

Leadership by design

Business authors Robert J. Kriegal and Louis Patler have noted, "Research shows that the overwhelming majority of Americans (85 percent) are reactive and static, not action- or dynamic- or instinct-oriented." When faced with a crisis, "Their impulse is to lower the sails and wait out the storm."

It's true. Few people care to lead. Many would prefer to take the order rather than give it; to embrace the vision rather than cast it; to follow the example rather than set it. That's not uncommon—or wrong. Not everyone is called or gifted to lead.

Still, good leaders are hard to find. And they are much in demand. This is true in the church. The body of Christ needs disciplined, godly, focused leaders. But what happens when such leaders fail to lead? A parable from the book of Judges offers some insight.

Following his famous battle with Midian, Gideon (also called Jerub-Baal) ruled Israel for 40 years. He married many wives and had 70 sons. Another son, Abimelech, was born to him by a concubine.

When Gideon died, Abimelech sought support for a political coup from his relatives in Shechem. The citizens of Shechem gave Abimelech money from the treasury of a pagan god, and with it he hired a group of mercenaries whom he led back to his father's home in Ophrah to kill his 70 brothers. Only the youngest, Jotham, escaped the slaughter.

An Ancient Parable

With his political competition eliminated, Abimelech met with the citizens of Shechem in Beth Millo to be crowned king. When Jotham heard about it, he climbed to the top of Mount Gerizim and addressed the

crowd in a parable, warning them against choosing such a poor leader (Judges 9:8-15):

One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, "Be our king." But the olive tree answered, "Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?" Next, the trees said to the fig tree, "Come and be our king." But the fig tree replied, "Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?" Then the trees said to the vine, "Come and be our king." But the vine answered, "Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?" Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, "Come and be our king." The thornbush said to the trees, "If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!"

The final verses of Judges 9 show that Jotham's prophetic warning rang true. Soon after, Abimelech was killed and the citizens of Shechem were punished.

A 21st Century Principle

Jotham's parable contains an important truth for the 21st century church. We might think of it as the "leadership by default" principle. *When those who are capable fail to lead, leadership invariably falls to those who are less capable.* People want to be led. In fact, the need to follow is so strong in many people that they will accept an unqualified leader rather than do without.

When this happens in the church, everything suffers—outreach, discipleship,

vision, planning, organization. How can we protect the church from the leadership by default principle? To begin, if you're capable, perhaps you ought to lead. You know leadership can be difficult and thankless. You may not like the limelight. You may be smarting from negative reactions to your last attempt at leading. You may have become discouraged in your efforts to lead and walked away saying, "I don't need this!" But if you sense God pressing you into leadership, and if those around you confirm your ability to lead, shouldn't you lead?

Rather than the leadership by default principle, we ought to subscribe to the "leadership by design" principle: "If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously" (Romans 12:8, *NLT*).

From its infancy, God has given gifted leaders to the church (Ephesians 4:11-13). The church helps in the process by recognizing and affirming them, teaching and discipling them, nurturing and encouraging them, and ultimately following and supporting them. This is God's design for leadership.

The church needs leaders in every area of ministry. Leaders who cast vision, and leaders who cast shepherds and angels in the Christmas program. Leaders who change communities, and leaders who change diapers. Leaders who direct building programs, and leaders who direct Vacation Bible School.

If you feel called to lead, accept the responsibility. Don't wait to be asked. Express your desire to the elders of your congregation. Request their affirmation. Seek their input. Submit to their authority.

If God has gifted you to lead, then lead. The church shouldn't have to settle for second-best. ■



Shawn McMullen, editor