

Why Leaders Fail

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THE DANGER OF A QUICK SUCCESS

Every minister prays for success in his chosen work. Many dream of the “big break.” Well and good. But if and when this happens, there is a danger that the man may become swept away by his own successes. He may dream of still bigger things, forgetting that the first step is to consolidate gains already won. He may overlook the fact that the devil is busy laying plans for the downfall of all who are used of God in a special way.

A grave danger is that on the strength of the extra finances that come in, the minister will involve himself in obligations which he may not be able to meet. When creditors press for payment and there is no immediate source of help, we have seen elation replaced by fear and even terror. The man may be tempted to do something desperate. If he does not face the situation honestly, his actions may not only become a reproach to the cause, but they may saddle him with an image of irresponsibility that will hinder his ministry from that time on.

Some years ago, I invited a young man whose ministry was showing great promise to hold a campaign with me. He actually was being used of God in a special way and was reaching many souls for Christ. However something happened at the close of our first meeting together, which indicated the future course of his ministry. The audience attending the meetings reached about 1500 in number, which was many more than he had ever had in his services before. Consequently, his offerings were several times larger than he had previously received. After the close of the meeting, I did not see him for several days. When I met him again, I found that he had made an investment—he proudly informed me that he had just put money down on a brand

new Cadillac! In high spirits, he went on to elaborate about the great advantages of owning a Cadillac. He said that the added comfort was worth it in his evangelistic tours. He needed a fast means of transportation to take him across the country. (One fast trip across the country brought him three traffic fines.) Moreover, he added it would indicate to the people the new status of his ministry!

We are not saying that it is wrong for a minister with a large congregation who may be expected to live on the same level as they, to own a Cadillac. But it was altogether out of place for a young man who had been in the ministry only a short while to go heavily in debt by investing in luxurious transportation on the strength of one successful meeting. Needless to say, this young man long since has ceased to have any substantial place in the ministry. His reputation for extravagance, instability, and irresponsibility has preceded him wherever he goes. He owes bills to various persons which he probably will never pay. His wife lost confidence in him and left him. It appears that he belongs to that class of ministers who Paul said had made shipwreck of their faith.

Let us give another example of a young man who was having unusual success in the ministry. His rise as an evangelist reached a climax in a southern town where large crowds attended his meetings. He arrived at the conclusion that God had called him to great things. He came to my office and during his visit manifested a spirit of extreme self-confidence. He gave me a rundown of his plans. Already he was gathering a large staff and was planning to set up an office. He would put out a magazine. He had ordered all sorts of equipment, a large tent with tractors, trucks, and all the paraphernalia to go with it. Indeed, he was thoroughly convinced that God had singled him out as the man of the hour.

The more he talked the more disturbed I became. It seemed to me that I was witnessing a disaster in the making. I tried to caution him, but soon saw that nothing I said was getting through. However, his awakening was to come sooner than even I thought.

Intoxicated by his success, he went deeper and deeper into debt. His next campaigns were not so profitable as the others. Inevitably, he could not pay his bills as they came due. Debts were made some of which have never been paid to this day. This young man created for himself a bad image which has followed him ever since. What might have been a strong ministry today is practically shelved. All this trouble could have easily been avoided if he had kept a budget of his income and lived within it.

We could multiply cases like this of ministers who once had a bright future before them. But sudden success went to their head, and it was not long before they were in serious trouble. Although some have learned their lesson and today are carrying on a sound ministry, others have never since recovered their stride.

THOSE WITH POOR ADVISORS

“And the king answered the people roughly, and forsook the old men’s counsel that they gave to him; And spake to them after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions” (1 Kings 12:13-14).

Some ministers as a result of special gifts and talents attain an unusual prominence in the public eye. When a man achieves more than ordinary usefulness in the ministry it may be necessary for him to engage a staff. The members of a man's staff usually wield a strong influence upon his way of thinking. Therefore, the selection of such personnel is most important. They must be men who are responsive to their leader's vision and calling, but not to his weaknesses.

We recall the case of one young evangelist who had unusual faith. There was no doubt that the gifts of healing were powerfully manifested in his ministry. In the short space of about eight months his meetings increased in size from filling local churches until he was ministering in the largest auditoriums in the land. The men who worked with him at that time were solicitous that with the enlargement of his ministry and influence he might continue to walk humbly before God and to recognize that it was the counsel and wisdom of others that played a large part in his success.

Nevertheless, with thousands of people attending his meetings, a coterie of followers who played to his vanity began to gather around him. They would flatter him and tell him that he was the greatest preacher in the world, that if he only had men who truly understood and appreciated his talents, he would be able to shake the country. Unfortunately, he fell for these flatteries and set up a new staff.

Under the momentum that had been built up, he continued to have outstanding meetings for some considerable time. But the result was inevitable. His ministry had crested. A slow decline was already beginning. These new men gave him poor advice. The result was that he began to make serious mistakes. Because of his secretive handling of finances and failures to keep his promises, he soon alienated many influential ministers. Misunderstandings followed. He no longer had the backing of churches he previously enjoyed, and consequently his crowds fell off. Running into financial difficulties, he had to sell his equipment and suspend publication of his magazine. His staff who had been largely responsible for his downfall left him when he couldn't pay their salaries. Long since he passed into the limbo of forgotten men.

We recall another man who attained unusual prominence, not only in the Full Gospel world, but many denominational men received great inspiration from his ministry. His spiritual discernment was as perfect as anything that has ever come to our notice. Yet in the natural, his judgment was often that of a child. He was a humble man, but others not so humble who were eager to shine by his reflected light gathered around this man of God. They had no other intention but to further their own interests. To make bad matters worse, some of his followers had extremely weird ideas, a hodgepodge of teachings which were clearly unsound. They succeeded in publishing these errors under the name of the leader. Former intimates of this good man warned him of the dangers arising from the influence of those that surrounded him. Actually, the purpose of these "friends" was to form a cult by using the leader's ministry. Mercifully, the Lord removed the man from the scene so that his great work would not be lost.

The lesson is that a man must not only be sincere, but he must be careful about those whom he chooses to make his confidants. Rehoboam was not one of Judah's worst kings, and had he hearkened unto the counsel of the older men, he might have retained a united kingdom. Unfortunately, he chose to accept the counsel of men who were greedy for power and who were

little interested in the welfare of the country. The result was revolution and disaster. Rehoboam's sad story has been repeated on a smaller scale many times in our day.

THOSE WHO BETRAY CONSCIENCE WHEN THE PRICE IS HIGH ENOUGH

“Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceedingly high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:8-9).

Satan knew that it was impossible to get Christ to yield to temptation for a small price. His only hope of subverting Him was to offer everything he had - “the kingdoms of the world.” The devil was willing to step aside and let Christ take his place if He would but fall down and worship him. But if Satan had any such hopes, they were dashed to the earth by Christ's stern refusal of the offer.

Nevertheless, though Satan failed with Christ, he still believes that every man has his price. There is a story told of a certain individual who held an important position of trust in the government and earned a reputation of high integrity. On a certain occasion he was approached by a lobbyist who operated on the principle that anyone could be bought if his price were met. This man offered the official \$40,000 if he would exert his influence on the side of a certain bill that was coming up for a vote. The man indignantly refused the offer. The bribe was successively raised to \$50,000 and then \$60,000, but in each case it was refused. Finally the offer was raised to \$80,000. With that the obnoxious visitor was unceremoniously ordered from the office with the words, “Now be gone. You are getting too near my price.” The official meant by this that he was not going to dally with the temptation. It was a dangerous thing to do.

Nevertheless, they will first rationalize their conduct. Not for a moment will they allow themselves to think they are doing wrong. It is human for men to justify their acts, however wrong. Even in the chaotic period of the Judges, we are told that “every man did that which is right in his own eyes.” Most men who err will not violate their conscience; they alter it to bring it into conformity with their ambition. But like Jacob, there will be a time of reckoning—if not in this world then in the world to come. Men who do not “strive lawfully” for the prize, must miss it in the end.

It is sad to reflect that some men whom God has used in an outstanding way will violate their trust when they think the reward is great enough. These same individuals would have looked with horror on their act if it had involved only a small matter. Yet when the prize was of sufficient size, they were ready to forego their principles.

We have seen these things happen, and they are a warning to us of the limitations of men, even some who seem to be the soul of honor. For there is a Court of Last Resort which all of us must face eventually, and that is the judgment seat of Christ. There, all that is built on hay, wood, and stubble must be consumed in the fire (although they themselves will be saved as by fire) for the day will declare it.

THE TEMPTATION TO BUILD A SECT

Certain men have the ability, or “charisma,” as some call it to move men and attract followers far more than the average preacher. This ability spurs a dedicated man to become a great soulwinner. John Wesley is an example. Although his ministry rocked England for God, he had no desire to establish a kingdom of his own. He remained with the Church of England throughout his life. He had many opportunities to start an organization under his name, but he turned them all down. Looking backward, we can see that the time was well overdue for a new movement to arise distinct from the State Church. Although Wesley had nothing to do with its actual inception, shortly after his death the Methodist Church came into being.

But there are other men who are more ambitious than John Wesley. They are more interested in making a name than in giving themselves to the advancement of the work of the Lord. If such men would only keep their eye single unto God, thousands would rise up to call them blessed when their ministry was finished. Unfortunately, in many cases when a man discovers that he possesses unusual ability, he is tempted to try to build a kingdom for himself. In order to hold followers, he seeks some means to separate them from the mainstream of Scriptural revelation. This was the case of Jeroboam, who fearing the children of Israel would be lured back to allegiance to Rehoboam said to himself, “If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their Lord, even unto Rehoboam” (1 Kings 12:27). So after taking counsel with idolatrous followers, he had two golden calves set up for the people to worship. This false worship became a curse both to him and to his people.

Today when men get the urge to set up a kingdom for themselves, they are likewise confronted with the problem of how to hold the loyalty of their followers. In almost all cases of the formation of a new sect, the leader makes himself believe that he has discovered some overlooked truth of the Bible, which is of such world-shaking significance as to overshadow all else. Next, he proclaims that the church is willfully guilty of withholding this “great truth” from the people. This becomes a rallying point by which he can separate his followers from other believers. His work then in all respects becomes a sect, and if his teachings become sufficiently involved in error, the sect becomes a cult.

It is amazing the number of strange and unscriptural teachings that have emerged to divide the people of God. Often the doctrine emphasized revolves around a partial truth, but which in the main is unsound. In other instances, the doctrine propagated is out-and-out error.

It is tragic to witness good people caught in the web of error and led astray by men who could have been of great service to the cause of Christ, but who because of ambition allow themselves to become leaders of sects or cults which at best can do nothing but further divide the body of Christ.

THE MESSIANIC COMPLEX

In line with the subject we have been discussing is that strange obsession we occasionally witness in leaders which is called the “Messianic Complex.” Leaders who are unusually successful will find Satan always on hand to tell them that they are God’s man of the hour, that

they are another Moses “to lead the church out of the wilderness” or that they are Elijah returned again.

A classic example which illustrates this is the life of Dr. John Alexander Dowie, whom God used to bring back apostolic ministry to the Church at the turn of the century. The truth is that God used this man as few others to usher in His last day revival. In a few years’ time, he had gathered 100,000 followers, and his movement spread quickly around the world. The remarkable miracles of healing that occurred were of course what attracted the widespread interest and which made the movement so dynamic. A hostile municipal administrator in Chicago tried to drive him from the city. During that time he was arrested nearly 100 times for “practicing medicine without a license.” But in the end, the administration itself was toppled from power, and a newspaper editor who had vilified Dowie went to the penitentiary for two years.

John Alexander Dowie was a success in everything a minister of the gospel could desire. But he was not satisfied. He wanted new worlds to conquer. Ambition dominated him until it altered his personality. Satan played on his pride. A voice whispered, “Was not he, John Alexander Dowie, the great Elijah who was to come again? Was not he the First Apostle and also the Messenger of the Covenant spoken of by Malachi?” At first he rejected these suggestions, but gradually he began to believe them. In time, he became a victim of these delusions. Assuming the title of “Messenger of the Covenant,” he arrogated to himself an office that belonged to Christ. There could be only one conclusion to this sad story. He became like Nebuchadnezzar who said, “Is not this great Babylon that I have built for the house of my majesty?” and then was struck down with madness and his kingdom was taken from him. So John Alexander Dowie, a man who had done so much good, a man who had broken the fetters of ecclesiastical tradition that had bound the Church for centuries, a man whom God greatly honored—yet because of his pride he was struck down with an incurable disease, his kingdom going into receivership, and he himself dying a broken-hearted man.

There is no place in God’s program today for those who have messianic complexes. God has only one man of the hour and that is our Lord Jesus Christ.

SOME LEADERS FAIL BECAUSE THEY “USE” PEOPLE FOR THEIR OWN ADVANCEMENT

There are some brilliant leaders who might attain to a high position in God’s accounting, except that they insist on “using” people for their own advancement. How different was Christ who carefully trained his disciples that they might fit into positions of greater usefulness. To “use” people is a grave fault. Indeed such men apparently look upon themselves as so superior that they consider the interests of others to be inconsequential, therefore, to be given scant attention. The sin of Lucifer was his boundless ambition and disregard for God’s interests. This evil of personal ambition is so serious that if not corrected, God must in the end bring low those affected by it. “He that exalteth himself shall be abased.”

All of us owe something to others. Without the assistance of others the greatest among us would not go far. The least a leader can show to those who have helped him is his gratitude. Unfortunately, there are those who use the trust of others only as an opportunity to further their own personal interests and will ruthlessly set aside those who had helped them attain their present position without giving the matter a second thought.

Such methods may work for a while. Apparently God will permit a man who does these things to prosper for a time. Indeed a part of his punishment may be that he is allowed to prosper in his delusion! For no man can hurt other members of the body of Christ with impunity. He who seeks to promote his own interests unfairly over those of other members of the body of Christ will ultimately be demoted and his works burned up as hay, wood, and stubble in the day of Christ.

In this world, where often so little gratitude is manifested, it is refreshing to find some people who do show it. It always gives new confidence to the people of God to learn that there are men whom God has especially used and who are interested in the welfare and advancement of others beside themselves. A beautiful illustration of this is found in the friendship of Jonathan and David. Jonathan knew that in God's providence David would supersede him. But even as his father Saul was insanely jealous of others, so Jonathan was the opposite; he was willing to see another honored before him. Although Jonathan sadly suffered because of a rebellious parent, God took full note of his generous spirit and allowed the beautiful story of his selflessness to be recorded in the Scriptures for all generations to see. With the exception of Christ himself, Jonathan's life is the most wonderful illustration of true friendship in the Scriptures.