

AASS 4 (2001):89-94

Paper presented during the

AIAS Theological Forum 2001: The Church: Unity Amidst Change

August 8-11, 2001

LEADING THE CHURCH

DONALD SAHLY, Ph.D., Ed.D.

Global Leadership Training Director

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

While we are all called to be followers of Jesus Christ, we are also called to lead in a variety of capacities. We teach our children about Jesus, we put forth every effort to model a Christ-like demeanor in our places of work, we lead institutions, we teach Bible classes, we share our faith with a neighbor—we are all called to lead. Our following Jesus Christ should ultimately lead others to Him as we travel the road of this life.

Throughout history the church has struggled with the idea and concept of leadership. God has provided for people through His word both direction and principles for those who choose to be leaders and those He chooses to lead the church. When the subject of leadership is mentioned, many concepts come to mind. We can find hundreds of volumes written on ideas and concepts of what leadership is and what real leaders should do and practice. These books are for the most part very good and the ideas they contain are worthy, but in many respects they are secular and general in nature and do not fit what the church needs for this new century. If we would teach leadership for a church setting, we must look to material that is both specific and spiritual. Professional leadership must exist, but at the same time professionalism must be overshadowed by spirituality. Business-based attitudes and concepts, which are secular in their origin, will drain from the church spiritual strength and vitality. Jesus was critical of the highly professionalized clergy of His day and referred to them as hypocrites. Servant leadership does not emphasize academic degrees over and above spiritual service to others. “God does not put any premium on ignorance, but that does not mean He puts His priority on academic training.”¹

¹Frank Damazio, *The Making of a Leader* (Portland: Bible Temple, 1988), 2-3.

The Call to Leadership

Biblical history points out that spiritual leadership has been obtained in one of three ways:

1. Self-appointed leadership. In Num 16-17 we have the story of Korah, who rebelled against Moses out of envy for his leadership position.

2. Man-appointed leadership. These people may claim to have received a call from God, but it is a request through human channels, not divinely appointed.

3. God-appointed leadership. These calls follow the true biblical pattern. God requests a person under varied and unusual circumstances to fulfill a special assignment. God's call to Samuel in the night, to Moses at the burning bush, and the unusual call to Saul on the road to Damascus, are but a few examples of His intervention in the human life.

When God calls a leader He does so through specific spiritual acts of appointment, separation, sending, or calling.

Effective spiritual leadership does not come as a result of theological training or seminary degrees, as important as education is. Jesus told His disciples, "You did not choose Me; I chose you and appointed you" (John 15:16). The sovereign selection of God gives great confidence to Christian workers.²

In each of these acts God chooses to show His divine action, and that action is accompanied by a specific assignment. It should also be noted here that God not only calls leaders in a specific manner, He calls each one as a believer, to be part of the body and represent Him in all they do. We must also note that when God calls He also enables. Self-appointed and man-appointed leaders fail because they have not been given by God the gifts, grace, and talents required for the tasks assigned by God. When God truly calls, we cannot fail if we put all in His hands. As surely as the walls of Jericho came down, and Daniel walked out of the lions' den, we too can succeed only when we are totally committed to God and place ourselves and our leadership in His care.

²J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 22.

Changed Thinking is Required for Changed Leadership

In his books *Teaching the Elephant to Dance* and *The Flight of the Buffalo*, James Belasco points out a need for changed thinking in organizations today. Our church was organized more than one hundred and thirty years ago. The church has grown but the organizational pattern is still very much the same. It responds like an elephant—solid, sure-footed, dependable, but slow to adapt to current trends and needs. The comparison is also made to a herd of buffalo with its strong leader and the herd going wherever the lead buffalo determines the herd should go. Belasco suggests that the organization of today should be more like a flock of geese in its “V” formation. Leadership changes constantly, and each member of the flock is capable of providing some leadership in some area at some time, keeping the flock on course as it travels. When following the flock-of-geese pattern, true servant leaders will:

1. Transfer ownership and responsibility of the work to those who are called to carry out the tasks involved.
2. Create environments where each member chooses to be responsible.
3. Empower and coach others to assume greater tasks and responsibility.

While this example sounds logical and easily achieved, leading a V-shaped herd of buffalo across the open prairie is not a simple procedure. Because not all creatures were made to fly, it does take organization, planning, coordinating, and measures of control.

Our Response to God’s Call

Every Christian is called by God to a ministry, be it great or small. To sit and wait for some supernatural happening before we begin is to show a lack of faith in what God has already done and is presently doing for us. How we respond to God is the true indication of our own spiritual condition.

Heart is what separates the good from the great. If you want to make a difference in other people’s lives as a leader, look into your heart and see if you are really committed.³

As we look at the responses of those called from biblical history, we can gain some powerful insights and lessons for our own lives. Gideon and Moses provide

³John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 19.

good examples of some things we should not do. Gideon responded to God's call with six reasons why he should not accept:

1. Present world events and local problems. Israel was living in a time of oppression by enemies. Life consisted of hiding in fear from those who would come and steal the harvest from their storehouses. Gideon questioned, "Where is God, and why is this happening to us? Why is God asking me to deal with this? This is really God's problem, so why does He not solve it?"

2. Gideon's second question was somewhat related to the first. "If God is a God of miracles, then why has He not taken care of the problem?"

3. As the angel pursued the call for Gideon, Gideon's frustration grew. He honestly felt God had forsaken the people, yet he knew in his heart this was not so. His frustration signalled his lack of faith.

4. Gideon's next reason for not accepting the call was that he was inferior to others. God does call the weak and the unlikely. It is His way of making a bold statement and it is also proof of who has the real power and control. God does not really need us. He is big enough to do and accomplish any work He wants done. God chooses people to be vessels.

5. Gideon's fifth reason was that he came from a poor family. There had not been any famous people in his family tree. Why should God want anyone from this low status to speak and lead the nation? (Read 1 Cor 1:23-27.)

6. The last excuse Gideon used was one we could all use at one time in our lives, but many, like myself, have passed that point: "I am too young and not qualified" does not hold up with God. As the Spirit of God took hold of the heart and mind of Gideon, he answered the call and did a mighty work.

The ministry that God gives to each believer is one of the many treasures He puts in our lives as Christians. The call to service, and possibly to leadership, will change your life as nothing else will.⁴

Qualifications of Leadership

Accepting the call of leadership and succeeding at doing what God has asked you to do as a leader depends on a fine balance of divine and human factors. No life example more clearly teaches this concept than the life and leadership of

⁴Damazio, 66.

Nehemiah. The key to Nehemiah's success is clearly stated in Neh 2:8, where he recognizes that the "good hand of my God [was] upon me."⁵ Knowing, admitting, and remembering where the real power lies is the key to good leadership. "He was not only willing to pray for his people, but he was also willing to be the channel through whom God could work to deliver His people out of their desperate situation in Jerusalem."⁶

Following our recognition of God's place and our place in an assignment comes our responsibility to prepare ourselves and to remember that we will not be totally effective if we try to do anything in our own power. God is trying to speak through us, but it is God's message and His leading, not ours, that is to be conveyed to others.

Another qualification of a Christian leader is the knowledge of prayer. The prayer of Nehemiah outlines for us a prayer process that we can apply to our own lives and experiences as we answer the call of God to lead. True leaders are filled with love; they practice integrity coupled with a deep concern and intense compassion for the welfare of others. These qualities bring the true leader to a practice of these prayer principles:

1. We pray out of a heart of deep concern.
2. We make prayer a priority over all other needs.
3. We pray persistently.
4. In prayer and in all other things, we recognize that God is great and awesome.
5. We remind God of His promises.
6. We acknowledge our unworthiness, our sinfulness, and our human weakness and failing.
7. We request specific things and expect specific answers.

The apostle Paul, in Eph 3:20-21, has a specific prayer for the young Christian church, and he closes that prayer with words that encourage all leaders: "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

God's Call to Leadership in Our Lives

Mark 1:11 NIV says, "And a voice came from heaven: 'You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.'" To take the view that a direct call from God to a particular individual is a quaint or archaic happening is damaging

⁵Scripture quotations are from the NKJV, unless otherwise noted.

⁶Gene A. Getz, *Nehemiah: Becoming a Disciplined Leader* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 10.

to God's work and to individual lives and careers. As Christians, we need to believe that God has a purpose for our entire lives, professions, and careers. To take a view other than this is to deny our allegiance to God and what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. We must never let the opinions of others determine what God's will is for us in our own individual lives. Rom 14 states clearly that each of us must face God individually. Each of us must personally determine what God intends for our lives and how we should respond to what we believe and know is God's call to us and His will for our lives.

Reproduction in Leadership

Reproduction in leadership is not just an idea or concept; it is a law. Many who accept leadership positions are afraid of, or ignore, this law, but overlooking it is a serious mistake and usually leads to some kind of disaster. King Saul, who was given the opportunity of grooming David to take his place as king, became jealous, and his jealousy took him down the road to disaster and ruin. Those who practice the law of reproduction and train others to succeed them in their work are blessed and rewarded. Good leaders never have to be afraid of someone eclipsing them in their work. When we train others who follow us, we leave a legacy. Moses' training of Joshua, Jesus' training of the Twelve, and Paul's reproducing his ministry through Timothy, are examples of what God expects of us when He calls us to leadership. Leaders who fail to train others to take their positions fail to lead. Ignoring this law in the end will lead to organizational failure.

God the Father sent His Son Jesus to meet the people's needs, to be a source of beauty in a world of decay, to bring joy to those who mourn, to be a source and avenue of praise. Jesus reproduced these abilities in His disciples, who have, in turn, passed on to us the ability to lead and meet the spiritual needs of His children in our world today. As leaders, we must follow and obey the law of reproduction in leadership. It is a "must" that we bring up a new generation of youth, trained and empowered to carry forward the work of God on this earth.

Anyone can be a leader. We do not need a budget, a staff, or a title. What is needed is a willingness to do as Jesus did—to place ourselves in an attitudinal position of heart, mind, and soul to be of service to others. When we develop a servant's heart, then we have developed true leadership. It is not a matter of what we say or what we do when we are up front that counts. It is a matter of attitude—the attitude of being of service to others in whatever way we are able.