

Biderman's Chart of Coercion

"Most people who brainwash...use methods similar to those of prison guards who recognize that physical control is never easily accomplished without the cooperation of the prisoner. The most effective way to gain that cooperation is through subversive manipulation of the mind and feelings of the victim, who then becomes a psychological, as well as a physical, prisoner."

from an **Amnesty International** publication, "*Report on Torture*", which depicts the brainwashing of prisoners of war.

● Isolation

- Deprives individual of social support, effectively rendering him unable to resist
- Makes individual dependent upon interrogator
- Develops an intense concern with self.

Once a person is away from longstanding emotional support and thus reality checks, it is fairly easy to set a stage for brainwashing. Spiritually abusive groups work to isolate individuals from friends and family, whether directly, by requiring the individuals to forsake friends and family for the sake of the "Kingdom" (group membership), or indirectly, by preaching the necessity to demonstrate one's love for God by "hating" one's father, mother, family, friends.

Abusive groups are not outward-looking, but inward-looking, insisting that members find all comfort and support and a replacement family within the group. Cut off from friends, relatives, previous relationships, abusive groups surround the recruits and hammer rigid ideologies into their consciousnesses, saturating their senses with specific doctrines and requirements of the group.

Isolated from everyone but those within the group, recruits become dependent upon group members and leaders and find it difficult if not impossible to offer resistance to group teachings. They become self-interested and hyper-vigilant, very fearful should they incur the disapproval of the group, which now offers the only support available to them which has group approval.

Warning signs

The seed of extremism exists wherever a group demands all the free time of a member, insisting he be in church every time the doors are open and calling him to account if he isn't, is critical or disapproving of involvements with friends and family outside the group, encourages secrecy by asking that members not share what they have seen or heard in meetings or about church affairs with outsiders, is openly, publicly, and repeatedly critical of other churches or groups (especially if the group claims to be the only one which speaks for God), is critical when members attend conferences, workshops or services at other churches, checks up on members in any way, i.e., to determine that the reason they gave for missing a meeting was valid, or makes attendance at all church functions mandatory for participating in church ministry or enjoying other benefits of church fellowship.

Once a member stops interacting openly with others, the group's influence is all that matters. He is bombarded with group values and information and there is no one outside the group with whom to share thoughts or who will offer reinforcement or affirmation if the member disagrees with or doubts the values of the group. The process of isolation and the self-doubt it creates allow the group and its leaders to gain power over the members. Leaders may criticize major and minor flaws of members, sometimes publically, or remind them of present or past sins. They may call members names, insult them or ignore them, or practice a combination of ignoring members at some times and receiving them warmly at others, thus maintaining a position of power (i.e., the leaders call the shots.)

The sense of humiliation makes members feel they deserve the poor treatment they are receiving and may cause them to allow themselves to be subjected to any and all indignities out of gratefulness that one as unworthy as they feel is allowed to participate in the group at all. When leaders treat the member well occasionally, they accept any and all crumbs gratefully. Eventually, awareness of how dependent they are on the group and gratitude for the smallest attention contributes to an increasing sense of shame and degradation on the part of the members, who begin to abuse themselves with "litanies of self-blame," i.e., "No matter what they do to me, I deserve it, as sinful and wretched as I am. I deserve no better. I have no rights but to go to hell. I should be grateful for everything I receive, even punishment."

● **Monopolization of Perception**

- Fixes attention upon immediate predicament; fosters introspection
- Eliminates stimuli competing with those controlled by captor
- Frustrates all actions not consistent with compliance

Abusive groups insist on compliance with trivial demands related to all facets of life: food, clothing, money, household arrangements, children, conversation. They monitor members' appearances, criticize language and childcare practices. They insist on precise schedules and routines, which may change and be contradictory from day to day or moment to moment, depending on the whims of group leaders.

At first, new members may think these expectations are unreasonable and may dispute them, but later, either because they want to be at peace or because they are afraid, or because everyone else is complying, they attempt to comply. After all, what real difference does it make if a member is not allowed to wear a certain color, or to wear his hair in a certain way, to eat certain foods, or say certain words, to go certain places, watch certain things, or associate with certain individuals. In the overall scheme of things, does it really matter? In fact, in the long run, the member begins to reason, it is probably good to learn these disciplines, and after all, as they have frequently been reminded, they are to submit to spiritual authority as unto the Lord.. Soon it becomes apparent that the demands will be unending, and increasing time and energy are focused on avoiding group disapproval by doing something "wrong." There is a feeling of walking on eggs. Everything becomes important in terms of how the group or its leaders will respond, and members' desires, feelings and ideas become insignificant. Eventually, members may no longer even know what they want, feel or think. The group has so monopolized all of the members' perceptions with trivial demands that members lose their perspective as to the enormity of the situation they are in.

The leaders may also persuade the members that they have the inside track with God and therefore know how everything should be done. When their behavior results in disastrous consequences, as it often does, the members are blamed. Sometimes the leaders may have moments, especially after abusive episodes, when they appear to humble themselves and confess their faults, and the contrast of these moments of vulnerability with their usual pose of being all-powerful endears them to members and gives hope for some open communication.

Threats sometimes accompany all of these methods. Members are told they will be under God's judgment, under a curse, punished, chastised, chastened if they leave the group or disobey group leaders. Sometimes the leaders, themselves, punish the members, and so members can never be sure when leaders will make good on the threats which they say are God's idea. The members begin to focus on what they can do to meet any and all group demands and how to preserve peace in the short run. Abusive groups may remove children from their parents, control all the money in the group, arrange marriages, destroy personal items of members or hide personal items.

Warning signs:

Preoccupation with trivial demands of daily life, demanding strict compliance with standards of appearance, dress codes, what foods are or are not to be eaten and when, schedules, threats of God's wrath if group rules are not obeyed, a feeling of being monitored, watched constantly by those in the group or by leaders. In other words, what the church wants, believes and thinks its members should do becomes everything, and you feel preoccupied with making sure you are meeting the standards. It no longer matters whether you agree that the standards are correct, only that you follow them and thus keep the peace and in the good graces of leaders.

● Induced Debility and Exhaustion

People subjected to this type of spiritual abuse become worn out by tension, fear and continual rushing about in an effort to meet group standards. They must often avoid displays of fear, sorrow or rage, since these may result in ridicule or punishment. Rigid ministry demands and requirements that members attend unreasonable numbers of meetings and events makes the exhaustion and ability to resist group pressure even worse.

Warning Signs:

Feelings of being overwhelmed by demands, close to tears, guilty if one says no to a request or goes against a church standards. Being intimidated or pressured into volunteering for church duties and subjected to scorn or ridicule when one does not "volunteer." Being rebuked or reproved when family or work responsibilities intrude on church responsibilities.

● Occasional Indulgences

- Provides motivation for compliance

Leaders of abusive groups often sense when members are making plans to leave and may suddenly offer some kind of indulgence, perhaps just love or affection, attention where there was none before, a

note or a gesture of concern. Hope that the situation in the church will change or self doubt ("Maybe I'm just imagining it's this bad,") then replace fear or despair and the members decide to stay a while longer. Other groups practice sporadic demonstrations of compassion or affection right in the middle of desperate conflict or abusive episodes. This keeps members off guard and doubting their own perceptions of what is happening.

Some of the brainwashing techniques described are extreme, some groups may use them in a disciplined, regular manner while others use them more sporadically. But even mild, occasional use of these techniques is effective in gaining power.

Warning Signs:

Be concerned if you have had an ongoing desire to leave a church or group you believe may be abusive, but find yourself repeatedly drawn back in just at the moment you are ready to leave, by a call, a comment or moment of compassion. These moments, infrequent as they may be, are enough to keep hope in change alive and thus you sacrifice years and years to an abusive group.

● Devaluing the Individual

- Creates fear of freedom and dependence upon captors
- Creates feelings of helplessness
- Develops lack of faith in individual capabilities

Abusive leaders are frequently uncannily able to pick out traits church members are proud of and to use those very traits against the members. Those with natural gifts in the areas of music may be told they are proud or puffed up or "anxious to be up front" if they want to use their talents and denied that opportunity. Those with discernment are called judgmental or critical, the merciful are lacking in holiness or good judgment, the peacemakers are reminded the Lord came to bring a sword, not peace. Sometimes efforts are made to convince members that they really are not gifted teachers or musically talented or prophetically inclined as they believed they were. When members begin to doubt the one or two special gifts they possess which they have always been sure were God-given, they begin to doubt everything else they have ever believed about themselves, to feel dependent upon church leaders and afraid to leave the group. ("If I've been wrong about even *that*, how can I ever trust myself to make right decisions ever again?").

Warning Signs:

Unwillingness to allow members to use their gifts. Establishing rigid boot camp-like requirements for the sake of proving commitment to the group before gifts may be exercised. Repeatedly criticizing natural giftedness by reminding members they must die to their natural gifts, that Paul, after all, said, "When I'm weak, I'm strong," and that they should expect God to use them in areas other than their areas of giftedness. Emphasizing helps or service to the group as a prerequisite to church ministry. This might take the form of requiring that anyone wanting to serve in any way first have the responsibility of cleaning toilets or cleaning the church for a specified time, that anyone wanting to sing in the worship band must first sing to the children in Sunday School, or that before exercising any gifts at all, members must demonstrate loyalty to the group by faithful attendance at all functions and such things as tithing. No consideration is given to the length of time a new member has been a Christian or

to his age or station in life or his unique talents or abilities. The rules apply to everyone alike. This has the effect of reducing everyone to some kind of lowest common denominator where no one's gifts or natural abilities are valued or appreciated, where the individual is not cherished for the unique blessing he or she is to the body of Christ, where what is most highly valued is service, obedience, submission to authority, and performance without regard to gifts or abilities or, for that matter, individual limitations.
