

Insights on Church Leadership

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Pride

Pride can be manifested in several ways. In this discussion, I will concentrate in one aspect that I believe to be more directly related to the work of those serving in leadership callings.

A possible misconception may exist because of the frequent and generally inattentive use of the word "leader." In the context of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we interpret this word as "he or she that goes in front of others by showing an example." In many cultures a leader is a commander, a chief, someone in whom the people believe and someone whom the people follow.

While serving in presidencies or in other leadership capacities we are called to be leaders in the gospel sense. But without proper attention, our cultural heritage associated with the word "leader" may play tricks in our minds. The use of the word "leader" is not necessarily the problem. The problem arises when we unconsciously (or not) forget the correct meaning of the word in the gospel context.

For example, when in our organizations (or quorums, wards, or stakes) we find brothers or sisters facing difficult times, we generally feel a desire--or a sense of our responsibility--to "help" them. We then start to use our resources, our faith, prayers, and gifts, to help those individuals. When the problem is eventually resolved, and those persons come to thank us, some may make the mistake of accepting the credit for it, forgetting the true source of the power of our leadership. Instead of reaffirming our belief in being mere instruments in the Lord's hand, we may act as if we had accomplished the solution of the problem by ourselves.

Taking the credit for some of the Lord's actions happens because of our human need for accomplishment. The Savior admonished his apostles on the truth behind our achievements in his kingdom: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."¹

This is not a modern problem. In the New Testament Paul made some comments about the problem, and considered himself as a worker of secondary importance in the conversion process:

"So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. ... I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the

¹ John 15:5

effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ ²"

Mormon recorded the appropriate attitude shown by some of the early Nephite ministers: "... and the priest did not esteem himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength."³

In the early days of this dispensation the Lord, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, said the following to a few of the brethren: "... if you desire, you shall be the means of doing much good in this generation."⁴ And his next sentence was: "Say nothing but repentance unto this generation ... assist to bring forth my work ..."⁵ When thinking about doing good unto others, some may view themselves as the primary factor in the process of solving those individuals' problems. The Lord suggests that as leaders, we are a secondary factor in the process. Are we important in the process? Yes! Will the solutions come because of our intervention? No!

By saying "... nothing but repentance⁶...", we will be mere accessories in helping the individual draw nearer to the Lord, who is the only one with power to save and heal, and with wisdom to solve problems permanently. We should then consider ourselves as accessories because long before our intervention the Light of Christ will have guided the individual towards the Lord. Our role in the process will be to testify to the person of the reality of the Lord's love for us--something we may doubt when we are in distress--or in other words, our role will be to "... succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees."⁷

How Pride Can Be Manifested

In my view, pride may be manifested in the work of church leaders in the form of feelings of either self-aggrandizement or self-sufficiency, caused by a misinterpretation of the doctrine of foreordination⁸. It is true that in our pre-mortal existence the Lord set us apart to fulfill certain missions while on the earth. However, the thought that "I am the only one that can fulfill these missions" is not accurate. The Prophet Alma the younger suggested that a calling from God is dependent upon faith and good works⁹, not only intellectual ability or other worldly factors, a mistaken principle once believed by Oliver Cowdery and others, as explained by President Wilford Woodruff:

"I heard Joseph Smith say that Oliver Cowdery, who was the second apostle in this Church, said to him, 'If I leave this Church it will fall.' Said Joseph, 'Oliver, you try it.' Oliver tried it. He fell;

² 1 Corinthians 3:7; Ephesians 3:7-8

³ Alma 1:26

⁴ D&C 6:8; 11:8

⁵ D&C 6:9; 11:9

⁶ D&C 6:9

⁷ D&C 81:5

⁸ Yes, it is possible to misinterpret certain aspects of a true doctrine and get wrong conclusions. See chapter 11 for further insights on this topic.

⁹ Alma 13:3,10-12

but the kingdom of God did not. ... We have no chance to be lifted up in the pride of our hearts with regard to the position we occupy. If the President of the Church or either of his counselors or of the apostles or any other man feels in his heart that God cannot do without him, and that he is especially important in order to carry on the work of the Lord, he stands upon slippery ground. ... I say to all men ... that the Lord Almighty has power within himself, and is not dependent upon any man, to carry on his work; but when he does call men to do his work they have to trust in him.¹⁰

So, other individuals with different skills and talents may fill the leadership positions we now occupy and still be effective because of their faith and diligence. In the meridian of times some individuals thought that just because they were literal descendants of Abraham they were the only ones entitled to the blessings of the Lord. John the Baptist made clear that it wasn't so when he said: "And think not to say within yourselves, We are the children of Abraham, and we only have power to bring seed unto our father Abraham; for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children into Abraham."¹¹

We are not unreplaceable; for example, even though Paul did a wonderful job with the Gentiles, someone else would have done it if Paul had not accepted his calling on the road to Damascus. The same would have happened in the case of Moses, Isaiah, Peter, etc.

Conquering Pride

In order to conquer pride we must acquire the control of our thoughts. We will be always faced with many thoughts suggesting that "we" did this, or that "we" accomplished that, etc. Whenever that happens, we must immediately expel those thoughts and replace them with the thought that without the Lord (i.e. without his power sustaining and preserving our physical bodies, enlightening our minds, and without his wisdom and blessings) we would not have accomplished anything. "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."¹²

In these latter days the Lord made his feelings concerning this matter quite clear: "He that receiveth of God, let him account it of God; and let him rejoice that he is accounted of God worthy to receive. ... And in nothing doth man offend God, or against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things, and obey not his commandments."¹³ As church leaders we are still servants; and as mortals we must, as explained by King Benjamin, "... remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and [our] own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards [us], unworthy creatures ..."¹⁴

Whenever the idea of being a "leader" of the people start to come into our minds, we should pause and remember these words:

"... Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your

¹⁰ Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, p.123, April 6, 1890

¹¹ JST Matthew 3:36

¹² John 15:5

¹³ D&C 50:34; 59:21

¹⁴ Mosiah 4:11; brackets added.

servant. ... He that is ordained of God and sent forth, the same is appointed to be the greatest, notwithstanding he is the least and the servant of all. Wherefore, he is possessor of all things; for all things are subject unto him, both in heaven and on the earth, the life and the light, the Spirit and the power, sent forth by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ, his Son. But no man is possessor of all things except he be purified and cleansed from all sin.¹⁵"

It is interesting to observe that in a construction site only those considered "servants" manipulate tools. It is the same in the kingdom of God: only the "servants" manipulate tools, and in this case the tools are "... the life and the light, the Spirit and the power, sent forth by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ, his Son", these tools constituting what is called "... the powers of heaven, ... that ... cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness."¹⁶

We should also consider another idea: among those we are serving we can find some that have been chosen to be our own presidents or leaders in the future. I often ponder on the relationship between Abraham and the three holy men who once visited him.

"And the Lord appeared unto Abraham in the plains of Mamre. And he sat in his tent door in the heat of the day; And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men stood by him; and when he saw, he ran to meet them from his tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, and said; My brethren, if now I have found favor in your sight, pass not away I pray you from thy servant. ... And he took butter and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set them before them, and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat."¹⁷

We must pause here and try to depict Abraham's situation if he were a member of the church in our days. Let us imagine that he would be living in a remote area, hundreds or perhaps even thousands of miles (or kilometers) from the nearest meetinghouse, as some of our brothers and sisters throughout the world live today. He and his family would not be in a meetinghouse every Sunday, and as a priesthood holder he would have to conduct the meetings for his family by himself. He would not be a Bishop or a Stake President, or a Quorum President, and Sarah would not be a Relief Society or Primary President, although both would carry out all these functions by themselves at home. And yet, because of his faith and righteousness he received great promises from the Lord. Now, going back to the scriptural account:

"And one of them blessed Abraham, and he said, I will certainly return unto thee from my journey, and lo, according to the time of life, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. At the time appointed, behold, I will return unto thee from my journey, which the Lord hath sent me ... And the angels rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the angel of the Lord, said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which the Lord will do for him; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him. And the angels which were holy men, and were sent forth after the order of God, turned their faces from thence and went toward Sodom."¹⁸

¹⁵ Matthew 20:25-27; Mark 10:42-44; D&C 50:26-28

¹⁶ D&C 121:36

¹⁷ JST Genesis 18:1-3,7

¹⁸ JST Genesis 18:9,14,16-18,23

If we assume that those three holy men were Abraham's priesthood leaders¹⁹, we can see a fascinating relationship being described. Here we would have Abraham's priesthood leaders acknowledging his future position of patriarchal leadership over all nations of the earth. Would there be room in the minds of those three brethren for any feelings of "preeminence" over Abraham? While serving as a Bishop, I often asked myself how many of those whom I was "leading" were going to be my "leaders" in the future, and which ones would bless my life in the future in ways I could not comprehend at that point in time.

I believe that these thoughts--acknowledging the Lord hand in all things, considering ourselves as servants, and considering those we serve as our future leaders--can help us overcome the feelings of pride, or self-aggrandizement.

The True Nature of Our Accomplishments

Some may argue: "What about the experience of the brother of Jared? Didn't the Lord leave him to solve the problem of the absence of light in the barges by his own? Wouldn't that be an accomplishment?" We have to acknowledge that whatever good things we achieve in this life are the result of a partnership between us and the Lord God Almighty²⁰. After all, who gave us a body with a mind and who gave us the powers of intellect? "And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day."²¹

Moroni's advice to the young Prophet Joseph Smith clearly defines the way we must view our positions in the Church of Christ: "... I must have no other object in view ... but to glorify God, and must not be influenced by any other motive than that of building his kingdom ..."²²

A Warning Against Pride in Our Prayers

In the scriptures we find examples of prayers that are not acceptable before the Lord because of implied pride. One of the most widely know was mentioned by the Savior himself in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican:

"And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as

¹⁹ In the King James Version of the Bible these personages are mistakenly identified as being the Lord. President Joseph Fielding Smith presented the idea that these men were mortals (see *Doctrines of Salvation*, volume 1, pp.16-17). The prophet Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible also clearly indicates that these angels were mortal priesthood holders: "And the angel of the Lord said unto Abraham, The Lord said unto us, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will destroy them. And I will send you, and ye shall go down now, and see that their iniquities are rewarded unto them. ... And the angels which were holy men, and were sent forth after the order of God, turned their faces from thence and went toward Sodom."

Note that in the next verses Abraham is communing with the Lord, instead of talking to the three holy men: "But Abraham stood yet before the Lord, remembering the things which had been told him. And Abraham drew near to Sodom, and said unto the Lord, calling upon his name, saying, Wilt thou destroy the righteous with the wicked? ... O may that be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked. ... And the Lord said unto Abraham, If thou findest in Sodom, fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." (JST Genesis 18:19-29,39-42)

²⁰ Ether 4:12; Moroni 7:12,22,24

²¹ Deuteronomy 8:17-18

²² Joseph Smith History 1:46

other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.²³"

Another example of an unacceptable prayer is found in the Book of Mormon. When Alma and his missionary companions attended a religious ceremony held by the apostate Zoramites, they heard the following prayer being offered repeatedly:

"Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren ... we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children ... thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee; and we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren ...²⁴"

As Latter-day Saints, we can--and we must--be grateful for our blessings. However, we must never consider ourselves superior to anyone else. If we are ever tempted to pray like the Pharisee or the Zoramites, and thank the Lord for not being like other people, we should remember that those who do not have the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their lives will be judged by the Lord with less rigor than we will. The Lord said: "For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light receive the greater condemnation."²⁵

²³ Luke 18:9-14

²⁴ Alma 31:16-17

²⁵ D&C 82:3

About the Author



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Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.