

Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

The church today faces a serious leadership crisis. The only way to solve it is to embrace three forgotten virtues.

The people of Israel faced a leadership crisis during their sojourn in the wilderness. From morning until evening, dozens of people would line up outside Moses' tent to ask him to resolve a dispute. When his father-in-law, Jethro, saw the crowds outside his door, he pulled Moses aside and gave him wise advice that ended up being recorded in Scripture.

Jethro warned his son-in-law that he would burn out if he continued to govern the nation by himself. He told Moses: "You shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens" (Ex. 18:21, NASB).

In the middle of the Sinai desert Jethro taught the first management seminar. But his counsel was not just about the principle of delegation; he was also stressing the importance of godly character in leaders. In fact, he makes it clear that people who lack character should be excluded from leadership positions.

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Jethro could have identified other qualities as prerequisites for leadership. He could have mentioned charisma, sex appeal, preaching ability, musical talent, intellect, organizational skills, business know-how, wealth, pedigree or high ratings in political polls. But none of those are God's requirements.

Jethro mentioned three qualities that we desperately need in the church as well as in mainstream culture.

1. Leaders who fear God. A person who fears God lives in a continual attitude of reverence—whether he is alone or in front of a crowd. He is aware that God is watching his actions and weighing his words. Because this person cares more about pleasing God than people, he takes God's moral standards seriously—and he depends on the Holy Spirit to help him make right choices.

You don't have to look far to see that the American church has fallen short when it comes to the fear of God. In 2008 one popular charismatic preacher led a series of revival meetings and then ran off with another woman after four months. Another popular minister from Atlanta assaulted his wife in a parking lot and was arrested; after his divorce he cavalierly announced that he wanted a new wife who was "sensual." Another preacher in Baltimore fathered a child with a mistress and then bragged from the pulpit that he was "still the man" even though he had committed adultery. And one preacher in Florida carried on an affair with a stripper and then divorced his wife when she found out about it.

If we apply the Jethro principle, every one of these men should be out of the ministry today. The sad truth is they are all still preaching—and they have large crowds following them.

A person who fears God is never flippant about morality. Because he keeps his conscience clean he is immediately convicted if he makes an unkind remark, entertains a lustful thought or sets a bad example. He's also aware that if he doesn't quickly repent when he grieves the Holy Spirit, his conscience could become callous. So he regularly examines his motives, conversations, appetites and relationships to make sure he's not veering off-course.

God, give us leaders who fear You!

2. Leaders who tell the truth. In 2008 we heard the tragic story of Australian worship leader Mike Guglielmucci, author of the popular worship anthem “Healer.” He told audiences that he wrote the song after he had been diagnosed with cancer. He even performed on stage with an oxygen tank while telling his fans that he was in intense pain from his treatments. But he admitted last summer that he made up the whole story to mask a pornography addiction. Today Guglielmucci faces a possible criminal sentence for fraud because he used the bogus story to raise money.

We live in a dishonest culture. The current financial crisis was triggered, in part, by people who lied when they applied for home loans. Bank executives have admitted that mortgages were even granted to people who worked service jobs and yet claimed six-figure salaries. When people who lied about their incomes couldn’t pay their mortgages, they defaulted on their loans and the system imploded. The greedy financial sharks who sold those loans lied too. Now taxpayers are paying for the ensuing meltdown.

Our moral system will suffer a similar collapse if we don’t return to truth. The church should set the standard for integrity—and that includes honest accounting practices, full financial disclosure and an end to the “evangelastic” stretching of the truth that is so common in our ranks. If we realized that heaven keeps a record of “every careless word” we speak (see Matt. 12:36), we would stop exaggerating our ministry reports.

God give us leaders who tell the truth!

3. Leaders who hate dishonest gain. Most of us breathed a collective sigh of disgust last month when we heard about Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s outlandish bribery scandal. After being arrested for attempting to sell Barack Obama’s Senate seat, the embattled Illinois politician dug in his heels and insisted on appointing state Attorney General Roland Burris to

the vacant spot. Blagojevich turned the evening news in December into a three-ring circus.

You know it's bad when the governor of a populous state gets caught telling people that he wants a wad of money in exchange for a political appointment. It shows how deep moral corruption has infected our system. What's worse is that this corruption is mirrored in many of our churches.

Greed has actually been morphed into a virtue in some charismatic circles, where pastors take hourlong offerings and guest speakers require limousines and five-figure honorariums to maintain their celebrity lifestyles. It's especially bad on some Christian TV channels, where spiritual extortionists sell medieval-style indulgences disguised as "Day of Atonement offerings" and use other ridiculous ploys to rob Christians.

God give us leaders who hate dishonest gain!

It's time for a leadership reformation. God requires us to drive the greedy moneychangers out of His house. True spiritual revival will not come to the American church until we take Jethro's counsel seriously, remove corrupt leaders from their positions and replace them with those who match the biblical standard.