

Protecting Our People from Ourselves

Dear Doug,

For three years Jim worked his way into a full-time staff position. Along the way, he headed up several different ministries, finally settling in as the pastor of small groups. When the church hit one thousand in average attendance, plans were laid to start another church. Jim was selected as the lead pastor.

The same plan was used that had worked so well for the young mother church. A strong core group was established and soon Jim, and his wife Sarah, found themselves leading a church of their own. That's when a troubling pattern began to appear. Whenever a strong, gifted leader would become part of the body and begin to exercise his gifts, Jim would find some way to alienate him. As the months went by, only people who were no threat to Jim were recruited. At the end of three years, the embryonic church collapsed. Jim had pushed away the very people he needed most. Somehow, he forgot an important practice—to protect his congregation from himself.

Churches self-destruct and pastors quit for a variety of reasons, but here are some common themes associated with the demise: pride and egotism, selfish ambition, obsession with power and control, competitiveness, divisive case building, rivalry, malicious attempts to destroy those considered *the opposition*, arrogant insistence on *my way or the highway* and stubborn self-righteousness. Unfortunately, these are the sins that plague both pew and pulpit.

The command to *love above all* is neglected, and the image of Christ is destroyed and defaced in his church.

So how can we avoid this potential pitfall, Doug? How can we assume command, yet protect our people from abusive leadership? It may just be that, like the Apostle Peter, our ministry effectiveness can only begin after we see our natural abilities fail.

You'll remember that Peter was bold and confrontive by nature. He alone joined his Lord for a walk on the liquid footpath of the Sea of Galilee. He alone stood against the temple guards, sword in hand, to defend Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was typical. Peter was assertive, aggressive and strong-willed by personality type.

When Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times, he was offended. Yet, at the fire outside the door of the High Priest's courtyard, when a servant girl asked, *You are not one of His disciples, are you?* Peter mumbled in abject cowardice, *I am not.* Within minutes, he had denied his Lord twice more . . . ultimate humiliation! His worse personal nightmare became reality. He had failed at the very place of his strength.

Peter never forgot this first rite of passage into Kingdom leadership. The raw material of personality and self-confidence was broken down so that the power of God's Spirit could produce a transformed leader. Only now was he ready to be the mouthpiece of God on the fabulous Day of Pentecost. In the face of a hostile culture, he proclaimed the first sermon of the church era. The Spirit's control of his brokenness was a thing of rare beauty and effectiveness.

Here was a strong, courageous leader with the ego-proofing of God-centeredness being increasingly developed. He was still capable of assertive confrontation (see his rebuke of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5), but it wasn't a competitive, self-oriented drive that motivated him. He was at God's disposal, doing God's business, in God's power. The issues of self-worth, self-image, self-in-control, and self-centeredness were being replaced with the reign of the Spirit in the throne room of his inner being.

A test of Peter's ego is reported in Acts 15. It is a situation of confrontation between peers—apostle in the face of apostle. Paul was on the *dishing it out* end, and Peter was on the receiving end—and Paul was right! Peter accepted the rebuke and humbly corrected his course. He had come a long way in his spiritual formation!

After thirty years in pastoral ministry, I have come to the conclusion that the first duty of those of us in Christian leadership is to protect our people from ourselves . . . specifically from what remains of our old self-in-control nature. Oh, I am not minimizing the danger of the world and the Devil. I am simply observing from the vantage point of long experience that we are often our own worst enemies. All too often, stuck in our unresolved ego issues, we rend and tear the sheep entrusted to our care, and in turn, are bitten and devoured ourselves.

The safest, healthiest, most effective ministry leaders are those who tap into *greater grace* through lifestyle repentance and voluntary humility. Peter learned this bedrock principle in the school of hard knocks—and he learned it

well. God resists the proud! God strips the mantle of his favor from those who refuse to allow Him to break up their dangerous inner egoism.

The great news, Doug, is that God freely gives His grace to the humble. Christian leaders thrive on grace. It is the spiritual empowerment that flows from the process of submission to Christ. Grace-based, God-exalted leadership is trustworthy. It follows in the footprints of the safest and most substantial of all leaders—*The slain Lamb of God . . . who is worthy to receive honor, power, and glory!*

Your fellow servant,

Jan Hettinga

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*Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older.
All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,
‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’
Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand
that he may lift you up in due time.*

1 Peter 5:5-6