

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 7: CALM, ASSERTIVE LEADERS

Joshua 1:1-11, Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

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Many years ago when I lived in California a new pastor came into a neighboring church near the Whittier Alliance Church where I attended. Steve was a remarkable young man with tremendous enthusiasm. We used to meet together for fellowship and prayer. He had great vision for reaching the community and building up the body of Christ. He had many questions about how to be a senior pastor and how to reorganize his church. We would often talk about these.

In a very short amount of time he had his entire church mobilized to pursue a set of new programs. Almost everyone was doing something. Within a matter of a year Steve was reporting good growth, conversions to Christ, and almost a complete change in his formerly slow-moving church. It had become a sports car, and Steve was at the wheel. It would go anywhere he pointed, as he would often tell me. Amid all the good news there began to be a constant refrain from Steve about how much better he was doing than the previous pastor, and the other churches in the area. The church became very excited.

Sometime less than two years into Steve's ministry I stopped hearing glowing reports of victory. Pretty soon Steve was asking me questions about how to deal with problem people, difficult leaders, and conflict in the church. Eventually he revealed that many of the people who had once participated in high-energy ministries had chosen to be on the sidelines, and many of his signature ministries were being run by a small staff of stressed and overworked people. Growth and change slowed to a stop.

Then I discovered, as we prayed together, that people were taking sides. An annual meeting became a shouting match, with accusations of the misappropriation of funds by the pastor and other leaders. At the beginning of this conflict Steve became tentative. Soon he became defensive and verbally abusive to those who did not agree with him in every way. His assertiveness became aggressiveness. He took the tack that it was his way or the highway, and said so in a sermon. The situation deteriorated as many people stopped giving to the church. People began to leave, including long time members.

The District Superintendent was called in, and he began to hold meetings with disgruntled members. In spite of his admonishments to stop gossiping, people kept spilling their complaints all over the church. After many attempts to achieve reconciliation, people on both sides of the conflict became discouraged and left. The Superintendent strongly urged the pastor to confess his inappropriate behaviors before the congregation and seek reconciliation privately with many people. Steve could not see anything wrong with what he had done, and he chose not to act on the Superintendent's instructions. The church dwindled to forty people. Most paid staff had to be let go. The pastor's salary was cut in half. Steve ended up with only a handful of people willing to follow him, and eventually he left.

I had often wondered what the core issue was in that sad scenario because I wished I could have helped him. How could someone with so much energy and zeal end up with such a bad outcome?

THE ANXIOUS AND ASSERTIVE LEADER

Steve was an example of an anxious and assertive leader. His leadership energy did not arise primarily from inner strength but from an insecurity which impelled him to cover up what was really happening in his soul. Steve's primary battle was internal, namely, the struggle to feel competent and accepted. This is a paradigm for disaster in a leader.

There is a dramatic story of such a leader during World War II, portrayed in the 2002 HBO miniseries entitled *Band of Brothers* [content warning: this is a disturbing war movie]. A lieutenant named Sobel had command of Easy Company, a group of men made famous by their exemplary soldiering during the notorious Battle of the Bulge. Easy Company became the fittest and best trained men in their battalion under his demanding guidance. Whatever the training requirements were for the other companies, Sobel increased them. He did things like grant them a special meal, let them eat it, and then sent them to run three miles up a local Georgia hill in the heat with full stomachs.

He often shouted abusively at his men, even beyond what a normal drill sergeant would do. He would rail at a man for a bit of extra thread on a seam, a little rust on a bayonet, or trousers with wrinkles. If he saw anything out of regulation he would cancel leaves, make the men go on forced marches with no water, and run them incessantly up the three miles to the top of the local hill. The men of Easy Company became fine soldiers, but they hated their leader and only followed him because he had the power to punish them--which he often did.

Then came the opportunity for this anxious and overly-demanding leader to actually lead his men during war games. He could not read a map to save his life and he was indecisive. Sobel was so anxious to avoid looking like he was not in total command that he insisted his men follow him even when they all knew he did not know where he was going. In that way Easy Company often got annihilated by other companies during practice maneuvers.

And then Easy Company's deployment approached. The men understood what was at stake. They believed that they would all die if forced to follow Capt. Sobel on a real field of battle. After a long discussion, all of the non-commissioned officers of Easy Company marched to the Colonel's office. At the risk of court martial, they turned in their stripes and requested transfer to another company. No matter how well they had been trained by Capt. Sobel, they would not follow him.

No one wants to follow an anxious, insecure leader even if he or she seems to be effective for a time. This is one explanation for what happened to my friend, Pastor Steve.

THE LORD'S PRESENCE IS THE BASIS FOR CALM

The life of Joshua reveals a very different pattern of leadership, a leadership of a sort we love to follow. He was the leader of Israel who took command after the death of Moses with the daunting task of leading them into the promised land. The first few verses of the book of Joshua pick up the story: **"Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, 'Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to**

Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory. No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you....Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go'" (Joshua 1:1-5, 9).

Joshua was faced with an unbelievable mission by the command of God himself. He was to lead the citizen army of Israel to take over the land of Canaan which was filled with enemies, armies, and walled cities. If anyone had an existential reason to be anxious, it was Joshua. Yet he did not walk the path of Pastor Steve or Capt. Sobel. We know that, with some deviations in the mission, Joshua led Israel to accomplish the very thing the Lord commanded them to do. As a rule, he presented Israel with a calm leadership which was easy for them to follow.

How did Joshua achieve this level of calm in the middle of the most demanding mission? The basis of his calm demeanor was that he knew the Lord was with him: **"No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you..."** The basis of calm leadership is the knowledge and personal appropriation of the reality of the Lord's presence.

I am struck with the great similarity between the commission given to Joshua and Jesus' Great Commission to his church. Christ commanded folks like us to do the impossible, to make disciples of the entire world, even those people who want to kill us. How can we face such a formidable task with calm assurance? The same way Joshua did: **"And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth....and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'" (Matthew 28:18, 20b).** The power and personal presence of God in Christ is with each and every one of us as we undertake to make disciples of all nations. He is, in fact, with us whatever our hand finds to do in his will, and whatever life throws at us. Every believer in Jesus Christ already has the basis for calm rather than anxiety, no matter what our human tendencies may be.

THE LORD'S COMMAND IS THE BASIS FOR ASSERTIVENESS

But calm leadership is not enough if it is not moving forward! A calm, passive leader makes people feel relaxed but cannot take anyone anywhere. And, as Peter Drucker pointed out in his classic book, *The Effective Executive*, the whole point of a leader is to get things done. Joshua's assertiveness did not arise from an egotistical idea of himself, but from the knowledge that he was a man under command--God's command! This command was accompanied by a promise of success if a certain condition was fulfilled. The text goes on to say: **"Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success"** (Joshua 1:6-8).

This commission gave Joshua the basis for assertiveness on two levels. First, there was the mission itself, to take the land. Believers in Christ have that as well: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..."** (Matthew 28:19-20). Never let any believer get away with saying that he or she does not know what Christ wants them to do! And never let anyone succeed at asserting their personal preferences about how the local church should be run if they cannot explain how their preferences promote the mission given by Christ himself. His mission supersedes every human preference.

Second, the other area where Joshua was under the command of the Lord was obedience to the word of God. This was the primary way saints under the first covenant expressed faith in the Lord. We must realize that the Holy One of Israel had no motive to empower Israel to complete the mission of entering the promised land unless they were, in fact, holy according to his word.

So Joshua had two powerful motives to be not only calm, but assertive. He revealed those traits in the very next words of our text: **"Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, saying, 'Pass through the midst of the camp and command the people, saying, 'Prepare provisions for yourselves, for within three days you are to cross this Jordan, to go in to possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you, to possess it''"** (Joshua 1:10-11). In common parlance as used today, Joshua said: "Let's do this!" And they did. Picard: Make it so!

There is some area of your life where you need to be a leader. Effective godly leaders present themselves as calm because they know that God is with them. They are also assertive because they know that God himself has commanded them with their mission. Parents, teachers, managers, elders, deacons, trustees, nursery workers, hike leaders--name your own moment to be a leader. If you want people to follow, you must be calm and assertive, and for the right reasons.

How can you embrace those traits? Begin by practicing the presence of God. Camp on his promise: **"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."** Once you repent of your sins and believe in Christ, you can never be alone again. You never again have to face the challenges of life with only your own wisdom and power. You have the resources necessary to be a calm leader.

Secondly, absorb and adopt the specific commands of the Lord Jesus Christ as your own. Identify yourself with his mission and his methods. Let them penetrate to every part of your body, soul, mind, and spirit. When you have abandoned yourself to his commands for you, you have the basis for assertive living and leadership in the will of God.

When the time comes for you to be part of calling a pastor or appointing a leader within the church, use this twofold character set to inform your decision. How obvious can this be? And yet the church has stumbled over the matter of leadership repeatedly. The anxious and assertive leader is insecure, and will act to assuage his self-doubts rather than promote the good of the whole. The calm but passive leader will make everyone feel peaceful until they realize how ineffective he or she is to get the work done. And the worst of both worlds is to have an anxious and passive leader, who will permit every unruly element in the congregation to rise and do its maximum damage to the group--while not going anywhere!

As the men of Easy Company sat on the ground in full paratrooper gear in front of the aircraft which would drop them behind enemy lines on D-Day, their second in command, Lieutenant Winters, stood before them. He presented to them the epitome of calm, assertive leadership. There was not much left to be said at that point. He said three things with his lips and one with his behavior. First, he said: "Good luck." These words sound different when they are coming from a leader of substance! Second, he said: "God bless you." He pointed his men to the divine, the true source of their help. Third, he said: "See you at the assembly area." These last words were pregnant with meaning. He was saying: "I am your leader. Where you jump, I jump. The bullets shot at you are shot at me. Whatever we find when we land we face together."

And then he went to the first paratrooper at the front of the group, grabbed his hand, and lifted him to his feet. Then he did the same with the second, the third, and so on until he had personally hoisted every man. No man was allowed to rise on his own. It was as if Lt. Winters was saying: "I bear this load with you--all of it! The mission, the danger, and even the combat gear hanging from your overburdened body."

That's the kind of leadership we love to follow. That's the calm, assertive leadership Jesus Christ displayed to the world, as he said: "**My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work**" (Luke 2:43). It's the leadership he wants us to express in the church in the face of the fiery darts of the evil one who would just love to shoot every one of us out of the air. What is your food today?

Essential churches are built by essential leaders. There is no other way to build them. You have the personal presence and affirmative command of the Lord Jesus already. Let's get on with the mission which the Lord has given us. Let's be the leaders people love to follow.

[clip of Capt. Sobel over-disciplining his men, *Band of Brothers* DVD, Disc 1, Part 1, 0:13:34 to 0:16:15, inside ch. 2]