

**For Such a Time as This:
A Situational Model of Leadership**

by William D. Dobbs*

Leadership is the challenge of the hour. Leadership in the church in the 21st century demands responsiveness to change. Situations change. Ministry opportunities change. Persons who would provide leadership in the context of change can benefit greatly from knowledge of how other leaders have dealt with change. For those of us in the religious community, we often begin with biblical leaders and then look to more contemporary models. The current model of choice seems to be Servant leadership, but I believe there are other models that are equally valid. I propose to reflect on the leadership of Moses as a different model of leadership. We will examine other biblical examples to see how they relate to the model and then discuss this model in light of current leadership theory.

Moses as the Archetype

The first thing we discover as we read the book of Exodus is that there is a crisis affecting God's chosen ones who had come to Egypt with Jacob. This is the first criterion of Situational leadership. Some crisis must arise which causes those who know God's name to cry out for God's deliverance. This cry for deliverance is, I believe, the second criteria. It implies a realization that self-sufficiency doesn't work, repentance, and a willingness to renew the covenant. In Egypt, the sons of Israel and their descendants "groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exodus 2:23c-24 NRSV).

Even as the Israelites were crying for deliverance, God took notice of their plight and began to prepare a leader for them. From Moses' birth, God was preparing him for the task of leadership that lay ahead. The infancy narrative and the early career of Moses all contribute to making Moses the kind of person who could speak to Pharaoh and survive the wilderness for 40 years. This is not to suggest that God's power and presence did not play an integral part in Moses' ministry post "burning-bush." It is meant to state that God's gift of life experiences is the third criteria for a Situational leader.

All of which brings us to the call of Moses and three more criteria for a Situational leader. We begin with the Divine-human encounter. "The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses" (Ex. 3:2 NRSV). In Moses' case, this angelic appearance came in the form of a bush that was burning, but not consumed by

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the flame. As Moses turned aside to see why the bush was not burned up, he experienced the miraculous authentication of God's call. To which, Moses responded, "Here I am" (Ex. 3:4 NRSV). This personal response to God's call then becomes the sixth criteria for a Situational leader.

A seventh criterion for a Situational leader also becomes visible in Moses' call experience: the leader's willingness to step outside the box of conventional thinking. We see that in Moses' turning aside to look at the burning bush. We see that in his appearances before Pharaoh. And we see that in his wilderness trials with the stiff-necked and stubborn people he had led to freedom through the sea. Moses is not bound by the things that "have always been done that way." And, in the end, Moses is not bound by the image he has of himself. He does try to keep the shackles of impossibility firmly in place, but God will have none of that and, in the end, Moses was indeed able to get beyond his own vision of himself. So there are two subsets of this criterion: 1) the ability to see reality in new ways, and 2) the ability to see oneself with new eyes.

Following Moses acceptance of God's call we find the next three criteria of the biblical model. In verse seven, we discover God giving Moses a vision for his life, his ministry. He would be the one whom God used to lead God's people to freedom. This vision would require Moses' being willing to go where God led, to be faithful to God when the going got rough, and to trust God when he could not see the way clearly. In addition to a vision, God also gave Moses a promise that God would be with him. Moses would not be alone. He could go wherever he was led, even into Pharaoh's palace, secure in the knowledge that God was with him and God's power was in him. He was not promised a journey without difficulties. He was promised that God would give him whatever he needed to do God's will. His was the confidence of a Paul who was "sure that nothing in all creation could separate him from God's love" (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV). God gave him others as well, to walk beside him in the journey: Aaron, Hur, Jethro, Joshua and Miriam all served to strengthen Moses in his leadership role. Some gave him advice, some gave him a supporting arm, and some joined him in song but all were instruments of God in Moses' life. And finally, there is a spiritual relationship or intimacy between God and the human leader God has called "for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14 NRSV).

In summary, then, we find 10 criteria for a Situational leader in the biblical account of Moses:

- 1) Presence of a Crisis
- 2) Cry for deliverance
- 3) Gift of life's experiences
- 4) The Divine-Human encounter

- 5) Divine authentication of the call
- 6) Human response to God's call
- 7) Willingness to step outside the box.
- 8) Vision.
- 9) Promise or Assurance.
- 10) Spiritual Relationship or Intimacy.

To this list, we need to add an eleventh criterion that would be true for every model. There needs to be the authentication of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22 NRSV). In any authentic biblical leadership model, we can look backward in time and see the evidence of God's handiwork. Unlike Abimelech (Judges 9ff.) who gave no evidence of God's Spirit in his leadership and quickly lost his power and his life, biblical leaders demonstrate the ability to stay the course and give evidence of God's continued affirmation. In the Moses model of Situational leadership, God's authentication is visible in the continual demonstrations of God's power from the court of Pharaoh to the top of Mount Sinai. God authenticated Moses' leadership in the sight of the people. Moses' was God's leader for that moment and those people.

Other Examples of the Situational Leadership model.

Many of the leaders named in the Hebrew Scriptures demonstrated some of the criteria but not necessarily all. For example, Judges 6 and following tell the story of Gideon. The Israelites were being oppressed by the Midianites, who were confiscating the food necessary for the survival of the people. They had done what was evil and finally came to their senses and cried out to the Lord. God appeared to Gideon while he was at work and called him to a divine task or vision. God authenticated that call and confirmed that God would be with Gideon (v.16). While we do not know much about Gideon's life experiences that prepared him for God's call, except that he was the son of Joash the Abiezrite, we do know that he "did as the Lord told him" (v.27). Gideon demonstrated an ongoing relationship with God. And there is the evidence of the fruit as Gideon and his small band of 300 prevailed over "the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east" (7:12 NRSV).

Or again, the story of Jephthah the Gileadite illustrates some of the criteria for a Situational leader. Consider: "the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (Judges 10:6 NRSV) and then repented and "put away the foreign gods from among them and worshipped the Lord" (v.16). While the call of Jephthah came from the elders of Gilead, the authentication came from God as Jephthah proved victorious. Jephthah demonstrated a trust in God and a relationship with God that culminated in his faithful keeping of his vow even at the cost of his daughter's life.

I believe that Deborah fits the pattern, even though God is not named in the usual way. Certainly she came forward in response to a call at a crisis

moment for the Hebrew people. The Israelites had again done "what was evil in the sight of the Lord" and they had "cried out to the Lord for help" (Judges: 4:2ff). And her prophecy of God's word for Barak, son of Abinoam, was authenticated by victory. This victory came because God sent the rain (Judges 5:4-5).

Or consider Queen Esther. Again, the name of God does not appear, but can there be any doubt that she was prepared by her life experiences and called by God's servant "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14 NRSV). The *Additions to the Book of Esther* in the Apocryphal Books does name God as the source of her leadership. However, the Esther account by itself leaves little doubt God is the power behind the scenes and the One who authenticates her leadership.

As we come forward in time to the period of the new covenant, we would have to alter the criteria in order to name Situational leaders from the followers of the Way. There is not a sense that the people recognized their sinfulness or their arrogance, repented of their actions, and cried out to God for deliverance. It is possible to find those, like Stephen in Acts 6, who respond to a call authenticated by God's Spirit and come forward for a specific time or situation. However, they do not give evidence of leading a group of God's people or acting of God's behalf to save the people, with the singular exception of the man from Nazareth. Let us look more closely at Jesus.

It may have been an intentional design to validate Jesus in Jewish eyes by the synoptic writers, but no other account of a New Testament personality so closely parallels the account of Moses' life. Beginning with the God-protected infancy narratives, the life stories of these two leaders offer many similarities. For Moses and Jesus, there are angelic appearances, divine authentications of a divine call, personal responses, and God-given visions for each one's message and ministry. And there can be no denying that Jesus' appearance in history came as a response to the sinfulness of the people. An interesting note in Luke's gospel is that Jesus also came into the public sphere at a time when the people were responding to a message of repentance proclaimed by the Baptizer. There is the image of both men calling the people to think "outside the box" of the ways the people had always done things as covenant people. Finally, there is that sense of conversational intimacy with God that so marked the leadership of these two central figures in the salvation history of God's people. To see these parallels is not new, of course. And there are many in the literature who would name Jesus as a Servant leader. I would like to suggest, however, that reading the gospels with an Old Testament filter allows one to posit that Jesus is also the chief example of a Situational leader in the New Testament. Truly, Jesus was a leader for such a time as his.

Situational Leadership in Contemporary Leadership Models.

From looking at Moses and Jesus as Situational leaders, I would like to move forward in time to reflect on a contemporary model and then suggest several principles of Situational leadership that would be available to the reader. The thinking in this portion of the article has been influenced by the work of Robert Quinn: *Change the World*, and the trio of Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James Furr: *Leading Congregational Change, a Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey*.

An examination of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life reveals several similarities to the criteria we have already established: First, King was prepared by his life circumstances for the moment of his call. His birth, his early education, his formal training and his natural gifts of intellect and personality all conspired to prepare him for a public ministry which could bridge the gap and speak to both the "palace of Pharaoh" and the people of his birth. King could speak with eloquence in the language of those who held the power, and King could speak to the hearts of those in bondage. Secondly, there was a "burning bush" moment in King's life. Rosa Parks would not take her usual place in the back of the bus and King turned aside from his pastoral work to play a pivotal role in leading the successful Montgomery boycott. I would suggest that God called Martin in those days and Martin stepped forward, all without fully knowing where the journey would lead. Further, I would suggest that God had given King a vision of the possible future into which he would lead his people. God even allowed King to echo Moses' words and feelings at having been to the "mountain top" to see a future he would never enter. And, by King's own words, God strengthened him in those moments when his own people murmured against him:

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter..." And almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm... I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life.¹

There is also evidence of the fruit of King's leadership. Even he was allowed to see some of the changes that his leadership brought forth. He got to experience some victories as well as the struggle. And there is something else...

another criteria which has become evident by looking backward from King through Jesus to Moses. Each of these Situational leaders was able to commit themselves totally to something that would take them away from their usual places of comfort and familiarity. They would each commit themselves to a vision that ultimately claimed their lives. It was not death or martyrdom that they sought, however. They simply gave themselves over to the power of the vision and the leadership of God. Finally, like the other leaders we have mentioned, M.L. King had a deep and intimate relationship with God. He had a consciousness of being where God intended him to be.

We have looked briefly at several persons in history, ancient and modern, as we have considered Situational leadership. Is there anything we can apply to ourselves in all this? Are we Situational leaders? Do we even want to be? What contemporary leadership principles carry over from the biblical models?

I do not believe we choose to be Situational leaders. I do believe that we can choose to respond to God's call, and, depending on the circumstances, may be seen to have been a Situational leader. I believe that God is already at work in us, by the means of grace, to equip us for leadership. I do not mean to suggest that each one of us will be a Moses or Martin Luther King, but I am convinced that God is preparing us for our moment to respond to God's call. Family of origin, early childhood experiences, life lessons and opportunities for learning, successes and failures all contribute to making us who we are at a given moment in time. Some of us will not recognize God's handiwork; some of us will not know God's name. Some of us will not know the situation to which we are being called. We will not have heard the cries of the people. But there will come a moment (or moments) when we will have an opportunity to "turn aside and see this thing" which God is doing outside the ordinary of our experience. It will require us to make a commitment to leave the comfort of our cultural "safe place" and follow the leading of our God-given vision and be true to our God-shaped values. Many us will not be able to leave our flocks or family business or even our holy work. Some of us will be so preoccupied with self that we will not even see the burning bushes or hear the voice from the wilderness. But for those who do, their lives will never be the same. They will be invited into a closer relationship with God that will strengthen them for the difficult moments and days ahead. And they will see the evidence of God's hand upon their witness. People will be influenced. Lives will be changed. The Kingdom will come closer and God will be glorified.

Endnotes

1 Quinn, Robert E. *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Accomplish Extraordinary Results*. 2000. Jossey-Bass Inc. P. 56

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