

So, for sure, effeminate songs and men in long frocks don't help, but they're not the primary problem. The primary issue is that we live in a culture which is undergoing a massive, seismic transformation and until that transformation finds a confident direction, we will struggle to draw men into anything which they perceive as threatening to their fragile ego.

In the fullness of time, the tide will change. Men will once again feel confident about who and what they are and represent. Meanwhile, let's take the opportunity to rethink our structures, methods, language and message, but let's not back off from the gospel just because men don't like it!

Lessons in a leadership failure - Learning from King Saul how not to do it

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One of the puzzling aspects of the Old Testament is why Israel's first king who came to the throne with the anointing of God on his life and the high hopes of Israel on his shoulders proved to be such a disaster. His failure was so great that God regretted he had chosen Saul and rejected him as king of Israel (1 Sam 15.26, 35).

Notwithstanding some successes, the signs of Saul's failure as a leader were evident from an early date, and much can be learned from the multiple lessons he provides in leadership failure.

1.The failure to accept responsibility (1 Sam 10.21-22)

When Samuel identified Saul as the first king of Israel and went to anoint him for office, "he was not to be found" because he had hidden himself among the supplies. While this could be interpreted generously and explained either as a sign of natural diffidence or impressive humility, in view of subsequent developments it is more likely to be an attempt to avoid taking responsibility. When, in 1 Sam 18.17-21, Saul is challenged by Samuel for his failure to complete the mission God had assigned to him, he quickly passes the buck and blames his disobedience on his soldiers.

Rudolph Giuliani, understood the first essential of effective leadership and when he was Mayor of New York he kept on his desk a two-word sign saying, 'I'm responsible'. Leaders willingly accept responsibility while others merely want to observe, or even, as in Saul's case, hide, so as not to get involved. The person who cannot accept responsibility, or does so only when all is going well, is ill-suited to leadership.

2. The failure to inspire trust (1 Sam 13.7-12)

Saul's military career had a promising beginning when, empowered by God's Spirit, his army – a bunch of volunteers, not a disciplined corps of trained and professional troops – defeated the Ammonites. But soon afterwards, when they faced the Philistines, they were demoralised and nervous (v.7). Rather than inspiring them or giving them confidence, the troops began scattering (v.12). A second basic characteristic of good leadership is the ability to win the trust of one's followers. If they trust you, they'll do amazing things for you. If they don't, they won't achieve what they could. However good he was to start with, Saul does not appear to have had the capacity to sustain the loyalty of his followers. When you're in that position, the writing is on the wall of your leadership, whatever position or title you cling on to.

3. The failure to respect boundaries (1 Sam 13.9-10)

In seeking to win the loyalty of his troops, Saul made a crucial error. He went for the quick fix, the superficial gesture, the seemingly easy option, but it only served to compound his failure. In the absence of trust, his restless troops were not prepared to hang around until Samuel showed up to offer a sacrifice that would have rallied them to the defence of the covenant and bound them together again as a united group. Fearing he might lose them all, Saul decided to offer the burnt and fellowship offerings in Samuel's place. After all, he was the king, wasn't he? What was to stop him? The problem was that offering sacrifices was the calling of the priest, not of the king. In offering sacrifices Saul was arrogating powers to himself which were not his and stepping outside the calling and anointing he had as king.

Time and again I have observed gifted leaders make the same error. Success in one field gives them a sense that they are called and equipped to function in any field, and when they do so, they often do so to the detriment of the people they think they are

serving. Sometimes the action is, as it was for Saul, a short-term answer to an immediate problem, but it is one that creates long-term difficulties. In referring to his role as the herald of the Messiah, John the Baptist said, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven”, implying that they should be content to function within their area of gift.

The apostle Paul knew his calling as a church planter among the Gentiles and had no desire to exploit the work done by others (Rom 15.14-20). Most evangelists are unwise to pretend they are theologians and many pioneering social activists aren't great pastors! True leaders serve confidently in the area in which they are gifted, but know that they are not omni-competent. They know they need to work with others, not only for greater effectiveness, but because that is the way God has designed his body to function.

4. The failure to plan strategically (1 Sam 13.16-22)

Saul may well have complained that the circumstances were beyond his control. Because of Philistine oppression “not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel” (v.19), which meant that Israelites had to use the services of Philistine blacksmiths for their agricultural implements, and pay for them! However, even more significant than the economic benefit derived by Philistia was the military advantage they gained from this policy. It meant that “on the day of battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan has a sword or spear in his hand, only Saul and Jonathan had them” (v.22).

A gifted leader would have refused to put up with this injustice, found a way around the prohibition, planned more strategically, and never sent soldiers into battle so ill-equipped. Who has the superior equipment and firepower is usually a significant factor in determining the outcome of a battle. Leaders today need to equip the church strategically for the spiritual battle in which we are engaged rather than acting as holiday reps – intent on keeping punters happy as they soak up the sun. Proactive strategy rather than reactive tactics or, even worse, laissez-faire indifference is needed.

5. The failure to command compassionately (1 Sam 14.24-26)

In the sovereignty of God, Saul's failure to equip his army did not matter. The Philistines used the swords they had to kill each other, rather than to kill their enemies who had no swords. Victory

belonged to Israel, whose army pursued the enemy to Beth Aven. Rather than celebrating the victory and rewarding his troops, Saul drove them harder. He bound his already famished troops by oath to fast for the whole day, under pain of death. Saul had obviously not heard that “an army marches on its stomach”, nor had he any real appreciation of how to motivate people. The ban caused ‘distress’ (v.24) and the soldiers obeyed their commanding officer out of ‘fear’ (v.26) rather than for any more positive reasons. The imposed fast was exacerbated when the troops entered a forest where ‘there was honey on the ground’ and where ‘they saw honey oozing out’ (vv.25-26).

Saul may have been well intentioned: the fast concentrated their minds; the fast would make them hungry for victory; the fast would indicate to God their religious zeal in seeking to defeat the Philistines. Whatever justifications Saul may have advanced, it was a failure in sensitivity and compassionate command. Religious zeal can often be distorted and become a legalistic burden to people. Encouragement, especially encouragement that has an appreciation of human frailty, is a far better motivator than well-meaning coercion or spiritual intimidation.

We are not told that Saul even expressed gratitude to his army for the victory they had won. Like many a ‘super-spiritual’ leader, he may have passed it off as all due to God’s activity rather than any action they had undertaken, so they didn’t deserve thanks. Or he may have taken the line: we’ve won one victory, but there’s no time to celebrate - on to the next battle. Either way, he expresses no gratitude, as he drives them harder. Yet, good leaders are constantly thanking their teams, or their church members, and giving recognition to others. Good leaders may find themselves in somewhat of a lonely position, with everyone else receiving thanks, but, sadly and unjustly, no one thanking them. But that goes with the territory. Good leadership will often be taken for granted. But it can never take the contribution of others for granted.

6. The failure to obey completely (1 Sam 15.1-35)

The reason why God rejected Saul as king of Israel was his failure to obey God completely. “I regret,” God said, “that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” (v.11). Far from destroying the Amalekite enemy completely, Saul spared the life of their king and the best of their livestock and anything that was good, while

destroying that which was worthless (v.9). The failure to serve *under* command disqualified him from being *in* command.

The failure to obey meant he was unfit to command the obedience of others. Spiritual leadership requires total obedience. Trying to amend or improve on God's instructions is never a legitimate option. Our plans are of no concern, only God's. Spiritual compromise is a continuous temptation. Given this, most of us are long disqualified from leadership. Our lives are littered with incidents of disobedience and failure, and surely that is also true of most of the great leaders in Scripture. The apostle Peter, for example, was far from being a perfect leader, as his denial of Christ and his later argument with Paul over the very essence of the gospel (Gal 1) demonstrates. Can only the perfect be leaders? No, by the grace of God a thousand times no. But the difference is this: Saul boasted of his accomplishments and lived in the delusional world that he had been obedient (v.13). He then compounded his errors by refusing to take responsibility for his actions and blaming his troops for the failure (v.20-21). 'It wasn't me, it was them,' he pleaded in mitigation.

Honest admission, confession of failure and repentance would have released the grace of God rather than triggering the rejection of God, and he might have continued in or (like Peter) been re-commissioned for leadership. His failure to repent meant Saul remained "in office but not in power", as Normal Lamont famously put it, for some time to come.

7. The failure to think spiritually (1 Sam 17.31-40)

Some time later Israel faced a new challenge from the Philistines in the giant form of Goliath. Saul's handling of the situation, and especially his conversations with David, is evidence of the failure to think in other than purely human, rational terms.

When David presented himself to Saul and volunteered to go and fight Goliath, Saul's response was, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him, you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth" (v.33). Quite apart from the fact that Saul, once again, shows no understanding of his people, since, as a shepherd David had been used to fighting with and killing wild beasts, more importantly he showed no understanding of his God either. It is young David who has to instruct the king of Israel in his faith: "The LORD who rescued me

from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine” (v.37).

Yet Saul persisted in his secular mode of thinking. Assenting to David going, and mouthing a pious religious formula, Saul dresses David in his own ill-fitting armour. The picture is absurd. Encased in the king’s armour, the young stripling was unable to walk, let alone fight! Israelite health and safety regulations may have recommended it as a way of keeping David alive, but it was no way to defeat an enemy. And it left God totally out of account. Saul had not learned the lesson Paul was later to teach, that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood...[but] against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” and therefore it is ‘the full armour of God’ we must put on, not the normal armour with which men and women protect themselves against an enemy (Ephesians 6.11-18).

Disciples of Christ need to blend human shrewdness (Luke 16.8) with a rigorous commitment to think according to spiritual ways of operating rather than merely human ways. Saul failed by only taking the latter into account.

8. The failure to reject jealousy (1 Sam 18.6-16)

David’s victory over Goliath led him to be the heartthrob of Israel and Saul became deeply envious of his success. When the crowds turned him into a celebrity and chanted, “Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands”, we read that “Saul was very angry: this refrain displeased him greatly” (v.7-8). The cancer of envy grew inside him, giving a foothold to an evil spirit (v.10) and numerous attempts to dispose himself of David followed.

Envy is a besetting temptation in ministry, even if it is hard to admit. We envy another pastor’s success. We covet the more successful or prosperous church in which they minister. We begrudge the opportunities they have had and the platforms on which they have preached. We are jealous of the rise of a younger generation of leaders whom seem to have it so easy when we have been ploughing away on hard soil for so long. Even the godly evangelical statesman, F B Meyer confessed to having felt jealous of the rising star of Campbell Morgan when they ministered together at the Northfield Convention one year. It’s all too human. Nonetheless, it is a failure of leadership, especially where it concerns, as it does in the case of Saul and David, the failure to

encourage the next generation to grow in their leadership and assume a role to which we should not cling on for too long.

9. The failure to demonstrate integrity (1 Sam 18.17-29)

Having promised David the hand of his oldest daughter Merab in marriage, subject to fighting yet more battles, Saul then goes back on his word and marries her off to someone else. So David ends up being offered another daughter, Michal, who 'was in love with him'. But the change of plan enables Saul to extract a higher and sinister bride price from David, that of a hundred Philistine foreskins, which was in effect a death sentence since he would be killed in the attempt to secure them. The incident perhaps reflects no more than Saul's increasingly unstable personality, but his actions were totally devoid of integrity.

Saul here represents those leaders whose word cannot be trusted, but change their minds so that their followers do not know where they stand. He represents those leaders who are unstable, perhaps for no greater reason than they have a desire to please, or that they have been influenced by the latest person to whom they spoke, rather than taking a more considered views. Above all, he represents those leaders who are manipulative and fix any situation or manage any conflict chiefly for their own advantage. Leaders who serve in the footsteps of the 'man of integrity' (Matt 22.16, Mark 12.14) must demonstrate integrity.

10. The failure to control passion (1 Sam 19.1-24)

The situation degenerates. The combination of the failure to restrain envy and the increasing influence of the evil spirit inside him meant that Saul's behaviour became increasingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable. His passions were unrestrained and undisciplined. The energy that could have been spent becoming angry about the real enemy and invested in destroying the real opposition was directed at his own family, especially his son-in-law. He was set on destroying David and ended up destroying himself.

Ironically, there was one brief interlude as Saul was bent on his destructive course. At Ramah, Saul is temporarily possessed by the Spirit of God rather than an evil spirit and channels his passion into prophesying instead of persecuting (vv.23-24). Saul, the rejected king and erstwhile priest, now became the incongruous prophet. His spirit-inspired action led him to strip

naked 'in Samuel's presence' and remain naked for twenty-four hours. It was symbolic of him stripping off his royal robes, of divesting himself of the kingship, and of God's sovereign will to replace him on the throne with David being brought into being.

By definition, leaders will be passionate, not passive people. But the very characteristic of passion that makes them leaders is also the very characteristic that puts them in danger. Passion always needs to be disciplined and channelled. A failure to do so has disqualified more than one established leader from making it to the winning tape.

It has not been my intention to engage in a character assassination of Saul. But it is often profitable to learn from the mistakes of others as well from the positive models we might choose to imitate. Saul is presented in scripture as a leader who was chosen and then subsequently rejected by God. Other kings fell into the same category, but none is reported in such detail. The focus in other cases falls on the leader's spiritual failure. Saul presents us with a more complex picture where personal and spiritual failure combines with a failure in competence, in the skills that might be expected of leaders. If we want to run as leaders to the end of the race, we might learn at the expense of the king whom God rejected.

Ministry and Technology

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A new context for ministry

Ministry is always given in a context. Urban ministry, rural ministry and estate ministry are examples of ministry contexts. We could add to that the size of church, complementary or competing styles of worship, university town or city or popular retirement area. There are more subtle contexts of ministry. Are some professions represented much more or much less in a church? Has a church been affected by various splits both within its own history or the history of other local churches? Grappling with these and other contexts is the bread and butter of pastoral ministry.