

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: *The Sting of Personal Rejection*

“Not everyone will like you.”

So began Pastor Stephen Heleman at our recent Skill Builder session on building trust as a ministry leader. Stephen is right. No matter what you do, there will be people who do not respond positively to your leadership. That is true if you are a pastor, a staff member, a small group Bible teacher, or the guy in charge of the tea at Wednesday night supper. Someone is going to be unhappy and will focus their unhappiness on you.

Knowing it does not take the sting out of it. It will hurt. Sometimes it will hurt acutely for a while and then go away. Other times it will linger like a toothache, flaring up at unexpected moments. However you experience it, one thing is for sure: If you are called to ministry leadership, you *will* experience the sting of personal rejection.

It behooves us, then, to have a plan that will guide our responses to this hurt. If we simply react, we will often say and do things that undermine our ability to lead and may even disqualify us from further leadership. If we let the hurt accumulate and fester without addressing it, we will likely burn out and experience a debilitating depression.

So be proactive! I suggest these attitudes and actions.

1. *Remember that you are in the people business.* I tend to be a task-centered introvert. It may surprise you, but a lot of us ministry leaders are wired that way. However, if we neglect the work of building relationships across generational lines, two things will happen. First, we'll become increasingly isolated from what is really happening in our ministry area and therefore more likely to do something unwise. Second, when we experience the sting of personal rejection we will not have a network of positive, sustaining relationships to bolster us emotionally. It hurts when someone does not like us. It really hurts when we have to bear that hurt in isolation. So get out of the study and spend time with people inside and outside of your church. Yakking it up with a table of the old guys at the men's breakfast is every bit as important as poring over another commentary in your sermon preparation. Don't forget what business you are in. Be proactive about building personal connections.

2. *Temper your reactions.* We live in a social media world that tells us, “Instantly broadcast your outrage!” That is a bad plan for a ministry leader. Reactions by their very nature are irrational, meaning they are driven by emotion rather than sober thinking. Reactions also tend to focus on the person who hurt us rather than the issue involved. When you are feeling the sting of personal rejection, let some time pass before you say or do anything. Let the initial sting subside. Pray. Talk to some wise counselors. Consider the issue from the other person's perspective. When you do respond, focus on the issue at hand and watch the inflammatory language. Speak the truth in love.

3. *Listen.* It is entirely possible that the person who hurt you has a legitimate point to make. They may have gone about it in the wrong way, but there still may be something for you to learn. Bring some calm into the situation by listening. Seek to understand the person's point of view about the issue and their reasons for seeing it that way. Even more importantly, seek to understand the *person* speaking. Listen to their story. Find out about their life experiences. This will give you insight into why they feel so passionately about a particular issue. It will also help you discover common ground on which to build. One of the most ennobling things you can do for another human being is to listen to them. It says, "Even though we may see things differently, I value you. You are important to me." The act of listening expresses love. That can go a long way in redeeming a situation.

4. *If anger and injustice are still eating at you, pray Psalm 137.* Go ahead, look it up. I will give you a moment. [Insert menacing background music here.] Okay, we are back. You feel better now, don't you? I am being somewhat facetious here, but don't miss the three most important words in Psalm 137. In the English Standard Version it says (v7), "Remember, O LORD..." The point is this: It is not your job to set things right. If there is retribution that needs to happen, leave it with the Lord. He will take care of it in due time. You must leave the matter with him. Trust the Lord and do good.

5. *Remember, you have been the hurter, too.* Somewhere along the way, intentionally or unintentionally, you and I have caused others to feel the sting of personal rejection. Since we are not innocent, it is good to remember the Lord's Prayer on such occasions: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). This will help us avoid an inflated view of our own goodness and thus allow us to relate in a more equitable way to the one who hurt us.

Ministry leader, not everyone will like you. Some folks will hurt you, but the sting of personal rejection need not shipwreck your ministry. In the Lord's grace you can get through this, and you can do it in a way that builds rather than destroys. So when the sting comes, slow down and proceed in a way that exhibits faith in the Lord, humility about yourself, and consideration for others. Don't scorch the earth. Keep the relational bridge intact as much as possible. You will be glad you did.

And pray Psalm 137 as many times as necessary!