

## PASTOR'S NOTES. CONTROL vs. RELATIONSHIP, Part 1

When we have power, we have the ability to control things, and we have been taught to use power. It is a trademark of living in a free country. Some people have power based on wealth or weapons or even physical strength, but we are told we all have the power of the ballot box, of peaceful protest, and if we don't like our existing church, we can create a new one. The assumption is that we have the ability to control, we should use it.

The problem is, the ability to control or even force an action might be necessary in some instances, but it does damage to relationships. When we have a young child, we have to take some degree of control over their lives, such as making them eat, making them sleep, and applying some kind of punishment. By the time the child enters their teen years, however, these efforts at control become less effective, and by the time they are adults, almost not at all.

*Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

Matthew 7:28-29

Notice it says that Jesus had authority, but He was not demonstrating power or control. He did not have an army or political influence to back up His words. He doesn't seem to try to force anybody to do as He says. To some people His words were clearly the voice of God, but at that time of the passage above, most of the people were not ready to say He was God's Chosen One. Yet they did respect His life. There was an integrity about His words and His life that drew respect from His hearers. Without trying to control, He was influential – enough that more than 2000 years later these teachings are preserved. We could say that His influence, or even His authority, was built on His relationship to the people.

This bears true in our situations today. We might be forced to do something because someone has more physical strength or a weapon. In the workplace, someone has the power of suspend or fire us. But even workplaces find that a far more effective long-term strategy for getting people to do what you want is to NOT use force, but to get them to buy into the result,

Retired NFL coach Tom Landry once described his job as “to get people to do what they don't want to do, so they can achieve what they want to achieve.” I would say that as a pastor, that sounds a lot like my job description as well. It could also be the job description of every teacher and every parent and probably many other professions. Some of us, like me, don't have the added power of being able to punish or fire those who don't go along.

Notice, however, that those who do have the power to hire and fire may not be more successful. It turns out that even in those settings, controlling others seems to work at best in the short term, and not in the long term. People will not indefinitely do things they don't want to do. Yet all of us know that sometimes you need to do things you don't want to for the greater goal at the end. When Landry says “to get people to do what they don't want to do,” he is talking about the practice, training and preparing that nobody wants to do for its own sake, but when they see how it leads to winning and championships, they are willing to endure it. What he doesn't say is that a large part of his ability to get people to buy into this is not the power that he holds, but the level of trust in him and the other leaders that they are working for everyone's good and the goal of the team. In other words, it's about the relationships.

If there is ever a time that force has to be used: a penalty, a firing, etc., it is a hurtful time in the relationship. In fact, many times we can look at sports teams or workplace teams that are not functioning well and see that the problem is damaged relationships. If I had to guess, I would suspect that persons have tried to relate by controlling.

Another example of this I saw when I got involved in working with domestic violence issues in the 80s. I began counseling abusive men at a time when most in society thought those were unusual men with some kind of mental illness. What I quickly learned was that all of us men have been socialized to believe we are supposed to be in control of most aspects of our life, including our job, our emotions, our possessions, and our family. We realized that almost all men tried in some way, verbally or physically, to exercise control over wives and children (at least they did back in the 80s). So first we were asking these men: why do you hit, but we moved to: why do you verbally abuse, to finally: why do you try to control another person in the first place.

I want to write a bit more about this, so in the next couple of installments I want to address how this applies to our relationship with God, and then come back to how we relate to other people when we can't make them do what we want them to do. That might give us some insight as to how God intends to use us to change the world.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kevin', written in a cursive style.