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# ON ASSIGNMENT FROM GOD

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*All of us* have at one time or another been embarrassed because we've made a wrong assumption. For example, when Bryndan, our youngest son, was a teenager, I disciplined him for something that I just knew he had done. In fact I was so sure that he had done it that I wouldn't even allow him to give me an explanation. Based on the circumstances and his past behavior, I couldn't possibly be wrong, and I wasn't about to let him off the hook. So I lowered the boom! I put him on restriction and told him that I hope he learned his lesson.

But as it turned out, I was the one who needed to learn a lesson. Our oldest daughter came to me and explained what really happened and let me know that he didn't do what I thought he did. I was embarrassed, and I had to apologize to my son.

As I look back on this experience, it's obvious that I made a wrong assumption based on the wrong information. I didn't have a clear picture of what was going on—I had the wrong perspective. I disciplined my son because I *thought* I saw behavior that was consistent with what I had seen in the past. If I had let him give me his explanation and then checked it out, I would have seen it in a different light.

I needed to get a different perspective in order to come to an accurate assessment, a right conclusion.

In the same way, we need the right perspective as we approach the subject of leadership. This sounds so simple, and the influence of our culture is so pervasive that few of us take the time to question just how modern ways of thinking cloud our minds and warp our view of true biblical leadership.

For example, as a young man I had the privilege of meeting a Christian leader whom I greatly admired. I enjoyed spending time with him, but the more I listened to him, the more concerned I became. At one point he said, "When people begin to recognize you and you get to where I am at, there's a lot of leverage in the authority I have."

It rattled me—here was a man whom God had used over the years to lead people into His kingdom, and now it seemed like he was more concerned with exerting his power and influence than he was about following God's priorities. There was a hollow ring to his words—his ministry was focused too much on him. After I left him I prayed, "God, don't let me be like him."

#### KEY PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

As I have watched, read, studied, interacted with leaders, and experienced leadership through more than thirty-five years of ministry, I have come to embrace a few guiding, fundamental

perspectives concerning distinctively Christian leadership. These perspectives in my mind represent a starting point that will be very helpful in our approach to leadership. There are five of them.

First, *we must fight the encroaching secularization both of Christianity in general and Christian leadership in particular*. As leaders we ought to be students of our culture, but we need to be discerning. We must learn to recognize worldviews and approaches that are human-centered rather than God-centered. Yes, by all means passionately search for principles and approaches that will help us advance His cause, but in the process let's make sure that we edit our findings through the grid of the Word of God.

The word “secular” comes from the Latin, meaning nonsacred. To be secular means that you don't believe God is foundational—He is not at the center. It doesn't necessarily mean that you are an atheist or agnostic. It just means that God is pushed out to the edges of consideration, and day-to-day operations are done from priorities and philosophies that reflect a human-centered agenda rather than a God-centered one.

We live in a Western culture that worships materialism and achievement. In our businesses and even in our churches, we think something is wrong if we aren't meeting our quarterly or yearly growth projections. We measure success by how much money we bring in or by how many people fill our worship services and Sunday school classes. This man-centered philosophy cannot help but influence our view of leadership. We look for leaders who can achieve the type of growth we expect, but we don't consider whether or not that growth reflects God's priorities.

There is a powerful, almost irresistible undertow that comes with worldly success. Over the years I've observed an unsettling pattern among many leaders who develop a track record as a “winner.” When they hear people applaud them and tell them how

wonderful they are . . . when high-profile people take and return their calls . . . when they begin believing they are something special . . . the success puffs them up and makes them into something different and unpleasant.

As leaders we want to get things done; we want results. And we should! This gives us a bent toward the pragmatic. However, we need to make sure that the truths and approaches we import and adopt are not contaminated. They should be consistent with what the Scriptures teach. The Word of God should be the rule, the standard for *everything* we are and do. What we believe, how we think, and how we act should be governed by our biblical framework.

Second, as a result of adopting human-centered values, *we've made too much of leadership*. I can hear you saying, "Then why are you writing this book?" and "Didn't you just say in the introduction that nothing of lasting value ever happens without leadership?"

Remember that my purpose for this book is to call us back to what the Bible emphasizes as core to true Christian leadership. And though leadership is crucial, it was never meant to be a status symbol or a personal statement of worth and value. The one who leads is no more important than the person who faithfully serves in obscurity. We have all been created in the image of God and given work to do. It is not the position that adds value to us as people—we were created with value and worth.

In our culture we have pumped up the idea of position so much that we risk sending a message that a person hasn't maximized his life unless he is moving up the corporate ladder or is recognized as a leader in our church or community. Upwardly mobile parents brag that they are raising their children to be leaders, and they send these children to schools that boast they are "building leaders for tomorrow."

We need to stop making idols out of leaders and stop idolizing the position of leadership. We need to turn down the volume and put leadership in context. As followers of Christ, we should not parrot a culture that celebrates image, stature, and position, nor should we tout leadership as the pathway to recognition and fame.

#### A LEADER'S WALK WITH GOD

Third, *we must avoid preferring competence over character.* Often a leader is appointed because of “what he brings to the table”—his skills and experience, his eloquence, his forcefulness and determination, his vision, his charisma, his ability to get results. But what about his walk with God? What about his family life? What about his character?

We tend to ignore character flaws and even sin in the life of a leader because of his more worldly leadership skills. Do we really want to risk all that he's doing for us by confronting him about sin? So for the sake of results and “competence,” we give the leader a pass, rationalize and put a favorable spin on the issues or situation, and for the time being we declare, “life is good.”

But maybe life is not good. Sooner or later problems will be apparent in both the leader and the people who are affected by his leadership. Simply stated, God never ignores or excuses sin. It's good to be good at what you do and it's a blessing to be admired and respected. But the growing competence and admiration are no substitute for the consistent nurture of your soul and the commitment to overcoming sin and pursuing Christlikeness as the focused theme of our lives.

Fourth, *we ultimately live and therefore lead before an audience of one.* Our motivation should be the glory of God. We should love Him more than anything, and all we do should be an expression of

that love relationship. This includes how we lead and should be our motivation for leading. It is what John meant when he said in 1 John 2:15–17: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” The love of the Father and not the love of the world (the secular) must be our focus.

My heart is grieved and broken over the number of Christian leaders who have been seduced by “lights and the stage.” When we start sharing the stage with God, eventually He lets us know—usually in a very memorable way—that He doesn’t do variety shows and He’s not into cohosting what He wants done in human history.

When we as leaders downplay the prominence of our walk and relationship with God, and underemphasize godly character, the Word of God, and prayer in relationship to His call for our lives, we shouldn’t be surprised when we get leaders whose résumés are crammed with accomplishments but who have impoverished souls.

Fifth, *distinctive Christian leadership must be defined by the assignments given to us by God*. Recently I saw a definition of leadership that does a good job of summarizing the world’s view: “Leadership is the art of getting other people to do what you want.” But by its very nature, Christian leadership is different.

God’s view of success is very different from that of the world. The world looks at numbers, at growth, at influence and power. But God looks at the human heart and is in the business of drawing people to Him. God gives us assignments and gives us the

responsibility of leading others to implement that work. To be a leader is a sacred trust.

And here's the key: God's priorities are so different, so supernatural, that only He can fulfill them . . . and He works predominantly through leaders who remember that truth.

## THE NATURE OF GOD'S ASSIGNMENTS

I believe God will make His will known to the believer who follows Him, and He will use that believer to accomplish some amazing things. What we easily forget is that these assignments are impossible for us to fulfill in our own power, because they are spiritual in nature.

Look at the final words of Christ before He ascended to heaven. Matthew 28:19–20 records that He told the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

This directive is rightly called the Great Commission, and it's pretty intimidating if you think about it. Look, for example, at the phrases “make disciples of all the nations” and “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.”

Have you ever considered that you don't have the power to make even one disciple, let alone disciples in all the nations?

Have you considered that you can teach someone all the Scripture, help him grow in his faith, and model what it's like to walk with Christ, but you don't have the ability to make that person follow God?

Only God has the power to change lives. And that's why it is comforting that Jesus ended His commission with the words, “and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”



The real irony is that *God's assignments involve changing your life as a leader* just as much as they involve changing the people you want to reach. God is constantly at work in building your character—making you more like Christ. He wants to build your faith as He works through you and as you encounter Him. I thought it interesting to note that Robert Lewis, a friend and former pastor, told me, “It was in leading that I encountered God the most. I saw in powerful ways His power to change lives, open doors, fulfill His promises.”

Another distinctive feature of God's assignments is that they *ultimately bring Him the glory*. Leaders should not be obsessed with or defined by the *position* they occupy but by the *assignment* they have been given and the contribution they are making. Accolades may come, but the motivation for accomplishment is rooted in self-sacrifice and the faithful execution of the mission. If this brings recognition, then leaders should be humbly grateful for it, give the glory to God, and leverage the increased stature to do even more.

It's easy to lose your way in Christian leadership. If you lose sight of God's priorities, His assignments, then you lose sight of what type of leader is needed to fulfill those assignments.

But when you are attuned to God's direction and committed to fulfilling His assignments, you're on the right track. “It cannot be done without Him,” says Gary Rosberg, who works with his wife, Barbara, in a ministry to strengthen marriages. “Barb and I are in so far over our heads that to bring a smidgeon of self would scare the snot out of me. If He doesn't lead, I am not going. When He does lead, I can't resist going. When we see Him glorified in what we are doing, we know we are on the road.”

Godly leaders are passionate about effecting change. But they understand that the way to produce lasting impact is by *staying the*

*same*. I'm talking about the *same* spiritual passion, fervor, and commitment to the lordship of Christ—the *same* commitment to keep the spiritual disciplines the priority and core of all that we are and all that we do. The same commitment to talk and live by the timeless, eternal values and truths from the Word of God that have transformed our lives.

In other words: The same commitment to fulfilling God's assignments.

## **Notes on Leadership**

### **What are the qualities of an authentic Christian leader?**

#### **Michael Little**

*"Humility; inner strength (from God's Spirit); compassion; knowledge of the required topic versus faking it."*

#### **Karen Loritts**

*"Humility; a servant's heart; confident in God's assignment; a good listener, patient; wisdom used in communication; good reputation among peers, even critics; biblically literate; culturally aware."*

#### **Bob Gerndt**

*"Abiding in and depending on God; under the authority of God; humility; compassion; love for God's Word; vision; burden for the lost and for the flock; the gift of leadership."*

#### **Robert Lewis**

*"Knowing who I am and who I'm not (the latter is maybe even more important than the former . . . you need to build off your weaknesses and not your strengths); availability and a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit; a win-win spirit (you most enjoy others winning, not yourself); good marriage; accountable."*

**Bruce Fong**

*"Humility . . . authoritative . . . confident of God's will through knowledge of the Scripture and [they] represent truth with their life closely reflecting Christ. A Christian leader is sacrificial. They will do whatever it takes to achieve, inspire, and direct others to accomplish what God is directing to be done."*

**Bill McCartney**

*"A leader has a call of God on his life to lead. He surrounds himself with yielded, Spirit-filled staff and he serves them."*

**George Murray**

*"A close daily walk with God; spending time in His Word and in prayer; having a godly, supportive spouse; leading by influence and example, not just by position or title; decisiveness; humility; willingness to sacrifice personal prominence for the sake of the whole."*

**Hans Finzel**

*"Humility; transparency; flexibility; lifelong learning; a family and marriage that are of good reputation."*

**Jim Reese**

*"Must be a servant—willing to serve, do what you would ask others and demonstrate it not just talk it; a person of character—live your life in a way honoring to God, where you can be trusted."*

**Ken Behr**

*"A humble spirit; a heart for people; a hunger for the Word of God."*

**Joe Stowell**

*"Living a life that is worthy of respect, by living as an exemplary leader in five areas: words, conduct (particularly my conduct in regard to women, work, and wealth), love, faith, and purity!"*

**Dwight McKissick**

*"Calling, character, competence, and capacity."*

**Ric Cannada**

*"Humble; determined; godly; listens well to those around him; willing to make and stand by hard decisions; gracious; winsome."*

**Tim Kimmel**

- "• A humble heart—a reverence for God and a respect for others.*
- A grateful heart—an appreciation for what he has been given and who has given it.*
- A generous heart—a great delight in sharing with others what God has entrusted to him.*
- A servant's heart—a willingness to take action in order to help bring the best out of everyone around him."*