

BOOK AND RESOURCE REVIEWS

## Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse—and Freeing Yourself from its Power

Geoff Robson, BA (Mass Comms), BD (1st Class Hons)<sup>1</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup> Matthias Media

Keywords: Something's Not Right, spiritual abuse, bullying, narcissism

<https://doi.org/10.56505/001c.33187>

---

### Gospel Leadership

Vol. 1, 2022

---

Wade Mullen. *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse—and Freeing Yourself from its Power*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Monument, 2020. xvii + 220 pp. £13.50/\$16.99.

Over the last few months, several friends—mostly people serving in vocational Christian ministry—have urged me to listen to *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. I doubt I need to describe it for you; it seems to have become the podcast that all the evangelical cool kids are talking about. But despite the rave reviews, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Sixteen hours on narcissism, bullying and spiritual abuse, and on the hundreds of lives damaged as a result, was just a bridge too far.

I don't think my reluctance was a case of burying my head in the sand. Having personally experienced serious bullying in a ministry context, and having since spent more than a decade hearing countless horror stories from churches of all sizes, I'm already painfully aware that spiritual abuse is endemic in evangelical churches around the world.

Given the magnitude of the problem, new resources that are willing to tackle spiritual abuse head-on are desperately needed. And *Something's Not Right* by Wade Mullen is a very welcome contribution to the field.

Mullen, a former pastor and an abuse survivor, has provided an extremely readable, insightful and compelling account of spiritual abuse—or, more accurately, of any form of abuse that remains hidden or amorphous, the kind of abuse that is as difficult to understand “as nailing Jell-O to a wall” (p. 31). But given Mullen's own background, spiritual abuse emerges as the central, unifying concept. He writes primarily for victims of abuse, aiming to chronicle, catalogue and capture the nature of abuse through systematic analysis. “Freedom comes first by understanding, and understanding means having the language to identify and talk about your situation. I want to give you that more than anything” (p. 4).

In fulfilling this aim, Mullen unequivocally succeeds. Over the course of nine chapters, he walks us through the tactics used by abusers, and by those who enable them (who, rightly, come under plenty of scrutiny as well). He

moves back and forth between real-life stories and careful analysis, stitching together a comprehensive picture of what abuse looks like, how to spot it in the wild, and how to confront and overcome it. Chapter summaries offer extra clarity, and an extensive list of “Resources for Survivors” (pp. 197–206) helps readers take whatever next step is needed. Throughout, Mullen strikes a skillful balance between free-flowing description and careful categorisation.

Put simply, Wade Mullen *gets it*. He’s walked the tragic path of abuse himself, and has dedicated himself to learning about the issue in great depth. *Something’s Not Right* gives us wonderful access to his research and will become a source of life and relief for many. There are countless moments of affirmation and clarity—the repeated cries of ‘Yes!’ as he puts your experiences into words, as you realise you’re in the hands of someone who understands the issue both from the inside and from the outside. There is great wisdom even in the title: sometimes, in the fog of abuse, about all one can say is “something’s not right.” Mullen’s gift is in helping us to nail down *what* is not right. He adeptly walks the tightrope of writing with compassion and personal involvement, but not with sinful anger.

Reflecting on my own experience of abuse, and on the opportunities for ministry to other victims that have resulted, I’ve often thought about the opening of 2 Corinthians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3–4). Mullen has clearly embraced this reality personally, and through this book he now comes alongside victims as a welcome comforter and guide.

Yet *Something’s Not Right* is not without a significant flaw. As I read the book, a conflict developed in my mind. On the one hand, I delighted in the clear, accessible insights, and thought of all the people I hope will read it. On the other hand, I kept asking myself, “Where is the word of God? Where is the gospel?”

I want to tread carefully here; it’s unfair to pan an apple for not being an orange. The Bible clearly informs Mullen’s approach, and there is nothing *unbiblical* here. Perhaps his aim was to write a book that could be used by Christian and non-Christian alike (given that church-based abuse is the dominant motif, but not the sole focus). And perhaps Mullen’s decision to keep the Bible mostly in the background, rather than the foreground, has a certain benefit: we’re made to realise that understanding and confronting abuse doesn’t require special revelation—which in turn begs the questions, “Why do so many churches and ministries struggle to deal with these issues properly? If the world can see it, why can’t we?”

That said, I count Mullen's lack of direct biblical engagement as a missed opportunity. For where do we truly find light and life in the face of darkness and evil? Surely it is in the word of God, which refreshes the soul and gives light to the eyes. Those who presume to lead God's people must never allow the Bible to slip into the background of our ministries. It must be constantly in the driver's seat of all that we do and say, including our approach to complex pastoral and ethical issues.

This meant that my relief and gladness at reading such sharp, lucid prose on such an important subject was tempered by a repeated, low-level frustration about what might have been. "Great thoughts on the importance of language, but why not turn to James 3 and show us what the Bible says about the power of our words?" "Fantastic insights on leadership, but why not show us what the New Testament says about godly (or ungodly) leadership?" "Beautiful reflections on forgiveness, but why not take us to the fount of all forgiveness, the cross, to fuel the possibility of forgiveness and restoration?"

Taking us more directly into the Scripture needn't have alienated any readers. On the contrary, some winsome and explicit engagement with the Bible could have commended the gospel to a range of readers and deepened the impact of the book's strengths.

In the end, though, I'll happily use and recommend *Something's Not Right*. It will become a go-to resource to put into the hands of victims, survivors, and leaders. The recommendation will just come with a caveat.

Submitted: March 03, 2022 AEDT, Accepted: March 03, 2022 AEDT