

Intimidation and Control Issues

By Pastor Alan Utting

'No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.' Eleanor Roosevelt

Most people experience intimidation sometime in their lives. This is where there is a sense of fear or inadequacy where others try to control your thoughts or actions. If we're not careful, we too can display controlling attitudes toward others. It's important to be aware of this in ourselves. Being on the receiving end of control is a horrible experience, especially when it continues over a long period. It can leave us feeling trapped, worn down, and confused. Sometimes the control is subtle like a kind of manipulation we can't quite pinpoint. We may walk away from interactions with certain individuals feeling uneasy or diminished without knowing exactly why. Don't ignore these feelings. They are signals worth paying attention to.

One of my most vivid experiences of intimidation happened when I was an 18-year-old school leaver. Not long after starting a new job, my boss publicly humiliated me in front of others because I didn't know the answer to a question he asked. My mind went completely blank, and I felt deeply embarrassed. It wasn't a pleasant experience.

Intimidation and control can present themselves in many forms. For instance, in some cases pastors or team leaders may dread team or church meetings, unsure of what poor behaviour or negative attitudes might surface. Navigating such situations requires wisdom and emotional strength to guide people into a better place. There are countless examples of how intimidation and control have worn individuals down, even leading some to the brink of losing their ministry. Ironically, someone who is intimidated or fearful can also become controlling themselves, often because of unresolved insecurity or past wounds.

Bible Perspective

The word 'fear' appears 274 times in the Bible, and in many instances, it is presented as something to be resisted.

'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand' (Isaiah 41:10).

Fear is a very human response, especially when we're under pressure. But God's Word consistently reminds us that we are not alone. His presence, strength, and help are promised in the face of fear.

Notice how the Pharisees tried to control and oppose Jesus:

'He looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The

Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.'

Mark 3:5–6. Their response reveals how threatened they were by Jesus' authority and compassion, and how control and intimidation can be rooted in fear and hardness of heart.

But Scripture reminds us of a different way:

'For God has given us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control'
2 Timothy 1:7 (ESV) Rather than responding in fear under manipulation, we are called to walk in the Spirit with strength, love, and sound judgment.

Observations: Underlying Causes of Intimidation and Control

1. Pride.

Pride leads to self-importance and was ultimately the cause of Satan's downfall (Isaiah 14:12–14). It elevates oneself above others and can easily lead to a controlling spirit.

2. Wrong Ambitions.

Simon the Sorcerer desired recognition and spiritual power for the wrong reasons (Acts 8:9–18). Similarly, James and John sought positions of honour beside Jesus (Mark 10:37). The love of money (1 Timothy 6:10) is another frequent root of intimidation and unhealthy ambition.

3. Fear.

Fear when unchecked, can drive people to control others. In some cultures, shaming children is normalised, creating a shame/power dynamic. Those raised in such environments may struggle with differing opinions, leadership transitions, or change. Compassionate confrontation, paired with verses like Isaiah 41:10 (as Page 53), can bring healing.

4. Personality Differences.

Everyone is wired differently. Those gifted in organisation and leadership may unintentionally become controlling if they lack patience and grace. Awareness and humility are essential.

5. False Prophets and Teachers.

Some use spiritual manipulation like, 'The Lord told me...' or 'Everyone agrees with me...' to demand agreement or silence dissent. These may seem spiritual but often mask insecurity or pride. Both Paul (Acts 13:6) and Peter (2 Peter 2:1) dealt with such individuals.

Some Ways to Cope with Wrongful Behaviour

1. Prayer is a Powerful Weapon.

David said, 'I am a man of prayer' (Psalm 109:4). Prayer brings peace, strength, and divine help.

2. Wait It Out.

Like David under King Saul, sometimes we must endure opposition. God may use those seasons to shape us. I once faced five years of opposition from three different leaders within the church until each moved away peacefully within a six week period. Trust God's timing.

3. Create a Loving Community Atmosphere.
Build an environment where people feel safe and valued. Make even business meetings a celebration. Avoid legalism. Trust builds support.
4. Memorise Scripture Regularly.
Scripture is the sword of the Spirit. In tough times, I claimed Isaiah 54:17: 'No weapon formed against you will prosper.' Use verses that fit your situation.
5. Seek out a trusted, wise friend.
God can bring someone along who speaks the truth in love. Our perceptions aren't always accurate. For me, my wife has often brought clarity in dark seasons.

Extra thoughts

1. Discernment is important.
When entering a new ministry environment, be aware of those who go out of their way to impress. Some are sincere, while others may want influence.
2. Gifts with strings attached.
Generous gifts can sometimes come with hidden motives. Use wisdom and transparency.
3. Coping with undue criticism.
In our early days of pastoring a church, we were often criticised by a small group. Under the advice of an older, wiser minister we learnt to look beyond the words from the speaker's heart. 'Does this person love me?' we would ask ourselves. We learnt not to take the negative words to heart when we recognised a power play was going on.
4. When you miss the mark.
We all can be controlling at times. Confess it to God and ask forgiveness where necessary.
5. Recognise where real power lies.
Not all influence comes from those in leadership. Connect with those who hold informal power and befriend them. It can diffuse difficult situations later.
6. Watch for subtle control.
Some use flattery or gossip as a means of control. If confronted, they may react defensively. Proceed with caution and wisdom.
7. Address whispering and discord.
Gossip and quiet division may seem small but can grow. Gently correct with love and promote peace.

'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' Galatians 5:1

Leading with both wisdom and grace preserves freedom, peace, and the integrity of your ministry.

Resources

Gene Edwards, *A Tale of Three Kings*

David Johnson & Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*