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LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLESHIP

Part 9: The Frustrations of Leadership

by Gary North

And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron; and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD? (Num. 16:3).

So announced Korah, Dathan, and two-hundred fifty "princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown" (v. 2). Moses' reply was to the point: You want holiness? You will get holiness! You want to be set apart by God? You will be set apart by God! "Even to morrow the LORD will shew who are his, and who is holy" (v. 5).

Why were they so desirous of sharing his authority? Why were they discontented with their positions of leadership and renown? Moses asked these Levites: "Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And he hath brought thee near unto him, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee: and seek ye the priesthood also?" (vv. 9-10).

Moses invited Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, to consult with him. They replied: "Is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land that floweth with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, except thou make thyself altogether a prince over us? Moreover thou hast not brought us into a land that flowed with milk and honey, or given us inheritance of fields and vineyards: wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? we will not come up" (vv. 13-14).

Slow Learners with Short Memories

In Numbers 11, we read of the complaining Israelites who grew tired of manna; they wanted meat. They praised the luxuries of Egypt, contrasting this with manna. God sent them meat: the quail. He also sent them a plague.

In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron revolted against Moses' authority. God afflicted Miriam with leprosy for a week. Aaron repented and escaped this affliction.

In Numbers 13, Moses sent a dozen spies into the land of Canaan. They returned: ten with fearful stories, two with a recommendation to invade and conquer. In Numbers 14, the nation cried out in despair, calling on Moses to lead them back into Egypt. Here it was again: the benefits of Egypt. Joshua and Caleb told them not to despair, to invade Canaan instead. The congregation decided to stone them to death. God then threatened to destroy them all, but Moses inter-

vened, calling on God to honor His promise to deliver Canaan into their hands, lest His enemies ridicule Him as one unable to deliver on His promises. God relented, cursing the entire generation of the exodus to die in the wilderness, except for Joshua and Caleb, whereupon the nation attacked the Amalekites and were routed.

These people – every one of them holy, according to Korah and Dathan – were slow learners. Korah and Dathan were the slowest of all. The day after their challenge to Moses, God opened the earth beneath their feet, and they and their households fell into the pit, which then closed over them (Num. 16:32-33).

These people also had short memories: about Egypt and about the consequences of rebellion. God sent fire out of heaven to consume the two hundred and fifty Levites of renown who had offered incense to him (v. 35). This had been the fate of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2), but the two hundred fifty apparently forgot. God therefore led them into a trap by the word of Moses, who commanded them to bring censers and incense (v. 17). They wanted a test of authority; they got a test of authority!

The Marks of Supreme Leadership

Moses was a man who preferred to avoid confrontations (Ex. 3:11). God sent him to confront Pharaoh. Moses was a man who thought he lacked eloquence (Ex. 4:10). God made him His spokesman: not before Pharaoh – that mediatorial assignment went to Aaron (Ex. 4:14) – but before the nation of Israel. Moses was the meekest man on earth (Num. 12:3). God made him the greatest leader of men in history: the name above all names in national history.

Jesus Christ suffered the taunts and afflictions of men, bore their sins, and died a criminal's death. He rose again from the dead, and God gave all power in heaven and earth to Him (Matt. 28:18-20).

His disciples wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This was a dispute over leadership within the immediate group (Mark 9:34). Jesus put a child in their midst: "Whosoever humbleth himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4).

Zebedee's wife, the mother of James and John (Matt. 4:21), came to Jesus and made a request: to grant that her sons would sit beside him in His kingdom. He asked them if they were ready to drink the cup He would be required to drink and be baptized with Him in the baptism He would undergo. They said they were. He told them that they would indeed drink that cup and undergo that baptism, but God the

Father alone grants the seats at his right hand and left hand (Matt. 20:20-23). As it turned out, this was a blessing in disguise for them: the two thieves were at his right and left hand at Calvary. But the sons of Zebedee nevertheless had verbally sealed their futures. "Thanks, Mom!"

There is a lesson here. Those who would rule must serve (Matt. 20:26-27). This is why Christ came to minister to others: to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).

"Me First, First Me!"

Miriam and Aaron wanted to be first, and so they became. Miriam was the first recorded victim of biblical leprosy, while Aaron was the first to lead the nation into public idolatry: the golden calf incident. Korah and Dathan wanted to be first. They were first to be swallowed up alive. Absalom wanted to be first, and he was the first recorded to die, cursed (Deut. 21:23), hanging on a tree (II Sam. 18:9, 14).

The sons of Zebedee wanted to be first. Jesus told them and their mother: "Ye know not what ye ask." He immediately challenged the sons to count the cost. They thought they had. No doubt they later paid more than they had imagined at the time of the reckoning. Over three decades later, John sat on the island of Patmos, a "companion in tribulation" with the churches just prior to Nero's persecutions. He knew the trials that lay ahead. He had wanted to be first; he wrote the last book of the Bible. This was a high honor, but it came through difficult circumstances.

But they could never be the first, for Adam was the first. He wanted to be the first to gain the knowledge of good and evil. He wanted to gain this knowledge early and on his own terms. Eve was deceived, but Adam sinned self-consciously (I Tim. 2:14). This cost them dearly. Those who pursue power and honor early in life refuse to learn from Adam and his many recorded imitators. They do not count the cost.

The cost they are most unwilling to pay is the personal frustration of delay. They are not believers in the benefits of delayed personal gratification. Their slogan is: "We want the world, and we want it now!" What they want they cannot get. This frustrates them even more.

The earlier in life the desire for leadership strikes, the more frustrating the delay. The greater one's capacity for leadership, the greater the frustration. No one is more sorely tempted by the lure of leadership than the person with the capacity to lead others whose capacity becomes visible to many when he is young. Occasionally, such people are given the opportunity to lead early in their careers. Rarely do they exercise wise leadership for long.

Solomon is the model. He asked early for wisdom, but later he ignored biblical law. He multiplied gold and wives, contrary to Deuteronomy 17. The result was frustration, for God thwarted him. No more eloquent book of sophisticated frustration exists than Ecclesiastes, the product of wisdom, rebellion, and frustration.

Fast Start, Long Wait

Want to be a Moses? Try herding sheep in exile for four decades. Want to be a Joshua? Try wandering in circles with professional complainers for four decades, knowing that as long as they live, you will continue to wander in circles. Want to be a David? Try living in exile in your chief enemies' nation. Drool a lot (I Sam. 21:13).

Each of these men began their careers with a bang. It did them no good in their youth. Moses slew the Egyptian. It did him no good. He had to flee. Joshua told the truth about the Canaanites' weakness. It did him no good. He had to wander. David slew Goliath. It did him no good. He had to serve Saul and then the Philistines. Jesus at age 12 astonished the theologians with His knowledge (Luke 2:46-47). It did Him no

good. Fast start; long wait.

This is not a criticism of fast starts in life. Fast starts give people lots of extra time to come to grips with the reality of sin and frustration. But fast starts generally are followed by long waits. Maturity has a high price: patience plus problems. Tuition is high in the school of hard knocks. "Hurry up and wait," an old Army slogan informs the troops. It is correct.

The fastest starter I ever knew personally was Leonard Ross. I first met him on a train travelling from Los Angeles to Sacramento. It was June, 1958. About 400 southern California high school juniors were journeying to the American Legion's week-long Boys State program. Word spread that Leonard Ross was on board. A year earlier, Ross had won \$64,000 on *The \$64,000 Question*. This was in an era in which a white male professional earned about \$6,500 a year. You could buy a new Mercedes Benz 300SL gull wing for \$15,000. Then he went on another quiz show and went all the way again: \$100,000. His field was the stock market.

I went into the lounge car where Ross was holding forth. Other students were calling out problems in chemistry for him to solve. Take so much of this, add it to so much of that, and how much of something else will you get? Ross told them, almost instantaneously. Unlike them, he did the computations in his head. He was 12 years old.

He went to college at age 13, graduated with a Ph.D. in economics and a law degree at age 21, and was a full professor at the Columbia University Law School in his mid-twenties. He came back to California, co-authored a best-selling book – appropriately titled *The Best* – and became an advisor to Governor Jerry Brown.

In 1982, my wife was reading the newspaper. "Lenny Ross died," she told me. He had drowned in a swimming pool. His family reported that they suspected suicide. He had been suffering from depression. He was 36 years old. He was sufficiently well known to deserve an Associated Press news wire obituary as a "whiz kid, emeritus." That was his final achievement. Fast start. Early finish.

There were others on that train who experienced similar careers. I will not name them. They are still alive, as far as I know. They may rebound. Maybe they already have. I liked three of them. Two of them were my friends. The two who were merely one-time acquaintances went the farthest fastest. One became known as America's leading Shakespearian actor by age 28. Then he got into the movies. He also starred in at least two TV series. His career was disrupted, though not destroyed, when he served time in a British prison for cocaine possession. The second became Nixon's appointments secretary, was the intermediary in the "dirty tricks" campaign, and went to prison.

The third was a straight-A high school student and student body president who went to the 1960 Olympics at age 17 and set the national junior college high jump record as a sophomore at age 18. But he was attending his third college. He then disappeared from public view. I'm not sure he ever graduated from college. The fourth was elected president of Boys Nation a few weeks after that train ride: the highest position a politically ambitious high school junior can achieve. A year later, he enrolled in a prestige college where he was elected student body president in his senior year. He attended a moderately liberal Presbyterian theological seminary, went to law school, got arrested during a Vietnam war demonstration, and disappeared. None of his classmates can find him. The rumor twenty years ago – and rumors are cheap – was he was disbarred for something or other. All I know is that I haven't been able to locate him, and I've tried.

I mention all this because their experiences stamped into my mind early that if you have a fast start, you are expected to keep moving forward steadily for a long time. Your knowl-

edge and your experience are expected by others (and by God) to be like compound interest: growing, on average, at a "market rate of return." This isn't easy to do, long term. Not many people seem to be able to sustain high lifetime returns after a fast start. J. S. Bach did. John Stuart Mill did, but only after a mental breakdown. Winston Churchill is a classic modern example, but his years of frustration and near-exile from the seats of power in the 1930's were accompanied by financial difficulties, terrible psychological depression, and a sense of futility. To pay his bills, he wrote. How he wrote! He also schemed patiently. And then his day came. In the 1950's, it came again. The American physicist and mathematician John von Neumann was an early starter, and the modern computer is one of his legacies. Douglas MacArthur was the best student in West Point's history and perhaps its greatest general. But not many do this. Even those who do not fade early can die early: Alexander the Great and Mozart come to mind. So, for that matter, does Jesus.

When I think of a whiz kid, emeritus, I think of Fidel Castro. He outlived Communism, the Soviet Union, and his welcome. His nation and American investors are waiting for his near-term departure. You can see history's buzzards circling overhead. So can he, I presume. What did he get out of it? Local power, local women, and Havana cigars. Fast start. Long decline.

Future Orientation

In 1970, Harvard's Edward Banfield wrote a book that has become a classic in the social sciences, *The Unheavenly City*. It offered a unique thesis: traditional class theory, based on Marxism, is incorrect. Class position is not a function of wealth; it is a function of time perspective. Future-oriented people are upper class; present-oriented people are lower class. Different class positions lead to differences in wealth, not the other way around.

Economist Thomas Sowell, writing in the February, 1994, issue of *The American Spectator*, reminds us that Banfield's warnings regarding crime and punishment, job retraining programs, and social policy in general are still not taken seriously. Liberals still believe that a person's time perspective is irrelevant for social policy. They are wrong. It matters how soon a criminal will get punished if he is present oriented. The longer that judgment is delayed, the less effective the deterrent. It matters that a person wants gratification now. He is not a good candidate for job retraining: the payoff is too far away.

But Banfield's insight is not limited to an economic underclass. It applies just as well to the upper class. If a person has the capacity for leadership but is unwilling to wait, he has two options: revolution or retreat. He can lead men to tear down the system and establish a new one in which he will play the predominant role. Or he can quit trying. We see both approaches in Christian circles today.

Retreat is very common and has been since 1900. Christians give up when they see no short-term means of gaining power in society. They re-define success as perseverance in the face of persecution, especially when they are not actually suffering persecution. Entire eschatological systems have been devised to justify the recommended policies of cultural defeat, retreat, and passivity. Such eschatologies become self-fulfilling prophecies for those individuals and groups that adopt them. Expecting defeat, they achieve it.

Political revolution is far less common among Christians. An exception is liberation theology, which its promoters tell us is Christian. Liberation theologians in Latin America invoked Marxism after 1965 when they saw their socialistic plans frustrated by existing governments. Some of them actually

joined guerilla bands. The collapse of Marxism has undermined their theology. Seminary professors still teach it, the same way that American college professors still teach Marxism. Professors are defenders of lost causes.

What is quite common is ecclesiastical revolution. We see churches splitting all the time. Theology is rarely the underlying cause. We know this because the losers generally wind up in congregations that are either more liberal or at least less theologically rigorous than the one they left behind. The split comes because some disgruntled would-be leader sees that he cannot gain control by patient work and sacrificial service. He seeks to tear down the church as a means either of gaining control or inflicting pain on those who maintain control. This practice is especially true in non-hierarchical denominations where no bishop or presbytery can intervene and impose sanctions. This revolutionary approach can be characterized as "take it or break it."

Occasionally a disgruntled loser and his handful of followers will leave to start some temporary meeting that they call a church. This is why we see short-lived house churches sprouting up. They rarely last for very long. The reason why they exist is because their Dathanite founders are not sufficiently patient to serve under others' authority for the long haul. The revolutionary founder is of course quite willing to have others serve devotedly under him for the long haul. But what kind of people are willing to serve such a person? Three types: deceived enthusiasts who will eventually come to their senses and quit, emotional doormats who are not of great use as change-agents, and rival would-be leaders who will plan a subsequent revolt. The hearty band shrinks. They wind up listening to the audiotapes of some distant guru, serving holy communion to each other, and pretending that they are accomplishing something important. They aren't.

Dealing With Frustration

Leaders must endure frustration. So must would-be leaders. There is no escape from frustration. Either their followers will not follow – the leader's frustration – or else existing leaders will not follow: the would-be leader's frustration. No better example exists of political frustration than Moses. Paul is probably the best example in ecclesiastical history. A true leader asks himself daily: "Who needs this?" Only one legitimate answer comes to mind: "My followers." Three words encapsulate the leader's task: "Feed my sheep." Yet there are present-oriented power-seekers who would dearly love to sit in the seats of power. They are sheep-stealers, sheep-shearers, and mutton or shish-ke-bob eaters.

Moses was a frustrated leader whose peers would never see the promised victory. Because of his own sin of tapping the rock twice, Moses knew he would only see the boundaries of the victory, not participate in it (Num. 20:12). "Who needs this?" The exodus generation did; so did their heirs.

Joshua was a frustrated would-be leader. So was Caleb. They patiently endured the delay of victory. They knew they would enter the land. God had said that Caleb would after their near-stoning (Num. 14:24); presumably, so would Joshua. But that announcement was made a generation early. They could not lead the troops to victory for four decades. "Who needs this?" The heirs of the exodus generation did.

God afflicts all leaders with frustration. "It goes with the territory." A national leader who goes through the worst frustration of all – wartime – and who is still in office when the other side surrenders, becomes the great leader in the history books. If he dies immediately after, he becomes a legend. In U.S. history, Lincoln is the consummate model, with Franklin Roosevelt close behind – he died six months too soon. Roosevelt's personal battle with the paralyzing effects of polio

made him the leader he was after 1932 rather than the lightweight he had been in 1920, when Cox and he lost the national election. Woodrow Wilson outlived his victory by two years and suffered a humiliating defeat over the ratification of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations. He had suffered only one minor defeat in a meteoric career: a forgotten battle in 1906 over Princeton University's dormitory arrangements. That piddling defeat so discouraged him that he went into politics to escape. He did not perform well under pressure. Frustration literally paralyzed him in the fall of 1919: a stroke in the middle of the battle over the League. The cheering stopped. His reputation in the textbooks is not equally bright.

Why do wise men seek positions of leadership? There is the negative reason: to keep out evil and incompetent men. There is a positive reason: to extend the kingdom of God in a specific area of lawful authority. There is a personal reason: to exercise a God-given talent for the job.

Yet those who seek power rarely call their opponents evil. That loses elections. The leadership-seeker must gain the support of his opponent's supporters. To call him evil is to imply that they are either evil or fools. Sometimes they call their opponents incompetent, appealing to the public record. Usually, they confine their remarks to generalities, e.g., "the need for a change." But why is there a need for a change if one's opponent is neither evil nor demonstrably incompetent?

In a pluralistic world, it is suicidal politically to run for office on a kingdom of God platform. It is only marginally less suicidal ecclesiastically.

It is not considered proper etiquette for a would-be leader to announce his God-given talent for the job.

How, then, can an honest man seek leadership if he cannot publicly announce his best reasons and expect to gain his goal.

There must be another valid reason for seeking leadership. There is: to gain experience at lower levels of responsibility in preparation for a crisis. This is another way of saying that a person needs the experience of personal suffering and overcoming frustration. A person trains for the big race by participating in smaller races.

But how does a would-be leader persuade people that a crisis is coming? By appealing to the facts: standards and sanctions. A society that commits evil brings judgment on itself. If the present leaders are doing evil things out of ignorance, the would-be leader can seek to educate voters in the reasons why present policies are evil. This raises the age-old question: Why do good people do bad things? Political philosophers have been asking this question since the days of Plato. It is still considered a legitimate question.

Still, any would-be leader who is not constantly asking himself, "Who needs this?", is not ready to exercise leadership. A leadership-readiness personal inventory should always end with this question. It is a variation of Jesus' warning to count the cost (Luke 14:28-30).

What's in It for Me?

This is the satanic version of "Who needs this?" The person who seeks leadership because there is anything in it for him other than fulfilling the shepherd's function is not safe for his followers. This is why Jesus told Peter three times, "Feed my sheep." Those who feed Jesus' sheep for the sake

of anything but the preservation of the sheep and the glory of God have the wrong agenda.

In 1905, a New York City politician named George Washington Plunkitt was credited with having written a book on politics. It is known as *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*. He defended something he called honest graft. An example of honest graft is buying a piece of property that you, as a political insider, know in advance is going to be purchased by the city or will rise in value because of something the city will do. This is not theft, he said. It is merely taking advantage of an opportunity that someone will inevitably gain. It might as well be the politician. Plunkitt immortalized the phrase: "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."

Leadership that is based on honest graft is not easily distinguished from corruption. The temptation is too great to reverse the process: have the city do something because of what the politicians already own. That is dishonest graft. But it is as evil for voters deliberately to vote for men who will do this for them as it is for the politicians to do it for themselves. Yet almost all of politics is a scramble for votes by promising to reward one group at the expense of another. Frédéric Bastiat in 1848 called this the politics of plunder. He warned that it will destroy both productivity and morality.

Why the Worst Get on Top

In 1944, F. A. Hayek titled Chapter 10 of *The Road to Serfdom*, "Why the Worst Get on Top." He argued that the more powerful the State becomes, the more ruthless the quest for control over it. When the State can inflict either great harm or shower other great benefits on those under its jurisdiction, representatives of special-interest groups will stop at almost nothing to gain and maintain power. The kind of people who survive such political competition will not be men of high moral vision.

The Soviet Union is a fine example of Hayek's warning. Konstatin Simis wrote a book, *USSR: The Corrupt Society* (1982). In it, he described the massive corruption of the State and most of those who tried to prosper in terms of its operations. But his warning was not taken seriously by Western intellectuals. Only when the Soviet economy collapsed did the West's intellectuals – overwhelmingly defenders of the interventionist welfare State – admit that something had been wrong with the Soviet system.

This is why the most important step a society can take to remove the incentives for political corruption and tyranny is to shrink the State. Cut off its funds and its authority over the economy. Hayek had argued this in 1944, and he was vilified for three decades after the publication of *The Road to Serfdom*. This is why his Nobel Prize in 1974 came as such a shock to the intellectuals.

Conclusion

Because leadership is always accompanied by frustration, those who seek leadership positions are suspect. They should be considered guilty until proven innocent. Either they are so new to office that they are unaware of the frustration factor, which means they should not be trusted with very much power, or else they have a hidden agenda. That agenda must be searched out very carefully by those who will soon be fed by such shepherds.

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