

Welcome to the top

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I was finally on top. I had been picked to serve on the executive committee, and in my chapter that was an incredible honor. Not only that, but to be selected as president--well, that was one notch further up. I had gained that honor as well. And I must say, in my humility I thoroughly enjoyed the admiration and respect of my peers.

Our leadership candidates were chosen on the basis of recognizable deeds done in the group. If someone had been very active in the chapter and had gone to all the conferences, he or she was considered a worthy candidate. If that person also went on a summer mission trip or to a training camp, they were almost a shoe-in. I had done it all, so I was a natural, right? In a jubilant, yet humble sort of way, I accepted the position, considering it an honor to serve the Lord by serving the chapter as their president.

But several things happened to me when I became a leader-- things that can happen to all of us. First, I found myself viewing my chapter from a different vantage point. Second, I was suddenly different from everyone else in the group, or at least it seemed so. Third, everyone's perception about me and about themselves began to change. As group members looked to me as their leader, they placed greater expectations on me. And, as their appointed leader, I tended to expect less of them. After all, I reasoned, if I'm their shepherd, they must be my sheep! I'm the leader, they are the followers. I'm the servant, they are the "servees," the ones to be served.

Why did our attitudes change?

Most of us are in chapters which have well-defined job roles. In some ways these roles dictate each member's place on the organizational chart. All well and good for maximizing efficiency. But by building hierarchical leadership structures—good intentions notwithstanding--we end up creating distance between leaders and followers. And this distance fosters an unbiblical view of people in our groups. Those closer to the top of the organizational chart are ascribed greater value. And it may not be long before the leaders start to see themselves as the ones with the most to offer. After all, they start to think, what can dumb sheep do but be led by self-sacrificing, multi-gifted, super-spiritual shepherds?

In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen highlights the importance we have placed on keeping the organizational lines straight: "Somehow we have come to believe that good leadership requires a safe distance from those we are called to lead. . . . Someone serves, someone else is being served, and be sure not to mix up the roles!"

Promoting Positional Power

Few leaders create this distinction on purpose. I honestly never intended to. But our organizational structures encourage it, and the

label of leadership certainly strokes our egos. Because group members expect their leaders to be closer to God, leaders are forced into the awkward expectation of good spiritual performance. They are tempted to buy in to the notion that effective leadership requires a safe distance--safe, perhaps, because what leaders really end up doing is hiding their own flaws.

It isn't long before leaders begin to believe these lies about position and distance. I wanted to believe them. I enjoyed being thought of as better than I really was. Having been set apart as a leader told me that I must be at least as good as (if not better than) the rest of the chapter members.

Unfortunately, I used my position to create even more distance from people in an effort to keep my new image from being tarnished. I realized this through a conversation with a fellow exec member. He began to describe how members of the chapter--even the exec--viewed me. Their image of me was much larger than life. I was confused, because I thought I was supposed to create that very image--that chapter presidents pretty much had it all together. And yet in some ways I liked that image, and there were things I could do to keep it in front of me. One of the most important was to keep people from getting too close, lest I blow my cover. The result? As my self-image was merrily inflating, my view of others was rapidly deflating.

Shepherd and Sheep: a Misused Metaphor

The Christian world has suffered for centuries because it began to create a separated leadership caste early on. And as church leaders grew in their skills and knowledge, inexperienced and uneducated followers became even more dependent on them. The trained leaders of the church, the clergy, were hesitant to trust the common folk, the laity. And the laity, believing they had little to offer, assumed a passive role in the church. It wasn't long before much of the activity in the church was left to the "professionals" while the majority followed in helpless, sheep-like fashion. Today, many sheep in the church continue to play their role well--needy, uninitiating and self-seeking. But, hey, what more can you expect from such a dull-witted animal?

In agricultural life, shepherds call the shots for their sheep. They dictate where the flock is headed and how it is to get there. The sheep are free from responsibility. They don't have to think for themselves; that's done for them. After all, who can really blame the sheep when things go wrong? Any fault must lie with the shepherds. Holding to this view, the church began to function along well charted organizational lines which bred dependency on leadership and a sense of inferiority among followers. This unbiblical separation continues in our fellowships and churches today, setting up leaders as idols and watching them shatter when they fall off their pedestals.

So what's wrong with our thinking? How can we stop this from happening? The shepherd metaphor we commonly use in describing leadership gives us many valuable principles. In Ezekiel 34:10-16, God puts himself in the role of the true shepherd, explaining how his first concern is for the welfare of the sheep. He is a rescuing, caring, nurturing, healing, loving shepherd. Jesus continues this theme in John 10:11-18, calling himself the "good shepherd." He paints the picture of

a leader who sacrifices whatever it takes for the sake of the sheep, even his own life. The metaphor continues in the early church as Peter challenges the elders to "be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (I Peter 5:2).

As I think back on my experience, the biblical shepherd/sheep metaphor of leadership was very helpful. But metaphors are illustrations, and sheep are animals, not humans. Putting myself in the role of shepherd distorted my view of people. Part of the problem was that I had to distinguish myself artificially from fellow humans. The metaphor could only hold up literally if I were more than human, just as a shepherd is more than a sheep. It fed my ego to think that I could get along fine without the sheep, and yet without me they would be lost and starving. Worse, I was tempted to dehumanize those whom I was chosen to lead. People became fair game to manipulate in order to accomplish my goals. In doing this, I ended up behaving more like the false shepherds Ezekiel describes who were to receive God's judgment (see Ezekiel 34:1-10).

It's easy for leaders to drift into a utilitarian view of group members. We begin to evaluate them according to their level of involvement and quality of performance. Soon their importance is relative to their usefulness. Those who are important get our attention; the rest can be safely ignored.

The Scriptures stand in opposition to this view of people. They speak of the incredible worth each of us has before God. In Psalm 139:14, David says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." In Psalm 8:5, he wonders at the exalted position God has given humankind, "crowning him with glory and honor." According to Genesis, each of us is made in the image of the triune God (Genesis 1:27), bearing his likeness (5:1). Finally, the incarnation of the Son of God in the historic person of Jesus Christ is the ultimate testimony of God's high view of human beings.

Even though our relationship with God was distorted by sin, it was not erased. In our need for redemption, we all fit the role of the helpless sheep, described by Isaiah as each having gone astray (Isaiah 53:6). God is the caring, sacrificing, loving shepherd. None of us can help ourselves apart from the power we receive from him. Everyone is on equal ground before the cross.

The good news of the cross is that we are delivered from our waywardness and that our true identity is restored. Those who have believed and received the Son are given new life with the Father and become his adopted sons and daughters (John 1:12). As his children we are heirs of all the riches and blessings of the everlasting kingdom of God (Ephesians 1:3-10). And now we belong to God, constituting a "royal priesthood," gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve and offer sacrifice to God (I Peter 2:9). We are temples of the living God and bearers of his glory (I Corinthians 6:19-20, John 17:22)

Members of One Body

In our position before God as adopted children, enjoying his grace and empowered by his Spirit, we are all equal. But we are not the same.

God didn't make us as carbon copies, but as different expressions of himself. He intends our diversity to enhance our unity as we rely on one another.

To describe this interdependence, the apostle Paul used the analogy of the body. God has arranged it so that each of us has a part to play, and each part cannot get along without the others. All parts are necessary and "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22). Can you imagine what this revelation meant to me? While we have diversity, there is no hierarchy of value in God's system! This truth is reflected in the very title of Francis Schaeffer's book, *No Little People*. And in that book, he writes, "There are different jobs to be done, different offices to be filled, but we as Christians are equal before one Master."

Unfortunately, we have done no better with the metaphor of the body than with that of the shepherd and sheep. We have created distinctions which give some parts of the body an inflated sense of their importance while robbing others of their dignity. As leaders we have to remember that we play just one of the many equally valid roles within the body of Christ. And we would do well to remember that the way we lead communicates how we view the other members of the body: Do we merely fill job slots with warm bodies? Or do we nurture growth by helping our fellow members discover and use their gifts?

Whether you are the chapter president, the worship team coordinator, a small-group leader or are simply initiating a discipleship relationship with a friend, you must act to break down the unbiblical separations created between leader and follower. Here are some questions that might guide you as you ponder this:

1. Do I expect to receive something from those I lead or do I only expect to give? Our leadership team always focused on ways we could serve our members. We never discussed how they might minister to us, much less allowing room for it to happen. We felt that the success of our group rested solely on our shoulders.

2. As I make plans for my role in the chapter, will I allow input from other people? Do I actually listen to them? Our leadership teams would head off to chapter camp each spring to make plans for the year without getting input from anyone else. Fancying ourselves to be like Moses on Mt. Sinai, our stone-engraved plans were "handed down" to the chapter members after our experience on the mountaintop. (It's rather easy to see why they weren't as excited about the plans as we were!)

3. Am I willing to be influenced by those who aren't in leadership positions? During leadership meetings and at chapter camp we did our planning in a vacuum. If we looked for influence, help or encouragement, it was usually "up" the organizational ladder to the staff worker.

4. What are my expectations of group members? My fellow leaders and I often had great expectations for group members to carry out the plans that we made. By pegging people onto our organizational chart, our view of them was limited to their job description.

No Ordinary People

How you respond to the above questions will reveal whether or not you have fallen into thinking of group members as pathetic sheep, helpless without your leadership. Pray that God would give you eyes to see people as he sees them.

In his essay *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis reminds us that we never deal with "mere mortals" or "ordinary people." He warns that "it is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations."

People are important, not impotent. They can enhance our effectiveness as leaders within the body of Christ. Service is a two-way street that frees us to be vulnerable, to care and to be cared for. As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, let's serve as leaders not because we are better, but rather because we are called.

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