

DON LIVESAY

SANCTIFYING GOD BEFORE THE PEOPLE

One definition of a leader is “someone who has influence over at least one other person.” This definition puts all of us in leadership positions, some having influence over just a few individuals, others having influence over many people, with most of us falling somewhere in between.

Moses’ Missed Opportunity

Leaders carry an awesome and sometimes frightening responsibility. We can let it shape us for God’s glory, or we can let it take us into a self-centered realm and create trauma and damage for ourselves and those around us. In the book of Numbers, we find Moses departing from his faithful practice of spiritual leadership and doing things by his own authority and in his own way:

And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. (Num. 20:10-11, New King James Version)

Moses had just come from a personal encounter with God where he received clear instructions:

Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD said to Moses, “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water.” (Num. 20:6-8, New International Version)

What went wrong? Was Moses afraid of another 40 years in the wilderness? Did he lose his temper—again? Was he tired? Was he emotionally spent after the loss of his sister? Whatever the reason, Moses

disobeyed God; he struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Here's what God said: "And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them'" (Num. 20:12, English Standard Version). The New Living Translation renders the text: "Because you did not trust in me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel." This reveals one of

coming from the people against him, which jeopardized his own personal gratification. Our moment of gratification gives evidence that self has been elevated instead of God, and we stand guilty of misrepresenting His holiness before the people.

Leaders face many dangers. People say a lot of nice things about us. We are given upgrades in meetings, office, and travel; we get special treatment that many other people do not receive. When we walk into a room, people notice. We always have to be “on,” so it is easy to be less than genuine. The demands of our leadership role are often so heavy, and often controlled or pushed by others, that it is easy to jump to entitlement thinking—“the church owes me!” These and other realities in our daily experience contribute to the seduction of leadership into an internal focus on self instead of on God.

What are some warning signs that you may have been seduced by your leadership role?

- If you lose your temper in a church board or elders’ meeting and lay the opposition low
- When in a conflict situation you worry more about how you will look than about the spiritual outcomes for the people involved and for the organization
- When you feel you are entitled to receive that which is beyond policy
- When you give more focus to image than to spiritual depth
- If after a sermon that went well you agree with the compliments that it was probably one the best sermons they ever heard
- When you are not thinking and praying about how to expand the leadership beyond your circle
- When it is easy to expect things of others that you won’t do
- When you take advantage of your position to exercise power

Lest we think this a small thing, reflect on God’s response to Moses’ lapse of leadership focus: “And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!’” (Num. 20:12, NLT).

Wait a moment: had not Moses been amazingly faithful to God? Had he not been intimately engaged with God in His very presence, speaking face to face as one speaks to a friend? Had he not led the children of Israel out of Egypt? And had he not endured years of rebellion, murmuring, and disobedience by the people he led? I consider Moses to be the greatest leader in all of history, second only to our Lord Jesus. So

He gave detailed instructions on the religious ceremonies that the people were to observe (Num. 28-29). He also gave moral and ethical instructions from the Lord which were to guide the Israelites in everyday life. One of the most impassioned pleas for obedience to God is found in Deuteronomy 30, after Moses had instructed the Israelites about God's law.

There were still problems that Moses faced, but he never again failed to honor God before the people. When poisonous snakes began killing the Israelites, it was Moses who appealed to God on their behalf, even though the Israelites' had brought this judgment upon themselves because of their complaining against God and against Moses. Moses made the bronze serpent and instructed the Israelites to look upon it to be saved (Num. 21:4-9). When the men of Israel engaged in sexual immorality and idolatry with the women of Moab, Moses followed God's command and told the people to execute the perpetrators (Num. 25). While such a response might seem harsh to us, it shows how seriously God, and Moses, took the sin of idolatry. Moses had learned the lesson of sanctifying God before the people. He would allow nothing to stand in the way of God's holiness being displayed to the Israelites.

Moses accepted the consequences of his sin and continued to faithfully lead God's people even though he would never enter the Promised Land himself. But God did allow Moses to see the Promised Land before he died. From the heights of Mount Nebo, God showed him the land that the people he had led for those 40 long years would inhabit (Deut. 34:1-4). Moses died without setting foot into the Promised Land, yet God did something even more remarkable for him. The Ne for

approach that has been helpful to me and has become a personal

timely statements by quiet but solid people have turned many negative meetings to the positive outcomes God intended for the mission of the church. So, standing for and doing right is a cornerstone to a spiritually sound community. But it is not the only thing on which we are to focus.

In the Right Way

The core of doing something in the right way rests in our attitude. Some operative words are “loving,” “unselfish,” “respectful,” and “caring.” In harmony with God’s nature, the focus is on the best spiritual outcome for as many of those involved as possible. Moses’ attitude when he struck the rock revealed his loss of focus. He lost sight of the spiritual outcome and failed to sanctify God before the people. His handling of the situation was not loving, unselfish, respectful, or caring. He was probably exasperated by the grumbling of the Israelites. In many ways they deserved to be rebuked! If we were in his place we might have reacted similarly. But Moses’ reaction did not reflect the character of God.

When Christ was confronted with the woman found in sin (see John 8:2-11), He did not condemn her but approached her in a loving way that made a difference in her life. From that day on, she was a follower. He knew she had sinned, and she was painfully aware of her sin; but Christ treated her with an accountable and redemptive approach. Christ applied grace, but also moved her life upward with graceful accountability. In saving her, He also made an appeal to those who opposed Him and gave them an opportunity to sweep away the sin in their own hearts.

In confronting them, Christ was mindful of two things: He was protecting the life and heart of the woman while at the same time being sensitive to her accusers by not making a public spectacle of them. The outcome of a good spiritual process is more likely to be redemptive when the approach follows Jesus’ example. Gentleness does not eliminate accountability. When confrontation is the right thing, the best confronter is one who has a relationship with that person. Love cares enough to help someone move away from behaviors that are destructive to self and/or others. People who are controllers can be very difficult to approach. Because of their own insecurities, they often use the following behaviors:

- Manipulation using hostility, intimidation, the martyr complex, etc.
- Not respecting others’ feelings, boundaries, and opinions
- Rejecting good counsel
- Inconsistently applying standards to others versus themselves

- Overreacting at an inappropriate level in relation to the actual issue in question
- Misusing inspired authority as a power tool
- Rarely accepting responsibility by deflecting away from the

Authority does not control, it authors. (Kennedy & Charles, 1997, book jacket)

I believe the huge misunderstanding of our God is that He is just some authoritarian making unilateral decisions about people with no care, no love, and certainly no compassion. It is of eternal consequence for us to understand that God, the most powerful being in the universe, is not an arbitrary judge, not a dictator, not authoritarian—He is, in fact, an Author of our lives, our future, and our salvation. His plan, His sacrifice, all that He is, is about carefully, lovingly fashioning us for fulfillment now and a joyous eternity. In fact, Paul understood this concept when he wrote in Hebrews 12:2: “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (King James Version, emphasis supplied).

At the Right Time

Timing can be the most difficult of the four principles to apply. When is the right time to address a conflict or problem? It is common for a leader to know what should be done and how to do it long before knowing when the time is right. Timing especially needs to be subject to the Holy Spirit’s leading. Remember, the most important goal is reaching the best spiritual outcome. When a person is engaged in hurting someone emotionally, physically, or spiritually, our response should usually be very quick. But there are many cases when acting too soon will increase damage and responding too late will allow more damage than necessary. With focused and caring prayer, God will provide signals that indicate that the time for action has arrived. Often, issues of courage or fear, stubbornness and self, will inhibit our understanding God’s timing. Paul’s description of dying to self is important so we can know God’s timing. Timing is often a huge factor in good outcomes.

For the Right Reason

Our personal motives in leadership are the primary engines of good outcomes. Remember, control is not our goal; good spiritual function, personal growth, and quality outcomes are the goal. If our focus turns to self, motives are compromised. If we are operating in godly love and altruistic concern for others, we are probably doing things for the right reason. The right or wrong reason for doing something often dramatically shapes the first three parts of the accountability list. It’s a good

question to ask ourselves as we look in the mirror: Why am I doing this?

Those who feel that doing the right thing is the only necessity in

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