



The Tree of Life Bears Leadership Fruit

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It would seem as if society is gearing up to take off. Every day we find new ways of doing things faster and more automated. I remember reading an article that was written in the nineteen eighties that said that the average person would be working between 20 and 30% less by the year 2000 because of all of the technological advances. Quite the opposite has occurred.

We now work longer hours and at more complex jobs, and it does not seem apparent the pace of change is slowing at all. As Christians and as leaders we have to ask ourselves how and what are we supposed to be doing because even though we are in the world we are not from it. We ask ourselves how we can have greater impact. We question our results and try to ensure that in the following years the growth in budgets, people and projects will be better. We are in other words very concerned with the results we are showing as Christians.

This paper will serve to motivate Christians to ask the difficult questions rather than present solutions. We are not in the habit of finding the right questions and then building relationships with God and one another around these questions because since the beginning of history we have been abdicating our responsibility on earth. We avoid the critical questions we should be asking ourselves and one another. As Christians we simply do not question enough. Of these questions that we are missing the most essential is to question our heart motives behind our leadership actions.

The Mandate

From the foundations of the earth we have been given choice: In the Garden of Eden we were set over all creation (see Gen 1:28 AMP) with clear instruction to be fruitful and multiply. This is truly a complex assignment. This was a call to authority (verse 26) from the only living God. There is one Way, Truth and Life. We do however have a choice to follow the instruction of being fruitful and multiplying. So even if the way to live is clearly spelled out for us we still have a choice to obey it or not – we have a choice to live.

The beauty of God is that even though he commands we can still choose not to obey. It is this beauty that lies at the heart of creation, the fact that we have been given instruction that will lead us to life – one Way. Any other way might seem good to us but ultimately it leads to death.

My question is: have we been fulfilling this mandate? What I refer to is what is known as dominion eschatology, the examination of future events through the lens of the dominion mandate and the assumption that the influence of the church will increase on earth until Jesus returns. (I do find it necessary to clarify the term church. As I use the word church it refers to the Greek word *ekklesia* or people of G-d. From here it is important to view all daily activities of the people of God, whether it is specific activities related to the church as organisation or daily individual work, as part of the mandate given to us in the Garden of Eden.) Indeed we have been very busy reforming the church, creating new programmes and fighting over the best way to grow churches. Have we however been extending dominion in His name; have we chosen to be obedient? The alternative of course was modelled to us by Adam and Eve who chose a different path. Eve was seduced by the Snake and instead of following God's instruction they chose a different path which led away from Him.

We must therefore look to our own choices and ask ourselves what we have been choosing and what how will we choose in the future. In many things we have been greatly successful. Just look at the grandiose buildings and institutions we have created but in fact, as Bob Briner¹ states that we have been very successful at creating Christian ghettos where we go and hide from the world rather than step into full dominion as commanded.

So there it was in the beginning, the two trees that resembled a simple yet earth shattering choice: to turn towards God or away from Him. Both trees bear fruit, both trees are symbols for choices which have separate consequences. We know that eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil brings death. On the other hand, if we eat from the Tree of Life we can expect life. It was not that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is bad; remember that God created it and He saw that everything that He created was good. It never states that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is excluded from this. It is one of God's creations – He put it there! It does however symbolise not choosing God.

A Deceitful Heart

There was however clear instruction not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 2:16&17) for death would surely follow. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil therefore bears fruit of death. Here death refers to a path that leads away from God and not to Him because God is the only source of life and if we do not choose Him we are choosing death – there is no middle road. Death might therefore not be immediate but it will surely follow and also refers to the opposite of eternal life.

Throughout the Bible there have been various instances where humanity went terribly wrong and God in fact did intervene to give us the chance for relationship with Him. If you read the story of Noah it becomes very clear that man had continual evil thinking and God decided to wipe them from the earth. All except Noah who God found to be just and righteous. In the Amplified Bible it says that “Noah walked [in habitual fellowship] with G-d”². So Noah was spared and indeed became fruitful once again in order to fill the earth.

Two generations later his grandson, Nimrod, becomes a great ruler and is associated with the Tower of Babel. According to the Amplified Bible (Genesis 11: 4) they built the tower in order to make a name for themselves. They were choosing the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They were not choosing God.

Their hearts were corrupted once again and the Bible is filled with many more stories of individuals seeking their own glory and not the glory of God.

Indeed we have been made for glorious things but it is God's glory and by seeking position, as the examples above illustrates, always leads to great disappointment. Still the allure of earthly success calls us by name every day and the seduction of this world makes us exchange our calling for an ephemeral experience. The worst is we actually believe that we are doing good when in fact we are being wicked. It is as C.S. Lewis³ states that "...wickedness, when you examine it, turns out to be the pursuit of some good in the wrong way".

This clearly reflects the *modus operandi* of Lucifer since the beginning of time; he is a deceiver. In Jeremiah 17:9 the prophet states that the heart is deceitful above all things but in Proverbs 4:23 we are warned to guard our hearts because out of it flows the springs of life. It seems to be contradictory. According to these scriptures the heart is deceitful and the spring of life all at the same time – quite confusing. In fact it is perfectly in line with God's character because from the beginning he has given us great potential and at the same time the choice to realise it or not. This is why our hearts can be deceitful but at the same time be the Spring of Life.

The questions therefore needs to be asked how do we ensure that our hearts are not deceitful but are the spring of life in order that we may be fruitful?

Restoring the Tree of Life

Not much is actually mentioned about the Tree of Life except that we were allowed to eat from it. It was quite simple eat from all the trees except the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil or you will die. Such simple instruction did not stop the sinful nature of man to be revealed.

The Tree of Life does however, as it names states, lead to life. In other words the Tree of Life leads to God. Choosing the Tree of Life is choosing God. Choosing anything else, represented by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, is choosing death. As stated in the previous section our hearts are also seen as the spring of life. Indeed I would venture so far as to say that at our core we desire to truly live but there are few of us that do so. It is as Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad⁴ say: "The world is full of the walking weary".

To state in other words: we received clear instruction and opportunity to truly live through relationship with God but chose to seek our own way and step away from relationship with God. We were banished from the Garden of Eden and throughout the Bible we see how God intervened in order to save man from himself and his evil ways. This dramatically changed when Jesus was born.

Although God never changes he did give us a better way through Jesus. Sacrifice is still required in order to forgive our sins and restore our relationship with G-d. Jesus has therefore become the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. We do not however fully realise this and we try to be good and make up for our sins through lots and lots of busyness every day. Yet in John 6:27 Jesus tells his disciples to stop toiling and doing and producing for the food that perishes and decomposes. He tells them to rather strive and work for the food which endures unto life eternal.

This is also in line with what He tells Martha in Luke 10:41, 42: “...Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; There is need of only one or *but a few things*. Mary has chosen the good portion [that which is to her advantage], which shall not be taken away from her.” Indeed we all are guilty of striving to produce for the food that perishes, running around anxious and troubled about many things until we reach a point where we are deceived and we choose to eat the fruit from the wrong tree. Afterwards we realise our mistakes and then guilt drives us to hide from God. Few of us ever return to the Father. We remain away from Him, ashamed for what we have done. We do not realise that there is one way truth and life, as it was in the beginning – the Tree of Life. This same way is now through Jesus – the only Way, Truth and Life. In our hearts we bow down to everything else in our hunger for Christ and restoration. We eat more and more fruit that we should not and get so busy that we miss the portion that cannot be taken away from us. We are lost and we are desperate to find a way back. We believe that the harder we work the better we will look to those around us. We are desperate to be seen as leaders, achievers, successful!

We build grandiose towers that glitter in the sunshine and we say that this is the way to the Father. This is the great deception. We seek greatness, not G-d. We fall! We seek position (leadership) without understanding what it is about. The word Christ used to describe “leadership” is *diakonos*⁵. *Diakonos* consist of two words. *Dia*, which means “through” or “across” and *konos*, which means “dust, dirt or earth.” Therefore *diakonos* literally means “through the dust.”

So instead of going through the dust we choose to go for gold. Jesus never told anyone how to be a leader (ibid, Pp. 17). In essence He did not teach how to lead but how to follow; follow Him as He follows His Father. Indeed Lucifer came with the promise of leadership. Remember He said that they will be like G-d. It was the promise of the servant superseding the master. It was the temptation of putting man before God and stepping out of relationship. The result is not the fruitfulness which God intended and the resulting dominion eschatology. The result is death.

Should we not therefore ask ourselves what our focus and approach should be in order to have life in abundance and assist others to experience the same? The focus has perhaps been on leadership too strongly. It should rather be on The Leader and seeking relationship with Him. I do believe that this is what scripture means when it says that: “...seek (aim at and strive after) first of all His kingdom and His righteousness (His way of doing and being right), and then all these things taken together will be given you besides.” We focus on God and His way and He gives us what we need. It should not be that we seek to get more things and later check in with Him.

Once again this is clear instruction. We have to check our hearts to see whether we truly long for our Father and His ways firstly. We need to eat from the Tree of Life – that is where we will find meaning and life!

Choosing the Tree of Life

So it is quite clear from the Bible that we are consistently called to exercise a choice. We need to choose between, turning to God and, as stated previously, to turn away from G-d. Righteousness and relationship is what we get when we decide to turn towards God and press in no matter what. Choosing to turn

away from God is where we place ourselves where God should be – idolatry. As illustrated above, this leads to death.

The challenge was when the snake came to Eve and tempted her with fruit. He did not tell her how wonderful the tree tasted or how good it's shade is. No, he lured her with the fruit of the tree. This is all too familiar because we are lured by many different good fruit, which could probably always be connected to money, sex or power. We recognise that if we pursue a specific path we will reap the fruit of this path and be recognised, rich or powerful. We will be in control. But as it states in Proverbs 29:26: "Many crave and seek the ruler's favour, but the wise man [waits] for justice from the Lord."

Why are we in such a hurry to receive all the great blessing of the kingdom that we forget a tree takes a long time to grow to maturity before it can eventually bear fruit? Perhaps we should be seeking to follow rather than lead; seeking Him rather than His blessing. This is ultimately the path of righteousness and out of it flows G-d's will and purpose for our lives: "[Then] the consistently righteous shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever." (Psalm 37:29)

This is strongly echoed in John 6:38 where we are given the clear example by Christ himself when He states that He only came to do the will and purpose of the One Who sent Him. In this regard it is noteworthy to mention the work by Gary Oster⁶ which highlights the importance of not being aware of the motivations and desires of the heart. According to Oster there are many different idols that we place central to our lives rather than giving God His place of honour in our lives. These idols can take the form of money, education, sex, power, etc. So in other words, as Oster states: "Anything that wedges God out of His rightful central role in a person's life is a form of paganism."

Simply stated, if we seek the fruit first we remove God from his rightful place and the result is death. It is the repetition of Adam and Eve in our every day, we are no different.

The question is therefore not whether you are placing your own will and purpose ahead of God's but rather how you are doing it. For be sure, none of us are perfect. In this regard this paper takes the stance that seeking leadership is seeking self but seeking to follow is seeking Christ. To seek Christ therefore restores righteousness and out of righteousness flows relationship. The fruit will follow in accordance to God's will and purpose – if we put Him in His place, He can put us in ours.

Our focus should be to ask how I can please God. It is as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:9: "...we are constantly ambitious *and* strive earnestly to be pleasing to Him." We need to ask ourselves whether we get up in the morning with a burning question of what will be pleasing to our God? Do I want to make His name distinguished or am I concocting plans to distinguish my name?

Conclusion

As Christians we have a great privilege and great responsibility. Many of us feel the pressure to perform as Christians and we are in many respects much busier than our worldly counterparts. We have become

obsessed with results! Our value systems have become corrupted and we are not truly reflecting Christ. Our priorities are wrong and our focus has shifted to material wealth rather than spiritual wealth.

Throughout biblical history we find that when we focus on results primarily, as many leaders do, we end up with disaster. Our nature has not changed since the Garden of Eden and all of us still choose to eat the fruit that appeals to us and in this way we raise up many different idols and worship them. In the end it is our polluted desire that turns our good intentions into disastrous consequences.

Through Christ we do however have the opportunity to once again eat from the Tree of Life. The only way to do this however is through questions. Truly honest questions about the condition of our hearts will lead us to sit at the Master's feet and receive the good portion which cannot be taken away from us. Instead of an eagerness to lead we should simply ask our Father who He is. It is the hunger to know Him which should come first and nothing else. We do fail however and this becomes the process of knowing Him. In this regard failure is not an option, it is a necessity. In our weakness He is strong.

If you seek to lead, ask yourself what does God desire for you. There is no compromise, even leadership can become your god – was this not the original sin? In the words of Denny Gunderson (ibid, Pp. 42): “Obedience and humility are God's twin guardians against the plague of vain ambition resident within the heart of the leader who wants to be a star.” Should we strive to become great leaders at all? Especially if the definition that is recognised by the world is tainted by the pursuit of luxury cars, big houses and money. Should we not rather ask what it means to be living examples?

I would like to finish off by quoting a prayer by an unknown confederate soldier⁷ who fought in the American Civil War. I believe it expresses the true reward of learning to surrender our own heart's desire to God's will and purpose:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked God for health, that I might do greater things;
 I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing that I asked for but everything I had hoped for.
 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
 I am among men, most richly blessed.

About the Author

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