

T. Austin-Sparks:

“For that the leaders took the lead... bless the Lord” (Judges 5:2).

While there are few things fraught with more difficulties, perils and involvements than leadership, there are few things more vital and necessary. The fact of leadership needs no argument. It is in the very nature of things. Every situation that arises of a serious and critical nature either finds its salvation by the spontaneous forthcoming of the spirit of leadership in someone, or becomes a disaster for want of it. When an emergency arises, people are either paralysed and helpless because there is no one to give a lead, or are galvanized into action or confidence by the right kind of leadership.

But not only in emergencies does this factor show its importance. Both in any enterprise, mission, and service, and in any realm of responsibility, this— which is an elemental principle— invariably shows itself. We have much to say about its nature, its sphere, and its purpose, but first of all it is necessary that we should recognize and accept that leadership is a fact in the very constitution of life and purpose. It has been so from the beginning, and in principle (if not in form) has operated in every realm, not least in the church.

In its right place, sphere, nature, and relationship it is a must. Only chaos, confusion and frustration can obtain where there is no spirit of leadership. Indeed, even where there may be a pretending to the contrary, it will be there somewhere if things are not completely stagnant or running to seed.

We have known it to be said that leadership is an Old Testament feature, but not in the New Testament. It has also been said or contended, that, while leadership may obtain in the wider work and enterprise of the church universal, it has no place or right in the local church. Many will find it hard to understand such arguments, and it is a pity that time and space should have to be taken to take notice of such objections, but there they are, and no dealing with the matter of leadership would be sound until such contentions were dealt with. Those contentions are based upon what is believed to be the essential corporate nature of leadership or responsibility in the local church. It is argued, and with truth, that there is one Head only over the church; that the Holy Spirit is the immediate Custodian of that headship; that the plurality of elders in the New Testament churches is the law by which all autocracy and personal leadership is ruled out and the leadership of the Holy Spirit in relationship to the headship of Christ alone is preserved. All this is quite true and right, and God forbid that the outworking of anything that we may say should violate those sacred laws.

With all the desire and intention in the world to safeguard the unique and sole rights of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the church, we still believe that there is an essential place for, and need of, subject and subordinate (to the Lord) leadership. Moreover, this, we believe, not to be out of order, but in the divine order.

The place and function of the shepherd in the Bible is to “go before”, and the sheep “follow after”. The Lord is truly the Chief Shepherd, but there are shepherds in the churches, and they have to lead. While James, John and Timothy were apostles of the churches, they were recognized as having particular responsibility in a local church. If this can be proved to be true in any case, it must be accepted as: (1) expressing a certain personal leadership, and (2) not necessarily violating either the headship of Christ, the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, or the corporate nature of local responsibility. To argue otherwise is to say that it is impossible to have a corporate body of responsible men who recognize anointing for leadership amongst themselves, and to honour such, while not being under autocratic oppression.

When we have said that, we feel sure that the full answer will be reached as we open out this matter to its greater range. To say that leadership may rightly be recognized in the church universal but that it must on no account be found in the church local is surely to say that the local church is in this respect separate and different from the Body of Christ as a whole. If the Body as a whole has personal leaders in it legitimately without violating the principle of Christ’s unique headship, must it be that the spirit of leadership resting upon an individual in the local church of necessity violates that principle? While we most strongly contend against autocracy, we as strongly contend that leadership even amongst responsible brethren is right, provided always that it is evidently anointed leadership and of the kind that is approved of God.

Because we are going to learn much from Old Testament examples in these chapters, it is necessary to point out another fact in view of an aforementioned objection.

In the Old Testament everything is on a temporal, earthly, and material basis. Leadership was therefore in such a context. But it is of the very essence of Biblical interpretation that nothing was the sum and end in itself. The

wood, gold, silver, fabrics, etc., etc., of the tabernacle did not begin and end with themselves. They represented, and, in a way, embodied spiritual, heavenly, and eternal features, characteristics, and principles. This is true of everything divinely instituted in the Old Testament. The same was true of the "works", "signs", and miracles of Christ. So it was with Old Testament leaders.

With the New Testament, after Christ's ascension, the forms, means, and connections change, but the spiritual principles remain. The apostles are the Joshuas, Gideons, Nehemiahs, etc. of the new dispensation, but their realm, function, and purpose is spiritual, not temporal. They are undoubtedly spiritual leaders, and their spiritual leadership could function in a local church even for years. This was complementary, and did no violence to any spiritual principle. It would be only creating an artificial technique to put these things into watertight compartments, and say, this and that must not be. The New Testament knows of no such legal or artificial position. Fellowship is the answer to most of the difficulties.

From there we are led to look at the matter of leadership in other general ways before we seek to learn from examples.

As is always the case the positive is revealed in its importance by the opposition which it encounters. We have only to consider the leadership function of such as Adam, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Nehemiah, Paul, and a hundred others to understand the intense and many-sided antagonism levelled at them. Of course, the Lord Jesus as "the captain of our salvation", i.e. "the file-leader", is the supreme instance. Break, defeat, beguile, seduce the leader and the battle is won, the forces are helpless. The focus of adverse attention upon leadership is its own testimony to its importance.

Then, in approaching the question of what leadership is, we must say something of what it is not.

Leadership (in the work of God) is not firstly on natural grounds. It is not, in the first place, a matter of personality, natural ability, assertiveness, enthusiasm, assumption, strength of mind or will. A blusterer is not a leader. A leader in God's work is not made or trained in the schools or academies. That may be so in the world's work, but we are dealing with spiritual leadership. Many natural things, inherited or acquired, may or may not be helpful subsequently, but God's leaders are not essential leaders because of certain natural qualifications. Whatever may or may not be true in the natural realm, the fact is that God's leaders are chosen by Him. They, and others, may always have many questions as to why but that fact governs. God only knows why! When God does it men have either to take account of it and accept it, or in repudiating it to be out of divine approval. This is very true to the Bible, as we shall see.

What we have just said does not imply that there are no qualities in leaders. They go to school with God, and in a hard school the kind of qualities required by God are inculcated. Another general thing about leaders chosen by God is that they, while being very human, are, in many respects, a class by themselves. They are pioneers, and pioneers are lonely people in more respects than one. In some ways they are difficult people. Their standard and measure has to be ahead of others, and as human nature generally likes not to be disturbed, but would seek the easy way, the pioneer is often a bit too much for people. He is restless, never satisfied, always pressing and urging forward. The keynote of his life is "Let us go on". His is not the easy way, and because human nature does want the easy way, the leader is not always popular. The whole nature of man is either downward or to a quiet and happy mean and snugness. The pioneer is therefore not always appreciated, but often very much otherwise. He is so much contrary to this mediocre gravitation. A part of the price of leadership is loneliness.

Leadership is a divine imperative. In the work of God, true leadership is not by the choice or desire of those concerned. Very often it is against their inclination or desire especially when they have been in God's "school of discipline". Indeed, the man who wants to be a leader, who forces himself into that position, who assumes it, and who would not rather be saved from it, will most likely be a menace. It will be clear to all that it is more the man than the Lord. His leadership—such as it is—will be forced, artificial, and lacking in unction. The God-chosen leader is a "cannot" man in two ways. Firstly, like Moses and Jeremiah, he will genuinely feel and confess, "I cannot". But on the other hand, he will know that he cannot do otherwise, it is a divine compulsion, a fire in his bones, an urge and energy not of himself. While he is on his job he may give the impression of personal strength, perhaps of efficiency, or even self-assurance, but he and God know the depth of his secret history, the overwhelming consciousness of need and dependence, the awareness of limitation, and the desolating realization of failure and weakness. Leaders know deeper depths than any others and their battle with self-despair is more acute. Yet it is a part of their leadership and responsibility that they hide their own personal sufferings and sorrows. Like Ezekiel and Hosea they have to anoint their face and in the hour of deepest sorrow, go before the people "as at other times". The troubles must not get into their voice

or manner. If they do, their influence has gone, for, if people are going on to the greater fulnesses of Christ, the supreme virtue is courage, and it is this that a leader must inspire. His boldest times before men may be his times of deepest suffering before God. Leaders know that they are involved in the "impossible", but—in spite of themselves—they are committed, and for them compromise is unthinkable.

While writing this I have come on *The Making of a Pioneer*, by the Misses Cable and French, and in it these lines occur in reference to the pioneer.

"They are not an easygoing class of people and are subject to an inarticulate urge, the impact of a driving-force pushing them forward to further effort and carrying them into what other men call 'impossible situations'. 'Appointed to pioneer work' is an expression which is a travesty of the true case, for no man can be called a 'pioneer' until he has proved himself to be one. The... pioneer is heaven ordained, not man appointed."

In this introduction to this great matter, let us just add this, that it is in the very nature of true spiritual leadership that the leader has to have in his own being through experience that to which he seeks to lead others. He has gone the way before. He has tasted what he calls others to taste. He is no book leader; what he says to others and urges them toward comes out of his own life at great cost. The artificial "leader" can say the most extravagant things, can give all the theory and assume all the mannerisms, and he gets away with it and knows little or nothing of the real heartbreak. "The husbandman that laboreth must be the first to partake of the fruits" said Paul, but while this may apply to the reward of labour, it may also apply to the cost.

When we have said all as to that special class of pioneer-leaders in spiritual things, we must point out that, even if we cannot count ourselves among them, you and I should be leaders in the sense that we inspire and are an incentive to others to "go on" with the Lord. While "followers", there are always others who can be influenced by us, and, as we shall see in one particular Bible instance, the very essence of leadership is inspiration. May we all be leaders in this sense.