

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: *What It Isn't*

I feel for ministry leaders. They have a challenging calling. Often they and their families sacrifice materially in order to obey that calling. Often they feel isolated and alone and unsuccessful. And often they get bad advice.

There are two types of bad advice that trouble me regarding ministry leaders. The first is the kind that fuels pride instead of humility. This is the kind that says, "If you're not going big, then you're not going anywhere." Bigger, larger, grander – all the time. That kind of advice troubles me.

The second type of bad advice is the kind that heaps more personal burdens on ministry leaders. This is Pharisee advice, the kind that says, "If you're not doing *this*, then you're not doing anything." If you're not amazing, then you're a slacker. God could not possibly be pleased with you. That kind of advice troubles me, too.

I do not believe that the essence of ministry leadership is being big or amazing. I believe it is *dying where you are planted* and trusting the Lord to bring the harvest that he has determined (see John 12:24-26). Dying people typically are not all that grandiose or astounding, so I recoil at definitions of leadership that require us to be both.

If what Jesus told us about the "grain of wheat [that] falls into the earth and dies" is true, then leadership is not...

1. *Being in high demand.* I am not saying you won't be in high demand at some point in your ministry; I am saying that it is neither here nor there. It doesn't matter if you are popular or gain recognition. What matters is if you are faithful to do what God has called you to do. Forget worrying about who knows about you.

2. *Being a social media star.* Maybe you'll get a zillion Twitter followers or Facebook friends; maybe you won't. Maybe your blog will get on someone's "must read" list; maybe it won't. Social media has its uses, but it can also engender pride and competition in ministry leaders. Use the tools to aid your calling, but don't be depressed if you're not the next big deal on social media.

3. *Matching or exceeding others' performance.* When someone tells you that you *have* to do what they are doing in some area, I hope your "hooey" detector sounds an alarm. This is how ministry leaders become Pharisees. Don't fall for this nonsense. For instance, it is good for ministry leaders to be challenged to new levels of prayer. Prayer is fundamental to our calling. It is bad when someone prescribes their practice of prayer as *the* practice, or when we measure our success based on what someone else is doing. Just pray. Listen to the Holy Spirit. Don't worry about what someone else is doing.

4. *Having an opinion about everything.* You don't have to have all the answers. You're not supposed to. It's okay to say, "I don't know." It's okay to say, "That is beyond the scope of my knowledge or experience. What do you think?" Remember this piece of wisdom, variously attributed to Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln: "It is better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

5. *Concealing your flaws.* The Lord called us into ministry leadership knowing exactly who we are. That ought to humble us and it ought to give us the courage to be real. Beware the temptation to elevate your image. It will lead to posing and pretending and those things will ultimately undermine your ministry. I do not mean that you should "unzip your viscera" (a Calvin Miller phrase I've never forgotten) in front of the people you lead. Some things are inappropriate. But you should be real and as transparent as possible. Some people may reject your leadership, but most people will respond better to your leadership if they realize that you struggle as a follower of Jesus just like they do.

6. *Being the only one who knows "God's vision."* Just because the Lord has given you responsibility to lead a ministry doesn't mean you are the only one he speaks to about that ministry. Consider the possibility that the Lord has you in that role of leadership to facilitate a process of vision discovery for the group rather than simply making pronouncements. Yes, as the leader you see and know things that not everyone sees and knows. But that does not mean that you see and know everything, nor can you stimulate "ownership" in the group simply by making pronouncements. Build good people and good processes in your ministry, then trust the Lord to speak through those people and processes under your shepherding. If you want the burden of achieving the vision on your own, make pronouncements. If you want a team, build people and processes.

So ministry leaders, unburden yourselves from these onerous and dangerous misnomers about leadership. Resolve to die where you are planted. Submit yourself to the conditions of the soil where God has placed you. Do what he has called you to do in a way that honors him. Trust him to accomplish through you and your people what he desires. Rest in his faithfulness.

I hope your burden feels a little lighter now.