
29 Practical Leadership Tips for Mission & Ministry

Leadership insights and tips from
seasoned practitioners

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Character First

Eric Geiger

Order matters. This is true for massive, complex projects like launching something into space (see: launch sequence), and it is also true for small, simple things like baking. Across the board, when you get things out of order there can be devastating consequences.

When the apostle Paul challenged Timothy to reproduce himself in others, to broaden the number of leaders, and to hand ministry over to more people, he too had an order. He emphasized character over competence. He didn't diminish competence, but he started with character. Notice the order of the language in this often-quoted leadership development verse:

The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others. (2 Timothy 2:2)

The verse does not read, "Entrust to able men who will be faithful." Paul is not saying:

- Go find some great leaders and try to make them faithful.
- Make a list of high-capacity leaders and work to turn them into faithful followers.

- Find the best, most talented people and put them through a character boot camp.

To the contrary, Paul essentially says, “Entrust all the important things to the faithful, and in time, they will be able.”

- Find those whose hearts are His and coach them on their competence.
- Invest in people who love the Lord and develop their skills.
- Pour yourself into people who have devoted themselves to Him.

No doubt you have seen the devastating effects of character implosion in ministry leaders, whether prominent leaders of major ministries or individuals in smaller roles.

When the role and responsibility outpace the leader’s character, disaster is inevitable. And more people than the leader suffer. Competence is important in ministry, but character must be first in these two realms:

1) Character first in your life

While the apostle Paul was far from perfect, he was faithful. He was able to say, “Do what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9). Paul’s life was a sermon to those he served. The lives of great leaders are lessons to those they serve.

When a ministry leader falls externally, the leader has long before imploded internally. David's well chronicled fall manifested itself in adultery and murder, but the seeds for the implosion were already in his heart.

He was isolated in Jerusalem while his men were at war. Instead of being the man who "sought God through the watches of the night," he walked around on his roof looking for something else. He was filled with pride and entitlement.

Because we are prone to wander, we must repeatedly and continually return to Jesus. If we sense a drift in our affections toward Him, then we would be wise to repent, to beg Him to redirect our hearts.

If our character is suffering, in time our leadership will as well. All will be revealed. Charles Spurgeon no doubt had this in mind when he reminded leaders to first feed themselves before feeding others:

You cannot feed lambs, or sheep either, unless you are fed yourself. I think a teacher is very unwise who does not come to hear the gospel preached and get a meal for his own soul. First be fed, and then feed.

2) Character first in your team

There is a temptation to hire or recruit competence over character. Competence has the quicker return, and when deadlines are looming or balls are being dropped, the pain is often great. But a lack of character on your team has far more damaging long-term effects. A very talented person with little integrity is a hindrance to

the ministry. There is no amount of training, skill, or charisma that can sufficiently cover for a lack of integrity.

As you bring people onto your team, consider his/her:

Personal walk with the Lord: Does the person show a sense of awe and appreciation for the grace of God? Has he/she walked with the Lord consistently over time? Does he/she personally practice spiritual disciplines?

Leadership of the family: According to Scripture, if a man cannot lead his family, he cannot lead the house of God. Does he/she display a healthy marriage? Does he/she manage finances with wisdom?

Sense of responsibility: Does the person display a sense of ownership for his/her current role?

Relationships with others: How do his/her current leaders and colleagues view him/her? Do they view him/her as trustworthy and credible?

Caring about your team's character begins with the ongoing process of building and assembling the team, but it does not end there. Care for their souls. Pray for them. Remind them of the grace of God. If you sense a lapse in character, if the Holy Spirit brings something to your mind, don't bury it. Behind closed doors, have an open and honest conversation.

Entrust the ministry and the message to the faithful who will be able. Reversing the order of Paul's famous leadership development verse may provide short-term relief, but it has massive long-term implications.

3 Simple Ways to Re-Declare Vision

Eric Geiger

There has been a lot written about the importance of “casting a clear and compelling vision.” Leaders often invest a lot of time with their leadership teams crafting words, figuring out the best way to capture the direction they sense the Lord is leading the church they serve.

And leaders often invest far too little time re-declaring the vision and continually aligning actions to the vision and values they have declared.

Jim Collins spoke of this same reality in organizational leadership:

Executives spend too much time drafting, wordsmithing, and redrafting vision statements, mission statements, values statements, purpose statements, aspiration statements, and so on. They spend nowhere near enough time trying to align their organizations with the values and visions already in place.

In other words, most leaders fail at the discipline of reminding, repeating, and re-declaring. Great thinkers and leaders have reminded leaders of the importance of reminding.

Max Deprea said, “Leadership is like the third grade, it means repeating the significant things.”

C.S. Lewis said, “People need to be reminded more than instructed.”

Of constantly reminding people of the gospel, Martin Luther stated, “Most necessary is that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.”

The apostle Paul wrote to believers in Corinth, saying, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand” (1 Corinthians 15:1).

Leaders often fail to remind because they “don't want to say the same things.” They feel they need to bring something fresh, something new. This is a mistake. We all need reminding. We tend to forget. We tend to drift from what is most important. We tend to drift to activity while lacking the heart behind the activity.

Yet we can and should remind and re-emphasize in new ways. Here are three ways to re-declare the vision and values the Lord has given the team or church that you serve.

1) Involve other voices

Use new voices to declare the vision, the direction the Lord has given. By doing so, the people see that vision is not merely owned by one leader but by a team of leaders.

If one person, the same person, is the only person declaring what is important, the impression can be given that only one person stewards what is most important.

Empower team leaders to share the vision with the departments they lead. Consider sharing the mic with another leader or team-lead on what is most important in your culture.

2) Tell new stories

Find stories from among the people you serve that illustrate and emphasize what is important in the culture you lead.

For example, if you cast a vision of impacting a local school, then tell new stories about the needs of the school that you have placed before the people, share new stories of how people have embraced and are loving on the students and teachers, and tell new stories of how people are being impacted.

Weave new stories into your regular communication platforms to remind the people of the Why behind all the activity.

3) Celebrate

Plato said, “What is celebrated is cultivated.” Celebrate what the Lord is doing, even if it feels small, because the celebration will help root what is most important more deeply into the culture you are stewarding.

4 Questions Leaders Should Ask About Their Ideas

Josh Patterson

Leadership involves the innovation and execution of ideas. But sometimes great ideas aren't the best ideas for your ministry. Below are four simple questions a church leader should ask before starting a new ministry initiative.

What's the purpose?

Purpose drives practice. Everyone knows a clear purpose is helpful, but few people take the time to clearly articulate it. Sadly, the purpose for a new direction is often assumed rather than articulated.

And, in this assumption, the fog of confusion spreads. If you can't write out the purpose of your new ministry initiative in one sentence, then you are aren't ready for a new ministry initiative.

Does it complement or compete with the greater mission?

Competition has its place, but it can't be to the detriment of the greater mission. It's not unusual to discover that a new idea either competes with the greater mission or competes with another ministry initiative that already exists as a complement to the greater mission.

This is where humility and courage collide to simply say no to competing initiatives within your organization or church.

Remember, the leader is to serve in a similar fashion as a coxswain, or "boat servant," on a competitive rowing team.

The coxswain sits on the boat and gives the calls to the team. He or she ensures the team rows in concert, navigates the course efficiently and that the collective energy of the team moves in the same direction.

How will you define success?

Before you launch a new ministry, it's vital to clearly know what this ministry will look like if all goes well. Conversely, defining success in advance lets you know when you haven't achieved it.

It is helpful to use both quantitative and qualitative metrics to paint the full picture. Numbers don't tell the whole story, and stories alone can be anecdotal. Work with your team to dream about the impact of this ministry and begin to refine exactly what it is that you are working toward.

How will the team be trained?

Train towards the win. It is not enough to have a compelling purpose and clear understanding of success. In a real sense, that is the easy part of the process. Now the intentional work of training and development begins. How will this new ministry initiative work to train and develop leaders to own and execute the ministry?

Ultimately, intentional training leads to multiplication of leaders, and healthy multiplication requires training. A plan needs to be in place prior to the launch of any ministry.

These four questions do not represent the totality of the planning process, but they are vital for a healthy ministry initiative. And they need to be revisited often. Clarity around each of these questions better serves our energies and resources, and, ultimately, the people we are called to serve.

Two Things Leaders MUST Do in a Difficult Season

Eric Geiger

You will lead through a challenging and difficult season. You are a leader in your context precisely because challenging seasons will come to your organization.

We can even say that in some sense, leaders aren't really necessary if there aren't challenges and difficult seasons. The truth is leaders are both revealed and developed in times of trial.

Napoleon famously stated, "The role of a leader is to define reality and then give hope." When facing a major challenge or a difficult season, wise leaders offer both reality and hope.

To offer only hope is to fail to tell the truth or build urgency, to offer solutions without building understanding that there is a problem. To offer only truth is to demoralize a team, to burden a team with a problem with no opportunity to push forward to the future.

Leaders must continually define reality and give hope, but this is especially critical during a challenging time.

1) Define reality

In his classic work *Leadership Is an Art*, Max Depree wrote, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you.

In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor.” Depree is vividly clear: define reality, serve people with a sense of obligation, and then thank them for their service. But the first responsibility is to define reality.

In a difficult season, people need to know the reality of the brokenness. They need the full truth, for the team cannot respond to information they do not know, to a reality that is kept from them.

Understanding always precedes commitment, and if you want people to commit to overcoming the challenging reality, they need to understand what they’re up against. Though you may feel you are being nice, you really aren’t serving people well by keeping the truth from them.

2) Give hope

While people need to understand the challenges or pain of the current reality, as a leader you cannot leave them there. You must paint a hopeful picture of the future.

Rudolph Giuliani is credited for being the first to say, “Hope is not a strategy,” and he is right. Giving organizational hope is more than just promising things will be better; it also means offering a wise plan forward that’s been embraced by godly leaders in community.

As Christian leaders, we must point people ultimately to Jesus. Our hope is in Him. Jesus is better and sweeter than any failure or any win. He is better and sweeter than the pain of the season we are in.

And He is better and sweeter than the joy on the other side of the pain. As our hope is in Him, we are able to remind those whom we serve of the maturing work of trials and the glory of our ultimate future.

Hope in our maturing

John Owen reminds us that “Storms produce growth.” Not only does Jesus hold us through life’s storms, but He also matures us in the midst of them. A challenging season makes a stronger team, a more sanctified team, and a better team of leaders. The axiom, “A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor,” is true. Leaders thus remind their teams, “We will be a more developed team on the other side of this.”

Hope in our ultimate future

Moreover, we eagerly wait for the day when all these difficult seasons will be gone. We join with creation in standing on our tiptoes expectantly looking for the day when Christ returns to make everything right and new. On that day we will know full well that our trials pale in comparison to the glory being revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

When you find your leadership tested, when you find yourself in a challenging season, define reality and give hope.

4 Leadership Lessons from Nehemiah

Josh Patterson

Leadership tends to define itself better in person than on a page. In recent decades leadership has vaulted to the forefront of organizational discussion, classroom research and publishing houses across the world. Books on the topic abound.

In their work, “Classical Leadership,” Michelle Doyle and Mark Smith write, “What is leadership? It seems to be one of those qualities that you know when you see it, but is difficult to describe. There are almost as many definitions as there are commentators.”

Even so, both the professor and layperson can readily identify great leadership and great leaders. Leaders attract followers. They move them toward a common cause or vision.

People respond to leadership. But how this happens can look many ways, leaving us with a host of questions. Are leaders born? Are leaders molded by the moment? Are leadership traits universal? How does the leader’s context impact his or her methods? What is the difference between leading and managing?

There are no simple answers to these questions. But looking at the life of someone who led with excellence can help us draw a few conclusions.

Nehemiah, the great biblical leader, offers four key lessons in leadership for any believer looking for guidance.

1) Leadership Is Providential

God raised up Nehemiah to accomplish an important mission. God is the active agent leading and directing. This is evident in how He moves in the king's heart and elevates people to do his bidding.

This is seen in both the lives of Nehemiah and his contemporary, Ezra. The book of Nehemiah demonstrates the indisputable role of Providence in leadership. This is still true today.

As A.D. Clarke confirms in his biblical theology of leadership, "Leadership in the Bible is framed within the overarching context of divine sovereignty."

Leader, yield to the unseen hand guiding the way and humbly walk in such recognition.

2) Leadership is Spiritual Hard Work

Nehemiah exemplifies the interplay between prayer, planning, and hard work. These work in tandem. Andy Stanley sums this up well in his book, *Visoneering*: "This [Nehemiah] is a tale of hard work, prayer and (behind the scenes) divine intervention. Nothing out of the ordinary here." There are no shortcuts in leadership.

Admittedly, there is a grind to leadership- a continual pressing forward in planning, preparing, navigating conflict, executing and finishing. The meteoric rise of leadership studies and the attention that many leaders attract may cause some to miss this simple fact: Leadership is challenging.

Leader, be prepared to work hard at leading.

3) Leaders Use Projects to Build People

People cannot become a means to an end. Although Nehemiah faced a daunting project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, this project was secondary to the plight of the people. Stephen Dempster writes on the subtext of Nehemiah's work:

Nehemiah is regarded as the wall builder in Jerusalem, and this is the theme that resonates in the book. But his story is not only about building the physical walls of Jerusalem for physical protection, it is also a story of building spiritual walls around the people with the Word of God and thus building up the people as well.

Leader, fight to keep your priorities straight: God, people, project.

4) Leaders Persevere

Finally, as Mark Dever notes, "A godly leader keeps leading." Projects end. Tasks get accomplished. But a leader continues to lead.

Certainly Nehemiah faced adversity and conflict in the midst of building the wall, a task that required fortitude to see to completion.

When the wall was built, he continued to lead through political means as a governor. New leadership challenges emerged, but the call was the same: Remain steadfast and faithful.

Leader, persevere through the changing seasons of leadership, remembering the call to long-term faithfulness.

The book of Nehemiah concludes with a prayer regarding the leader's legacy: "Remember me, O my God, for good" (Neh. 13.31). Nehemiah's heart bled for legacy, namely, a legacy of covenant faithfulness. Godly leaders recognize their time of leadership will certainly come to an end, so they lead with a view to the generation coming behind them and work to develop new leaders. May it be so among the great leaders of our day as well.

5 Practical Administration Tips for Church Planters

John Quick

If God is calling you and your family to plant a Church, I just have one thing to say...it is going to be very hard, messy, and nothing like you thought it would be. I have the opportunity to talk with church planters all over the Globe.

Many went into it thinking that this was going to be sexy and if they preached well then they would have 100 people at their first gathering and 1,000 a year later.

However, 3 years later they actually have 50 people attending, working three jobs, taking sleeping pills as the only way to sleep, and haven't had sex with their wife in months. Wow that sounds like a fun calling to me.

First, I would encourage church planters to have their main goal of being a Church Family committed to living life on mission in order to make disciples who make disciples. Let the Spirit build Jesus' Church, He has a better resume than you.

One of the biggest topics that come's up in the Church Planting world: MONEY. Here are some practical things a church planter can do as it relates to money:

Raising Personal Support and Being Bi-Vocational

Starting out right: When planting a church you should ask the Holy Spirit if you should raise personal support or get another job to help pay the bills for the first couple years. I would recommends doing both making each 50% of your salary needs.

Raising Personal Support – If you are planting a church you most likely have family and friends; start with asking them. If you don't at least have friends then maybe you are in the wrong field. This will be a great way to get used to telling people the truthful, compelling message on why you are doing what God is calling you to do.

Do not stop raising money at just half your Salary/Benefits, anything you raise above and beyond this I would recommend that you put into saving each month for you and your church. Most people make the mistake of stopping and throwing in the towel right when they reach their 100% funded goal. Here is a great website that can help you think this through more www.gcmweb.org.

Jesus was a carpenter and maybe you should be too. You may be able to raise more than you need in personal support but I would still recommend getting a job in the city, town, or community that you are planting a church in at least for the first year or two. This will help you get a heartbeat for the people in which you are trying

to reach. Here is a great website to help you find a job:
www.craigslist.org

Proper paper work

If you are planting a church and you meet these criteria:

- the organization must be organized and operated exclusively for religious, educational, scientific, or other charitable purposes
- net earnings may not inure to the benefit of any private individual or shareholder,
- no substantial part of its activity may be attempting to influence legislation
- the organization may not intervene in political campaigns
- the organization's purposes and activities may not be illegal or violate fundamental public policy

...then you are automatically tax-exempt by the federal government.

Although the government recognizes tax-deductible donation for a church without having to file a 501c3 paperwork I would still recommend it. If you file your 501c3 paperwork your church family is guaranteed that their donation is tax deductible and your church will have extra benefits like not having to pay certain taxes and getting bulk non-profit rates on mailing items through USPS.

You will also have to file for an EIN #, there is no real way around this, as you will need this to open a bank account. Both the 501c3

and the EIN # application can be done here at www.legalzoom.com - I use this for all legal documents and its great.

Finances

If you are just starting to plant a church and do not have elders, deacons or other leaders right away I would encourage you to ask 2-3 people to help be apart of your advisory team. One of the things they would help you oversee is your church family's finance. This keeps you at a higher level of accountability and integrity in your finances, you should not be the only one looking at it and making decisions.

Once you have found a couple people to help advise you, you need to find a platform to help you keep track of your finances. Quickbooks for Churches is the most affordable, reliable software out there that can fully integrate with church bank institutions.

As a paid staff person you are also going to be racking up expenses. I know how much of a pain it can be to save all your receipts, as the IRS wants you to save the last 7 years of all things finances. I would recommend using Expensify to track all your expenses, as it generates IRS approved receipts without saving them all up in your wallet.

Once you are getting paid FT and possibly have another PT staff, building expenses, and other ministry expenses, things start adding up pretty quickly. Next thing you know you are up to your eyeballs in QuickBooks and Expensify. Once you reach this position I would encourage you to outsource this to an organization. MAG

Bookkeeping is one of the great ones out there that does bookkeeping for churches all over the USA. It would cost you 2-3 times more to hire a person with expertizes in this field rather than outsourcing to a Christian organizations for \$300 a month. <http://magbookkeeping.com>

Communication with Money, Finances and Stewardship

I would encourage you to start a practice early of at least once a month giving a financial update to your church family and your personal supporters. Also include your church family in all major financial decision, this isn't a fortune 500 company that you get to make top down decisions without asking or telling anyone.

This is a church family who is on mission together. Imagine coming home one day and letting your wife, daughter, and son know that you just bought a new house, sold all the cars, and reinvested all your money in Amway. They would probably have liked to be informed and included in these decisions. Communicate frequently and keep it simple.

Implementing these steps can help you navigate your admin and finances.

5 Mistakes All Leaders Make

Doug Paul

I recently stepped away from my position at 3DM as the Director of Content. While some of my time went to overseeing the development of content and resources, the majority of my time was spent building and leading Learning Communities designed to train, consult and equip pastors in all kinds of churches; helping them put discipleship and mission at the center of everything their communities do.

As I stepped back into local church ministry at Summit Church, my strong sense was that the Lord was asking me to take an extended time away from any kind of writing and training beyond my own local context. In fact, it's only been within the last month that I feel like God has been nudging me back to that world.

And so speaking as someone who simply leads in a local church, seeking to equip, empower and release God's people into their mission in His world, it seemed appropriate to first share some of the things I've learned in the last 18 months (which while not being the largest sample size, is still a good, sizable 'chunk' of time).

Moreover, it should come as no surprise to anyone that the best learning comes through the many, many mistakes you make. Much, if not most, of what I've learned are the mistakes we've made along the way.

#1: LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS DIFFERENT IN EVERY CONTEXT

This seems like a fairly intuitive one, but it's shocking to me the way I didn't consider this in the first 6 months I was leading at Summit. Our church is unique in that we don't have a Senior Pastor; rather, we are led by 5 elders, all of whom have the exact same amount of power in their 'vote', who lead the church. There is no 'first among equals;' everyone is exactly equal.

Moreover, while we have three campuses, we choose not to use video and instead have campus pastors and a rotating central teaching team who preach live each week. While certain leaders are more tied to a campus than another, it's set up to not be personality or celebrity driven. It's the antithesis of that.

I will easily admit that this sounds great on paper, but took a great bit of time to understand the practical realities and nuances in practice. I'll also readily admit I'm still learning how this works! But I think about how my first 6 months I simply functioned with the kind of leadership I've always been accustomed to, all the while thinking I was adequately contextualizing.

It was a good reminder that no matter how similar or different from what you're used to, there's always nuances in how leadership functions.

#2: TOO MUCH TOO FAST AND IN THE WRONG WAY

It's a common story: The new leader comes in and without doing too much listening or observing the context, they start to make all kinds of changes to achieve the vision. And while I don't think that's exactly what happened with me....a version of it certainly did.

It's funny. At this point in time, I can't tell you the number of people I've coached to make sure you take your time, understand the culture, listen a lot and then discern the way in which God is leading any changes you are making.

I did all of that....and it still wasn't close to slow enough.

When you factor in the on-the-job-learning that goes with discovering a culture that lives out interdependent leadership (see #1 above), it's a brave new world. Even as I attempted to be patient... I should have been far more patient and moved slower.

#3: IMPLICIT VS. EXPLICIT

I want a culture where it's normal to see disciples of Jesus running around whose lives look a lot like the lives of the people we read about in the New Testament. (That should be normal, not the exception).

One of the things I've always emphasized over and over is that 'Language creates Culture.' If that kind of 'normal' is going to happen, we need a language that's intentional in creating that.

One of the reasons my wife and I were really drawn to Summit in the first place was because this understanding was already at work

there. They've been very intentional with their language and it's created a very specific culture. It's fantastic.

But one of the biggest things I learned in creating a Discipling Language there is that all cultures have things that are explicitly stated as well as implicitly stated. And you can screw up quickly if you're not on the same page with those things.

One on occasion in the native discipling language we were developing, we shifted from an explicitly stated reality to an implicitly stated one and it raised all sorts of red flags. I was changing the culture in a way that I wasn't even meaning to change. And it was so subtle.

All this to say...the subtle nuances of culture matter a tremendous amount. I'm learning to constantly look for those nuances. And before this experience, I'd never really thought through IMPLICIT and EXPLICIT shifts that much.

#4: THE PILOT PROCESS IS A NECESSITY

After reading those first three, it probably sounds like the first 18 months at Summit were pretty rough. In reality, it really wasn't.

We definitely had some bumps and bruises along the way, but I could not be more excited about where we are in the process and what the process has produced. I think the process worked/is working, though we certainly could have navigated the process better.

One of the things I'm most grateful we did was utilizing a 'pilot process.' What I mean by that is that before we multiplied any new language, processes or vehicles (like Missional Communities) into the wider culture, the elders and senior staff used ourselves (and families) as guinea pigs first.

I think that's informed by some bedrock convictions I have about leadership:

- We should never ask the people God's entrusted to us to do something we aren't doing ourselves.
- Don't simply lead from a place of theory. Lead from a place of practice informed by theory.
- Leaders go first.

The idea that anyone would release a new kind of vehicle for discipleship and mission without first testing it out, experimenting with it, trying it out to see what things must shift in their culture...I just don't understand that.

Reading about something in a book is wildly different from leading it in reality.

One of the things we did right was taking a year to really try out different things before beginning to multiply it out. And even then, it's not the 'fully formed thing.' We aren't there yet. We are multiplying what we think God has confirmed for his people, in this place, in this time.

#5: LEARNING MUST BE FRESH

This is almost a PART 2 of #4. But it's a personal one. You see, I was coming off a three-year stint of primarily coaching, equipping and training pastors who were on the front edges of pioneering ministry. I loved it. I was good at it. We saw a lot of fruit from it.

But other than the local Missional Community that Elizabeth and I led, we weren't able to be terribly involved in our local context. There just wasn't time.

We weren't able to pioneer and innovate and try new things in practice to continue our own learning. Sure, we could wax and wane philosophical on new innovations in theory, but in many ways, we were teaching on what had already been learned.

This isn't to knock theory or theorists. But to say when it comes to training for discipleship and mission, it could not be more important that we try new things in real life.

Perhaps what I've enjoyed most from the last 18 months is that the process of learning in real time never stops. I love that we are pioneering new things here at Summit that have never been done before. I love that we have made mistakes because it means we are risking something worth going after and mistakes are part of the process. I love that over the next few years we will be trying out and experimenting with things that we are learning from the church in India to see what things translate here.

I love that we are trying to understand what it means to be faithful with the people God has entrusted to us, but with the same universal call we all share: To make disciples who make disciples.

4 Steps To Making Great Decisions Every Time

Tyler David

When making decisions, there are situations in life where morality is not enough and we need wisdom.

Wisdom is not a teaching, but rather a person named Jesus. When God calls everyone to pursue wisdom, it's a call to know Him through the Lord Jesus. He is the wisdom of God.

How are you wise in making decisions? When you have multiple options in front of you, how do you determine which is the best choice? How do you not make a bad choice?

For those of us who love Jesus we want to know how to make a choice that honors God.

We could not be in more desperate need for wisdom in decision making than now, both as a society and as a church. We're in an unprecedented time where we have more options than ever. When you look at anything in our lives, there are multiple choices.

At the grocery store, every single product has thousands of variations. I feel this every time I buy deodorant. There are thirty different brands with different features, scents, and incredible technology. I don't know what the best choice is. It can be debilitating sometimes.

With all these options, how do you know what the best choice is?

In some ways, it's a blessing. But some psychologists are finding that for all the options we have and the promises that having more choices make you happier, this isn't the case. Actually, the more options you have, the less happy you are in making a decision. There was a study done in 2000 where they saw the paralyzing effects of having too many options.

“In an experiment examining the effects of choice on happiness, Iyengar and Lepper randomized individuals to either a group in which they could choose from 30 types of chocolate or a group in which they could choose from six types of chocolate. While subjects initially reported liking having the choice of 30 chocolates, they ended up being more dissatisfied and regretful of the choices they made than those who only had the choice of six.” –Frederick Muench, Ph. D

One group got thirty options of chocolates while the other group only got six. At first the group with thirty options thought it was awesome. But when they were asked which they liked best, they didn't know. There were too many. For them, having all those options made it harder to choose. They were less happy in making a decision than those who only had to choose from six.

It was counter-intuitive.

The more choices you have the more difficult it is to know you're making the best choice. Am I missing out on something? Did I remember that rightly? Is that really the best option? You make a choice, but you're dissatisfied and regretful.

1. We get paralyzed because we think there's a "godliest" option

For us as the church, we are also paralyzed to make decisions sometimes. The reasons we're paralyzed are different than those for the world around us.

We're paralyzed to make decisions because we have this prevalent assumption that in the gray areas of life with multiple options in front of us there's a "godliest" option.

There are three choices in front of you and though none of them are sin, you have the assumption one of them will make God most happy with you. If we don't pick that one God won't be as happy with us as He could be.

2. We get paralyzed because we put too much pressure on ourselves

We're also paralyzed because we put way too much pressure on our decisions. We begin to think our decisions will define the rest of our lives. Everything you're hoping to do depends on this one decision.

3. We get paralyzed because we're waiting for a sign from God

Lastly, we're paralyzed in our decisions because we're waiting for a sign from God. We have a decision to make from many options which none are sin. We think how other people have said God told them to do something so we just wait for Him to tell us what to do.

You begin to overanalyze every intuition, every conversation, and every gust of wind. Every upset stomach becomes, "Could that be God or just the bad burrito?"

We're so paralyzed we don't know how to make a wise decision. We don't have a good process to filter through all the different data points that go into making a wise decision. What we need is a process with steps to put things through to help us make better decisions, especially in those areas of your life where God has not spoken directly to you through His word.

I'm going to give you a four-step process to make wise decisions. I didn't just make these up. They're from the Book of Proverbs. I want us to pursue wisdom practically and follow Proverbs 3:5-6.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)

This process is meant to help us trust the Lord and His Word, not ourselves.

Here's the four-step process to making a wise decision:

1. Believe God's Word.
2. Listen to Godly counsel.
3. Do what you want.
4. Ask for faith.

Before I get into them I want to emphasize two things. First, the order of this process is vital. If you skip the order it won't be as effective. In fact, it could be very unhelpful. Secondly, this can't guarantee always making a wise decision.

You can go through this whole process and still find yourself making a terrible choice. This process does is like bumpers on a bowling lane. It doesn't guarantee a strike, but it keeps you from falling into the gutter.

Step 1: BELIEVE GOD'S WORD

We start with His Word because all wisdom starts with God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:7 (ESV)

Wisdom starts with a proper relationship and knowing of God. This is where you take time to consider who God is, what has He said in His word, what has He said about Himself, about you, the circumstance, and our relationships, and His expectations on us. You start with the Bible because if it speaks to something, it is the truest data you could have.

In decision-making we tend to start with things we don't know and work through to the things we do know. That's not helpful. The best way to do it is to start with the things you do know and then work toward the things you don't. What we know in the Word is that it's always true; it's breathed out by an infinite eternal God. It's going to be true to whatever it speaks to.

First, you have to ask if what you're considering is sin? Does God's Word forbid you to do the thing you're thinking about doing? If the answer is yes, then this process is over. This process is not to help you to think through whether should you sin or not. It's not meant to help you justify thinking or feeling or acting contrary to God's Word.

If God says it's sin, our response is to trust Him. We are to say, "God, you alone know where life is and you're leading me towards life through your Word. I'm going to trust you."

God has set clear standards in the Bible. This is not a process to think through how far is too far with your boyfriend or girlfriend. That isn't a wisdom issue. This isn't a process to think through whether you should forgive someone or not.

God commands His people to forgive as you have been forgiven. This isn't a process to consider if you should give anything away. The Bible says to be generous, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. That's a command. The Bible says repent and believe the gospel. This isn't a process to determine if that's really for you.

If it's not sin, then there are three truths that are narratives of the scriptures that can help you think through how you believe in God's Word in particular.

To believe in God's Word for decision-making in the gray areas of life, you go to God's gospel, God's sovereignty, and God's mission. These three truths help you remember who you are. We don't like things that don't tell us immediately what to do, but working through these help you see things more clearly and in practical ways.

GOD'S GOSPEL

Let us never be a people who assume we totally believe the gospel.

God made the world to work in perfect harmony for us to know Him in joy forever and we chose His stuff over Him. We lost everything because of those decisions. We lost relationships with one another and now they're fractured and torn. We lost God and had no way back to knowing Him. The only thing we had to look forward to was His wrath for our sin.

But then God sent Jesus to come after us. Jesus came and lived the life we should have lived. Think about all the places you failed and remember that Jesus was perfect in them. Then He went to the cross and died the death we should have died. Then He rose from the dead as a guarantee that if you trust in Him, His death counts as your death.

Remember this gospel before you make any decision. It tells you Jesus has secured all the benefits and blessings of God, not you. It's secured by His work, not our work. Remember this because it reminds you that the things that are most true about you can never be taken away regardless of the decisions you make. That's what the gospel says.

Through the gospel God has given you an identity, a hope, and a joy that no unwise decision can take away. He's made you a child of God. A citizen of heaven. One loved by God. Those can never be taken from you. You can't add to them either, no matter how wise your decisions are.

This takes pressure off of your decision. Now your decision doesn't determine who you'll be and the joy you'll have. Sometimes we think our choices are going to determine who we are and the joy we'll have in the future, which puts a lot of pressure on us to make the right decision. All that pressure is going to make it hard to think rationally. There's too much at stake. You can't think clearly. But the gospel removes that pressure, so you can think through your situation clearly.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Over all of our decisions is a God who is working all things for our good. He is a God who is moving all things according to His plan and purpose. He is in complete control over both your wise and unwise decisions.

Now, the truth of God's sovereignty does not justify unwise decisions. You can't think God is going to take care of you so you can do whatever you want. You are still responsible for your actions. Here at the Austin Stone we like to say, "God's kids are going to learn one way or another, whether through discipline or wisdom, but they'll learn." You can make unwise decisions, but you may experience discipline for them.

Just like the gospel does, God's sovereignty takes pressure off your shoulders. Your decisions don't dictate what ultimately happens in your life.

GOD'S MISSION

I've had so many conversations over God's gospel and sovereignty, but I rarely hear anyone consider God's mission when making a decision.

When Jesus rose from the dead, before He ascended into heaven, He got His disciples together and said, "Hey, I'm leaving you here. Take the gospel to the ends of the earth." In Matthew, Luke, John, and the beginning of Acts, they all emphasize the same thing. Jesus told His

disciples to take His gospel to every type of person and people all over the planet.

So when you're thinking about the decision to make, you have to consider how it affects your ability to make disciples of Jesus. It's a command from Jesus; we have to consider it. Every relationship, every job, and every opportunity in your life has to be filtered through the question of how you can make more disciples of Jesus through this opportunity?

Your job matters to God. Marriage, your kids, and your friendships, they all matter to Him. They're not just cogs in a machine; you have to know the reason for them being in your life is for the gospel to go deeper into the hearts of believers and preached to non-believers so they will come to know Christ. That is why you have all these opportunities and relationships.

Believing in God's Word is the first step in making wise decisions. It's not enough just to know these things. You have to believe them. If you have anxiety, I will put money on you not believing one of these truths, you're probably not believing God is in control. So take time to believe God's word. If you don't pursue Him, you'll have a very difficult time getting the wisdom you need.

Step 2: LISTEN TO GODLY COUNSEL

One of the greatest gifts God has given His people is His people. So often we neglect or ignore the collective wisdom God has given in this room.

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. Proverbs 11:14 (ESV)

When people speak into your life and decisions, there is safety.

Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment. 2 A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. Proverbs 18:1-2 (ESV)

When you isolate yourself and don't let people speak into your life, you break out against all sound judgment to your own harm.

God distributes wisdom to His people in such a way that it typically comes through consulting other Christians. Whatever decision you have, you need to bring it before others who know and love Jesus. I'm emphasizing Christians, not because non-believers can't give good counsel, but you want to hear from somebody who prizes Jesus over everything.

So when you think about godly counsel, there are three different spheres of people to think about:

1) Family and those around you most

These people have the most knowledge about you. They know you the best. They can tell you an honest perspective of yourself and let you know how your personality and tendencies are affecting your decision-making.

2) People in the church at large who have demonstrated wisdom in the area you're struggling with.

Go to people who have handled what you're dealing with in a wise way. We have people in our lives that we love and want to bring our decisions before them, but sometimes those people have the least amount of wisdom in the area you're struggling in.

Ask somebody else, there are people in this church that have walked through the season you're in that you can benefit from. Seek them out. Ask around for someone who has been wise in parenting, investment, dating, career. Benefit from the larger church.

3) Seek out your pastors and elders

Every pastor and elder here has been placed over this church to serve you. We love getting to be your pastors. It's a privilege that you would entrust your souls to us and listen to the teachings of God from us. Don't ever think you can't reach out to us.

You don't need to go through all three spheres with every decision. Some decisions are easy; you can go to your immediate community and figure it out. But the bigger the decision and the more life changing it is, the more you probably need to go through all three spheres of people.

If you are going to change jobs and move your family across the country, you need to go through all three spheres. If you're going to

marry someone and you're unsure about it, go through all three spheres. You have nothing to lose.

If you really want wisdom, you need to listen most carefully when the people in these spheres disagree with you. Listen when people push back on what you want to do. Listen when people give you truth that's hard for you to hear. Godly counsel is useless if you only want to hear people agree with you.

This is one of the things that as a generation we struggle with, listening to counsel when it hurts and people push back on us. People can be wrong in their pushing back and not be considering something or have their own agenda. But if someone says something you don't agree with, don't dismiss it. Take it to somebody else and ask him or her what they think about it.

The people who don't get wisdom in this process are those who refuse to take advice that goes contrary to their own opinion.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. Proverbs 12:15 (ESV)

Step 3: DO WHAT YOU WANT

Now, I know this feels incredibly unspiritual. If you haven't done the first two steps it is unspiritual. But if you go to God's Word and His people then the question becomes what do you want to do? You want to take that job? Do you want to move? Do you want to marry that person? Do you want to invest there?

If the answer is yes, then do it. If the answer is no, then don't do it. It really can be that simple to follow Jesus in the gray areas of life.

You can make a wise decision without a vision or sign from God. So many of us don't want to make a decision until God tells us exactly what to do.

You can go to God's Word and people and still be completely paralyzed in making a decision, because you're waiting for some mystical moment when God whispers in your ear what to do. We sit there waiting and waiting for that and some of us never actually make a decision, because we think it's not godly.

You may have times in your life where God makes it abundantly clear which direction you need to go and if you don't you're not following Jesus.

Becoming a pastor was this circumstance for me. If I didn't, I knew I wouldn't be following Jesus. But that was six years ago and I haven't had a moment like that since. Moments like this happen, but it's not the rule. It's the exception.

The normal way God leads His people is as we pursue wisdom. The whole concept of wisdom in the Scriptures is that there are normal and ordinary ways God leads His people. It's unhelpful if you think God will show up in some powerful vision every time you need to make a decision.

You have the freedom in Christ to do what you want. Once you've brought your decision under the authority of His word and people, do what you want to do.

Once you make a decision, you have to know this means you will miss out on something else. We all have FOMO, the fear of missing out. If you go one direction, you're necessarily not going other directions. You have to be okay with that. You're only going to experience so many things. You can't experience everything in this life.

But that doesn't diminish the choices you make. The quicker you can accept this, the more confident you'll be in going a particular direction. Don't let fear of missing out lead you to do nothing. You have to make a decision. Go with it and see what happens.

Step 4: ASK FOR FAITH

You've made your decision. You're going in a particular direction. Now you need faith to trust God, because you have no idea what's going to happen. You can be the wisest person on the planet; you still don't know the future. You can look at trajectories and trends, but no matter how confident someone may be, you don't know what God is going to bring.

What you and I need is faith to trust Him, His decisions, and what He decides to bring in to our life.

The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. Proverbs 16:1 (ESV)

He is directing our life.

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.
Proverbs 16:9 (ESV)

The sobering truth is that you can make only wise decisions and still find yourself in dire circumstances. Don't think wise decisions will bring only blessing. You can make only wise decisions and still wind up in suffering and have all your greatest fears come true. You don't need to look any further than to the King of the universe, Jesus Himself to know this.

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. Matthew 12:42 (ESV)

Solomon wrote Proverbs. The queen of the South came from Ethiopia, traveling great distances to hear Solomon's wisdom. But Jesus said something greater than Solomon was here; He was saying He had wisdom that Solomon knew nothing about. He knows more than the Proverbs. He is the wisdom of God. He never made one unwise choice, but He still ended up on the cross.

We need faith to trust Him no matter what He brings. He will bring us into circumstances we never wanted to be in or experience. We get it when we make unwise decisions, but it's harder when you make a wise decision and things still go bad. It's in these moments where we have to ask God for faith.

“God is too good to be unkind. He is too wise to be confused. If I cannot trace His hand, I can always trust His heart.” – Charles Spurgeon

When you don't understand what is happening and you can't see God's hand that is when you need faith to trust Him.

Pursue God and Wisdom

When we make decisions, we believe in God's Word, listen to godly counsel, do what we want, and then ask for faith. We go through this process so we can make the wisest decisions we can. But this process is not our God. Our God is in the heavens and He does what He pleases.

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord. 31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord. Proverbs 21:30-31 (ESV)

Our job is to get the horse ready for battle and make the best decision you can, but you have to know whatever happens on that field, God is over it. That's the best news in the world, because He is the God who sent His Son to die for us, raised Him from the dead for us, who now reigns for us and is promised to return for us.

We can make wise decisions, but God is better than anything we can get out of those decisions. He is leading us as we pursue this wisdom. May He make us a wise people, but may He makes us a people who want for Him more than anything else.

Contributors

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John Quick is a serial entrepreneur having started up and scaled 5 businesses most recently moving from brick and mortar to online businesses. His passion however lies with Jesus, his family and living on mission in the everyday life. He has been the Executive Director of Soma a Family of Churches and now serves the local Church as a non paid Leader.

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Josh Patterson serves as the Lead Pastor of Ministry Leadership at The Village Church located in Flower Mound, TX. The church has witnessed a tremendous growth since December 2002; growing from 160 to averaging over 10,000 adults across four campuses during weekend worship services. He serves on the elder

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