

A Spiritual Cancer Called Leadership Identity Crisis (LIC)

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One of the key issues for leaders to determine is whether their identity is rooted in the approval of God or man. Without this foundational element properly placed in our hearts, we risk placing ourselves on the bench. Our identities should rest squarely on who we are in Christ. Simply put, we are His. Understanding this at the heart level is profoundly important.

I remember being challenged by the Lord after leaving my engineering position in Chicago to pursue my calling to the ministry. I spent a year at a Bible institute and then was led to seminary. During the first semester the Lord moved powerfully in my life and called me to surrender my pursuit of an advanced degree I thought I needed. It was not a trivial decision. Eighteen months prior, I had surrendered my professional career to pursue my calling and now it appeared I could no longer prepare for what I had sensed the Lord calling me to do. If I stepped out of seminary, I would no longer be a seminary student pursuing a Masters of Divinity degree. If I gave that up, what would I be then? What would people say?! You get the picture.

First of all, my identity had been based upon what I did, rather than whose I was. I was confronted by the fact that I wasn't *what I did*, even if what I did was ministry. I was His. That was good enough. The Lord was calling me to sit at His feet and revealed that the hunger and thirst that I had for Him was the better part and, like Mary, I would not be denied. I was being given a personal invitation to sit at the Master's feet and learn from Him—and I almost missed it. He was giving me the desire of my heart. The Master was calling. He is always calling us.

For years I had read the Bible and had yearned for the experiences that the disciples had with Jesus when He walked on the earth. He walked with them. He talked with them. He ate with them. They learned to know Him. They saw Him demonstrate His power. I had wanted that, but now I was faced with a very painful choice. Either I would follow God and submit to Him, or follow my agenda and my desires that would give me the accolades of men. John illustrates this type of temptation in Jn 12:42-43.

His call for me to surrender seminary training was a call to die to approval of men and a false identity. Men normally want titles, position and ranks of power. An identity based upon these things wreaks havoc on those called to the ministry and brings compromise, impeding the Lord's will. The consequences can be devastating. In short, it is a spiritual cancer that prevents us from fulfilling our calling. There is nothing we do in ministry that LIC won't touch. Ultimately, if left unchecked, it will cause us to be benched, stripped of our spiritual authority and responsibilities.

I remember a pastor friend who had been in the ministry for 30 years telling me that while he working as an associate pastor, he would do almost anything to be recognized and promoted. This flies in the face of Jesus' teaching that those who would be leaders must be the servants of all (Mk 9:35). It is impossible for anyone called to the ministry to surrender their position when their identity rests in the status that is available in their church, denomination or community. Leaders of the Church must find their rest in the fact that they work for Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the flock. The Lord is The One who places them in their positions of ministry. Ministers of the Gospel are called and sent by Jesus, not man. When our identity rests in the approval of men, there is no rest.

Another example comes from a letter I received from a leader of a para-church ministry saying they were struggling because they were without pastoral covering, which in his mind threatened his ability to minister. He recounted how he had demonstrated his loyalty to a new church by attending their services and won the "gracious" approval of the pastors who agreed to provide a covering for him. How tragic! Where in the Scripture does a ministry stand or fall based upon whether or not it has a man's approval?! The doctrine of "spiritual covering" is nothing short of a diabolical heresy! With demonic roots, it has been subtly crafted by men who desire to control what they were never called to control. What spiritual covering did Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, David and countless others have? It was the Lord Himself! It was not man or some ecclesiastical governing "authority".

Let's take it further. What about John the Baptist? The Scripture says clearly that **he was a man sent by God** (Jn 1:6). What of Peter and John? Men did not make them leaders of the Church. No! It was the Lord Himself who called, appointed and sent them out in the power of the Holy Spirit. Praise God they understood that, because they would stand in front of the religious "leaders" of their day proclaiming – "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

Again in Acts 5 we see the Apostles taking their stand against the religious leaders declaring, "We must obey God rather than men" (Ac 5:29). Their identity rested squarely upon the One who had called them and given His life for them. We have one God and Savior, Jesus Christ. What about Paul? If there was a question about Paul and his ministry, he made it clear when he boldly declared, "Paul, an apostle, **not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead**" (Ga 1:1 NASB; emphasis mine, punctuation altered for clarity).

When we have been called and sent by the Lord, with the revelation and message that His Holy Spirit has given, we have all the authority AND spiritual covering we need. We have been entrusted with a mission. We minister in His name. When we give another the authority over that which He has entrusted to us, we cut ourselves off from the True Vine. When we surrender our God-given authority and responsibility to men, we prove ourselves to be unfaithful stewards. Until we die to the approval of man, which is

rooted in the fear of man, we cannot be who He has called us to be, nor can we do what He has called us to do.

Scripture teaches that the fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted (Pr 29:25). We see how serious the matter is to the Holy Spirit when He rebukes Peter through Paul in public concerning his hypocrisy among Gentile believers when the party of the circumcision comes to call (Ga 2:11-21). The fear of man drove Peter to relinquish his freedom and the freedom of others. Paul exerted his God-given authority to call sin out in Church leadership no matter who it was. If Paul had not done so, we would not have the truth that is set forth so plainly in the Scripture. The Lord's truth flows through those called by His Spirit and refuse to relinquish their responsibility given to them! They will not compromise!

On the other hand, I've also witnessed those powerfully gifted in the Lord sideline themselves as they struggle for position and/or recognition in the ministry. On the flip-side of abdicating responsibility, there are those that fight for position. This is but another symptom of spiritual cancer, LIC, deeply rooted in the heart. I've observed leaders fight for their way in leadership meetings, pushing and shoving, attempting to secure what they believe is their rightful position in the Church. Their actions betray them; they care nothing for the Church. They care about position and title. They are addicted to the approval of men. They actively destroy the bond of peace within fellowships. They delight in airing their opinions and demanding that people listen to them and their point of view. They reject Ja 3:17, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy."

They operate in the flesh, they scratch, they claw, they bicker, they backbite, they argue, they fight for position, they leverage organizational politics and wonder why they aren't blessed by the Lord. They have never learned that true promotion comes from the Lord (Ps 75:7; 1 Pt 5:6) and not the power brokers they believe they must appease or find a way around.

As a result their lives are out of order and their homes are anything but places of peace. These are those that muddy the waters for others and trample what should be green pasture for the flock. Lord rebukes them in Ezekiel 34:17–23 (NASB95) –

17"As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats.

18'Is it too slight a thing for you that you should feed in the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pastures? Or that you should drink of the clear waters, that you must foul the rest with your feet?

19'As for My flock, they must eat what you tread down with your feet and drink what you foul with your feet!'"

20Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them, "Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

21"Because you push with side and with shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns until you have scattered them abroad,

22therefore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey; and I will judge between one sheep and another.

23“Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd.

Consequently, they become angry and bitter, blaming everyone but themselves for their inability to move forward in their calling.

We must rest in the truth that we are His and that His approval is all that matters. Only then can we be entrusted with true riches and authority in the Kingdom. Paul's freedom to do the will of God was founded on the truth that he did not have to earn the approval of man. This is where the rest in our calling flows from. Either we will seek the approval of God or man. We must choose. Either Jesus is Lord of our lives or He isn't. Either we will find our identity in Jesus alone and say what He would have us say, or we will compromise the message and ministry He entrusts to us in order to gain the favor of man. Having our identity squarely resting in Jesus is **the key** to proclaiming the message He entrusts to us.

Placement in the Kingdom is performed by the Holy Spirit. All of nature declares that He is the God of precision. We will be precisely placed if we trust Him who is the Lord of the Church.

Are you struggling to be noticed? He notices you. You have trusted Him with your life. Why not trust Him with your ministry and cry out for Him to establish your identity squarely in Him? Your ministry is not dependent upon man or an agency of men. It is solely dependent upon the Lord Jesus Christ. If you will surrender, He will set you free from the approval of man and entrust you with His ministry. You are His. You will find your rest in Him and Him only. He will make a way for you (Jn 15:16). How do I know? Jesus said, “I am **the way**, the truth and the life.” (Jn 14:6)

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