

There's an interesting movie about politics and elections from the early 1970s, a movie starring the popular heartthrob-actor Robert Redford. The name of the movie is *The Candidate*. In a couple of hours, this film winds its way to a conclusion that always plagues every free society and is relevant to every business, nonprofit, and church. But we're getting ahead of ourselves—here's a sketch of the plot.

The movie was made and is set in the 1970s. The back story is that no prominent Democrat will run for the U.S. Senate in California against the current incumbent Senator, who is considered a shoo-in to win reelection. But a smooth political operative convinces the Redford character to run for office. Redford plays the idealistic and highly personable son of a popular former Governor. So, Redford agrees to run in this unwinnable race to try to get his ideals and ideas communicated to the public.

But it gets complicated from there. Feeling pressure to gain traction with voters, Redford waters down the messaging of his ideals and then gets within striking distance in the polls. Then the special-interest labor union makes a move. Redford tells the union he doesn't want their support—it's apparently against his pure values—but they endorse him anyway. So what does Redford really stand for now? Well, in two words, that's become very murky. Nevertheless, Redford wins the election. And amidst the robust celebration that election day, Redford pulls his campaign manager aside and says, "What do we do now?" That's right, and that was the ending to the movie: "What do we do now?"

You see, it became more important for Redford to win office to be a perceived leader than to be a steward of what he was originally committed to. If Redford had actually been elected to deliver on his ideals, then he wouldn't have asked the question. So, will he be dishonest and pursue his ideals that couldn't get him elected or will he alter what he started out to be steward for?

This is an age-old problem, as old as the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Having already been appointed steward over the entirety of creation except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation "be like God," you know, *to be in charge of it all*. Of course there were consequences to their acting on that...bluntly, that "you shall surely die." You see, God is very serious about our precise focus on exactly what we are appointed to steward—nothing more and nothing less!

Remember in 1 Samuel 8 when the Israelites wanted a human king "like all the nations?" When Samuel prayed to the Lord about it, the Lord answered: "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." See, the Israelites wanted a human leader-king to replace God as their leader-king. Of course, the scary lesson for Christians from that story is that God let the Israelites fulfill their wrong-headed leadership aspirations... and we Christians have the free will to do just that, too!

Then, as ultimately revealed in the broad sweep of the Old Testament narrative, God still didn't release the Israelites from their stewardship responsibilities. And, of course, they often fell far short of those stewardship responsibilities, at least partly because they had chosen faulty human leadership in their human kings. So, in due time—in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah—God sent a host of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah to remind both kingdoms of their stewardship responsibilities and also their failure to fulfill those responsibilities. And, of course, God allowed both Israel and Judah to fall as a fatal consequence to a multitude of stewardship failures.

Yes, *stewardship failures!* Is that just an Old Testament problem? Of course it's not, you know that—it's a human problem! You might rightly say, look at huge numbers of politicians in America—swearing oaths to uphold the U.S. Constitution and then shredding that Constitution by their daily actions...or, often more importantly, their daily *inactions*. Like Redford's character in *The Candidate*, leaders often appear to covet being perceived as important famous leaders more than fulfilling the core stewardship

they have sworn to fulfill. So, in considering Redford's words, "What do we do now?"—the correct answer is foundationally clear: honor freedom and limit government in line with the Constitution!

*Yes, the key here is laser-like focus on legitimate stewardship over perceived leadership.* It's tempting to think that followers of Jesus don't prioritize their perceived leadership over stewardship. But sadly, many Christians fall short by doing that. And that may well be true even when they are working to fulfill roles serving God. The Apostle Paul knew this was a real temptation: that tempting of the siren call of being perceived a leader over that of vigilant stewardship of the legitimate priorities of officeholding.

How do we know this? Because of what Paul wrote to Timothy in his pastoral role in the early church. Here's what Paul wrote: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." (2 Timothy 4:1-5 ESV)

Hey, did you get that? "...be ready in season and out of season...for the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth." You know, you have seen it yourself, they will want unsound *leaders* to accumulate, not *stewards* of the Word!

What's very intriguing for us here is the *out of season* language that Paul uses. Of course, *out of season* would certainly mean that Timothy would not be perceived as a leader during that season. Nevertheless, Paul teaches and exhorts Timothy to be a steward of the Word, regardless of the lack of perceived leadership stature that results. Paul was warning Timothy to never fall into the trap of pursuing ego-centric leadership that is not directly serving core stewardship. That's simple. But it's not always easy!

All this should bring us remembrance of a profound event in the Old Testament. Moses left Aaron in charge while Moses went to get the tablets from God. The people wanted to worship the golden calf, and Aaron, who was clearly focused on being their leader, went right along with that. When Moses returned, he was angry. But *why* was Moses angry? Because Aaron had not been a steward of the Lord and His purposes! Like the Redford character, Aaron coveted being perceived as a leader, going with the flow of the "polls" and the votes from "the people." Wow. Wrongly pursuing leadership can be a snare!

Here's the point. The truth about this theme is clear as a bell, both Old Testament *and* New Testament. *Leadership exists to serve stewardship.* That's right. The leadership that's worth fulfilling exists solely to serve stewardship. Leadership is not something that exists just to build our resume, bank accounts, or ego. No, leadership is simply a tool for helping us fulfill our stewardship, a tool like a laptop or a car. And remember, great stewardship of God's purposes *often* doesn't require leadership at all...just obedience!

So, in season, out of season, no matter the season...we are called to stewardship! Like Redford, let's step back and ask "what do we do now?" Let's take a fresh look at our families, businesses, nonprofits, the Kingdom itself. Let's pursue authentic stewardship as *the* goal! Stewardship of finances, sure. But it's really about stewardship of God's purposes, manifested at the Cross and intentionally executed by Christians as the Great Commission. Loving God and loving our neighbors are best fulfilled by proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and making disciples of Christ!

Remember Peter's message at Pentecost when about 3,000 souls were added? Now that's real leadership—leadership that exists to serve stewardship! Bravo to that...both then and now!

## A&A: Application & Action

1. Think of your key leadership roles over the past five years. Then name exactly what stewardship you were/are measuring and fulfilling for each leadership position, as set out and expected by the persons in authority over you. Yes, what were/are you a steward of? Be specific.
  
2. Nowadays, the church in America at large is struggling for effectiveness. Are the leaders in your church focused on the primary stewardship given by God to Christians in the Scriptures? List the Bible verses that frame your church's stewardship mandate and how your church is doing with that stewardship. Be specific.
  
3. In the past, have you foregone leadership opportunities that didn't have clear imperatives for stewardship that honors God's priorities? Give examples. Are you prepared to do so in the future?