

POWER OR CONTROL?  
PSALMS 145:8-13 MARK 13:24-32  
NOVEMBER 17, 1985

There is a fundamental distinction between control and power. God's omnipotence is about power and not control. God is all-power, but not all-control. How often we get these mixed up in our own lives, in our families, and in our thinking about God as we try to make sense out of life. God has plenty of power, but little control. Does that shock you? Sound like heresy?

When we confuse power and control and assert that God is in control of the world because God is all-powerful, we are then faced with those uncomfortable questions: If God is in control and if God is good, why is there evil? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why are there accidents, cancer, AIDS? Philosophers and theologians have grappled with these questions for centuries. The answers are basically three: 1) God is evil as well as good; therefore, bad things happen as well as good. This answer has not been very popular! 2) God is good, and what we humans call "bad" is only "bad" because we do not see the larger picture. Perhaps we are being taught a lesson, or we are learning patience. 3) God is good but weak; and "bad" happens when things get out of control.

The disturbing question--With God in control, why do bad things happen?--and the three unsatisfying answers are avoided when we differentiate between control and power. God is all-power, but not in control. When God granted humans free will, God surrendered control. God did not want a planet of marionettes, controlled by strings. God gave us the privilege of assuming responsibility for our own lives and for the planet. Beginning with the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God has exercised little control over humanity.

In order to realize the goal of creating humans who of their own free will would choose to fellowship with God and freely decide to choose the kingdom of God, God gave up control because control is not effective. In fact, control is virtually impossible. We humans are made in such a way that eventually we cannot be controlled, either by other people, governments, dictators, or even by God.

God does not control. God empowers. God shares his power with us humans so that we might be empowered to live our lives responsibly, creatively and victoriously. In two weeks the season of Advent begins. We will be confronted again with the Messiah who gave up control and unleashed a force that still changes lives today. Jesus demonstrated that he had little control over people and little control over the situations in which he found himself. He turned the other cheek, loved his enemies and submitted to the Roman soldiers. Jesus may not have had control, but Jesus had power. When he died, his power so impressed the Centurion soldier that he exclaimed, "Truly, this was the son of God."

The power of God and the power God shares with us will eventually triumph. That is the message of the gospel lesson this morning. "The Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory." Eventually, good will triumph. We are Easter people. We are people of the resurrection. Christ

triumphed and will triumph. An ancient affirmation of the church proclaims, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." God will triumph.

A man went to buy a Rolls Royce. Even though he had already made up his mind to buy it, he had the salesman tell him about its outstanding features. "Well, it's the most famous car in the world," said the salesman and proceeded to describe the car. The man bought the car and as he was driving home, he realized he had forgotten to ask one question. So he drove back and asked the salesman, "What's the horsepower of the Rolls Royce?" The salesman answered, "No one has ever asked me that before. I'll have to look it up." He checked in all his manuals but couldn't find the answer, so he sent a telegram to London asking what the horsepower was. Back came a one-word reply, "Adequate." Likewise, the power of God is adequate. The power of God will triumph and will empower you to triumph.

The Old Testament lesson this morning describes God's power.

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. All thy works shall give thanks to thee, O Lord, and all thy saints shall bless thee! They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and tell of thy power." Psalms 145:8-13

God's power is his power to be merciful, gracious, compassionate and abounding in steadfast love. When you allow God, he will empower you with mercy, compassion, steadfast love, and you will live your life responsibly, creatively and victoriously. God does not control, but shares his power so that you and I might be empowered.

Successful businesses today are learning this principle. Steve Brandt, a member of our church and a professor at Stanford, has written a book which has just been released, Entrepreneurship in Established Companies. Steve and Judy, by the way, are in New Zealand for several months where Steve is consulting with a company. Steve writes (pg. 40), "The customary task of management has been to stay on plan. 'Plan the work; work the plan.' In many respects, people have been viewed as possible causes of deviations from plans. To minimize the deviations, control practices were developed." But, today, Steve says, that style is obsolete. Controlling doesn't work anymore.

In successful companies today, controlling has changed to empowering. Steve writes (pg. 40), "In the world of now, the primary corporate assets are people." In the world of yesterday and yet today in companies that are having difficulty, the primary assets are buildings, machinery, inventory, and cash; rather than people. Ken Callahan, a popular church consultant, makes the same point concerning churches. Dying churches are those churches who give primary attention to maintenance, money and membership. Growing, dynamic churches are those who see themselves as missionaries concerned with people and their needs. We in the Bay Area are in a unique position as we are located in one of the richest mission fields in the world. Over 50% of the population have no church, no religion.

In successful companies, the people are empowered rather than controlled. Steve writes (pg. 54), "The challenge is relatively straightforward. The United States must upgrade its innovative prowess. To do so, U. S. Companies must tap into the creative power of their members. Ideas come from people." Effective managers are no longer managing by issuing directives (i.e., controlling) but are managing by consent (pg. 52). Wise Thomas Jefferson understood this principle when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, "...deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." In the delightful movie Emerald Forest, a father searches ten years for his lost son in the Amazon jungle. When he finds his son, he discovers that the son is happy with his life in the tribe and doesn't want to return home with his father. The father complains to the chief, "You tell him to come home with me. You're the chief!" He assumes that the chief controls the members of his tribe, but the chief wisely answers, "If I tell a man to do what he doesn't want to do, I won't be chief anymore!" He manages by consent, not by control.

Businesses today are learning this principle; but, as usual, the government is far behind. Our government is slow to learn the lesson that no nation can control another. Look at the extent to which our foreign policy has been geared toward control rather than empowerment. Many of our problems in Latin America stem from our attempt to control. We have tried to control other countries with guns, warships, embargoes, covert activity, and bribery (sometimes called "foreign aid"). Do you suppose the two leaders meeting today in the Summit meeting will realize that neither can control the other? Let us pray that Reagan and Gorbachev will finally realize that no nation can control another, that no one nation can control the globe. But, each nation has power. Look at the power we have. Is there any power stronger than the desire to be free? The power of democracy, the power of freedom, the power of an idea, the power of people struggling for dignity--these are our weapons. Power, not control.

Successful families are also learning this principle. Wise parents have learned that they cannot control their children, especially when the children reach the teen years. Force may work for awhile but not in the long run. The English schoolmaster Keate tried to control his pupils and teach them religion by force. "Boy," he is reputed to have said, "you will believe in the Holy Ghost by 5:00 this afternoon or I will beat you till you do!" There are some parents who try to control their children by beating them, either physically or psychologically. Some children are whipped into shape by being shamed, put down, and humiliated. Some parents try to control their children through bribery by paying them to behave or excel. But, such children eventually learn to serve whoever will pay them more, or sell their souls to whatever cause, business, or crime pays the most.

Effective parents do not seek to control their children, but to empower their children so that they will assume responsibility for their own actions; discover their innate power; develop a trusting, dynamic faith in God; use their intelligence; and experience the consequences of their actions so they will learn from the situation, thus rescuing parents from power struggles and nonproductive confrontations. Wise parents, like effective managers, act in such a way that the best is brought out of their children, not the worst. Wise parents encourage self-reliance, responsibility, cooperation, and the commitment to excel in their children; not rebellion, resentment, irresponsible behavior, withdrawal, sullenness and poor performance. A wise parent does not control, but shares his/her own power so that the child might be empowered to live his/her own life. Mother love, not Smother love!

## POWER OR CONTROL?

DOUGLAS NORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

NOVEMBER 17, 1985

Successful persons are learning this principle. Look at your own life. Do you try to control your life, rather than relying on power--your power and God's power? Some say, "I'm afraid to go to new groups, or try a new job, or do anything new because I may not be able to control the situation." How sad and stifling! Life is risky and some protect themselves by trying to control their lives. A woman shared with a group that she was very upset because she couldn't control the group. She confessed that she had always been able to control the groups in which she participated, and that she had been trying to control this group, but it wasn't working. The group helped her to relinquish her desire to control. Imagine the freedom and the joy she experienced when she surrendered her need to control.

Admit that you cannot control situations. Admit that you cannot control other people. Admit that you will often find yourself in circumstances where you might feel lost. Admit that life is risky. Rather than trying to control, discover your power. Take responsibility for your life. Give your life to Jesus Christ and lean on the Holy Spirit who will empower you with the power of God which is more than adequate. Then, live responsibly, creatively and victoriously.

God doesn't control. God empowers. God shares his power with you so that you might be empowered. Likewise, do not seek to control other people, but empower them as you are being empowered.