

Why You Can't Give Up On the Church

Mean-spirited and abusive church leaders have hurt lots of people. If you've been wounded, please don't give up on the church.

A while ago I visited a large church to meet with the staff. The objective was to give the pastor feedback and recommendations about their strengths and weaknesses. What I found was all too typical.

While meeting with staff members individually, I discovered a great deal of mistrust, anger and fear. Although the church had every appearance of success—large facilities, multiple services, multifaceted programs—there was much dissatisfaction and even dissension in their midst.

After two days of interviews and observations, I made my report to the pastor. He responded in anger.

“There aren't any problems here,” he said, “especially with me or my leadership style. The problem is the staff. They are lazy. I am giving them names of people, and they aren't following up to build this church.

“The answer is not understanding different personalities and styles. The answer is that I should fire every one of them.”

I was paid for my time (a check commensurate with what the pastor thought of my services) and politely thanked for the visit. What happened on the way to my car, however, was revealing.

Many of the staff thanked me for coming. One man said: “You're the only one who has ever spoken honestly to [the pastor]. He can be so mean, and the church is being run by a few of his

favorites.”

Another commented, “This is the first time I can remember open and honest communication taking place among the staff.” Yet another said: “We need what you’ve done. We’re going to do all we can to get you back here as soon as possible!”

But I left knowing I would never be invited back to that church. Sometime later, I read this startling comment on the state of the church in the May 2002 issue of Charisma magazine:

“Hundreds of thousands of charismatics have been so offended by leaders they have either stopped going to church or attend a middle-of-the-road Protestant church where the leadership isn’t weird, even if there is no life.”

The writer did not quote his source for the numbers, but my experience backs up his statement. Yet the churches abandoned by disillusioned members continue to limp along, and those people who stay are sometimes so enamored with the pastor’s personality they are easily reduced to mere spectators in the weekly church performance.

My life’s work and passion is to help people find and fulfill their purpose. For people to find their purpose, they need leaders who know how to focus on the people and not on themselves. For them to fulfill their purpose, they need leaders who take seriously the job descriptions for the ministries of the apostle, prophet, evangelist, teacher and pastor.

Paul tells us that Jesus calls “some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13, NKJV, emphasis added).

Yet often in a church the leader is a strong man or woman, usually the founder or a relative of the founder, who has built the church through his or her personality and a mix of gifts. Typically the leader employs an authoritarian leadership style that is reminiscent of Moses or the Old Testament prophets. Because this style is depicted in the Bible, it is assumed to be godly. It is not.

And though this style of leadership may be useful in building the church to a certain size, it isn't effective in managing the church once it grows beyond that size. What's more, this approach tends to "chew up" people who are trying to serve the vision of the leader.

Why? Because the key characteristic of it is anger. I have found a lot of anger among church leaders in general. Their anger has injured many people, resulting in their purpose, gifts and experience being lost—or severely hampered as they try to serve the church.

The Bible is full of examples of authoritarian leaders whose leadership style and relationships with associates were characterized by anger. Let's look at a few of them.

Moses. Moses was a product of his age, a time when authoritarianism was the rule of the day. Though Moses was for the most part a meek leader, his anger prevented him from entering the Promised Land.

His anger also caused him to misrepresent the Lord when He was dealing with the people. After the Lord had told him to "speak to" the rock to bring forth water, he instead "lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank" (Num. 20:8,11). God honored Moses' leadership by providing water, but Moses was not permitted to enter the land God had promised to the Israelites. His problem: anger.

King Saul. As Saul got older, his anger became more

pronounced. He became jealous because his trusted No. 2 man, David, experienced great success in battle and the people honored him above Saul for his achievements. Saul did not share in the people's joy.

"Saul was very angry ... and from that time [he] kept a jealous eye on David" (1 Sam. 18:8-9, NIV). The Bible tells us that Saul tried to assassinate David on three occasions and spent much of his latter reign pursuing David in order to eliminate his rival to the throne.

Herod the Great. Herod ruled during the time of Jesus' birth. He arranged to have family members and rivals to the throne murdered and then spent his life mourning them. When the Magi who came to visit Jesus did not follow his instructions to return to him and tell him where they had found the Child, "Herod ... was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under" (Matt. 2:16, NKJV).

Jesus' disciples James and John. During one trip, the Samaritans prevented Jesus and His disciples from passing through their territory. The Bible tells us that "when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But He turned and rebuked them" (Luke 9:54-55).

Jesus wasn't impressed with the men's appeal to what I call an Old Testament prophetic syndrome. Some leaders feel obligated to follow a stern style because they believe it is how God wants them to be. Jesus rebuked His followers then for their anger and revenge; I'm sure He would do the same today.

The Sanhedrin and the High Priest. These Jewish religious leaders enjoyed their position of authority and became angry when anyone challenged them. That is one of the reasons they killed Jesus.

A significant display of their anger led to the murder of Stephen, the first martyr. “[The Sanhedrin] were furious. ... They all rushed him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” (Acts 7:54,57, NIV).

You can see that anger was the trademark of all these leaders. It fueled jealousy, fear, intimidation and ruthless tactics.

Authoritarian leaders have little patience for those who do not respond quickly to their demands. They see themselves as owners, not stewards, and consider dissent a personal affront that requires swift retaliation, lest the dissension spread like a virus and their vulnerability be exposed. No matter how wonderfully their relationships with others in the church begin, it is only a matter of time before their imperfect followers stir up their wrath and find themselves in the hands of an angry minister.

Let's consider one more biblical character—Elisha, the Old Testament prophet. He raised the dead, performed other unusual miracles (such as causing a metal axe head to float on water) and delivered the word of the Lord to God's people.

But it was hard to work with Elisha because he had a temper. Historically, his temper has been excused, overlooked and even justified because he was a “prophet of the Lord.” It is commonly assumed that the deaths he caused were the will of God in response to the sins of those who died.

But what if they weren't? What if Elisha's anger, coupled with his true prophetic power, somehow released a curse on the people he was supposed to bless? What if the Bible, by reporting Elisha's actions, wasn't endorsing them but simply reporting them as historical facts? Let's look at three examples.

In 2 Kings 2:23-24 we read that 42 youths were mauled because they mocked the prophet of God. Was their experience God's will, or did Elisha's anger unleash a harsh sentence on some

irresponsible youth?

Even a cursory reading of 2 Kings 5 makes it clear that Elisha's servant, Gehazi, was wrong to pursue Naaman and take a contribution that his master had already rejected. But was the just sentence for his folly a lifetime of leprosy for him and his family?

Second Kings 6:32-7:2 gives us another example. In this account, the king becomes angry with Elisha and travels to his house to kill him. Elisha tells the elders who are sitting with him to bar the door so that the king's messenger—and the king, who is directly behind him—cannot enter to carry out their plan.

No punishment comes to either of them for plotting to murder Elisha. Yet when the king's officer simply questions a prophetic word Elisha gives, the officer pays with his life. Why was the king spared and the officer sentenced to death?

Some say the officer died because of his lack of faith in the prophet's word. But is unbelief a worse crime than murder?

I think there is a possibility it was Elisha's anger that was the cause. I see a pattern of anger in Elisha's life that made it difficult to be around him when he was challenged or questioned.

As a leader (and a strong one, I've been told), I've had to deal with anger. I'm still learning to deal with it. During the process, I have reflected again and again on the words of James, who wrote, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

James didn't say never to be angry; he said that anger should not be immediate. Similarly, I'm not saying a leader should never be angry; I'm saying anger should not be a predominant emotion in anyone's leadership style, especially that of someone who is committed to being a servant-leader.

I want to help leaders understand how destructive an angry, heavy-handed style can be both to themselves and the people they lead. I want people who are experiencing this form of abuse to realize it is not God's endorsed style of leadership. And I want those who are called but not yet in leadership positions to formulate a more gentle, Christ-like leadership philosophy.

Perhaps you have suffered firsthand, as a sinner, in the hands of an angry leader. I encourage you to forgive and to allow the lessons you've learned to help you eliminate anger from your own leadership repertoire. Don't let your experience make you shy away from church altogether.

You might be a leader who was or is angry and has hurt others as a result of it. The people you hurt may have been wrong in what they did, but that doesn't justify your anger.

Repent and ask their forgiveness. Ask God for a new heart to lead, so anger won't cost you the Promised Land as Moses' anger did him.

To help you be the leader God wants you to be—whether you are the head of a church or simply leading a Bible study in your home—I direct you to a passage in Peter's first epistle: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

These verses give three helpful tips for any leader who wants to be more effective and avoid the angry minister syndrome. First, lead willingly. Some leaders are angry with people because they are angry with God. Second, lead without focusing on money. Third, lead as a servant, not as an overlord.

It's time for the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and

self-control—to become a central part of our leadership style rather than anger. It's time for us to pattern our ministry after that of Jesus, rather than the flawed biblical characters of the Old Testament.

If we follow His example, no matter what our calling, we will succeed in fulfilling our own purpose and helping others fulfill theirs. And instead of tearing others down, we will build up the body of Christ so that we all can attain “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).³

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