

# Choosing Wise Leaders

Among the most common buzzwords associated with leadership in the church today are “passion,” and “vision.” But another characteristic of quality leadership that is a non-negotiable, one that we neglect at our own peril, is wisdom.

A leader can have passion enough to make listeners almost swoon and can pass on a contagious zeal, but if people are not moved into paths carefully defined by wisdom, then the result may be dramatic movement, without anybody really going anywhere.

So also, a leader may cast a great vision, imparting images of what may be, and even a new way of seeing, but if the vision is not defined and focused by wisdom, then the leader may be leading people toward what merely could be, rather than what should be.

## WHY WISDOM MATTERS

In the best of circumstances leaders let the “wisdom from above” point their eyes in the right direction to gain vision, and to keep their passion pushing at the proper pace.

Why then is it that in discussions about leadership, wisdom gets relatively little attention? Let’s face it, wisdom is not one of our flashier words. It conjures up pictures of owls—up high and aloof, mysterious, and oh-so stationary. We think of wisdom as the special property of the elderly and wizened. And to these misconceptions we add this: we treat wisdom as some kind of treasury stored up in a few people’s souls that ordinary people draw on when it’s really needed. In this view wisdom is the exception rather than the rule. It is the belief that there are leaders, and then there are really wise leaders, the kind every church should have in reserve—when they’re really needed.

But Scripture does not allow us to ghettoize the wise, nor to cast wisdom itself as a rare gem. Wisdom is God’s normal gift for ordinary times, and it is at the core of good leadership.

For years now, whenever our church’s council of elders sets about the task of selecting new elders, I’ve given my one standard plea: please, oh please, find candidates who are wise. The discussions about whether John Smith would be a good elder easily gravitate toward the standard questions: is he a godly person? what is his reputation? are his gifts a good match for the needs of this assignment? But if we can use all these typical, appropriate filters, and also ask: does this person have wisdom?, then we will end up with the kind of leaders who will have a long-lasting and deep influence in the church. Zeal adds spark, and devotion adds shine, but wisdom in leadership yields substance and stability.

The most responsible leaders will cherish wisdom, as was the case with Joshua who couldn’t possibly have done what he needed to do without the “spirit of wisdom” that rested on him. Solomon’s wisest word was his request for wisdom in order to lead: “Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people.” In Proverbs 8 wisdom has a voice of its own: not a whisper or a secret, but a shout and a call. “To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind. You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish, gain understanding. Listen,

for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right” (8:4-6). In Proverbs, to be wise is to be discerning, humble, prudent, fair, and right. What a blessing when we find those things in ourselves or in the leaders we work with: discernment with which to see the differences between major and minor issues; humility so that we don’t make ourselves the issue; prudence, which not only judges what is right, but predicts different contingencies; fairness and rightness which causes others to trust and to want to follow.

Human nature does not naturally submit to wisdom. As Abba Eban, the Israeli politician said: “History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.”<sup>17</sup> Have you ever seen that in the church? We apply every other test to a challenging decision, and then the wise person in the room shows that discernment, humility, prudence, fairness, and rightness point in a clear direction. It may not be the easiest course, or the fanciest, but it is the best. James speaks of the “wisdom from above” as the antithesis of envy and selfish ambition which can only produce “disorder and every evil practice” (3:17). Wisdom from heaven is...

“first of all pure” (wise people have godly motives)

“then peace-loving” (wise people value the Whole Church; they are disturbed by conflict)

“considerate” (wise people are emotionally intelligent, and care about others)

“submissive” (wise people consider others better than themselves)

“full of mercy and good fruit” (wise people do real acts of mercy)

“impartial” (wise people give a fair hearing to all sides)

“and sincere” (wise people are honest in what they say and how they act)

To be wise, in other words, is more than being smart. You can be the most intelligent person in the world and be a fool. Wisdom means to be good, and in so doing, to be right. When leaders make wise decisions the people who have their eyes open will nod their heads in knowing assent because they see behind the decisions attitudes of generosity, selflessness, fairness, and rightness. Wisdom gives people reason to trust.

The question of the day is, how do we find wise leaders? It would be a simple thing if one only needed to look for white hair. But age alone does not impart wisdom (remember the aphorism, sadly, often true: “older, but no wiser”), and the church needs younger leaders working side by side with the seasoned ones.