Stephen Parsons is an Anglican priest who, together with his wife, experienced a dramatic healing in a Pentecostal context. This initiated a remarkable healing ministry in his and his wife’s life. He later wrote a groundbreaking book on healing (The Challenge of Christian Healing, [London: SPCK, 1986]).

However, his book Ungodly Fear makes disturbing reading because he shows pastoral practices which are inimical to the gospel. It is surprising, writes Parsons’ colleague, the well-known Robert Jeffery from Christ Church, Oxford, that so many stay within the faith, for the cases of abuse which the author analyzes are not just individual slip-ups but they are inherent in a pastoral and theological system.

Parsons tells, for instance, the story of Rachel and John. They handed over £78,000 (sterling) to their community church but had to leave homeless and penniless. Kathleen went for prayer and counselling, only to be told that her family had sexually abused her and practised witchcraft (although there was no proof for such allegations). She was told that she was possessed and lacked the faith to be healed of her ME. Teresa was mysteriously demonized by her church and friends. Peter was a church pastor until he admitted to a homosexual encounter and immediately had his job, family and home taken away. Those whom Peter had baptized
were re-baptized. Rita was raped by a Christian minister, then found herself silenced when she sought help from other Christians.

Parsons’ purpose in telling these stories in detail is not to blame, in the first instance, the individuals who were responsible for this unchristian behaviour. The cases of abuse are too numerous in the Christian church to be laid at the door of certain individuals. There must be deeper reasons. That is why Parsons is concerned with what he calls ‘institutional abuse’. By this he means ‘abuse that is made possible because of the teaching and theological understanding of particular church bodies’. In short, the author claims ‘that Christians are, on occasions, being harmed by beliefs and doctrines held by sincere Christian people’. These beliefs, Parsons thinks, are particularly harmful in neo-Pentecostal and charismatic churches, although many of their members and ministers are Parsons’ personal friends.

The beliefs which favour and enable this kind of abuse, Parsons states, can be described as follows:

If the Bible is not true at every point, then how do we know what is true? It is a belief system [normally called fundamentalism] which proclaims certain beliefs about God and the Bible, but [does] so in a militant almost aggressive way to protect [adherents’] own convictions from compromise.  

They are exactly the opposite to that which Douglas Peterson describes as the very essence of a Pentecostal scholar:

Pentecostal scholars have demonstrated through their writings that they are capable of looking critically at their own movement. Unlike some of their fundamentalistic colleagues who feared various forms of criticism, Pentecostal academics have been open to apply the most recent advances in scholarship within their faith tradition.

Parsons also spots an organizational reason for these unchallenged abuses.

What is of concern is the way that the very independence of these fellowships led to their increasing dependence on the only system of authority and organization available to them: the authority of their leadership and biblical authority as filtered through these same leaders.  

1. Parsons, Ungodly Fear, p. 10.
2. Parsons, Ungodly Fear, p. 12.
4. Parsons, Ungodly Fear, p. 17.