

Questions ‘Decisive’ Leaders Should Ask Themselves

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Anniversary theme: “Greater things than these...”

The APNTS 30th anniversary “Leadership” seminar focuses on the subject, “Questions ‘Decisive’ Leaders Should Ask Themselves.” The presentation is built on this basic assumption: the "followers" whom we as Christians lead have a right to expect in their leaders "something more" in the relationship, something "greater than" the leadership provided by individuals with whom they live and work who do not profess faith in Christ.

In other words, as much as leaders want to be known as decisive, with our decision-making marked by firmness, and our action by certainty and conclusiveness, even more critical in leading others is a distinctively Christian quality and depth of communication. Caring for others is the mark of greatness, more so than decisiveness. Our testimony of faith in Jesus Christ must increasingly inform and transform the way we live in and lead a faith community, as that community is expressed in the home, Sunday school class, youth group, church board, local congregation or seminary. The *Sermon on the Mount* must shape us as we lead a Christian community of faith, not the latest ‘relevant’ leadership text.

Permit me to explain why this assumption is so important for us to consider.

I wrote a question thirty-five years ago, early in my ministry at the European Nazarene Bible College that remains with me to this day. The question is:

“How can we live together within this diverse Christian community
in such way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness
to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”

Students at ENBC were living in a small multi-cultural campus community on the Swiss-German border while studying Bible and theology in English as a second language. Their first languages were different, cultural traditions varied regarding ways of meeting and greeting each other as well as food options provided for them by the dining hall staff. Expectations, instruction preferences and course material became the focus of numerous discussions. I asked my question often.

Living together as a Christian family in a diverse Christian community in Europe prepared me for a later cross-cultural assignment in Asia. Following Dr. Don Owens, founding president of the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, I found myself challenged with leading this very culturally diverse graduate level theological seminary of the Church of the Nazarene. Again, on this campus, I continued to ask the earlier question.

In the midst of working with graduate students at APNTS from economically strong and weak countries, another question arose.

“If, ‘in Christ, all things are made new,’ then how does our relationship to Christ convert or transform the way we live and lead in a Christian community of faith?”

What phenomenal lessons I learned at APNTS about life together in Christian communities! And, at APNTS I crystallized my understanding of Christian leadership.

“Christian leadership is humble service to *others* for the purpose of enabling *them*, through teaching and example, to live *their* lives under the Lordship of Christ, to fulfill *their* ministry to each other, and *their* mission in the world.”

During my 18 years at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, I probed another “life together” question:

“In conflict situations, when good and godly people differ and sometimes collide over vision, values, and traditions, how can I lead in these situations, really lead (and serve) with the mind and spirit of Christ?”

Along the journey, I began to realize the questions I was asking myself and seeking to answer related not just to cross-cultural education institutions, but also to local congregations and even to individual Christian families. What I was asking was a fundamental question for Christians maturing in their faith:

“How does my testimony of holiness of heart and life transform the way I live in and lead a faith community?”

This is a life question for us. It is also a leadership question! In the midst of conflicting expectations, multiple constituents, differing denominational backgrounds, various levels of maturity, and multi-cultural perspectives, how can we live together and lead with the mind and spirit of Christ? How *is* our holiness testimony reflected in our family relationships and in our leadership lifestyle?

In the context of our life situations and leadership assignments, especially in our families and local churches, we are often placed in close Christian community. We quickly become aware of others’ strengths and weaknesses. Our own personality differences soon become obvious. Our specific life and leadership location becomes a dynamic laboratory for learning how to live together as God’s family.

In these situations, how do we respond to conflict under pressure? Where is the “something more...” or “greater than...” in our leadership and “follow-ship” roles and responsibilities?

THE ANSWERS TO OUR PROBING QUESTIONS are equally profound. They are: 1) deeply spiritual in nature; 2) intensely relational; and 3) strategic in planning and implementation. Let me briefly explain.

“Whatever happens,” Paul admonishes us, “conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” Philippians 1:27. This challenge is also given to the Ephesians church in 4:1 when he urges the believers to “...live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” These two passages from Paul’s prison epistles challenge me when I am confronted with good and godly people who differ with me—even collide with me—over the vision and values in my ministry assignments. And, I continue to learn what it means to “walk worthy....”

Indeed, the entire fourth chapter of Ephesians speaks directly to the questions asked above. Spend time reading the six chapters of this “prison epistle.” Then, focus in on Ephesians 4:1-3, 7-11, 15-16, 25-32, as well as 5:1-2, and 5:15-21.

Whatever happens, we are to be “*imitators* of God...and live a life of love” (5:1-2) in leading and living together as the People of God. When we do not live like this, regardless of the position we have in the home, local church, district, or seminary, we *grieve* the Holy Spirit (4:30a). The Spirit of God is deeply concerned about the speech of His people.

Relationships within a faith community are intensely theological. God Himself inspires and empowers this holiness lifestyle within us, calling us and enabling us to “walk worthy” of our calling (see also 5:15-21). We must not only “hear” and read His words, we must respond and obey them, even if we violate our culture, family tradition, or “natural” inclinations. There is a “Christ-culture” to which we must aspire and deeply embrace.

Ephesians 4:25-32 instructs us in how we are to live and lead with the mind and spirit of Christ. We are co-laborers together in the body of Christ (v. 25). The people with whom we work are God’s own creation. Because of this fundamental Christian conviction, we are called to be:

honest with the believers (v25);
immediate in dealing with conflict; (vs26-27);
up-building with our words (v29); and
forgiving, even when others do not forgive us (v32).

Words spoken and deeds done to us by others must never be permitted to create bitterness and resentment within us. Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Ephesians 4:29). Dialogue, for Paul, is a sacrament. God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative in forgiving those who hurt us.

When we ignore our "family" relationship within the faith community and treat those with whom we live and work as "means to an end" or persons to be manipulated for our purposes, Satan gains a "foothold" into the fellowship. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict and divides the “community of the king.” It is a travesty when believers see in their leaders attitudes and actions *no different* from supervisors on the jobs and elected officials in the community who do not profess faith in Jesus.

The people we lead can and should witness in us a way of living and leading “*greater than*” or qualitatively different from the way they are guided by leaders who do not identify themselves as followers of Christ. The mind and spirit of Christ in the life of the leader is what the people we

lead, and others who watch the way we lead, expect to *see* in a Christian who seeks to ‘lead decisively.’

And, they will support and follow us as we lead intentionally, consistently and aggressively with:

V - clear **Vision**, including strategic planning;
H - deep **Humility**, including intense listening; and
R – intense **Resolve**, including persistent praying.

Vision refers to seeing things at a great distance. A vision is a consuming, passionate, and compelling inner picture. We are told that the most important function of leadership is creating a vision of the organization’s preferred future. Only the leader who, by divine inspiration, sees the “invisible” can do the “impossible.” A vibrant, motivating vision statement is an expression of optimism and hope. It is a “big” dream of what we would like the church, seminary, or ministry organization to be and do.

Having a clear vision as a leader is essential. But, it is not enough. Thomas Edison, the consummate inventor, is quoted as saying, “Vision without execution is hallucination.” Leadership, we are told, is the *transference* of vision. We live and lead within a *community* of faith. It is essential, then, for *theological* vision to precede *organizational* vision. Who we “envision” or “see” as the people we serve in the church, must be clear before we outline what action is desired of them for the organization. Ownership of the vision cannot be solely that of the leader. It must be embraced and “owned” by the group who is asked to accept the vision and share in the implementation.

Planning strategically compels the leaders and followers to focus intentionally in laser-beam fashion on the mission and vision of the congregation or organization. Strategic planning is not exclusively “implementation” strategy. Rather, planning *strategically* begins with the clarification of the mission, vision, and values with the board to which the leader is accountable. Once these core “driving forces” are understood and embraced, then strategic initiatives and goals are defined. Personnel needs are included; financials are defined with timelines. The key idea is for the strategic plan to outline in detail the ways and means by which the church or organization will accomplish the mission and realize the vision.

A strategic plan provides leaders and boards with the basis for replying with an emphatic “yes” or a regrettable “no” when suggestions are made as to new directions for the church. Mission and vision are the keys. Stay focused on them. Good ideas may be rejected because they do not fit into the strategic plan of the local church, district, or ministry organization.

Humility demands intense listening by the person who leads others. Listening is so much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for an opportunity to respond. Nouwen states it beautifully: “The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously.... Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends....” We listen to what is said, and for what is not said. We observe “body language.” We listen for insights from brothers and sisters in Christ who help us

revise a vision or plan or program and make it better. Again, the vision must be “owned” by the group who is asked to embrace it and its implementation must be shared.

We “lead from our knees” during this important process. Good and godly people often differ and sometime collide with the leader. There is no place for arrogance; only regret that some may not embrace the majority decision. Vigorous discussions take place in board meetings or at other appropriate forums. However, when an official decision is made to move forward, the leader “leads decisively” even as she/he regrets that some within the fellowship may not agree with the majority decision. The leader refused to be paralyzed when not “everyone” agrees with the recommendation. Rather, she/he moves ahead aggressively, though with deep humility. In these situations, we lead with some pain and disappointment even as we move ahead with confidence.

Resolve insists that we don’t give up. We persevere. We stay with it. We endure. This does not mean that we go it alone. Just the opposite. Leaders work tirelessly at bringing the group along, and motivating them to implement and execute the plan and program as approved. Leaders dream great, God-inspired dreams, and are willing to pay the price – in time, energy, and patience - to see those dreams come true.

And, we pray earnestly and persistently. We know that some issues are only resolved and dissolved through prayer and total dependence on God. We believe that God can work in *us* to become the change we desire to see in *others*.

Holiness leaders know that we do not have the power to change others. Change can take place, however, within *us*! In the midst of experiencing honest and intense differences between good and godly people, the “pray-er” can be changed and transformed! Conflict situations can produce growth. They can also inhibit growth in the lives of leaders. Before God in prayer, we seek answers from Him to these two questions:

what can *I* learn;

how can *I* change?

In so asking, and seeking God’s answers to these two leadership questions for *our* lives, *we* are changed! Increasingly, by God’s grace, we become the change, we desire to see in others. Others around us may or may not be impacted by what happen within us. But, what happens to *us* is transformative!

We grow. We change. We mature. And, in the process, we experience the peace of God, which transcends understanding. We are “freed” from insisting on change within others. Through earnest prayer, caring leaders asks the right questions, and trust God with the results, even as we are changed in the process!

Perhaps decisiveness about *ourselves* as Christian leaders is the most significant evidence of Christian leadership.

Who *am I* in Christ, and what difference does *this* affirmation make

in the home, on the job, in the congregation or board meeting?

How important is the faith community I lead in shaping *me* as a Christian leader in deed as well as in word, title, or position?

Before we leave this issue, let's burrow deeper into the imperative to pray earnestly and persistently. Bonhoeffer offered profound guidance to leaders regarding prayer for our "enemies." He counseled,

"In prayer we go to our enemies, to stand at their side. We are with them, near them, for them before God. Jesus does not promise us that the enemy we love, we bless, to whom we do good, will not abuse and persecute us. They will do so. But even in doing so, they cannot harm and conquer us if we take this last step to them in intercessory prayer... Every insult from our enemy will only bind us closer to God and to our enemy. Every persecution can only serve to bring the enemy closer to reconciliation with God... Loving one's enemies leads disciples to the way of the cross and into communion with the crucified one."

(40-Day Journey with Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Copyright © 2007 Augsburg Books.

Christian leaders often look at those who oppose us as being our enemies. Perhaps the greatest behavioral characteristic of leaders who follow Jesus is to pray for those who oppose us, disagree with us, say critical things about us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges us to "hear His words and obey them." These words can haunt us. But we must obey His words, if we remain a faithful follower of Jesus.

Conclusion

Permit me to conclude with some **practical lessons on leading decisively** within our community of faith as you and I work with the tension of holding to our vision for the future while holding just as firmly to the realities of the present.

1. Good and godly people often see things differently from the leader.
2. Many issues over which we experience conflict are culturally, ethnically, local community, even family based, and not a violation of scripture.
3. Differences that divide us have the potential to alienate members of the body of Christ and to impact negatively the work of God in our communities.
4. Caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect and honor them, as God loves them.
5. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them.
6. Strong boards empower missional and visionary pastors; strong pastors embrace passionate and engaged boards.

We *can* serve as decisive leaders with integrity and grace as our testimony of holiness of heart and life continually transforms the way we live in and lead a faith community.

The people we serve should witness in us a transformed and transformative spirit reflected in the occasions of our disagreements, and in the ways we *plan* and *process* important issues. The way we preach on Sunday, live in the home, work in the community, *and* lead a board meeting on Tuesday evening should give evidence to an increasing “conformity to the mind of Christ” (II Cor. 3:18). Those whom we lead should see no separation between sacred and secular in our lives. No great divide between the message we preach and the way we lead. No inconsistency. No manipulation. No disrespect. No abuse. No significant gap between our words and our deeds. We now begin to see more clearly the means by which we “maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). We are learning, little by little, what it means to “imitate God...and live a life of love” (Ephesians 5:1-2), even as we lead decisively in our homes, congregations, work places, and communities.

This life-long pursuit to answer the key questions decisive leaders need to ask is a journey of maturing faith and painful encounters. It takes a lifetime to fully understand and embrace. However, the answers to these questions should increasingly reflect our transformed spiritual DNA, and be profoundly evidenced in us by those who know us best.

In so walking and leading in the spirit of continuing transformation into Christlikeness, we can believe that the Master teacher and leader, Jesus the Christ, will say to us at the end of our days, “well done, good and faithful servant.” Well done.

When we come to the end of our journey, may it be said of us that we led decisively, by providing “*something better*” and “*greater than...*” because we were prayerful, intentional and committed disciples of Jesus! We led with clear vision, deep humility, and intense resolve. We answered the questions asked above by connecting the faith we profess and proclaim to the way we live and lead. What a legacy to leave behind. What a legacy!

May it be so, Lord. Amen.

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