

Biblical Paradigms for Leadership Transition

The key concept through the process of transition is faithfulness – both God’s complete faithfulness to His people and our unwavering fidelity to our commitment to serve Christ and His Kingdom. Because the Scriptures, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, record centuries of God’s using sometimes rather unlikely individuals to accomplish His purposes, they are a goldmine of paradigms for leadership studies – some good examples, some not. In each of the emphases below, the pattern set by God Himself provides the perfect template for His people to follow. Three components of faithfulness are worth noting in regard to times of change and transition.

Prayer

This first is so obvious that it almost goes without saying, except that it must be said – and said again. Why? We rarely engage with sufficient intention and devotion the invitation to prayer. “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17); “in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6); “continue steadfastly in prayer” (Col 4:2). And it must be a particularly focused kind of prayer, consistently acknowledging first and foremost the sovereignty of Almighty God and His good purposes for His people.

As the Israelites moved from their rather loose coalition of tribes to the monarchy, Samuel’s farewell address to them closed with his assurance that he would pray for them. Not to do so would be sin against the LORD, he said (1 Sam 12:23). And this was in the face of his displeasure at their request for a king (1 Sam 8:6). Following that promise of prayer, he admonished them to fear the LORD, serve God faithfully with all their hearts, and remember the great things God had done for them (1 Sam 12:24).

When David became the king of all Israel, he moved the capital to Jerusalem, restored the ark of the Covenant to its proper location with the Tabernacle, and began plans for a Temple to the LORD that Solomon would build. These were major activities, some even radical. As he handed along the leadership mantle to Solomon, he affirmed the greatness, majesty, glory, and sovereignty of God, thanking God for His abundant blessings and praying that the people would forever direct their hearts toward God. Furthermore, he prayed that Solomon would keep God’s commandments faithfully (1 Chron 28-29).

When the Son of David, God Incarnate, was on the brink of His death, He prayed that His glory (manifest in the cross) would be made evident along with the glory of God. And then He prayed for the small apostolic band who would transform the world - that God would keep, protect, sanctify and unify them in the same oneness as is shared in the godhead (John 17). That very apostolic community was defined by devotion to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, and to prayer (Acts 2.42).

Paul, the apostle to the Gentile world, made prayer the linchpin of his ministry on behalf of the new churches to whom he wrote. And what rich prayers! That they would have the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, knowing the hope of their calling, the riches of their inheritance with the saints and the great power of the resurrection (Eph 1:15-22). That the Spirit would empower them, that Christ would indwell them, that they would be rooted and grounded in love to know the love of Christ in its fullest

(Eph 3:14-21). That their love would abound, tempered by knowledge and discernment so that they would be pure and blameless, filled with the “fruit of righteousness” (Phil 1:9-11). That they would walk worthy of the Lord, being fruitful and strengthened (Col 1:10-11). Paul was unendingly thankful for their faith in Jesus and love for the saints (Col 1:3-5; 1Thes 1:2-3).

As the new believers prepared to bring the Gospel message to the far reaches of the Roman world, they fasted, prayed and waited on the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-3).

Study of Scripture

What God has said in Scripture needs to be the centerpiece of any Christian institution’s foundation and especially as it moves from one chapter in its story to the next. Long before Samuel offered his prayer on behalf of the Israelites and their king, God commanded through Moses that the king must read the Torah all the days of his life (Deut 17). How odd! No, how absolutely necessary; the king was to learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping the law and not falling prey to pride and disobedience. Like leader; like people, as the subsequent history of Israel demonstrated. As Joshua took over from Moses, God exhorted him to meditate on the Torah day and night so that he would be careful to do all that was written therein. It was not considered a quaint tradition; these were the words of life for Joshua (Josh 1:8). Likewise, the Psalmist enjoined delighting in and meditating on the Law of the LORD (Psalm 1:2), transition times or not.

Jesus’ prayer on behalf of the generations of believers who would call themselves “Christian” was that God would “sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). On that foundation, Jesus sent them – us – into the world for a new work. The unchanging message of the apostles was the resurrection, affirmed by Jesus as evident in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. “Thus is it written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations ...” (Luke 24:44-47).

As he left them, Paul commended the Ephesian elders “to God and the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). His admonition to the church at Ephesus conveyed the same tone – “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15).

Love and Forgiveness

When major changes loom on the horizon, what will characterize those who are “little Christs”? Just as the LORD God is steadfastly merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and forgiveness (Exod 34:6-7), so also His children. While change can breed uncertainties as expectations are shaken and restructured, practicing loyal covenant love and forgiveness of affronts and oversights will sustain the community of God’s people.

Love and forgiveness that build on the affirmation of God’s sovereignty are the only antidotes to the ugly thorn of bitterness and resentment. When Joseph addressed his brothers twenty years after their treachery against him, they had every reason to be fearful. He had been transformed from their little

brother to a powerful ruler. Yet, he affirmed God's purposes saying it was God who sent him ahead of them (Gen 45:5-8) to preserve them. After their move to Egypt and Jacob's death, they again feared a reprisal from Joseph. Again, he reassured them that he knew God had meant all of those bitter circumstances for good (Gen 50:15-21).

Jesus' gentle admonition to the band of followers gathered for the Last Supper was "as I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). His was the supreme example. Suspended on the cross between life and death, and on the cusp of a completely transformed world, Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), a message echoed in Paul's words to the Ephesians – "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgives you" (Eph 4:25).

Neither sacrificial love nor forgiveness is at all possible without the same humility that compelled the LORD of the universe to take on human flesh, becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross. We are enjoined to have that same mind (Phil 2:5-8). As we move together into a new chapter, may it be so with Gordon College!