

Over the past several decades, it's been pretty easy to see a mindset in the education of young people in America continuously hardening in a very real way into a sort of mantra. And that's specifically true in many Christian institutions like churches, schools, and families. And when you hear of the establishing and nurturing of this mindset by many teachers, pastors, and parents it not only seems very sound, it actually starts feeling very necessary and foundational to the growth and thriving of a young person into the believer God wants them to be.

But here's the issue: I have to conclude that the assumptions often made and the approach to it all is often destructive—certainly regarding the astute and discerning discipling of others that Christians are appointed to by Jesus in the Great Commission to “go forth and make disciples” (Matthew 28:18-20).

So, right now, I'm going to boil this issue down to a one-word mantra that is relentlessly being pounded into the hearts and minds of countless young people in America about their necessary destiny during their time on earth. And that word is *leader*. That's right. *Leader. Leader. Leader. Leader. Leader. Leader.* Yes, every child—including your child, your children—apparently must strive to be considered leaders in their world. In school. In sports. In volunteer activities. In social settings. And, of course, in church.

*What, you might be saying...a problem?...you've got to be kidding! Leadership is as American as apple pie and baseball! Well, my response to that point is this: exactly, it's American! But the real question is this: is leadership a core aspiration to be developed in Christians as the pinnacle of evidence of serving God well...or is the pinnacle really something else?*

Turns out, there are several signature passages in the Bible that address this issue very powerfully. Let's take a look.

In the account in Exodus 32:1-7 (ESV), Moses departed from the Israelites to spend time with the Lord, and the restless Israelites approached Aaron, Moses' right-hand man.

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, ‘Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ So Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’

“So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.’ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”

There you have it. Aaron responded to a plea for his “leadership” from a rebellious people, even as God Himself labeled the Israelites “stiff-necked.” Heedless to that, Aaron set aside the model of Moses following God, instead listening to the call of misguided and restless people—yeah, he responded to the call of leadership *from the popular vote!* In short, Aaron did not continue in Moses' model of stewarding God's plan and God's purposes. And right there, we find the great lesson for all who earnestly follow after God: *the overarching mandate from God is to steward for God's plans and His purposes, period.* That's right: stewardship is the focus, not leadership. That's because the passion for leadership can all-too-easily be driven by powerful impulses like pride—by both those being elected and those doing the electing.

That brings us to a second Bible passage—the final temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness.

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.” (Matthew 4:8-11)

Yes, *Jesus declined leadership of all the kingdoms of this world offered by Satan*. And look at this: only then did Jesus enter His earthly ministry unto His Father, a different path altogether. Note that Jesus turned down leadership of all the kingdoms of this world *in order to serve His Father in the Kingdom of God*. This is the model for all who would claim to be a disciple of Christ: the test for godly acceptance of a role is not some grand perception of leadership of others, it's the proper stewardship of God's purposes.

Then there's a third Bible passage that very powerfully parses this issue. The Apostle Paul disciplined Timothy as to pastoring in many ways, and we catch very key glimpses of Spirit-led direction in the letters to Timothy. Here's 2 Timothy 4:1-5, again Paul writing to and discipling Timothy...

“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. But as for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

Wow, that is powerful! Note first and foremost that Timothy must steward the Word of God, even when that's “out of season,” yes, that's *when people have turned away from that*. In other words, they would be rejecting Timothy's leadership! Again, in Paul's words, “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.” Yes, indeed, they will elect different leaders for themselves to “suit their own passions...and wander off into myths.”

This profound passage captures why election to leadership by a gathering of people is not a guarantee of quality and veracity in the least, in fact it may well be the exact opposite! And when you couple that with Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, we see that appointment to leadership by either a powerful individual or a group of people is not necessarily an endorsement of rightness at all!

Remember, Christ's Great Commission was not to “go forth and make leaders”—it was to *go forth and make disciples!* And Christ's disciples have stewardship opportunities that will endure the rest of their lives—to properly steward the Word of God in all their endeavors. While on this path, we are to properly steward all our responsibilities in groups we are part of—our families...our churches...our workplaces.

Look, the title of this episode is “the pressure's off!” That's right, *the pressure's off* to become a “leader” the way others see it. Rather, the path for Christians is to be disciples of Christ. If we are to have a mantra at all, our aspiration is to be disciples, His disciples. Yeah, *disciple, disciple, disciple, disciple, disciple*. And of course, our stewardship opportunity as commanded by Christ Himself is to disciple others! And disciples of Jesus should decline those who offer enticing leadership positions outside of God's purposes.

Hey, there's nothing wrong with leadership positions being used in service to true stewardship for God's purposes...that's cool! But, for decades, I have observed young people who are under quite intense social pressure to be considered, to be seen, and to be lauded as a leader. And that can and often does translate in practical terms to dubious paths for anyone purporting to follow Jesus. Yes, this is it: true disciples of Christ can and very much should decline even the most enticing of faulty leadership positions in favor of true stewardship for God and His purposes. That means the good news here is that *the pressure's off*: it's truly all about discipleship and God-appointed stewardship, not whether others perceive us as leaders! As Paul prescribed to Timothy, we are to simply be stewards and fulfill our ministry! Now that's liberating!

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Have you seen examples of continuous pressure on young people, even early in their lives, to be focused on being perceived as a leader of others? How about applications to college entrance, for example? Discuss.
2. How about the example of Aaron and the golden calf? Have you seen similar parallels in the current era when an enflamed desire to be considered a leader precipitated disastrous choices in the life of the chooser? Discuss.
3. How about you? Are you peacefully content to effectively steward the opportunities set before you even if others seemingly are rewarded more highly for what are perceived as leadership positions? Discuss.