

Leadership Qualities: Empowerment

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Frank Laubach, a missionary to the Philippines in the early 1900s hit rock bottom one night. Looking at his life's work, it seemed as if it all amounted to nothing. He and his wife had lost three children to malaria. Now, in his mid-40s, he was sick and had to sequester himself from his wife and only remaining child. He was completely alone. That's when he met God.

Imagine how shocking this must have been. He had been a Christian most of his life, had given his life to taking the gospel to a foreign people. And in his moment of deepest despair, he finally realized that he could live in intimate communion with God through the Holy Spirit. In quarantine, he found the union he longed for all of his life. He began to keep a journal and wrote the following words sitting alone on a mountain.

The most wonderful discovery that has ever come to me is that I do not have to wait until some future time for this glorious hour. I do not need to wait for any grace. This hour can be heaven. Any hour for anybody can be as rich as God. For do you not see that God is trying experiments with human lives? That's why there are so many of them. He has, at this moment, one billion, seven hundred million experiments going on around the world. And His question is, "How far will this man and that woman allow me to carry this hour?" This Sunday afternoon at three o'clock He was asking it of us all. I do not know what the rest of you said, but as for me, I asked God, "How wonderful do you wish this hour alone with me to be?" And God answered convincingly, "It can be as wonderful as any hour that any human being has ever lived. For I who pushed life up through the protozoa and the tiny grass and the fish and the bird and the dog and the gorilla and the human being and who am reaching out toward eternity, I have not become satisfied yet. I am not only willing to make this hour marvelous, I am in travail to set you akindle with the Christ-thing that has no name. How fully can you surrender and not be afraid?" And I answered, "Fill my mind with your mind to the last crevice. Catch me up in your arms, God, and make this hour as terribly glorious as any human being ever lived, if you will. I scarce see how one could live if his heart held more than mine has held from Thee these past few hours."

Clearly my job here is not to go to the town plaza and convince people to change their religious beliefs or to win a theological debate. My job is to

live wrapped in God, trembling with His thoughts, burning with His passion. And my loved ones, that is the best gift you can give to the place where you live. You and I shall soon blow away from our bodies. Money, praise, poverty, opposition, these make no difference, for they will all alike be forgotten in a thousand years. But this Spirit, which comes to a mind set upon continuous surrender – this Spirit is timeless life.¹

Frank Laubach's life stands as a testimony to the power of God to empower the life of one willing person. This surrendered man decided that his one passion would be to walk in step with the Spirit, every moment of every day. He would walk with God and leave the results up to him.

So, what did God do through this man? Laubach developed a literacy education program known as "each one teach one" and became the leader of a worldwide literacy movement. As a result of his teaching methods, more than 60 million people speaking 200 different languages and dialects have learned to read in their own native tongue. This humble, broken man became an advisor to presidents and national leaders.

It would be easy to look at this man and assume that he was just an overachiever. To do so, however, would negate the single most important factor of his life – namely that he was enabled to accomplish what he did by an external source. God empowered him to do what he did, and the same power that was available to Frank Laubach is available to us today.

Waiting: Patience and Power

Jesus commissioned his disciples to reach the world with his message. Think about that for a moment. These were men who had probably never gone more than a few hundred miles from the place of their birth. The fastest method of travel in those days was by boat or horse, and these methods were probably more expensive than they could afford. They were largely uneducated and poor. They lived as a despised people under Roman oppression. And they were

¹ Frank Laubach, *Letters from a Modern Mystic* (Syracuse, NY: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), p. 14.

told by Jesus to travel throughout the world, with no visible means of support, spreading the good news of God's salvation.

Then, as only Jesus could, he gave them the power needed to succeed. He promised them the Holy Spirit, who would work through them to achieve God's plan:

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For...in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:4-5, 8

The minds of the disciples must have been spinning. They had given up everything in order to follow this man around for the past three years. In the course of that time, they had managed to offend everyone they were not supposed to offend – the synagogue leaders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, even the Romans. And yet, through it all, they had learned that as long as Jesus was present with them, there was nothing to fear.

We can only imagine how stunned they were to hear Jesus say that he was going away (John 13:33). This caused no small amount of confusion and worry. But, as if that wasn't bad enough, Jesus went on to tell them that his departure would somehow be beneficial to them (John 16:7). While their heads were swimming over this strange notion, Jesus was taken away, tried and crucified. This was the end of their world. They were at a complete loss as to what their next move should be. However, three days later the most blessed event all of history occurred: Jesus came back from the dead. It was only natural for them to ask him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

But Jesus never really answered their question. Instead, he told them to wait – perhaps the hardest command he could have given under the circumstances. But, as William Barclay

wrote, “The apostles were enjoined to *wait* on the coming of the Spirit. We would gain more power and courage and peace if we learned to wait. In the business of life we need to learn to be still.... Amidst life’s surging activity there must be time to receive.”² Power from God comes, but it often takes its own sweet time.

A few important things about this passage can stimulate our thinking about empowerment. First, Jesus did not promise his disciples clout or influence. Rather, he promised them “power,” the only resource they really needed in order to succeed at the job he had given them. By promising to supply what they needed in order to succeed, Jesus empowered his followers.

Leaders can’t literally confer *power* upon others. Delegating authority without resources does not automatically empower others. Like Jesus, leaders can, however, supply the resources and create the conditions that allow people to develop the power they need to do their jobs. Effective leaders think in terms of “enablement,” “equipping” and “freedom” in order to empower their followers.

A second essential to effective empowerment may be observed by noting *when* the events of Acts 1:8 occurred. Jesus had spent three years educating these men to lead the church. Only at the point at which they could properly manage the resource did Jesus empower them. Jesus invested time and energy developing these leaders. *Then* he supplied what they needed to accomplish the task he had given them. The leader who offers empowerment too early sets up followers for failure. On the other hand, the leader who fails to empower capable people creates frustration. Leaders should empower only people who are prepared.

² William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 11.

Relationship with God: The Prerequisite to Power

Christianity is not a set of regulations and instructions but a life-giving relationship with the person by whom and for whom we were created. It is not a matter of telling us what to do. It is rather a matter of God empowering us to be the people we were meant to be. We cannot be the people we were created to be without the empowering touch of God's Holy Spirit in our lives.

In Romans 8, Paul makes it clear that, apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, no one has the power to please God. "The mind of sinful man is death...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (vv. 6-8). Only when "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in [us]" (v. 11) does it become possible for us to live in ways that are pleasing to God.

Christianity is unique among all other world religions. It is not a works system of salvation or growth but a relationship based upon grace. God's requirements are fulfilled not by our own efforts but by the Spirit of Christ who lives in us. Our assurance is not based on our own attainments but on the merits of Christ who intercedes for us (v. 34) and on the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit (vv. 15-17). Instead of performance-based acceptance, those who trust in Christ experience the unconditional acceptance offered by the Father who sent his Son on our behalf.

Not only is Christianity unique among world religions, but our heavenly Father is often very different from the earthly fathers we observe. Many of us were raised in a context of performance-based acceptance. The love we receive in such environments is conditional, and children who receive conditional love often feel as if their best efforts are never quite enough. Tragically, growing up in such an environment can hinder us from being able to trust God to be a

loving heavenly Father. There is a sense, then, in which we may need to be re-parented, having our minds renewed and our hearts opened to embrace the truth of God's character.

But God is not distant and disinterested, as many earthly fathers are. Instead, he is intimately involved (Psalm 145:18; Isaiah 50:7-9). God is the lover of our souls (Psalm 145:17; 1 Peter 2:25). Instead of being insensitive and uncaring, he is kind and compassionate (Psalm 103:132 Corinthians 1:3). Rather than stern and demanding, he is accepting and filled with joy and love (Romans 15:7; 1 John 4:8). Instead of being passive and cold, he is warm and affectionate (Deuteronomy 10:15; Psalm 117:2). Instead of being absent or too busy, he is always eager to be with us (Zephaniah 3:17; James 4:8). God is a faithful Father who runs to meet us if we will but turn toward him, preparing a feast in our honor (Luke 15:11-31). Never mean or cruel or abusive, he is loving, gentle and protective of us (Psalm 86:15; Isaiah 54:17). Rather than a stingy killjoy, he is trustworthy and delights in giving us good gifts for a rich and abundant life (James 1:17; Philippians 4:19). Instead of being controlling and manipulative, our God is full of grace and mercy (Hosea 11:8-9; Ephesians 2:4-5), even giving us the freedom to fail. His will is good, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2). Instead of being condemning and unforgiving, he is tender-hearted and forgiving (Psalm 86:5; Ephesians 1:7). His heart and his arms are always open to us (Jeremiah 29:11-14; Zechariah 1:3). Instead of being knit-picking, exacting and perfectionistic, he is committed to our growth, and he's proud of us as we grow (1 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 12:10). We are his beloved sons and daughters, and he is well pleased with us (Isaiah 43:4; 1 John 3:1).

As if all this wasn't enough, God now empowers us to participate in something that will last forever: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last" (John 15:16). I believe it is the deepest yearning of every human heart to

make a mark, to accomplish something that will endure. But if we give ourselves to temporal things, we will never live up to that desire. God, however, enters our world and invites us to invest in eternal things. The only things of this world that are eternal are God's Word and people. These two things will go on forever. As we invest God's Word in people, loving and serving them with eternal values at heart, we are capable of actually storing up treasure in heaven. Our lives can reverberate throughout eternity. Things done in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Christ will never be lost or forgotten.

Paul expressed this beautifully when he recounted,

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

In Romans 6, Paul outlines the gospel's revolutionary message and challenges his readers to realize what Jesus has done for them (vv. 1-10), to acknowledge it in their lives (v. 11) and to offer themselves to God as transformed people (vv. 12-23). In other words, the key to walking in newness of life is to grasp your new dignity and identity in Christ and to accept, by faith, what he says about our new nature. Our deepest essence is now identified with Christ in his death, burial, resurrection and ascension. Neil Anderson writes:

Being a Christian is not just a matter of getting something; it's a matter of being someone. A Christian is not simply a person who gets forgiveness, who gets to go to heaven, who gets the Holy Spirit, who gets a new nature. A Christian, in terms of our deepest identity, is a saint, a spiritually born child of God, a divine masterpiece, a child of light, a citizen of heaven. Being born again transformed you into someone who didn't exist before. What you receive as a Christian isn't the point; it's who you are. It's not what you do as a Christian that determines who you are; it's who you are that determines what you do.³

³ Neil T. Anderson, *Victory Over Darkness* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), p. 43.

Mentoring: Passing the Power to Others

As you look back over the course of the years, who are the people who have made significant investments in your life? In what ways have they empowered you? These people are to be treasured and cherished. It could be that you would not be where you are or have accomplished as much as you have without their guidance and assistance. These people should hear from you the thanks you owe them.

Conversely, what investments have you made in the lives of others? As we mature in the life of Christ, he calls us to turn and mentor others. As we have received instruction, guidance and encouragement from those who have come before us, we should be willing to extend ourselves for the sake of those who will follow us.

Paul was a man who personally equipped and empowered others, including his protégés Timothy and Titus. Not only did he lead these men to the Lord, but he also disciplined and equipped them. As a mentor, Paul encouraged and trained Titus. His letter to Titus illustrates Paul's training. Paul followed through on his instructions for the appointment of elders by providing Titus with a checklist of qualifications to use in the process (Titus 1:5-9; cf. 1 Timothy 3). Titus accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey, and the apostle sent this "partner and fellow worker" (2 Corinthians 8:23) to Corinth on three separate occasions during that period. Following Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment, he took Titus to Crete and left him there to strengthen the ministry on that island (Titus 1:5).

It's interesting to see the differences between Paul's correspondence with Timothy and his correspondence with Titus. Though written at approximately the same time, Paul's first letter to Timothy is more personal and less official than his letter to Titus. Titus needed clear instructions, but Timothy also needed personal encouragement. Thus, Paul encouraged his

trusted associate Timothy to stand firm in the faith and not to be fearful or intimidated. Paul *instructed* Titus to “encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you” (2:15) but *encouraged* Timothy not to “let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.... Fight the good fight of faith.... Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care” (1 Timothy 4:12; 6:12, 20). As Paul’s relationships with Titus and Timothy demonstrate, empowerment must be adapted to the needs of the individual.

Prepared for Power

We began our look at empowerment in Acts 1. Here Luke records history’s greatest moment of empowerment. Since this event is so important for us to understand, let’s look at another account of it:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:18-20

When Jesus empowered his disciples, he provided helpful principles for empowerment. First, Jesus let them know that he possessed the power to transfer to them (v. 18). Second, he commissioned them to use the power for specific purposes, which he dearly defined (vv. 19-20). Third, he assured them that he would be there to back them up (v. 19). Fourth, he prepared them before delegating the authority to them (v. 20). Fifth, he held them accountable for how they used his power (Matthew 24:4-51; 25:14-30).

The disciples enjoyed the assurance that their leader – Jesus – stood behind them all the way, supporting them and providing what they needed for the task ahead. Similarly, leaders

need assurance that the authority of their organization stands behind them, even through failure, so that they may be enabled to lead their teams effectively. It is virtually impossible to lead without that support.

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus tell a story about a promising junior executive at IBM who got involved in a risky venture for the company and ended up losing 10 million dollars. He was called into the office of Tom Watson, Sr., the founder and leader of IBM for 40 years.

The junior executive, overwhelmed with fear and guilt, blurted out, “I guess you’ve called me in for my resignation. Here it is. I resign.”

Watson replied, “You must be joking. I just invested 10 million dollars educating you; I can’t afford your resignation.”⁴

How many times had Jesus had a similar conversation with his disciples, especially Peter? Jesus invested his life, his teaching, revelations, miracles, his death, his resurrection in this rag-tag band of followers. He let them know that even through failure and doubt, he wasn’t about to accept their resignation. The apostle Paul knew “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

Trusting Enough to Empower

Leaders do more than merely point people in the right direction; they empower them to do the job. In John 16:5-15, the disciples were distressed because Jesus had informed them that he would soon be leaving. After experiencing his physical presence for more than three years, they could scarcely imagine life without his voice, touch and gaze. Jesus understood their feelings. But he knew that it was to their advantage for him to leave. Why? Because only in his absence could the Holy Spirit empower them. Jesus would physically depart, but he wouldn’t abandon

⁴ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 76.

his disciples. He would empower them with the Spirit to be his “witnesses...to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Jesus understood what every skilled leader knows – that more will be accomplished when power is dispersed than when it is hoarded. As Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus observed, “Leadership is not so much the exercise of power itself as the empowerment of others. Leaders are able to translate intentions into reality by aligning the energies of the organization behind an attractive goal.”⁵

Jesus cast a vision of what his disciples were to do and then trained them to do it. But more than that, he gave them the power needed to bring the vision into reality. His Spirit worked through their unique personalities and skills to touch the world with the Good News.

Though the concept of empowerment has only recently gained recognition among the business community, it is hardly new to the community of faith. From the very beginning, God has selected and empowered his people to minister to those around them. After Jesus’ promise of empowerment from on high, his followers experienced this power on the Day of Pentecost. These uneducated early disciples effectively served their world and each other in ways they had not thought possible (see Acts 2:41-47).

Like them, we are empowered people. The same Holy Spirit who empowered those early followers of Christ, empowers us to serve and enrich our world today. However, empowerment is not merely the availability of power; it is an active term. It refers to the giving of authority and responsibility from one in charge to a subordinate. In business, empowerment happens when a manager delegates part of his or her responsibility for decision making to subordinates and then actually allows them to exercise that authority. In a church setting, empowerment happens when

⁵ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1985), pp. 224-225.

church leaders delegate responsibility for ministry to their people and actually allow them to execute it.

Empowering others is exactly what leadership is all about. As leaders, our role is not to control those under us but to empower them by granting them permission to become engaged in service. This is a difficult task for many leaders because it entails giving up control. Leaders who empower others must trust those others to carry out their duties. They may stumble under the weight of their new responsibilities, but we will never advance God's purposes for our world without empowered people. Consequently, we cannot empower people to serve unless we are all willing to take the risks involved.