

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. It's Carey here, and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. Today we are talking about... Oh, it's certainly not an issue I've struggled with in my life, control, control. I think it was here in a conversation with Ian Morgan Cron a few dozen episodes ago where I said, "You know, can look at my entire life through the lens of control." That's not always a good thing. That's why I was excited to bring Sharon Hodde Miller onto the podcast today. I met her a couple years ago through Lysa TerKeurst and she released a new book and I thought, "Hey, we got to talk about this." If you have control freak tendencies, you have come to the right place today. The episode today is brought to you by our partners at Compassion International.

You can meet a really practical need for a child in poverty this holiday season by simply going to compassion.com/givingtree/carey and buy a brand new book, Lee Kricher has a brand new book, Seamless Pastoral Transition, and he's got other free pastoral transition resources by going to futureforwardchurches.com. You can access them there. Well, Sharon Hodde Miller is a bestselling author. She leads Bright City Church in Durham, North Carolina with her husband Ike. They planted that church of all times in 2018. She shares teaching and leadership responsibilities with him. She also has a PhD on women and calling. I'm so excited to have Sharon on the podcast today. She's a great thinker and a great leader. Yeah, we dive into the link between control and anxiety. How controlling leaders create church hurt, and why so many leaders are control freaks. I will put myself in that category, hopefully in the recovering control freak category.

Sometimes these things just really interest me and I'm like, "Okay, we got to talk about it on the podcast." Got a lot of amazing guests coming up. When a subject catches my interest or an author catches my interest, that's how I flag what we are going to talk about on the podcast. I thought, "Well, it's time to have this conversation." I hope you enjoy it as much as I do. If you do, please leave a rating and review and I hope the fall is going well for you wherever you are, wherever you're listening, in the gym, at home, on your commute, or whether you're out riding a bike, going for a run, whatever that is, really glad to have you onboard. I want you to know it's our trusted partners that bring you this podcast week after week. One of them is Compassion, and I love Compassion.

Our church has partnered with them for years. My wife and I have partnered with them for years. You may not know though, that in all 26 countries where Compassion works, they partner exclusively with the local church and that's how they release children from poverty in Jesus name. The local church becomes the hero and I've seen this on the ground. As your church begins preparing for the holiday season and encouraging generosity, I know you've got people who are saying, "What can we do to make a difference internationally?" That's where Compassion steps in through a really neat opportunity called the Giving Tree. It's a simple way for your church to share the love of Jesus with kids in need. All you do is you decorate a tree with ornaments. They represent a variety of gifts. Each gift helps meet a need for a child in poverty.

Your church can get involved and you can check it out at compassion.com/givingtree/carey. Once again, that's compassion.com/givingtree/carey, which is C-A-R-E-Y. You can request a free ornament kit from the website, set it up and away you go. You've got maybe dozens or hundreds or thousands of people in your church changing lives with their giving this holiday compassion.com/givingtree/carey. Pastoral transitions are inevitable for every church. Unfortunately, a lot of the time they don't go well. I've known Lee Kricher for years. Well, he navigated a very successful one. He's got a brand new book that is going to help you with this. Seamless Pastoral Transition is a book that can help you navigate a pastoral

transition without negatively impacting the momentum, continuity, or the mission of your church. It contains some great insights about three transitional imperatives that are really critical to address, and six pastoral transition pitfalls to avoid that can jettison your leadership transition.

If you're a church leader, one of your highest priorities has to be succession. You can get Lee's book, Seamless Pastoral Transition and other free pastoral transition resources, simply by going to futureforwardchurches.com. That's futureforwardchurches.com. And now without further ado, my conversation all about control with Sharon Hodde Miller. Sharon, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

It's great to be with you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, I love your book. It's called The Cost of Control. I had the privilege of reading an early copy and being able to endorse it. I wanted to have this conversation because perhaps control has been an issue in my life as well. What Enneagram type are you?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I am a seven with a substantial eight wing substantial.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Depending on the day. Right. Control and eights go hand in hand, don't we?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

A lot of eights in leadership. You hold a PhD. You've co-founded a church with your husband. You've written three books. You've written for some of the top publications in the Christian world. With all that said, it sounds like you got things under control. I would love to know how has control been an issue in your life?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Well, it's funny, if you had asked me probably three years ago, I would said that it is not.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. Fair.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I didn't think it was an issue for me. The way that I came to this topic was a little bit different route. During the pandemic, everything shut down. I am watching how the people in my church are responding and I'm watching how people online are responding who are followers of Jesus. I'm noticing this is revealing a lot about how people are spiritually formed. One of the things I'm constantly curious about is how is our culture discipling us? I felt like this is a great moment to really discover what's going on

underneath the surface. I felt like the pandemic revealed this deep intolerance for uncertainty, for unpredictability and this huge idolatry of control. I could see this happening and I realized, "Okay, this is something I really want to dig into." I also feel that my best teaching comes out of conviction over my own sin.

I turned the focus a little bit back onto myself and started digging into my own heart, my own soul. That was when I started to discover, "Oh, you actually have a major issue with control." Part of the reason you don't know it is because you are so good at it. Maybe this is an Enneagram Eight thing. I don't know, but I have a way and I have a feeling this is probably true of a lot of leaders. I have a way of controlling people without realizing that I'm controlling people. That was what I uncovered through this journey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, let's unpack that. How do you end up controlling people without realizing that you're controlling people?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Well, one of the ways I discovered this was happening in myself, and I don't even think this is an Enneagram Eight thing. I think this is actually a human thing. I had this relationship with knowledge and information where I was running to it expecting it to give me power and influence over the people that I was leading. The whole book is this long meditation on Genesis 3, this moment where Adam and Eve reached for more knowledge, more power, essentially control in this moment that God has not given them, and just the fallout of all of that. I look at how every time we reach for control to empower us or to soothe our anxieties, we're just reenacting that moment again and again and again in a lot of different ways. There's a lot of different ways we exert control.

At ground zero of that moment in Genesis 3, the primary way they reach for control is they're reaching for knowledge. One of my takeaways from researching for this is I think that is possibly the number one way that we try to either feel in control or exert control in our lives. Even though we think it's power, I think it's actually knowledge. The way that this was playing out in my life over the last two years is like I and I were leading through this pandemic. There's a polarized culture. There's division. There's an election. There's racial tension. Every decision that we are making is disappointing people. Every single decision is disappointing people. I start to think, "Well, what if I walk them through all of the scripture that we have sought to inform this decision? What if I walk through all the experts in our church that we have sought wise counsel for? What if I point them to all the other pastors that we have spoken with?"

I give them all this data and I present it to them or download it into their brain, then they will change their minds and suddenly agree with me. It sounds really ridiculous that I thought that, but I genuinely was operating from this position that if I just brought the right argument to them in the right way, that would change their minds. What I soon realized is this is actually about control. I think knowledge has this power to change the people in my church that it does not have. I was doing this again and again and again. The thing that I also discovered, and this is the title of the book, *The Cost of Control*, is that in the same way that we are reenacting that moment in Genesis 3, again and again and again, we are also reenacting its consequences.

This is a rule of the Universe, that anytime we try to control something that we cannot control, it always comes with a cost. I was experiencing that in my leadership. I was anxious all the time because I was lying awake at night thinking, "What if I said it this way?" Maybe if I gave this argument, this would be the thing that convinces them. I was also straining my relationship with these people in the process because people don't want to be controlled. Even though I was doing it really gently, I wasn't yelling, I

wasn't domineering, but I was trying to change them and they could tell. That was a huge epiphany for me in my leadership.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I want to dissect that a little bit more. First question, how did that go? That seems like a very logical approach. Okay, here's the best information. Here are the experts we've consulted with. Here are the other leaders in our field that we've had conversations with, and as a result we're going to do A, B, C. Now most leaders found that no matter how reasoned and measured they were, things blew up in their face because other people had other sources, right? It's like, "Well, you haven't read this website and you don't understand. You're a puppet for the left or a proxy for the right." Did it go better in your case or did it also have elements of blowing up in your face when you had that measure [inaudible 00:12:11]

Sharon Hodde Miller:

It had elements of blowing up in our face. I think the fallacy in that thinking, one of the parables that I've really returned to and drawn on through this process is the parable of the sower. Jesus tells this parable of the farmer casting out seed on hard soil and thorny soil and rocky soil and good soil. I was behaving as if the takeaway from that parable is, "Well, you just need to throw the seed harder." Or you just need to throw more seed or if you just throw the seed differently, then it will take root. Obviously that is not the takeaway from that parable, but because that's how I was behaving, I think I was actually hardening the soil. One of the things that I've taken from this is, first of all, I'm really only responsible for just faithfully casting out the truth of God's word.

The other thing that I've actually been meditating, I don't even dive into this in the book, but I've been thinking about this more recently is, I've always felt a lot of freedom and I'm not responsible for the soil. I'm just responsible for faithfully casting out the seed. That's actually not entirely true because a farmer will tell you... Well, you do prepare the soil. You have a role in preparing the soil. You can help soften the soil. You can clear away the thorns. You can remove the rocks. I think what a lot of us are doing is we're approaching our people as if I just need to help them with more seed or I just need to throw the seed the right way and they're completely ignoring the rocks. They're completely ignoring the thorns, the hardness of the soil. Those are the questions that we need to be asking right now is why is the soil of their heart hard and how can I soften it? Our influence on that is limited. I think that is the question that we need to be asking.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I guess my assumption is always been that I just have good soil in front of me. That's not true either, right? It's like there are some rocks sometimes, all that kind of stuff. Let's play that out because it's been such a big issue. You go out with this carefully, thought through, meditated over, prayed over information, doesn't get a universal round of applause. People come back with their information. Fast forward a couple years, we're still in the place where we're heading into another election cycle. There are still information wars playing out on a daily basis. How do you handle that? Yes, knowledge can be abused, knowledge is power, but words are kind of our craft. That's what we do. That's what leaders do. If you're leading in a church context, you're bringing the word, even in a business context, what do you have to rally to motivate people? Words. That's it. You got your words, so you got information, you've got strategy, you've got truth.

We plan this ethereal realm. How do you approach it differently now? Clearly you haven't just like, "Well, I'm never sharing information again." That isn't tenable, so how's it different?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah, I wouldn't be in the job that I'm in if I thought words were powerless. If I thought teaching had no power at all. It has helped me to understand the limits of my words and have a much more realistic expectation for them, I would say. The arc of this journey for me and the arc of this book was the realization that God doesn't give us control, but he does give us agency. We see this again in Genesis 1 and 2 where Adam and Eve are in the garden. They're not in control, but that doesn't mean that they're powerless. It doesn't mean that they're puppets. It doesn't mean that they're prisoners, they're not robots. They are commissioned into a calling. They have purpose, they have influence, they have authority. What I call that is agency, which is a psychological term to describe this idea that we do have power to influence ourselves and our circumstances.

The operative word there is influence, not control. The difference between the two is a recognition of our own boundaries, our own human limitations. That there's only so much I can do to influence, but ultimately I'm not responsible for the outcome. Once you believe you are responsible for the outcome, you start to stray into the control territory. You begin to manipulate, to coerce, to try and engineer things. That has been the shift. The huge shift that has taken place in me in the last couple years is understanding, yes, I am responsible for faithfully teaching the word of God. I am responsible for teaching it with humility and holiness.

There's no excuse for me being ugly or sarcastic about it, but at the end of the day I could be literally Jesus and Jesus says this himself when he says, "Whoever has ears to hear." He is acknowledging the limitations. I can't make you listen. I can't make you hear what I'm saying. Recognizing I have my role but I am not responsible for the outcome. As soon as I believe that I am, I'm going to start breaking a lot of stuff around me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How else did control show up in your life looking back on it? Where else did it pop up?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Well, another huge one was in my marriage. Ike and I are leading a church together. I don't know if you have experienced this, but sometimes we don't agree.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, that may have happened once or twice in my marriage, I think, perhaps in the last five minutes.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

We don't always agree on the direction of the church or on really big decisions. We don't always agree. Ike and I are very different processors. He's an internal processor and I'm a verbal processor. I am very, very strong with my words. If I want to get my way, I can. I know how to pressure him. I know how to push all the right buttons. I know how to verbally out maneuver him to get him to make this decision that I believe is for the good of our church. This isn't just like, "I want to buy those shoes." And he said, "No." No, this is like, "Kingdom stakes here." We're talking about here. That's why it's so easy for me legitimize, applying a little bit of pressure. I'm not yelling at him, I'm not domineering him, I'm not screaming.

I think that's why I didn't see it. I'm not this really aggressive person, but I know the right words to use. What I discovered with him was... This goes back to this idea of The Cost of Control. One of the costs of control is broken relationships. Anytime you try to control a person, it will break your relationship with

them. The thing that I didn't understand is that you might not see that brokenness right away. You might not see it that day. You might not see it the next day, the next year. It could be five years before you understand that bit by bit, by slowly controlling this person that you love. You have been corroding the foundation of your marriage. Thankfully it's never gotten to that point of being that dire with us, but I did realize in the last, I would say six months or so, that that working relationship, if we had stayed on that path, it would have done just catastrophic damage to our marriage, but it did it very slowly. It was like erosion. Just that slow erosion of the tides.

I realized that and then that also caused me to realize this same dynamic is happening with my children. Again, I'm not physical with my kids. I'm not aggressive with my kids, but I will use the volume of my voice to overpower my children. Again, I might not see the fallout of controlling my kids tomorrow or next year. I might not see it for 10 years from now. That was really chastening to me to back off and realize, okay, what's at stake here? I can get this immediate yes, but the cost down the road is going to be so much higher.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Did that ever show up in other relationships with staff that you weren't married to? We're cut from a similar cloth. I was trained in the use of words, law, that's what they do. They train you to use your words as weapons, right? I'm pretty good at it. I have to be careful. I just had a 360 review and my big takeaway of that was even when I'm on mute, I'm loud. That's just my personality. I would love to know whether you saw that spill into... I think sometimes we have different standards at home than we do at work. People see us for who we really are. Our guard is down. I know a lot of leaders who feel controlled at work. Is that something that would sometimes show up in your interaction with other staff or volunteers?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

A 100%, and it's something I am still honestly trying to understand because some of this is a personality thing. I don't know if you can relate, but I suspect you can, based on what you just said, that even when you're on mute, you're loud. My mom is just this deeply warm and hospitable person. She's the kind of person that could sit on a bench next to somebody and 30 minutes later she knows their life story and they're best friends and they're crying together. That's my mom. Unfortunately, I did not inherit that. I inherited my dad, who is an investment manager. He managed all this money for these big companies. He's this big businessman guy. I have this, unlike my mom, it's like there's this hard edge inside of me that no matter how much I try to soften it, people are going to feel it.

If I am too direct with people and I'm not trying to be aggressive, I'm actively trying not to be aggressive, people will still feel intimidated. People will still feel hurt if I'm just too direct with people. That is something, again, I think that's why I didn't see it. I wasn't trying to control people. I wasn't trying to intimidate people. It just was happening. The other thing that I've really had to reckon with that amplifies this even more, and this is the case for anyone, like you and me or if you are just a naturally hospitable person, is if you are in a position of spiritual authority, then there is all this added freight behind every word that you say and every decision that you make because God's name is attached to it. Realizing that when I am gently trying to encourage someone in our church to make a decision or to do a certain thing, I feel like I'm being really gentle because I'm doing it as a spiritual authority in their life. To me it feels like a gentle nudge, to them feels like a shove.

I think that is part of how we've even gotten to the place that we're in right now with all these stories of church hurt is pastors misunderstanding this. I'm chief among sinners here. I'm not judging other pastors because we know we are just people. We are just human beings. There's nothing actually special about

me. I'm just like any other human, but because of the nature of my calling and my title, the words coming out of my mouth just have a lot more weight. If we don't recognize that and if we don't handle that with tremendous care, we are going to end up unintentionally pushing people around, making people feel controlled and I think without genuinely meaning to. That was the case for me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, definitely the case for me too. I'm really glad you went there. I want to bounce this off, see whether you think it's a good practice or overkill? I became so sensitive to what I would call spiritual abuse or the fact that I do have power as a leader. This I'm reflecting on my church leadership, the 20 years I led a local church, that I quickly got to the place where I decided I'm not going to speak for God. If I'm reading from the book of Romans, I can speak for God, but as soon as it starts to, or at least speak his word. I can't speak for God. Soon as it came to building project, raising money, hiring and firing decisions, I made it really, really intentional that I would never say God told me to or God led me to.

In fact, what I would say is, "Hey, it seems good to us and the elders that we build this building or open up a broadcast location, but I'm responsible for this." I left God out of it. Not because I didn't believe God was in it, not because it wasn't prayed over, but because that kind of spiritual manipulation and abuse, I've just seen it misused so many times. Is that overkill or do you think that is a healthy practice? Feel free to give an honest opinion.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I think wouldn't go so far as to just leave God out it. I think the goal is to be following God to the best of our abilities. I think we have all had the experience of saying, "I thought God was leading me here, but then this didn't work out the way that I thought it was going to. I don't know if that means I misheard God or I misunderstood the purpose of this direction."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think if you caveat it that way. I don't want to overstate it like maybe at the end we said and we believe this is our next step in faith or something like that or after a lot of prayer. Man, I've seen it so abused. Every time somebody says, "God tells me. God told me to." I'm like, "I don't believe it." I don't know, maybe that's me.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah. Well, unless you're telling me you read a Bible verse.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah. If you're quoting scripture.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Otherwise, I think the amount of frequency with which God speaks to us should probably in proportion to God's frequency of speaking to his people in scripture. There was like 400 years of silence sometimes. I feel like if you're regularly hearing from God, I have some follow-up questions.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That is really well said. Now throwing the baby out with bath water, is there an upside to control?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

No.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Interesting.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

No, unless we're talking about self-control, which is, I would say a different category, but control... Here's the thing about God. We talk often about God being in control. God is sovereign, God is in charge. The thing that we never say about God is that he is controlling. I think there's a reason for that. I think that distinction is trying to hold together two theological realities that we see in scripture. We see the theological reality of God's sovereignty and we see the theological reality of man's free will. Those two things must coexist. We see those coexist perfectly in the Garden of Eden. Even afterwards, you see God intervene at key moments, rescue in certain ways. There isn't this, He's the puppeteer and we are the puppets. At no point... It's always so much more mysterious. Even when you think of something like Pharaoh where it says that God hardened his heart but it doesn't say God made him pursue the Israelites or enslave the Israelites.

There's a really important distinction there. It's really important for us as his image bearers to continue to hold that balance and to know that there are going to be times where God has called us to exercise authority, to exercise our influence, but if we stray into the realm of controlling people or trying to engineer outcomes, I feel like every family in Genesis is a cautionary tale about why we shouldn't do that and what happens if we try. I would put self-control in a different category, but generally speaking we were not created to control. We were created to influence, but we were not created to control.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a healthy distinction. I immediately started thinking if you're a firefighter, what do you try to do? You try to get the fire under control, but we're probably not fighting fires. It is life and death but in a different way. I think you're right, you are responsible for using your influence as a leader. Sometimes that comes with a hard right or a hard left. It's like, "Hey, we got to go here. I think we need to go there." Okay, that's good. Anybody who's never read the Bible, who's listening, if you think your family dysfunctional, just read the first book. It's called Genesis and you will feel so much better about your family. Okay, why do you think so many leaders are control freak Sharon? It is an epidemic.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I think it goes back to what I shared earlier about myself where we don't realize that it's happening and that's why we don't see it. I think we associate, at least me personally, when I think of a controlling leader, I think of the headlines. I think of those big blow-up stories where a pastor was overtly domineering and had an anger problem or created this culture of fear. That's what I think of. What I don't think of as much, is the pastor who works and works and works and works, never observes Sabbath, never takes the sabbatical, has no boundaries with work because they believe that if they do, the whole thing is going to fall apart. That can actually look like sainthood, like, "Look how committed they are to the church." That's a control issue is what it is, but it looks much more admirable than the guy who's just burning everything to the ground. They're both rooted in the same struggle.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a really interesting distinction. I think one of the things your work is opening my mind to is the subtlety of control. I want go back before we move into other areas to using your words as weapons. What are some strategies? I am like true confession, still trying to figure out, okay. Yes, when I say something I pretty much can invalidate all other opinions in the room. I see myself as an equal. Other people still see me as the boss, et cetera. This is active tutelage in my life. What are you doing to make sure that your words don't have a misintended consequence? That they aren't too heavy. That they aren't too much blunt forced trauma coming from your words.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I'm so working on this as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know. Feels like therapy.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

It's really funny because my husband, Ike, is just brilliant at this. He's so good at this and I'm not kidding you, I will have a meeting with him before I have a meeting with a staff person and I will walk through when I'm planning to say, to make sure that I'm not being too direct or to make sure I'm coming at this in a way that cares really well for our staff. This is something I'm actively working on. Some of it has been really simple stuff like avoiding, you statements. I noticed you did this. Even if I don't mean it aggressive, it feels like it's putting them on the stand a little bit to be prosecuted. I've also stopped using, why questions, which is like, "Why did you do it this way?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

That has been really important and those are things that I would just never... I think are intuitive to my husband for some reason, sound like accusations. Anything that sounds like an accusation, avoid. Then the piece that I've also had to really work on is giving all of our staff the benefit of the doubt. If I don't understand why something happened the way that it did, I tend to go right in and start prosecuting it asking like, "Why did this go wrong? What happened here? Why haven't you taken care of this yet?" When the reality is they have thought much more about this than I have. To come in that way it sounds really condescending. I've had to really trust my staff. That comes down to it, that's the opposite of control is trust, is just to learn that we hired them for a good reason and to trust that they are thinking about this more than I am, has been really important.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you have yet a good alternative to the question, why did you do it this way? I've also tried, "Was there a reason that you did it this way?" Which I realize is just as condemning. What is a possible alternative to that?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah, I wish Ike was here right now with me because he's much better. He'll stop me and say, please do not say it that way.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Back up.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We'll put a pin in that one. You know what? It's probably good for leaders to know that two people who are at this one who's written a book and me who's interviewing still don't know the answers to all the questions.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

We're still learning, we're still works in practice.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What on earth was going on in your brain when you did it this way? I think that's an innocent question.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

It's not usually received very loud.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No it isn't. I know, I know. It's like when I'm on mute, I'm loud. Okay. Yeah, where do I want to go? Okay, let's talk a little bit about the relationship between control and anxiety. I think that was something you hinted out earlier and we skim past it. I want to come back to it. What is the link between control and anxiety?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

That link is established again in Genesis 3. The first thing that Adam says to God is that he was hiding because he was afraid because he was naked. The fact that he says he was afraid because he was naked, we tend to think, okay, this is about shame, but that's not what he says. He doesn't say, "I was hiding because I was ashamed." I 100% think that was part of it, but that's not what he says. He doesn't say I was humiliated. He says, "I was afraid." The Hebrew there is very clear. This is about fear. He's scared. Why would Adam be scared in this moment? I think a big part of it is that he realized in that moment after he ate the fruit, that he had gotten exactly what he wanted. He wanted to be in control. He wanted to cast off the protection of God in favor of self-protection.

Almost immediately, he was realizing this does not empower me the way that I think that it will. In fact, it makes me feel more vulnerable, more afraid. We reenact that moment anytime we reached for control to empower us or to soothe our fears in whatever way. We reenact that realization of, "Oh, this actually didn't make me feel better. This didn't solve the problem the way that I think that it will." A really great example of this is when you're experiencing some sickness like physical symptoms, and you go to the internet. Again, you go to knowledge, expecting it to give you a sense of control over what is happening. In the history of WebMD, has that ever happened? Has anyone ever used it and walked away head held high like, "I feel better now. I feel at peace. I know exactly what is happening with my body."

That has never happened. Instead, you go to the absolute worst place. This happened to me about a year ago. I was having some stomach pains and so I Googled it, obviously, and deduced that it was the worst possible thing. I'm now emotionally inhabiting this reality that I have cancer. I go to my GI then and I walk in and I tell her I've been researching and this is the diagnosis that I'm pretty certain I have. Do you know what she says to me? She says, "Get off the internet."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I have a lot of doctor friends. They would concur. That is the word, the phrase I've been researching strikes fear. It's like, "Yeah, you don't have five years med school."

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I know. Just a big-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Get off the internet.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

... eye roll. Yeah, we have so much knowledge available to us medically speaking and yet it does not empower us. It doesn't soothe our anxieties the way that we think that it will. It actually increases our anxiety more. That's because there's this essential relationship between control or anxiety. Anytime we try to control something that we cannot control, it actually ratchets up our anxiety even more. That's what I experienced with the people in our church. Whenever I was trying to control them, even if it wasn't aggressively, I was still trying to control them. I was the one lying awake at night.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You end up with 17 other diseases that you discovered you had while you were searching, right?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

100%.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We had Henry Cloud on this podcast a few years ago. Well, several times. One of the things I remember discussing, and I think this was in the early days of the pandemic. We were talking about anxiety. We were talking about a loss of control. One of the things, I think I was talking to Henry, like the bookcase behind me, if you're watching this on YouTube. The world felt like it was on fire, like it was just spiraling out of control. I went there to the bookcases and one afternoon just rearranged all my books so that they were up-to-date and looked better and got rid of some ones I didn't want to have anymore. He said that was a really good response to control. When there is no order, we seek to create order. That was super healthy.

One of the things in my own growth journey is don't control people, control things. Now, I cut my lawn, feels good, stays cut, get my #lawnlines going. I will organize my garage until you can do surgery in it. I will do that. Trying to control, Toni, my wife, not a good idea. Trying to control my team, not a good idea. What are some healthy outlets for the control freaks out there, myself being one of them, that is a better source for your control. Or do you think there's no good place when you feel the urge to control something? Are there healthy outlets?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

What you're describing, I would not quite define as control. I would categorize it a little bit differently, even though on its face it might be difficult to discern the difference. At the end of the book I talk about how God doesn't give us control, but he gives us agency. In Genesis 1, 2 and 3, we see six different forms of agencies. This God-given power, this God-given influence that we have over the world. One of the powers that he has given us is naming and ordering. That's God's first act of creation. It's what God then commissions Adam to do is to name and to order. Whenever we are ordering our lives, that is a God-given response to the chaos. To take the disorder of your house and to order it is actually what you were created to do.

Now for me, one way that I can tell because I love to clean our house. My house is one of the only things that I feel like I can control. I can clean it. I can put everything in its place. One of the ways that I can tell that this has strayed from agency of healthy God giving, naming and ordering into control is when my kids mess it up. Just, last week I spent an hour organizing my seven-year old's closet. An hour later he came in, he trashed the whole thing. I lost my ever loving mind and my husband does not care about this. He doesn't understand, "Why are you so upset about this? This doesn't matter. Just shut the door. You don't have to look at it. Just shut the door. Out of sight, out of mind."

To me it meant I was going to this to give me a sense of security and stability instead of going to Jesus. That's why I couldn't hold it loosely when my son messed it up. Yes, 100%. We are created to name and to order the world around us and that is very healthy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This is interesting as somebody... This is a tendency I've seen in a lot of high capacity leaders, I've seen that desire for order. I've been in a lot of offices of people who lead large churches, large organizations. There are rarely a disaster. Usually if they have books at all, they're all carefully orchestrated, et cetera. This need for order seems to be a personality trait of a lot of leaders. I totally appreciate, "Hey, I cleaned up that closet for me, not for my seven-year old." On the other hand, we don't live... I think if we live in a constantly chaotic and disorganized world that there's something, as I always joke with my wife, there's no magazine called Worse Homes and Gardens or cluttered homes and gardens or that kind of thing.

There's something about the human soul that craves a little bit of order. Do you know where that line is? I agree. I have a past and I've talked about it where my need for order became toxic to my family and it's still a trigger for some of them to this day. Hopefully, it's better channeled now. Where in your mind is that line where something healthy and God-given becomes something dysfunctional?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I think it's when order is no longer in service to something, but it becomes an end in itself. I think that's when you have a problem. Running your church, running your organization with appropriate systems and processes is just caring well for your staff. When you are disorganized, you are not caring well for your staff. If you're getting to a point where someone makes a mistake and they breach the system in some way or someone steps outside of it, makes a mistake and all of a sudden you are feeling the wrath of God towards them for messing things up. Then we have a disordered relationship with order at that point where you're missing the point. The point of order is to serve people. As a pastor, the point of order is to love your people, but also to love your staff really well. If order is now getting in the way of you loving your staff, I think that that should be a signal that this is now about control.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, and a good example of that is I'm thinking of Dropbox. We have a really well ordered Dropbox filing system for the company. Same with Google Drive. If people just start living things randomly, you're right. It's a total disservice to your team. Nobody can ever find anything, but super helpful. Anything else you want to say about agency? I think that's a really important word.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Do you have any other questions about it just from the conversation?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, yeah. I'm just wondering, I'm trying to get us out of the control mode and into agency. I think about agency often. I listen to Tristan Harris and people in Silicon Valley who worry with the way social media is running us, the way the media is running us these days that we're losing agency, which is the capacity to think for ourselves. I love your idea, Sharon, of leadership being influence. I think that's a time tested idea. It obviously stacks up. I'm just wondering about how agency plays out in your mind?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah, well, I mentioned six different forms of agency and several of them... Naming an ordering, those are strong action verbs. Not all of the agency that I name feels that way. To give you one example based on what you just said, one form of agency that I name is restoring limits, setting limits, and we see in Genesis 1 and 2 that Adam and Eve are operating within limits. That is why they are flourishing. They're the freest that any human beings ever were was not in the absence of boundaries, but because of boundaries. To get back to that place of human freedom and human flourishing, we need to operate with boundaries. One way that we can exercise our agency is by restoring boundaries in our lives. A really practical way, you just mentioned Silicon Valley. We haven't even touched on this, how we go to knowledge to control other people, but we also go to knowledge to help us to feel in control.

When the pandemic happened, we went to the internet reading everything we could about this virus. Where is it spreading? How is it spreading? What can I do to protect myself? We go to the internet expecting all this information is going to instill in us this security and this stability and this certainty. It does not do that. What it does instead is, it overwhelms us. We are completely overwhelmed because we have this godlike omniscience now without godlike omnipotence. One of the ways that we can exercise our agency is to have boundaries with the internet and to have boundaries with the news and making sure that we are not overwhelming ourselves with that information intake. Another way that we can exercise boundaries is if you feel out of control because someone is controlling you. You can't change that toxic person, but you can have boundaries with them.

Restoring boundaries in your life. Practicing Sabbath, it's another great boundary. This is a huge form of agency. Another form of agency that does not at all seem like power or influence is self-examination. The practice of self-examination. We see this opportunity for self-examination in Genesis 3. When God says to Adam, "Where are you?" This is very clearly a rhetorical question because God knows where Adam is. He isn't stumped by this giant tree that Adam hid behind. This question is for Adam to ask himself, "How did you get here? What were the series of events that led to this? Why did you doubt me? Why didn't you trust me? Why didn't you come to me and ask more questions?" Adam is not able to do any of that internal work.

Instead, he just points his finger to Eve, he blames. That was such a crucial moment for Adam where if he had been able to just pause and ask the question, why did I make this choice? How did I get here?

Instead, he shifts into, "I'm going to manage it. I'm going to fix it. I'm going to blame somebody else. I'm going to hide." Whatever it is. That's what control does. Instead of self-examining asking, why do you feel this way? When this person dropped all the things in the Dropbox out of the system, why did it upset you that way? You go to, it's them. They didn't honor the system and God's asking, "This isn't life or death. This is Dropbox. Why are you so upset?" That is the work of self-examination, that is so important for us. That is the thing that can disrupt that control anxiety cycle. That's a really powerful form of agency that is also available to us.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How have you and Ike navigated boundaries? You have three kids, roughly ages 4 to 10 is the range. You planted a church, you lead a church, you've led through crisis. You probably have 15 different inboxes between all your social media channels where people are pinging you day in, day out. Can you do this? Can you do that? How are you navigating that as a young family?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I will say it has been hard. This is a hard season with the ages of our kids and then church planting and then going... Our church only existed for a year and a half before the pandemic hit. It has been a lot. There was a season where it felt impossible to have boundaries because our kids were home. In normal circumstances we are very rigorously committed to observing Sabbath, having at least a day where we aren't just off from work, but we're actively enjoying one another. We have a weekly date night that we are religious about. We don't talk about work at home. This has been really important for us because what would happen, we would be in the kitchen cleaning up at the end of the day and I would just think of something from church that I hadn't thought of before.

Just a question that I thought was not a long question, just whatever happened with this person and it would take Ike emotionally right back into that whole situation. I had to learn also so that work isn't invading our marriage. We have a meeting just the two of us where every time one of those questions pops into my brain, I write it down in my phone under a list for our meeting together and that is when I can ask those questions. We fumbled our way to that as well. The most important thing that I've had to take away, and most people probably won't relate to this. This is unique to a married couple leading together, but for the first several years of leading together, I would think, "Okay, I need to figure out when I am supposed to have on my pastor hat and when I need to have on my wife hat. If I need to have on my wife hat, I need to not be operating as a pastor. I was constantly trying to negotiate that with Ike. At some point I had the epiphany, I can't take off my wife hat. I would never say to my kids, "Am I engaging them as their mother right now or as their pastor?" I would never say that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Good point.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I had to realize to some extent I can't just be another staff person to my husband. I will always be his wife. I really need to prioritize that and not let work invade our marriage. That has taken a lot of work to protect.

Carey Nieuwhof:

When you have your Sabbath or other designated times, have you just told your church don't bother us on Saturday or Friday or whenever the day is? Or what do you do with the inbound that probably inevitably shows up on that day, including text messages?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

My husband is the chief contact for any emergency. He will actually turn off his phone and his notifications and if there's an emergency then they can still contact me that way or contact him through me. He's actually really good. When he goes to bed at night, he leaves his phone downstairs. He will just not even check his phone at all.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Your church is just fine with that?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yes. We created that culture. That's the gift of a church plant is just doing that pretty early on.

Carey Nieuwhof:

For a leader, maybe is not in that space and who wishes they were in that space. Are there any other tips or tricks you can advise them on? How do you set expectations? I went through that journey. Obviously, technology wasn't what it was in the mid '90s to the mid 2010s when I was leading a church. People have a way of showing up at your doorstep when it's convenient to them and texting you when it's convenient to them. We figured that out. For a leader who is stuck there right now, who's like, "Yeah, I'm getting bombarded 24/7 and I feel like I have to sleep with my phone. What advice do you have for that leader?"

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I can only share what we have done since I haven't been in that exact situation, which is to undergird our practice of Sabbath with a biblical and theological vision. This isn't just, we're doing it because we're exhausted, we're doing this because we need a break, but we're doing it because God commanded it and part of the reason he commanded it is as a gift to us, but also so that we as human beings can honor the right order of things, which is that we are not in control of our church and the church does not rise and fall on me and Ike. It rises and falls on Christ.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you preach that?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

We do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh wow. Okay.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah, we say it regularly. We take the week after Christmas off, so that following Sunday we just don't meet. Also, this started with the pandemic. I don't know if we'll continue forever, but we take the week of Fourth of July off as well. Some of that is we are coming out of this just brutally exhausting season of ministry and we want to really guard the energy of ourselves and our staff, but every time we say we make the announcement, we will not be meeting. Next Sunday is a Sabbath Sunday and this is why. Then I cast this theological vision for it. I think that's been really helpful.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Sharon, before we close out, there's couple of subjects that we didn't really touch on that I think we should probably get to, which is autonomy. How have we confused control and freedom and autonomy? Those three words get pushed around. Also, I enjoyed it. You took the prosperity gospel head-on. I want to get there too. Let's start with autonomy.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I have a section of the book where I look at different forms of control. Different ways that we try to exert control or feeling control in our lives. We've really circled around knowledge and information as a big one. Another one that I look at that I think is really particular to our culture right now is autonomy. I define autonomy as just this extreme self-governance and some autonomy is actually healthy. Again, in the Garden of Eden, we see Adam and Eve are not prisoners, they're not puppets, they're not robots. There is some autonomy there. We are in a culture that has swung pretty hard in the opposite direction where we are hyper individualistic. We are anti-authority. There is a very, very heavy emphasis on personal rights. Part of the reason for that is actually understandable and important for us to show compassion to because we are in a moment where we're reckoning with abuse of power.

We are seeing the fallout of church hurt, manipulation by authorities, all the ways that can cause massive trauma in a person's life. We in our context have really tried to honor that, to care well for people that that is their story where they really struggle with authority. Any idea of being accountable to a community can actually be really scary to someone if they've been in a community that basically said, "Don't listen to yourself. Don't listen to your intuition." That in its extremist form is a cult. There's also forms of that in fundamentalism. We understand why that language can be really scary to a person, and yet we want to honor scripture's vision of the church, which in 1 Corinthians 12 is this beautiful portrait of this body of diverse parts that are not autonomous. They are interdependent. Or you have Acts 2, where everyone shares all things in common.

There isn't a bunch of individuals functioning in autonomy? We are one. We are together. We've been trying to figure out how do we hold those two things together? What makes it really hard is our particular cultural moment that says, Nobody can tell me what to do. That is about control.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that's often when you see, we've touched on it, when you see a leader fall, that often happens, it's like, "I'll rehabilitate myself." The best book I've read on that, and it's not that I've read terribly widely, Gordon MacDonald's, Restoring Your Broken World, has an amazing chapter on restoration. You're right, it's about community. You also take a moment to talk about the prosperity gospel in the context of control. Where is the link in that?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah, that's another chapter on ways that we control, ways that we exert control or try to feel in control, elegant theology. Again, when theology is used to control people, we would call that a cult or we would call that false teaching. A much more common way that we use theology to give ourselves a feeling of control is the prosperity gospel. The voice that has really helped me in this has been Kate Bowler. I don't know if you have interviewed her? [inaudible 01:01:42].

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I haven't yet. On the list, but no success to date.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

She has a book called Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've loved. She does a really great job of explaining how pervasive prosperity theology is. Even for those of us who would say that it is wrong and that we should not espouse it. How common this thinking is where we have this transactional relationship with God, where if we just are obedient, if we are just good people, then good things will happen to us. We even see it in the disciples. The disciples espouse a prosperity theology when they encounter the man born blind and they ask, "Who sinned?" That's the first question they ask, is who sinned? To explain why this man is blind. That is prosperity theology. All that is prosperity theology thinking he must be blind because somebody did something wrong. What is really going on in that moment is the disciples are reckoning with their own vulnerability in an unpredictable and broken world.

They are narrating reality in a way that makes them feel less afraid. If there is a reason, if I can point to a reason why this man is blind, then I just don't have to do that thing. That is about control. That that makes them feel more in control in the world. Once I saw that, I realize, "Man, I do that all the time." When I'm scrolling through social media and I come across a really sad, really tragic story, but then I start to think, "Well, maybe this happened to them because of where they live. Or maybe this happened to them because of this decision that they made or because of the way that their parent..." Whatever it is, that is a form of prosperity theology. More than that, that is me trying to make my world feel less out of control. If I can blame this thing, then I can avoid that thing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You can feel safe. You can feel like this will not happen to me. Wow.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

A 100%.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's even a lot more subtle than the, "Hey, if I give you a dollar, you'll give me 10." This goes very deep.

Sharon Hodde Miller:

Yeah. We tend to associate prosperity theology with swindlers on television. But it's much more common than that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, Sharon, this has been a rich conversation. Anything else you'd like to share?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

You were saying earlier about order and how that can be good. I think that's actually a really beautiful place to land this conversation because control is one of those things where we associate it with idolatry, we associate it with sin and I think that's why we shouldn't do it. Part of the reason we struggle with control is that we live in this post Genesis 3 world, but we were created for Genesis 1 and 2. Yearning for stability, this whole conversation has been about leadership. I'm sure there are people who have loved ones, adult children who are struggling with addiction or who are about to marry someone that they wish that they wouldn't. Maybe have a spouse that betrayed their trust in some way. This hits home in a very different way where you're wishing that there is a way that you could guarantee their safety, or you wish there was a way you could guarantee that they would not betray your trust again.

That desire to control the situation at the heart of it is not sin. It's the fact that you live in a broken world and that your soul was created for security and for stability. The pain that you're feeling right now is not necessarily idolatry, it's just this echo of that Genesis 1, Genesis 2 world that you are created for. I would love to end on that note of grace to say that where we go off the rails is how we pursue that stability and security. The desire itself was put there by God. At the end of the day, that is why he sent Jesus was to restore it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I don't know why, but I think that is a great place to wrap up. As you're describing that, I'm thinking about all these beautiful situations where there's order. There's order to a great restaurant in the design, in the food, in the service, in the sequence, in the preparation. I'm not talking about super expensive. I'm just like, we are meant to enjoy food. There's beauty in design, there's beauty in gardens, there's order in nature, there's order in music, right? That it follows a certain prescription. When it does, it's beautiful to the human ear. I think for those of us who maybe overstep our means from time to time, it's good to think about order and trust and relationships and health and boundaries and Sabbath and an ordering of our days. It's been a really rich conversation, Sharon. Thank you so much. The book is called *The Cost of Control: Why We Crave It, the Anxiety It Gives Us, and the Real Power God Promises*. It's practical as well as theological. Your PhD shows up in the book, and I appreciate that a lot. Where can people find you online these days, Sharon?

Sharon Hodde Miller:

I am most active on Instagram, [sharonhmiller](#).

Carey Nieuwhof:

Awesome. Thank you so much. Well, that was a little convicting and helpful. So grateful for Sharon's wisdom and insight. You can get more in the show notes, including the links to our partners as well by going to [careynieuwhof.com/episode526](#). Speaking of our partners, make sure you check out what Compassion International can do. They can help your church reach out and make a difference internationally by simply setting up a Giving Tree this holiday season. Go to [compassion.com/givingtree/carey](#) to register today. Lee Kricher has a brand new book *Seamless Pastoral Transition* and he has a bunch of other free pastoral transition resources. You can get it by going to [futureforwardchurches.com](#). That's where you'll get all the free stuff as well. Well, next episode, we've got Tim Elmore back on the podcast. I know he's been on recently, but when I saw his latest research, I thought, "You know what? We got to go there." We're going to talk all things Gen Z, and here's an excerpt.

Tim Elmore:

I think Generation Z members want to be a part of something that's very important and almost impossible. It has to really feel like we're going to move the needle when we do it. Some people think we can't even do it. In fact, Carey, that may be every young generation over the last 50 years, but I really believe if we can offer something that seems very important, almost impossible, we're going to win them at the heart level.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Also, coming up on the podcast, Brian Koppelman, Jon and McRae Acuff. Who else have we got? Annie F. Downs, James Clear, Erwin McManus, Patrick Lencioni, Sean Cannell, and so much more. Thank you so much for listening everybody. If you really enjoyed this episode, please leave a rating and review. They make a big difference in getting the word out. I got something free for you. I have a free workshop coming up very soon, October 24th and 25th and in it you're going to learn five different ways you can grow your church in the next 12 months. I know how hard it's been. I know how discouraged church leaders are. I want to give you practical help and practical hope, even a game plan to carry it out. Can't guarantee results, but I can show you the process. If you're interested, bring your entire team for free to churchgrowthaccelerator.com. That's where you can register, and we'll see you in a few weeks. Churchgrowthaccelerator.com. Thanks so much for listening everybody, and I hope our time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership.