

Avoiding Leadership Fetishes

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Strange title for a book, I suppose. So let me explain the phenomenon. First, let's go to a Thesaurus and see what other words are used to describe the word "fetish." "Obsession. Fixation. Craze. Mania. Engrossment. Inclination." I could have titled this teaching, "Leadership Binging." Binging is not just limited to eating disorders but can happen in other realms of life as well. People can have spending binges. People can go on an immoral binge. And even more subtle forms of binging can occur even among very stable people if not cautious. Binging and obsessive behaviour is a growing problem in our present day culture.

As a Christian leader myself and having observed many other Christian leaders over the years, I believe I have identified a behaviour pattern to which all leaders are very susceptible because of the nature of their calling. In one sense, a leader is separated and called to a lonely life. Of course, God never sentences anyone to loneliness. But, if we are not cautious, the call to be intimate with God can become an excuse to insulate ourselves in a kind of holy huddle that makes us vulnerable to certain fixations and engrossments. Sometimes, Christian leaders have too much unproductive time on their hands... too much time to think and think... and think some more. And thinking is not praying. Prayer requires thinking, but thinking in and of itself, is NOT prayer.

Here is the scenario: As a leader, we stand in that calling by sheer grace alone. Actually the Lord has us in a process of Christian construction as much as the sheep are under construction themselves. In reality, we struggle with certain points of emptiness and unfulfillment probably as much as those whom we lead. We get frustrated with our progress just as much as others. Our calling often becomes as routine and mundane as the ordinary saint's career becomes to them. Boredom tries to set in. As this happens, we begin to try to come to grips with why the church is not growing, or why such and such department is not doing well, searching for the solution to the boredom that has settled in our minds and hearts. But instead of seeking God for a personal revival and change in our hearts, we instead try to identify SOMETHING or SOMEONE on the outside that is causing this point of frustration on the inside of us. So before we realize it, we are saying over and over again in our minds, "It must be such'n'such that is causing this or maybe it is so'n'so." Often we grasp for an outside solution to an inward problem. A quick fix. A project to cure the pain. We begin to exaggerate a church problem. We get a fixation on a certain imperfect situation in our church or a certain imperfect person(s) in our church and begin to see it as the single issue in the church that must be conquered and fixed. (BUT THE REAL PROBLEM IS NOT IN THE CHURCH, IT'S IN US!) Before we know it, we are obsessive in our thinking about something or someone that irritates us. And then, compulsively, we manhandle the problem in the flesh, trying to correct it too quickly and without forethought of HOW to fix it and HOW those we lead will be affected by our latest fetish.

We become obsessed about correcting something and in so doing, we make rash decisions, catch people by surprise, and hurt the very ones God has entrusted to our care. By our compulsive actions and words, we force our people to drink both sweet water and bitter water from the same fountain. We confuse people with our unpredictability. Our fetish for correcting something or someone causes tunnel vision and further exasperates our discontent, not to mention the damage our fetish can do to the sheep.

This is not fair to those who sit under our leadership. When we pick up leadership fetishes, our leadership becomes too unpredictable, too inconsistent, compulsive, and comes across to others as harsh and difficult to please. The saints can no longer "read" their leader. The atmosphere becomes one of insecurity and instability as the leader goes from one seasonal fetish to the next. The followers then have to take the brunt of the cyclic panic and manic behaviour of their leader.

So as leaders, we must be on our guard against a thought becoming an obsession in our mind. The Bible teaches that we are to "Fix our minds on Jesus." (Hebrews 12) We should be wary anytime any particular issue about our church dominates our thinking, consumes too much of our emotional energy, or makes us feel the situation is "dire", meriting our undivided attention and rash action. We must do spiritual warfare when the devil pressures our minds to dwell on a certain thing too long or when we feel pressured in our minds or by people to take a certain action. We must sit on our ideas long enough to see whether they last on the inside of us (indicating their source as God) and we must ponder our courses of action, to be sure our protocol with the people who are involved is considerate. We must beware of prayer time backsliding into thinking time. We must have some other activities and other lines of thought that we can travel down whenever we become obsessed in our thinking about any situation or any person. We must have some people that can be sounding boards for our ideas and proposed actions, to help us see things more objectively. We should consult with those we trust and get their input. We should never take a drastic action that bypasses a leader whom we have appointed under us. We should never handle publicly what should be handled privately. We should never announce major changes publicly that directly impact others unless we have first given those who are directly impacted the time to hear about them privately first. This affords those under our care the opportunity to give us feedback and also to internalize the course of action we wish to take as a leader. We must beware of obsessive thinking that makes us feel "driven" to swift action without consideration of people's feelings. When dissatisfaction settles upon us, we should get help. We should get outside advice and counsel from those not immediately wrapped up in the issues or impacted by our actions. And we should be honest with ourselves when we identify our own fetish behaviour. I pray this teaching will be of some assistance to others who are in leadership positions and that just the identification of this phenomenon will serve as both an immunization and anecdote in and of itself.