlds. Its literary, journalistic, and aesthetic accomplishments — not to mention its evangelistic and community service outreaches — speak volumes of the doctrinal and spiritual integrity of the JPUSA community. They have further demonstrated a desire to be accountable to the larger body of Christ in many ways, including their 1989 decision to affiliate with the Evangelical Covenant Church.

This does not mean that JPUSA leadership has not made mistakes that it has later regretted or that individual members and ex-members have not at times had valid disagreements with the leadership’s decisions. It simply means that JPUSA, like all imperfect but basically healthy churches, strives to do justice under the rubric of a biblically grounded model of church government and authority. Consequently, for Enroth to present the testimonies of JPUSA ex-members without introducing important background information is unethical and un scholarly.

Whether or not a church is abusive cannot rest solely on the subjective perceptions of alleged victims and their families. Otherwise, someone could conceivably have been led to believe, after interviewing Judas Iscariot’s close

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friends and relatives, that the man who betrayed our Lord for thirty pieces of silver committed suicide because he was despondent after having broken free from the control of an authoritarian leader of an abusive cult.

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- 1 Although Enroth, in seeking “to be the voice of the voiceless” (10), might not have considered this book an exposé or an exercise in discernment ministry, when he categorizes a heretofore respectable group as an “abusive church,” an exposé is, in effect, what it becomes.
- 2 In the case of JPUSA, after appeals were made by individuals both inside and outside of that ministry, Enroth did at length agree to a meeting with their leaders before the publication of his book. However, to protect the “victims” he refused to divulge specifics on most of the allegations made against JPUSA leaders. As a result, they still were not really able to tell him their side of the story, and their side of the story certainly is not represented in the book.