

Saul Leadership

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So Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you.”

1 Sam 15:28

Saul lost the kingdom and it was given to one better than he—to David.

This transition from Saul to David typically represents a major shift currently occurring in the church. It is not so much which group we are in, but rather what is in us—the heart of Saul or of David.

Let's take a brief look at the characteristics of Saul-leadership in the church.

Pragmatism

First, it is characterised by *pragmatism*. Samuel gave him a command to wait in Gilgal seven days: “Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice ... but you must wait seven days until I come to tell you what you are to do.” (1 Sam 10:8 NIV). He was to wait for revelation and direction from the prophet. Just as Jesus commanded the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and “wait for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4), the Holy Spirit, Saul had to wait in Gilgal. But a crisis intervened, and Saul was faced with a decision: was he to obey and wait for the Lord or switch into management mode; was he going to operate out of *principle* or *pragmatism*—the spirit or the flesh? The Philistines had gathered for war with “3,000 chariots, 6,000 charioteers and soldiers as numerous as the sand”—there situation was critical (1 Sam 13:5-6). Saul waited the seven days stipulated by Samuel—but no prophet! Saul's men began to scatter—he had to do something! To hold them he decided to offer the sacrifice himself: “Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. So Saul said, ‘Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.’ And he offered the burnt offering” (1 Sam 13:8-9). He opted for pragmatism: for what would work and give immediate results, but at the cost of a principle—the principle of waiting for the Lord. He was not called or anointed as a priest but as a king. Every call and gift has limitations. He stepped beyond his calling, out of his anointing into that of another. Once we step outside the limits of our call and giftedness we step into the flesh—into soul-life and human strength. Many leaders go beyond their anointing doing things they're not called to do which may even be good. Saul only offered a sacrifice! Surely that was okay? Apparently not.

Sense knowledge & human reason

Second, Saul-leadership is characterised by *sense knowledge* and *human reason*:

Just as he finished ... Samuel arrived (v 10), asking, “What have you done?” ... Saul replied, “When I **saw** that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling ... **I thought**, ‘Now the Philistines will come down ... and I have not sort the Lord's favour.’ So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.

1 Samuel 13:11-12 NIV (author's emphasis)

Saul made two fatal mistakes: he *saw* and he *thought*. He operated out of *sense knowledge* (what he saw) and by *reason* (what he thought). We either walk by sight or by faith; that is, by revelation.

The prophet's verdict was immediate:

You acted foolishly ... You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a

man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people ...

1 Samuel 13:13-14 NIV

Saul's instantaneous response was to leave Gilgal and count his men (v 15). Completely phased by what his eyes saw and oblivious to what the prophet said, he could only look to the force of numbers: to his own resources; to human power to win the battle.

God is longsuffering and slow to anger. He came the second time to Saul to give him another opportunity to change principles—to operate out of the spirit rather than the flesh. Samuel came to him with another assignment: *"Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys"* (1 Sam 15:3 NIV).

So Saul attacked the Amalekites; but on his own terms:

But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle ... everything that was good. ... Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.' Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all night. Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul ...

1 Samuel 15:9-11 NIV

Samuel's imminent confrontation with Saul is about to expose the hidden condition of his heart.

Self-image

Third, Saul-leadership builds a *self-image*. Samuel was told that Saul has gone to Carmel where *"he had set up a monument in his own honour"* (v 12). Believing he won a great victory over the Amalekites he built his own monument! He is preoccupied with his own image and reputation. Even when confronted by Samuel, he was more conscious of how he appeared before men than where he stood before God. He was more concerned for his *dignity* than his *deliverance* when he cried, *"I have sinned. But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel ... "* (v 30). The genuineness of his repentance is also compromised by the fact that it followed on the heels of the pronouncement that he had lost the kingdom.

A spirit of religious deception

Fourth, it is marked by a *spirit of religious deception*. Saul greets Samuel with these high sounding words: *"The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions"* (v 13). He's quick with spiritual sounding words to maintain his image. But it is empty talk, only smoke and mirrors. The truth is that in blatant disobedience to his assignment he kept the best of the sheep and spared Agag (see v 3, 9). Even after the prophet rehearsed the facts of his failure and disobedience (v 18-19) Saul still claimed his complete innocence: *"But I did obey the Lord ... I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king"* (v 20). Saul-leadership operates in denial and cannot receive truth against itself. It in fact comes out of a lying spirit. This leads to the next characteristic.

Blame-shifts

Fifth, Saul-leadership *blame-shifts*: *"The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder ... "* (v 21, see also v15). Unable to receive truth against themselves Saul-leaders look for scapegoats—a fall guy. They cannot accept responsibility or admit they were wrong. Adam, confronted with his blatant rebellion against God's revealed will, did likewise, blaming both the woman—and God: *"The woman whom you gave ... "* (Gen 3:12a). This then leads into the next failure.

Rationalises and self-justifies

Sixth, Saul-leadership *rationalises* and *self-justifies*. He justifies his and the soldier's behaviour by claiming it was for the Lord, which harkens back to the spirit of religious deception previously mentioned. They fell on the plunder and kept *"... the best of*

what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord ... " (v 21b, also v 15b). A religious stronghold is established in his life through rationalising and self-justification. When we justify our behaviour we not only neutralise the justifying work of God in Christ, but also become our own god and our own saviour. In effect, we operate in an anti-Christ spirit. Even though we may claim a religious experience, engage in public worship, give to the church and go to the prayer meeting, if at a heart-mind level we justify our attitudes, mindsets, or behaviours we are not of the spirit of Christ. Our mental arguments and rationalisations set themselves up against the true knowledge of God and we are left with merely an imitation of spirituality (2 Cor 10:5, 6, 18).

Unbroken self-life

Lastly, Saul-leadership comes out of *unbroken self-life*. Samuel's response penetrates to the heart of the stronghold of religion:

'Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much in obeying the voice of the Lord? To **obey** is better than **sacrifice**, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. ... '

v 22-23 NIV (author's emphasis)

At the heart of the spirit of religion, behind the veneer of high-sounding words and images of spirituality, we find at work the spirit of hell itself in rebellion and arrogance (*stubbornness*, NKJV). Rebellion, according to the prophet, is like witchcraft or divination. Both are connected to the worship of idols and demons. Rebellion is a satanic principle operating to one end—deification of self. Just as Satan set himself up in opposition to God coveting the worship and obeisance of all creation so too autonomous man. Animated by this satanic principle man, through self-will and stubbornness, engages in the idolatry of self and becomes a god. To attain this status and the power of a god religious man not only exerts his will in resistance of the true God, but unwittingly crosses a line into the occult so as to gain mastery and control over others. What begins in self-will ends in the demonic. Witchcraft and idolatry are, according to Paul, both "works of the flesh" (Gal 6:20). Unbroken soul-life, as in the case of Saul, eventually gives ground to demonic control and oppression. As a consequence of Saul's covert rebellion the Spirit of the Lord lifted from him and instead an evil spirit was sent to harass him, driving him to jealousy and the attempted murder of David (1 Sam 16:14-16, 23; 18:10). The anointing had already shifted to David and, in time, so too would the kingdom.

May the Lord make the application in our own lives as we pray like David:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

Psalm 139:23-24 NASB

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