

VITAL SIGNS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH – LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES

Most of us have a boss, either at work or at home. And here's a question: how many managers does it take to change a light bulb?

A roomful - they have to hold a meeting to discuss all the ramifications of the change.

None, they like to keep employees in the dark.

"This topic was resumed from last week's discussion, but is incomplete pending resolution of some action items. It will be continued next week. Meanwhile..."

"We've formed a task-force to study the problem of why light bulbs burn out, and to figure out what, exactly, we as supervisors can do to make the bulbs work smarter, not harder."

And here's our question for today – who is boss in the church, and in our lives? Who is boss? We have a choice. But here, we aren't talking about the pastor, our manager or even the wife or husband. The question rather is – is God the boss in this church and in our lives, or is he not? This is the leadership priority that is most important in a healthy church. We're going to consult a range of Scripture to see how and why.

Accepting God's leadership

The Bible reminds us that right from Genesis 3 that God has a competitor as boss – us ourselves. And Adam and Eve chose to reject God's leadership for their own selfish ends, what we call sin. We have the same choice, who to obey. Paul sets it out well in Romans 6:16 "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" We have two choices in our leadership priority, to follow sin – driven by our own desires, what Paul calls the "sinful nature" that we inherited from Adam and Eve. Or righteousness, which is from God himself. And there are consequences of that choice, as Galatians 6:8 makes explicit "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." Not only for the individual but also for the church community they are involved in, we reap what we sow, destruction or life.

We only need to look out into the world to see what happens when leadership priorities are to the self and not God. As Paul puts it in Galatians 5:19-21 "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." But we can't go around waving fingers self-righteously. How easy it is for churches too to catch the infection!

Relationships in church can easily be overwhelmed by hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, when people follow their prejudices and don't seek God's will! Even at PBC, we have the occasional dissension in church meetings. And gossip and talking behind people's backs is all too common in Christian circles too. As a saying goes "gossip always travels fastest over grapevines that are slightly sour!"

There is a better way, as Galatians 5:22-23 reminds us, don't commit the acts, savour the fruit "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." A much more relaxing church meeting! So leadership priority one for a healthy church is to let God's Holy Spirit be in charge, and obey his will. God is to be the leader in our church and in our lives.

How can we ensure it? I think there are three key ways that we can all individually ensure we discover and obey God's will, allowing his leadership to be paramount. They are as follows: spend time with him, steep in his word and accept his discipline.

Spending quiet times with God is the essential starting point. We cannot hear from God, let alone obey him, if we live at a great pace and never make time for God in our lives. We will just be tearing along through an interior wasteland, most likely to make our own selfish decisions at every turn. We need to be like Jesus, who always found time to be with his heavenly father in prayer, especially before important decisions. Luke 6:12 says "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God", just before he recruited his disciples, for example. Luther is another example for us, he usually spent at least an hour in prayer but on a specially busy or difficult day it would be two. In God's presence we learn to obey him.

Steep in God's word. The Bible is God's user manual and details his commands. Anything we think we hear in our quiet time always needs to be tested against scripture - so as to eliminate our own delusions or demonic misleadings. As Guy Chevreau points out, to truly know Scripture we need to meditate on it. Not like the Eastern mystics, emptying their minds but relishing the deep meaning of Scripture, having stilled the tumult of our busy lives. The Hebrew word for meditate means to "mutter and mumble" as we slowly read, and "to bow down" in worship. It's part of a relationship with God. As it is put in Psalm 1, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. "Wouldn't you like to be like that? We need to be like the worshippers in Psalm 48 who say "Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love." Psalm 119:20 sums up what's needed "Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." Wonderful things are there from meditating on in God's word. It allows God to pose questions of us and lead us into obedience.

Accepting God's discipline. Discipline is unfashionable nowadays, but think of an army that could survive without it. It would be cut to pieces in battle with a more disciplined force. We in the church are also in the front line of battle against Satan so accepting discipline from God, our commanding officer, is equally vital. Hebrews 12:9-11 tells us how and why, it's a question of accepting that God is our father, which we might all delightedly agree with, but also that as a father he has the right to discipline us. As it is written "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness." Indeed, once we accept God's discipline, we become righteous and the church we inhabit becomes a place where God is at home and the lost world looks on with wonder.

Such discipline, arising from prayer and study need not just something external, and imposed on us. We can obey God when we freely and willingly submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit. As a saying goes "prayer is exhaling the spirit of man, and inhaling the Spirit of God"; "prayer is exhaling the spirit of man, and inhaling the Spirit of God". 1 John 3:24 states "Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us," while Galatians 5:25 says "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." Yes, God indeed can live in us, and will lead us, but we must open the door of our hearts to him first.

Now that we've seen the vital need for God to be the leader in our lives, let's see the consequences this has for leadership in the church, and leadership in our daily lives.

Effects on leadership in the church

Leadership in the church. For members of the congregation Scripture is quite clear. When God is in control we will obey the leaders whom God has appointed over us. Hebrews 13:17 states “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” This is our leadership priority as members of the church, and it recognizes the benefit we get from the leaders talents, and their responsibility to God, not the rest of us, for what they do. It’s a caution about sending that critical email straight after the sermon – why not pray and fast for a day before clicking the “send” button? Why not?

We need not just to obey the leaders but give them space to devote time to their anointing. We must not always expecting them to be at our beck and call. This is an easy trap to fall into if we think in a worldly way that we as members finance their salaries. For God ordains that leaders should have ample time for prayer and preaching as their core activities, as Acts 6:2-4 makes clear “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This is a word for leaders too – are we devoting sufficient of their time to these key elements of their calling? Prayer, meditation and discipline are essential to their achievement.

And if God is in control, he has further words for leaders too – not just the pastors but anyone who leads a team. They are to be servants and not bosses of those whom God has set them over, as Jesus says in Matthew 20:25-28. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Such servant leadership is not present in many churches, especially where there is no accountability structure like Elders and church meetings. In such environments there can be spiritual abuse.

Leaders are also commanded to lead obedient lives. 1 Timothy 3 gives a long list of qualifications for an overseer, for example “above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money”. (I think pastors are immune to that nowadays, given their salaries!) And leaders are not to hoard control and influence for themselves but form new leaders and encourage others, as is stated in 2 Timothy 2:2 “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” Such servant, holy, enabling leadership is a key hallmark of a healthy church.

Effects on leadership in our everyday lives

Beyond its effect on leadership in the church, obedience to God and acceptance of his leadership can transform our lives, making our church an even healthier environment. In terms of our wider lifestyle, the Bible gives guidance for godly living in families. But first, did you hear of the woman who came home in a fur coat? Her daughter yelled at her when she came home “Mum, you should be ashamed of yourself. Don’t you realize that a poor dumb animal has suffered for that?” “Don’t you dare talk about your father and his suffering wallet like that!” came the response. Father features naturally as a figure of fun, as any cartoon writer will tell you. [Andy Capp and wife with rolling pin]

But in Colossians 3:18-21 it is stated “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. “ Families in Scripture do have a clear hierarchy with the father the head of the household, although it’s unpopular to say that nowadays. There have again to be leadership priorities. But note that this is balanced by commands to love and not “embitter”. This week there emerged a survey that showed how important the natural father is to children, with much greater scope for poor development on average when he is absent. Even secular experts mourned the loss of the traditional family, amid and I quote “the aggressive pursuit of personal success by adults”. Something to reflect on.

Our leadership priorities will also be reflected in an obedient attitude to work, which follows in Colossians 3:22 “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” Operating with that verse could definitely change our view of our earthly managers, even if we are not slaves. When we see God as our master, we will work excellently and it will not go unnoticed. Glory to Christ will result.

Then finally there is our attitude to the leadership of the democratic state and the law. We may feel law abiding but how often do we speed, drop litter and park illegally? Romans 13 says that under God’s leadership “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” As with work, when God controls our lives, we will obey the law as a matter of course, and not just when we might be near a speed camera!

Certainly it is not easy giving in our control over our lives. The Israelites in the desert failed to do so, as Hebrews 3:7 remembers “So, as the Holy Spirit says:” Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert” . And this can happen to individuals and churches too, not just to nations. We can start just a little way off course, but without God’s leadership, we can as Wayne highlighted last week “wander from the faith”, lost without a compass.

If all this seems difficult, and in particular if we are plagued by sins that are hard to evade, we may need an accountability partner to help us to obey God and give him leadership in our lives. Leaders need accountability too, as the tragic case of Todd Bentley shows. He was an evangelist leading what seemed last year to be a mighty and godly healing revival. But he had no one to be accountable to, and he fell into adultery, he lost his marriage and his ministry.

Now, in Ephesians 6 when describing the armour of God, Paul highlights the massive Roman shield that protects the soldiers against flaming arrows: “In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” What we know from history is that the shield only partially protected the soldier, since his other flank would be exposed. This would be covered by the shield of his comrade next to him in the battle line. In the same way, an accountability partner can be contacted when we are sorely tempted to sin and disobey God, giving us strength and protection we cannot manage on our own. When we’re tempted to open that bottle again. When we’re tempted to open that website. And when we just have to spend a little more money than we have at Bluewater. We all need partners or triplets of this kind to keep us on the path of obedience to God’s leadership.

Equally, we have a shining example of allowing God leadership in our lives in the life of Christ Jesus. It was the toughest choice in the world for him to give up his life with the awful burden of man’s sin weighing on him, as Luke 22 says “He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.””. But his triumph is one not only to inspire and encourage us, but also to give us hope. Hebrews 5:8-9 says “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”

So, to answer our original question, in a healthy church, God is in control. The symptoms of such a leadership priority will be a lifestyle of prayer and Scripture giving rise to the fruits of the Holy Spirit for the congregation and the leadership. Let’s remind ourselves “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” When God is in control, there will be harmony between the members and the leadership, with neither seeking selfishly to impose their will on the other, but all discerning and following God’s bidding. And in the wider life of the church, there will be harmony in families, in workplaces and in our attitudes to the law. People will be forced to remark, see how these Christians are different from the world! To help us God has given us godly companions for us to be accountable on the journey of faith, and the shining example, of Christ himself. Indeed, a healthy church has God in command, that’s everyone’s leadership priority – let’s make it so in PBC!