

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY LEADER

Not too long ago I visited a large church to meet with the staff. The objective was to give the pastor some feedback and recommendations concerning the staff strengths and weaknesses. What I found was somewhat surprising, but all too typical.

After profiling the staff and making some public presentations, I began to meet one-on-one, first with the pastor and then with the staff. I uncovered a lot of mistrust, anger, and fear. Although the church had every appearance of success – large facilities, multiple services, multifaceted programs – there was a lot of dissatisfaction and even dissension in their midst.

I made my report to the pastor after two days and his response was one of anger. He said, “There aren’t any problems here, especially with me or my leadership style. The problem is the staff. They are lazy. I am giving them names of people and they aren’t following up to build this church. The answer is not understanding different personalities and styles. The answer is that I should fire every one of them.”

I was paid for my time (a check commensurate with what the pastor thought of my services) and politely thanked for the visit. What happened as I went to my car, however, was revealing.

Many of the staff thanked me for coming as I departed. One man said, “You’re the only one who has ever spoken honestly to him [the pastor]. He can be so mean and the church is being run by a few of his favorites.”

Another commented, “We need what you’ve done. We’re going to do all that we can to get you back here as soon as possible!” One more said, “This is the first time I can remember open and honest communication taking place among the staff.” But I left, knowing I would never be invited back to that church.

I read this startling comment on the state of the church in the May 2002 issue of *Charisma* magazine:

“Hundreds of thousands of charismatics have been so offended by leaders they have either stopped going to church or attend middle-of-the-road Protestant churches where the leadership isn’t weird, even if there is no life.”

The writer did not quote his source for the numbers, but my experience would back up his statement. Yet these churches continue to limp along and those left behind are sometimes so enamored with the personality of the pastor that they are easily reduced to mere spectators in the weekly church performance.

My life's work and passion is to help people find their life's purpose. If people are to find their purpose, they will need leaders who know how to focus on the people and not the leaders. If people are to fulfill their purpose, they will need leaders who take seriously the job description for the ministries of the apostle, prophet, evangelist, teacher and pastor:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13 emphasis added).

I want to help leaders understand how destructive an angry, heavy-handed style can be to both themselves and the people they lead. I want people who are experiencing this form of abuse to realize that this is not God's endorsed style of leadership. I want those who are called but not yet in leadership positions to formulate a more gentle, Christ-like leadership philosophy.

This problem, however, isn't restricted to the Church. The recent Enron scandal and collapse in the United States showed that authoritarian leadership is alive and well in the corporate world. for the sake of this discussion, however, we will limit our focus to the Church, knowing that there are lessons to be learned by all of us who are leaders in any situation, both in and out of the Church.

In the context of the church, you often find one strong man or woman, usually the founder or related to the founder, who has built the church through a mix of gifts and a personality. This leader often employs an authoritarian leadership style that is reminiscent of Moses or the Old Testament prophets. And that is the problem: because this style is depicted in the Bible, it is assumed that this particular style is correct or godly. It is not.

The problem is that this style may be useful to build the church to a certain size, but it isn't effective in managing the church once it tries to grow beyond that size. What's more, that style tends to "chew up" people who are trying to serve the vision of the leader.

I have found that the key characteristic of this leadership style is anger, and thus I have entitled this article, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Leader*. You may recognize that the title is a variation of Jonathan Edward's famous 18th-century sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. I have found a lot of anger among church leaders in general. Their anger has injured many, whose life purpose, gifts and experience have been lost or severely hampered as they try to serve the Church.

The Bible is full of examples of authoritarian leaders and in each case, anger characterized their leadership style and relationships with their management teams, followers, and associates. Let's quickly look at a few of these leaders:

1. **Moses** – Moses was a product of his age and authoritarianism was the rule of the day. While Moses was meek and a great leader, it is interesting that his anger prevented him from entering the Promised Land, the goal of his leadership. His anger caused him to misrepresent the Lord when he was dealing with the people. After the Lord had told him to speak to the rock to bring forth water, we read in Numbers 20:11, "Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank." God honored Moses' leadership by providing water, but Moses was not permitted to enter the Land. His problem: anger.
2. **King Saul** – As Saul got older, his anger became more pronounced.. His trusted number two man, David, had great success in battle and the people honored him for his achievements. Saul did not share in the people's joy. "Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. 'They have credited David with tens of thousands,' he thought, 'but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?' And from that time Saul kept a jealous eye on David" (1 Samuel 18:8-9). History tells us that Saul tried to assassinate David on three occasions and spent much of his latter reign pursuing David in order to eliminate his rival to the throne.

3. **Herod the Great** – Herod ruled during the time of Jesus’ birth. History tells us that he arranged to have family members and rivals to the throne murdered, and then spent his life mourning them. When the Magi who came to visit Jesus did not follow his instructions, “he [Herod] was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (Matthew 2:16).
4. **Jesus’ disciples James and John**– During one trip, the Samaritans prevented Jesus and His disciples from passing through their territory. “When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?’ But Jesus turned and rebuked them” (Luke 9:54-55). Jesus wasn’t impressed with the men’s appeal to what I call an Old Testament prophetic syndrome. Some leaders feel obligated to follow a stern style since they believe it is how God wants them to be. Jesus rebuked His followers then for their anger and revenge; I think He would do the same today.
5. **The Sanhedrin and the High Priest** – These Jewish religious leaders enjoyed their position of authority and they were angered when anyone challenged them. That is one of the reasons why they killed Jesus. They were jealous of his popularity and angry that the people wanted to follow him. This anger is also seen in the death of Stephen, the first martyr. “When they [the Sanhedrin] heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. . . . At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.” (Acts 7:54,57).

You can see from these leaders that anger was their trademark. Their anger fueled jealousy, fear, intimidation, and ruthless tactics. Authoritarian leaders have little patience for those who do not respond quickly to their demands. They see themselves as owners and not stewards and take most dissent as a personal affront that requires swift retaliation, lest the dissension spread like a virus and their vulnerability be exposed.

The problem, of course, is that most followers are imperfect. It is just a matter of time before those imperfect followers stir up the wrath of the imperfect, authoritarian leader, thus the title for this article—*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Leader*.

I would like to examine one more biblical character and that is Elisha, the great Old Testament prophet. He raised the dead, performed some unusual miracles (like causing a metal axe head to float on water), and delivered the word of the Lord to God's people. But it was hard to work with Elisha because he had a temper. Historically, his temper has been excused, overlooked, and even justified because he was a "prophet of the Lord." It is commonly assumed that the deaths he caused were the will of God in response to the sins of those who died.

I want to challenge the assumption that it was God's will for those people to die for just a moment. What if Elisha's anger, coupled with his true prophetic power, somehow released a curse on the people that he was supposed to bless? What if the Bible, by reporting Elisha's actions, wasn't endorsing them but simply reporting them as historical facts? Let's look at the three examples to which I am referring.

1. **2 Kings 2:24-25** -- Forty-two youths were mauled because they mocked the prophet of God. Was that God's will or did Elisha's anger unleash a harsh sentence on some irresponsible youth?
2. **2 Kings 5:23-27** -- Gehazi was wrong to pursue Naaman and take a contribution that his master had already rejected. But was the sentence of his folly a lifetime of leprosy for him and his family?
3. **2 Kings 6:32-7:2** -- On the one hand, the king had sent a group to kill Elisha and he barred the door with no punishment for the king. On the other hand, the officer asked how such a seemingly impossible prediction of immediate, bountiful supplies could be possible and he paid with his life. When I ask prophets why this officer deserved death, some tell me that he died due to his lack of faith in the prophet's word. Is unbelief a worse crime than murder? Why was the king spared and the officer sentenced to death? I think there is a possibility it was Elisha's anger that was the cause. I see a pattern of anger in Elisha's life that made it difficult to be around him when he was challenged or questioned. Do you

see the same thing? Or do you consider this the Old Testament prophetic syndrome mentioned earlier?

As a leader [and a strong one, I've been told], I've had to deal with, and am *still* learning to deal with anger. I have reflected again and again on the words of James, who wrote, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). He didn't say never to be angry; he cautioned that anger should not be immediate. I'm not saying that a leader should never be angry; I am suggesting that anger should not be a predominant emotion in anyone's leadership style, especially someone who is committed to be a servant-leader.

I can't change anyone's leadership style. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. I can, however, allow the Spirit to change *my* style, and that involves dealing with my own anger. I want the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – to be a central part of my leadership style. I want to be a good listener and learn to talk a lot less.

Perhaps you have suffered firsthand, as a sinner, in the hands of an angry leader. I encourage you to forgive and to allow those lessons to impact your own leadership style. You have a choice to duplicate that anger in your own style or to eliminate it from your leadership repertoire. I trust that you will choose the latter and become a leader who is relatively free from anger as you lead God's people.

Perhaps you are a leader who was or is angry. People have felt the sting of your anger and perhaps they were wrong in what they did—but that doesn't justify your anger. You must repent and ask their forgiveness. You need a new heart to lead or else your anger will cost you the Promised Land like it did Moses.

To help you be the leader God wants you to be, I direct you to three simple principles found in Peter's first epistle:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3).

How can you avoid the angry leader mentality? These verses give three helpful tips for any leader who wants to be more effective. First of all, lead willingly. Some

leaders are angry with the people because they are angry with God. Second, lead without focusing on money. Third, lead as a servant, not as an overlord.

It's a new day that requires a more open leadership style in the Church and society in general. I trust that the Church will respond to this need by leading the way in developing new leadership models. I for one don't want to be an angry leader. How about you?