



The Encouraging Leader

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The ministry of encouragement is the primary way a pastor and lay leaders help a congregation discover and fulfill its call from Christ to make disciples. One of the advantages of evaluating ministry through the lens of encouragement is that any congregation, regardless of size, location, or level of self-understanding, can benefit. Encouragement allows the congregation to shape its ministry around its strengths rather than to base its work on some model derived from another congregation's story or another pastor's experience.

Encouragement is not mere cheerleading, however, nor does it release us from the need to speak truthfully. In fact, the ministry of encouragement will invariably lead to confrontation and difficulty. The ministry of encouragement leads to growth, not to preservation of the status quo. As the effects of encouragement alter a congregation's ministry, some will resist the change we face in all areas of life. Encouragement seeks to broaden the church's base of leadership and to include those whose gifts and ideas have been left on the sidelines. But the ministry of encouragement requires more than sharing leadership to be effective. The following are four qualities of the encouraging leader.

Humility

Encouragement demands that we lead out of a true sense of humility, the knowledge of both our gifts and our limitations. Humility is not a false modesty that pretends we do not know our own gifts or that those gifts are not valuable. Neither is humility a method for avoiding responsibility by insisting that someone else would be better equipped to lead or a more appropriate choice for leadership when such is not the case. On the other hand, humility keeps us from overvaluing our gifts, from

being “puffed up.” It helps us avoid the traps of conceit and arrogance. In contrast to false modesty and arrogance, humility requires that we accept our gifts and develop them as fully as we can, given our limitations. Humility calls us to make the best use of what God has given us. An important value of humility for the ministry of encouragement is that it gives us empathy for the struggle others have in discerning the gifts and calling God has given them; humility makes our encouragement authentic.

The Ability to Deal with Conflict

Encouragement will require us to accept and deal creatively with conflict. We all know that change or the possibility of change is often threatening to people, ourselves included. But we also see in Acts that conflict brings opportunity for insight and growth. The creation of deacons, the Council of Jerusalem, the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over the role of John Mark—all these led to enhanced ministry. If we follow a ministry of encouraging others to discover their own gifts and ministries, rather than continuing preexisting programs and committees, we can expect the resistance and criticism that normally accompanies change. Some congregational leaders and members may not only refuse to cooperate but also resist the more enthusiastic, rejecting the new possibilities offered by shared ministry. Pastors and lay leaders alike may have to deal with their own discomfort when the path takes an unexpected turn or when our hopes and expectations are derailed by the surprising winds of the Spirit. The primary example of conflict and creative response in Acts is the discomfort and resistance of many Jewish Christians to the acceptance of Gentiles into Christ’s family and the defense of this acceptance by Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and the Council of Jerusalem.

Vulnerability

Because encouragement involves conflict, it requires acceptance of vulnerability on several levels. As we have already noted, discerning and implementing ministry through the process of encouragement will conflict with the image of leadership many people have. While this dilemma is particularly acute for pastors, who often have well-defined traditional roles and expectations within a given congregation, it will also affect lay leaders. (In fact, it can be a most difficult source of conflict when the lay leadership accepts and works well with ministry by encouragement but the pastor is not yet on board.) Ministry by encouragement takes seriously the ministry of all believers and tries to expand the circle of ministers beyond the select few. Encouragement will sometimes require saying no where we once said yes—no to attending and controlling the agenda for every meeting, no to the idea that ministry should never fail or make mistakes, no to the idea that ministry should be conflict-free, no to the idea that the pastor or other leaders should always get their

way. All these nos will violate a lot of comfort zones, including our own, and make us vulnerable to criticism and resistance. Yet effective ministry requires us to accept this vulnerability. Effective ministry will also require us to be honest about our own limitations, fears, and struggles, not indiscriminately or in a manipulative manner, but with an honest and supportive group of colleagues. Scripture is full of vulnerable leaders. Jesus himself, particularly in his dealings with the obtuseness of the disciples and the false expectations of the crowd, showed the necessity of vulnerability. We also see vulnerability in the painful passages of Paul's letters, Jeremiah's complaints, and the psalms of lament.

Integrity

Encouragement requires that we lead from integrity, for if we are leading by trust in prayer and the Spirit, we must both trust and be trustworthy. It should go without saying that encouragement should not be embraced on the surface, only to be undercut behind the scenes. If we are going to follow the Spirit, we must genuinely let go of control. Ananias, Sapphira, and Simon Magus all demonstrate the danger of trying to manipulate the Spirit for our own ends. At the same time, stepping back from control does not equal stepping away from work. If anything, encouragement requires more communication, more prayer and study, more listening and dreaming together than leadership by a CEO or an inner circle. The quality of integrity demanded by encouragement requires faith in the Spirit, faith in oneself, and the creation of a method for accountability to Christ and to each other. The Council of Jerusalem again, the break between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark's reliability and potential, and Peter's struggles with the "Gentile question" all illustrate the importance of integrity to our shared ministry.

All of these requirements—sharing power and responsibility, humility, dealing creatively with conflict, vulnerability, integrity—are interrelated. It is impossible to say where humility stops and integrity begins or exactly how the ability or inability to share power and responsibility affects how well or badly we deal with conflict. Issues will rise around these qualities, and their existence or absence, throughout our ministry. The ministry of encouragement gives us one effective way to understand these qualities and to make them a positive presence in ministry.

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