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## SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND SCRIPTURE

### WHAT IS 'SPIRITUAL ABUSE'?

The term 'spiritual abuse' is a contested descriptor and therefore throughout this guide we will instead use the alternative terms 'pastoral malpractice' and 'abuse of power'. But whatever we call it, this is not a new extra-biblical category. This chapter explores the terminology and the practices it describes, looking also at the biblical censure of bad leadership and the responsibilities leaders have as under-shepherds. We will look at the evolution of the use of this term to provide some broader context for how we deal with it.

The language of 'spiritual abuse' is becoming more widespread. But while its profile is increasing, there is not universal agreement about its definition. We can trace the term 'spiritual abuse' back to the 1990s, when it was defined and developed by a small group of American authors. Their focus was on harmful Christian leadership practices that might be viewed very seriously by church elders' or members' meetings but that, for the most part, were not regarded as criminal.<sup>1</sup>

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1. David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 1991); Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse*,

The practices identified with ‘spiritual abuse’ in these early sources included ‘heavy shepherding’ as a form of extreme micro-management in pastoral care. Also listed were highly pressurised instructions to tithe or give more extensively, imposition of doctrinal norms without dialogue or debate, and development of a ‘personality cult’ around a pastor, minister or leader. The same authors also identified ‘spiritual abuse’ with intense expectations of loyalty to a leader or leadership team who allow little or no room for dissent.

Tragically, there is no doubt that such practices have occurred in some churches, and it is good that more recent studies in this area have built on the earlier American work from three decades ago to provide a fuller account of those practices, and of how to address them. While the term ‘spiritual abuse’ remains most prominent in this later work, other language has been suggested – both within that original American research and, of late, by the Evangelical Alliance, the FIEC, and others. We will explore that alternative terminology here, while recognising that ‘spiritual abuse’ continues to have the most common currency, particularly among those who suffer from the treatment it aims to describe.

So, let’s start by exploring more fully what proponents of the concept of ‘spiritual abuse’ understand it to mean.

The academic psychologist Lisa Oakley and the CEO of leading Christian safeguarding charity ThirtyOne:Eight, Justin Humphreys, are among those who have expounded and promoted the concept of ‘spiritual abuse’. Building on the formative American work cited above, and developing her own academic work with Kathryn Kinmond, Oakley teamed up with Humphreys in 2019 to

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(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). See also Enroth’s follow-up volume from 1994, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994. Downers Grove, Ill, 1993); Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993).

publish the influential book *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*. There, she and Humphreys define 'spiritual abuse' as:

... a form of emotional and psychological abuse [that is] characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging effect on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.<sup>2</sup>

Although much in this definition could apply to abuses of power and authority beyond purely religious or 'spiritual' contexts, Oakley, Humphreys and others who echo them insist there is something so distinctive about the 'spiritual' context in which established criminal offences like Psychological Abuse and Coercive Control might occur, that it requires its own separate definition.

While they claim that 'spiritual abuse' need not itself rise to the level of criminality, the above formulation clearly draws on those criminal categories, and this has led others to critique their definition as too broad-brush – that is, as lacking sufficient nuance and precision. As things stand, Emotional and Psychological Abuse are defined in UK law as criminal abuses characterised by subjecting or exposing someone to behaviour causing or likely to cause trauma, including anxiety, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Within this definition, the term Emotional Abuse is usually applied to cases involving children, while Psychological Abuse is more typically applied to adults.

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2. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, (London: SPCK, 2019), p.31.

The concept of ‘Coercive and Controlling Behaviour’ is a more specific form of Psychological Abuse that came onto the statute book in 2015, as part of the Serious Crime Act. It defines an ongoing pattern of bullying, threats, manipulation, humiliation, or intimidation used within the specific context of domestic relationships to harm, punish or frighten an intimate partner. However, as their inclusion of the latter term in their above definition of ‘spiritual abuse’ suggests, Oakley and Humphreys have been keen to see ‘Coercive Control’ extended beyond the parameters of the home to the church – that is, to relationships between pastoral leaders and congregational members and, presumably, between members. Indeed, they have more recently been active in seeking to add the language of spiritual abuse to Statutory Guidance on Coercive and Controlling Behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere in this guidebook, as part of the section on governance and policies, we provide a more detailed chart which defines different levels of abuse that might occur in religious or spiritual settings – one we trust will move the discussion forward constructively, and help Christian churches and networks deal with such abuses in appropriate ways according to their varied forms and contexts. Later in this current chapter, we provide a summary of the key headings used in that chart and suggest reasons why it might help to refine the helpful work already done in this area. For now, however, it is important to unpack a little more closely what makes abuse distinctively ‘spiritual’ for Oakley and Humphreys as opposed to abuse that might be identified more generally as emotional, psychological, or coercively controlling.

Oakley and Humphreys propose that for abuse to be deemed specifically ‘spiritual’ it must:

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3. Section 76: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/serious-crime-bill>. Accessed 3/9/21.

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- be ‘justified’ by appeal to the divine, or to one or more sacred texts defined as having divine authority;
- be enacted by people associated in their role or function as religious,
- take place in settings identified in one way or another as religious.

These criteria, of course, allow the term spiritual abuse to be applied to all religious traditions. It is only more recently, however, that the focus of academic research and writing on the subject has begun to look beyond the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> Since Affinity is an evangelical Christian network, our focus here is on the latter – although it will become clear that the diffuse meaning of the word ‘spiritual’ within and beyond Christianity is one reason why some have looked elsewhere for more exact wording to describe the abuses in question.

Before we explore the implications of these points further, another terminological point is worth noting. Earlier books and texts on spiritual abuse tended to identify those who suffered it as ‘victims’. More recent sources mostly define those who have managed to escape, move on or find healing from it as ‘survivors’.<sup>5</sup> We see the case for each, and are happy to support either or both according to context – not least when that context includes the term preferred by those who have suffered the abuse in question.

This may seem all rather academic, but in reality it matters a lot. It matters because we need to be precise in what we mean when we use such terms as spiritual abuse but perhaps even more

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4. <https://www1.chester.ac.uk/trs/conference/spiritual-abuse/programme> Accessed 24/10/21.

5. For a more detailed examination of the respective merits of ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ terminology see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5426776/> Accessed 6/10/21; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1077801218820202> Accessed 6/10/21.

importantly, it matters because we must be aware how others are using it, especially others who are not supporters of biblical Christianity and who are likely to define the term ‘spiritual abuse’ very broadly including normal church discipline and leadership and conflate the term with criminal and unacceptable behaviour.

## RECENT CASES IN CHURCHES

As described above, it is recognised that much of what spiritual abuse seeks to describe is not unique to evangelical Christianity. Indeed, it resembles harm inflicted on many others who suffer bullying, manipulation and forced indoctrination at the hands of those who hold positions of power over them, whether the context of those actions is sacred or secular – let alone evangelical, liberal, radical, Anglo-Catholic or Roman Catholic.

Yet, it is clear from various high-profile investigations and reviews into the ministry of certain individuals, both in Britain and America, that this kind of abuse has indeed occurred in evangelical churches, and, sadly, may continue to threaten such churches unless more effort is made to spot, expose and address it. Controlling behaviour, bullying leadership and an expectation of unconditional loyalty have certainly characterised some of the ministries which have been in the spotlight under the definition of ‘spiritual abuse’.<sup>6</sup>

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6. For examples see:

Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/> Accessed 10/02/2022.

The Crowded House Independent Learning Review: <https://thirtyoneeight.org/get-help/independent-reviews/crowded-house-review/> Accessed 10/02/2022.

Independent Lessons Learnt Review concerning Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon: <https://thirtyoneeight.org/get-help/independent-reviews/jonathan-fletcher-review/> Accessed 10/02/2022.

Wyndham Abbey: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/19-november/news/uk/bishop-of-norwich-orders-vicar-to-apologise-over-pastoral-breakdown-in-wyndham> Accessed 10/02/2022.

The pain, hurt and trauma endured by victims and survivors of these harmful practices is disturbing and distressing. Such effects and symptoms of abuse in pastoral settings should be viewed with the utmost concern, and should be remedied as swiftly as possible, both through appropriate support for those harmed, and through preventative measures in safeguarding, governance and accountability that minimise the risk of such abuses occurring in future.

Later in this guidebook, we will provide practical advice as to how these measures can be put in place in your own local church.

### **ENGAGING WITH THE TERMINOLOGY**

We want to be very clear that we take the core substance of what the term ‘spiritual abuse’ aims to describe very seriously indeed. The behaviours it refers to represent the real, felt experiences of more Christians than many might have imagined, and we lament that they have suffered as they have. We also recognise the momentum and purchase that the terminology of spiritual abuse has gained in recent years – particularly within the Christian Church.

Yet while we acknowledge the essential content of what spiritual abuse seeks to cover, we do believe that other, more precise language is available which we hope will advance our understanding in this area, thereby aiding victims and survivors. So, what are the alternatives?

‘Pastoral abuse’ was proposed as a variant on ‘spiritual abuse’ by Ronald Enroth, one of the American authors of the 1990s who first engaged in depth with the phenomena we are considering here. He made this suggestion given the church-based contexts in which the abuses concerned most typically occurred. Enroth’s approach was ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or’: he used ‘spiritual abuse’ more frequently of the two, but it is significant that he was not wedded exclusively to it.

Others have developed and refined terminology based on Enroth's 'pastoral' vocabulary. As well as the Evangelical Alliance and the FIEC, the theologian David Hilborn, and the Christian author and leader Marcus Honeysett have found this language helpful. Indeed, we believe with these sources that the descriptors 'pastoral abuse', 'pastoral malpractice' and the more generic 'abuse of power' provide equally or more precise tools to describe this set of behaviours than the catch-all term 'spiritual abuse'. We also recognise that abuse of power can take place in churches against those in positions of leadership as well as being perpetrated by them, and that this dimension of abuse can be comparably harmful.

In a paper for a Chester University conference held in September 2021, David Hilborn proposed 'pastoral abuse' and (even more) 'pastoral malpractice' as better alternatives to 'spiritual abuse', arguing that they should even supersede it. He pointed out that while 'pastoral' is clearly a biblical word,<sup>7</sup> 'pastoral care' and 'pastoral teams' in schools, colleges or hospitals represent support offered by religious and non-religious people alike, so that 'pastoral abuse' in those and other contexts would not be an offence reserved to religious believers/spiritual practitioners alone.

By contrast, Hilborn argues in his Chester paper that the targeting of such believers and practitioners as distinctively liable for an extra category of abuse from which 'non-spiritual' people are exempt is a potential unintended consequence of the term 'spiritual abuse'. He adds that this could become problematic for religious liberties and inter-religious toleration in a secular civic society whose laws are otherwise designed to uphold religious freedom and prevent discrimination against people on the basis

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7. Cf. Ephesians. 4:11 and 1 Peter 5:2.

of their religion and belief – as, for example, in the Equality Act (2010).<sup>8</sup>

While noting these different approaches to terminology, and while supporting the ongoing refinements outlined above, this guidebook will use ‘spiritual abuse’ alongside the other terms we propose as appropriate, in recognition that for the moment, ‘spiritual abuse’ is the descriptor that victims and survivors most typically use. At the same time, we commend the fuller table of definitions supplied in chapter five, ‘Developing Healthy Procedures’ on our practice as an important contribution to ongoing work on this subject.

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8. <https://www.affinity.org.uk/news/617-reviving-erastianism-aspiritual-abusea-religious-liberty-and-the-paradoxes-of-post-christendom/>

In a yet-unpublished follow-up to this paper, Hilborn has further commented: ‘It is important to register that the word “spiritual” is notoriously hard to pin down. It is used not only to describe the vastly different beliefs and practices of a whole range of religions in addition to Christianity; it is also increasingly appropriated today by people who claim no formal religious affiliation, but who strive for some sort of peace or meaning beyond themselves. That said, by definition, the concept of “spiritual abuse” still leaves significant numbers of hard agnostics, atheists, materialists and sceptics immune from ever perpetrating it. In that sense, for all the good intentions around its coinage, the term risks being used in a discriminatory way against people of faith – however “faith” is defined. Unlike much longer-recognised forms of abuse – emotional, psychological, physical and sexual – accusations of “spiritual abuse” can, *ipso facto*, only be levelled at a particular sub-section of the population: that is, those who align with the Spirit, spirits, spiritual disciplines or “spirituality”. Normally, all citizens of a state are deemed to be equal under the law; in this case, some would be more equal than others. There is also a real risk that in an ever-more pluralist society, accusations of “spiritual abuse” might be wielded maliciously by fractious religious believers as a more benign-sounding cover for discrediting one another as heretics, infidels, bigots or radicals, or by non-believers hostile to religion as one more weapon in a mounting culture war between their secularist agenda and the missional ambitions of religionists.’

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Having discussed the debates about terminology and reality of the practice, we want to underline our conviction as authors that these ideas are not new to Scripture. Whatever terms we choose to describe it as, what we are talking about here all falls within biblical categories of ungodly behaviour – sinful behaviour from individuals, and in particular from leaders is all over the Bible, along with the contrasting behaviour of good leaders, supremely Jesus Christ. This means that the way we deal with allegations of pastoral malpractice should be subject to biblical scrutiny and that there will be principles that we must apply, with confidence (e.g. fairness of process, care for the vulnerable).

The Scriptures are clear that church leaders bear particular ethical and pastoral responsibilities for the Christians in their care. This makes emotional or psychological abuses perpetrated within the Church even more distinctive or aggravated. Indeed, biblically the standards to which church leaders are held are deemed to be ‘above and beyond’ those of other institutions and communities (Matt. 5:19-21; 1 Tim. 3:1-12; 5:7). Thus, the sense of hurt and betrayal can be intensified for a victim or survivor in such circumstances.

On one level, that intensification may be a difference of degree rather than kind (in relation to longer-standing definitions of emotional and psychological abuse). After all, the Bible recognises that we have emotions and a psyche (‘soul’), that they can be assailed or oppressed, and that in certain cases at least, they are synonymous with that dimension of our being which is elsewhere called our spirit (1 Sam 1:15; Ps. 42:3-4; Matt 26:38). The point is not to deny that church-based abuse or abuse committed by church leaders might have a ‘spiritual’ dimension for their Christian victims. Nor is it to deny that this could compound what non-believers might experience purely as emotional and psychological abuse. Rather, it

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is to recognise that it would be unrealistic, and in fact unhelpful, to expect the state to legislate against any such spiritual dimension or aggravation of such abuse. Far better, in fact, to work with biblical discourse around abuse that does retain some traction in wider society today. To explore that, we need to start where Scripture starts our human story: in Eden ...

- The Bible confirms that people have abused one another since the Fall in Genesis 3.
- The rebellion of Adam and Eve against God brought the corrosive dynamics of blame, accusation, dissembling, deceit and evasion into the world (Gen. 3:8-13). By Genesis 6 and the days of Noah, we learn that the ‘wickedness of humanity was great’ and ‘every inclination of people’s hearts was evil’ (Gen. 6:5). In Jeremiah 5:30-31 a more specific picture is presented of what happens when such wickedness and evil are manifested in abusive leadership: ‘The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own authority’. By the next chapter, this deception, power-mongering and egotism has curdled into counterfeit healing and pastoral care driven by the false bromide of ‘Peace, peace,’ when, in reality, ‘there is no peace’ (6:13-14). If anything, Ezekiel is even more scathing about abuse perpetrated by those called to be leaders: ‘Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, yet you do not feed the sheep.’ He then sums up the damage done by such leaders in words that are as resonant today as when he pronounced them: ‘The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not

brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them' (Ezek. 34:1-4).

- These earlier prophetic warnings echo through Jesus' condemnation of toxic and hypocritical religious leadership in the Gospels and through similar warnings articulated in the Epistles. So, in Luke 11:39 Jesus condemns Pharisees who 'cleanse the outside of the cup' but inside are 'full of greed and wickedness.' A little later, the effects of undue religious legalism on ordinary adherents are condemned by Jesus as 'loading people with burdens hard to bear,' while the legalists who propound them 'do not touch the burdens' with even one of their fingers. (Luke 11:46). Similarly, in Luke 20:46-47, the scribes 'like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the market-places and the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at feasts,' yet simultaneously 'devour widows' houses' while intoning 'long prayers' as 'a pretence.'
- In Matthew 23, Jesus comparably condemns religious leaders who unduly 'burden' others without supporting them (v. 4); who 'shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces' (v. 13), and who, again, hypocritically insist on petty legalistic observances while neglecting to show 'justice, mercy and faithfulness' (v. 23).
- In Luke 17:1-2 Jesus more specifically warns the disciples against those (in this context quite probably fellow-disciples or leaders) who cause 'little ones' to sin, where the 'little ones' are most likely either those young in faith, or young in years.
- In Mark 10:42-43, he contrasts existing Gentile rulers, who 'lord' it over those in their charge, with faithful Christian ministers who act as 'servants' to those in their care. Peter expounds on this same theme of servanthood when urging

the elders among his correspondents to ‘be shepherds [or pastors] of God’s flock ... not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock’ (1 Pet. 5:1-4). The opposite of this would, by definition, be ‘pastoral abuse’ or ‘pastoral malpractice’.

- Paul, likewise, lambasts religious ‘empty talkers and deceivers’ who ‘upset whole families’ and ‘teach things they should not teach’ (Titus 1:10-11). By contrast, authentic spiritual overseers are distinguished by the fact that they are neither ‘arrogant’ nor ‘quick-tempered’, by their being neither ‘violent’ nor ‘greedy for gain’, and by their characteristic hospitality, goodness, prudence, uprightness, devoutness and self-control (Titus 1:7-9). This in turn aligns with Paul’s depiction of healthy churches as communities of mutual service, respect, and care, called to follow the example of Jesus Himself (Phil. 2:1-11).
- Even when in certain contexts both Jesus and Paul also commend the exercise of church discipline (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:5), they still do so with these fundamental qualities of humility, compassion, grace, and pastoral concern very much in mind.<sup>9</sup>

### **PASTORAL ABUSE IN RELATION TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

It is important to stress that Scripture defines a whole set of additional abuses that have very rarely made it into the literature so far published on spiritual abuse. This is a vital point, because it

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9. Cf. Johnson and Van Vonderen’s advice that ‘It is not abusive when a Christian (whether or not they are a leader) confronts another Christian because of sin, wrongdoing or even honest mistakes that must be corrected. The objective, of course, is not to shame or discredit, but to heal, save and restore.’ *Spiritual Abuse*, p.24.

shows us that the Bible is clear that there are sinful behaviours that do warrant loving church discipline. It is not credible for evangelical churches to hold a position that church discipline should never be exercised on account of current trends that might tend to render it 'inherently abusive'.

What kind of things are we talking about here? Such sins include religious profiteering (1 Tim. 6:3-5), refusal to seek reconciliation after a dispute (Matt. 18:15-20; Luke 17:3-4), fornication and adultery (1 Cor. 5: 1-13; 6:9-20), doctrinal heresy or false teaching (Gal. 2:11; 2 Tim. 4:1-14; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11), blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:20), and idolatry (Rev. 2:16). These matters are often absent from the debate on spiritual abuse, but most evangelicals would agree that such offences are good grounds for loving church discipline – discipline, that is, which is motivated primarily by a desire to see the offender supported, rehabilitated, and restored to full fellowship.

### **ANALOGIES WITH OTHER MALPRACTICE**

Those who have studied and written about spiritual abuse have largely highlighted that the phenomena described are evidenced in the work and ministry of religious leaders, and for our purposes here, of Christian leaders. As we have suggested, however, it is not clear that all the behaviours cited in the literature of 'spiritual abuse' are in fact specific to religious settings. In certain more serious instances, there might be a case for making an analogy with medical malpractice or misfeasance in public office and its related, more generic category: Abuse of Power. These are civil rather than criminal offences, often aggravated by the very fact that a role that entails a significant duty of care to others has been simultaneously exploited in terms of its designated authority and undermined by the distorted use of that authority.

Misconduct in public office, by contrast, is a criminal offence, and could perhaps entail a sub-category such as ‘pastoral misconduct’ or ‘misconduct in a pastoral office’ – although it might be argued that only ordained ministers in the Church of England would be subject to it, by dint of that church’s established status in law and the related position of its clergy with respect to the state. In any case, the existing criminal categories of emotional and psychological abuse are available for any religious leader or adherent whose treatment, teaching, management, care or guidance of others is so egregious that it merits police investigation and, potentially, prosecution through the courts.

This underlines why it is problematic to use a vaguer and more generalised descriptor like ‘spiritual abuse’ to describe criminal behaviour like ‘psychological and emotional abuse’ and ‘coercive control’. As we have emphasised, these have very particular legal thresholds and penalties associated with them, and unless abuse perpetrated in or around the church and/or by Christian leaders reaches these criminal thresholds, it is better to avoid confusion with them in the language we deploy. Hence the more nuanced definitions we have advanced here as a refinement of the broader ‘one size fits all’ phraseology of ‘spiritual abuse’.

Plainly, there is a range of other oppressive actions in pastoral settings that might not rise to the level of criminality, but that might still very well constitute a dereliction of duty and care demanding internal disciplinary action by a congregation, presbytery, council, diocese etc. Granted, there will sadly be some church leaders, elders, and others whose treatment of fellow believers and seekers is deemed to have broken the law. Far more likely, however, is conduct that will fall into this latter, sub-criminal bracket. This is not to say, though, that the harm such conduct causes will not still be deeply offensive to God.

## CHALLENGING LEADERS

Indeed, that is why this guidebook takes all levels and types of such abuse seriously, seeks to define them carefully, and suggests ways in which they can be effectively addressed – and better yet, prevented.