

Successful Ministry

Rick Peterson

Luke 9:23-27; Philippians 2:5-8

Who defines the standard for a successful ministry? In the West, a successful minister of the gospel is often defined as one who is a popular conference speaker, a best-selling author, a pastor of a mega-church, and perhaps even has a Study Bible with his/her name on it. Then there is money, lots of money. Some so-called successful ministers even own their own airplane. But what defines success biblically? Better yet, *who* defines success? The New Testament is clear about the apostolic requirements for pastors, elders, and deacons (II Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; I Peter 5:1-4). But I want to address what I believe to be a foundational aspect of leadership which is sorely neglected in much of popular Christianity, and that is, the place of discipleship.

Discipleship in Leaders

Like all Christians, the pastor, deacon, elder, evangelist is first a disciple of Jesus Christ. That is to say, he is a student of Christ. He is under the discipline of his teacher. It is enough for the disciple to be as his master, meaning to do as the master does. The student is to pattern his life after the one who leads and teaches. The New Testament is clear that Jesus is the model for the Christian life. What is more, God is at work conforming the believer to the image of his Son; to grow in Christ-likeness is the “good” for which God causes all things to work together (Romans 8:28-30). Therefore, we need look no further than to Jesus himself to know what it means to be a successful shepherd of God’s flock.

The Wilderness Temptations

The fact that the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness is a well-known part of the Christian narrative. But few believers understand the religious undertones of those temptations. Satan was not tempting Jesus to become an atheist, or a secular leader; rather, Satan tempted Jesus to become a Messiah in accord with the devil’s own design and plan. In other words, in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to adopt the devil’s own standard for a successful ministry. The devil appealed to Jesus to adopt a view of ministry based on the carnal mind’s self-willed lust for material security, for the spectacular, and for personal fame, and not for the will of God. But

what if Jesus had failed the test? I submit to you today that if Jesus had succumbed to the devil's temptations, the church would look much like it does today. The church would be a man-centered community within which the lusts of the carnal mind are gratified, and the work of the Spirit is quenched. On this point, A. W. Tozer once remarked that if the Holy Spirit left most churches, no one would notice. If Jesus had succumbed to the devil's temptations, ministers would be men who pursue personal interest and selfish ambition while masking behind a thin veneer of religiosity. And this is not new.

Paul told the Philippians that he had no one like Timothy who would be genuinely concerned for their well-being, for all the other ministers "all seek their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:20). Paul also warned the Corinthians of the presence of "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. He added that Satan himself disguises himself as an "angel of light," and so, he concluded, it was "not surprising if his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (II Corinthians 11:12-15).

I am not saying if a man is a popular conference speaker, or authors a best-seller, or pastors a large church that he is somehow a minister of Satan. But if these things define successful ministry for him, then he has bought into a Satanic lie, as have his followers. If a man's identify rests in his popular success, then he has stumbled through the wide gate which leads only down the broad way of destruction. Howard Hendricks once told seminary graduates, "My fear for you is not that you will fail, but that you will succeed in doing the wrong things." These words of Hendricks define the modern-day ministry: they are succeeding at doing the wrong things.

So then, if we must avoid succeeding at doing the wrong things, what we need to ask, is, "What are the right things?" As I have said, what I want to address here is the pressing need for a minister of the gospel to understand himself first as a student of Jesus Christ, a disciple, one who follows another. Which according to Jesus, means a man must deny the self, take up his cross, daily, and follow him (Luke 9:23-27).

Self-Denial and Cross Bearing

I have known men of great intellect who articulated propositional truth better than most, but also harbored bitter envy and selfish ambition. These men had yet to come to terms with our Lord's first demand of discipleship: self-denial. As we just learned, Timothy had developed a

ministry of pastoral care in which the interests of Christ Jesus far outstripped his own self-interests. This degree of self-denial is foundational to successful ministry. Within this context, we can therefore understand self-denial to mean keeping the self in its proper standing in relation to God and others. After all, it was the exaltation of the self to the place of God which defined the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden fall. Self-denial therefore is the reversal of the sinful mindset. It is a spiritual discipline we must exercise, daily. And we need look no further for our perfect model of self-denial than to Jesus. For instance, Paul tells all Christians,

Have this attitude in [among] yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself [laid aside His privileges], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8, NASB) [marginal notes].

Here Paul sets forth the model for successful Christian living and for ministry. Notice, there is no hint of self-ambition, self-exaltation, or personal promotion; rather, there is a laying aside of privileges, the adoption of a servant’s place, utter humility and obedience before God, even to death on a cross. Which also affirms Christ’s call to every believer to take up one’s cross.

And what does it mean to take up one’s cross, but to do the will of God whatever the cost? It means to endure the rejection of the world as Christ did, and to also put to death in one’s self anything opposed to God’s will. But if the ministry is a career path for your personal ambitions, the New Testament calls you only a hireling, and a hireling always shuns the cross. Instead of caring for the flock, when danger arises, he flees (John 10:11-13). But the successful minister is the one who follows in footprints stained red with the blood of Christ, and not the red carpet offered by the world.

So what shall we conclude? Just this, many good men spend their lives seeking, discovering, living, and preaching the truth that is in Jesus Christ, and do so without much notice. These are those who deny the self, take up their cross and follow Jesus. You may never hear of them. You may never see their names on the New York Times bestseller’s list. They may never be seen autographing Bibles at a conference, but their names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, and that, for them, is a treasure far beyond what this world can offer. They may never win applause from adoring admirers, but one day, they will hear, “Well done, you good and faithful servant,” while others will hear, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who

practice lawlessness.” So, if you are a lowly pastor, elder, deacon or evangelist serving the church in relative anonymity, take heart. For the true measure of success has nothing to do with fame and fortune, but whether your concern was for the interests of Christ Jesus, and not your own career. Did you take up your cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus? Did you suffer rejection and scorn by those who love this world? Then your reward is great, for so they did to the prophets before you, and above all, so they did to your Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

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