

## **Reflections on Acts 2 Leadership**

### **By Bob Young**

*[Note: These reflections were written shortly after reading David Young's book, New Day]*

In a study of leadership, the Old Testament is filled with interesting and helpful principles of leadership before we ever come to the book of Acts. It is good to understand principles of leadership in the Old Testament and in the Gospels, but if we want to understand leadership in the context of the first century church, the book of Acts is a good place to begin.

In Acts 2, the apostles were the first leaders, although the 120 were also people of influence. Eventually we read about others who provided leadership. We often struggle in the church today because of a lack of leadership. Where are those who are out in front, going ahead, advancing, showing the way, serving as examples, mentoring? These are the actions that are at the heart of a biblical definition of leadership, both practically and biblically.

Who has dreamed of what God dreams of, who has adopted God's purpose as his purpose, who is focused on God's plan? Without such leaders, it is difficult to align congregational resources around the focus, plan, and purpose of God. It is hard to rally God's people who desperately want to know God and follow Him. It is hard to find warriors who will fight for the dream. The first step toward the future has to do with the leaders—those who see and move boldly to see God's dream come to life.

In the contemporary church, the model for leaders is often focused on management, budgets, buildings, staffing, and endless lists. We have people in a role rather than in an action. We must learn the differences between maintenance, management, ministry and mission.

The Acts 2 leaders set the pace. They had an intimate knowledge of Jesus, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They actively brought people to faith in Christ through repentance and baptism. They exemplify the mission of the church in its early days.

These leaders were also acutely aware of the ministry God had given to them specifically. When a problem arose in Acts 6, the early leaders (apostles) refused to leave their own ministry. Leaders are committed to fulfilling their own ministry, not the ministry of everyone else. An important biblical principle for leaders: do you own ministry. When the need for a new ministry arose, the people chose others for the ministry, because the leaders already had a ministry in the word and in prayer. They also had a ministry in preaching, and eventually Stephen and Philip followed them in that ministry. The leaders were out in front—proclaiming, teaching, facing problems.

In the church today, in many places, we have a leadership crisis. Without leaders who are God's leaders, the church cannot excel. The church cannot surpass its leaders. When the leaders are focused on maintenance and management, the church will reflect the same priorities. When the leaders constantly talk about mission and ministry, the church will adopt the same mindset.

A related problem is the system of leadership we have developed in many churches of Christ. The system doesn't work, it is toxic and often ineffective for accomplishing God's mission; and, it is discouraging. It is misfocused. Why do not our churches flourish? Many times, the answer is the system of leadership we have developed. Our governance is killing us.

First of all, in many cases we are not choosing leaders who are personally committed to and involved in helping the church reach out aggressively to the world. We are not choosing people of the word, people of prayer, people of evangelism, people of ministry.

Second, we have put our leaders in a "committee box." We confuse the leadership group, the leaders, and leadership. The first committee many churches have is the "eldership committee."

Committees generally offer poor leadership (and often, poor management). Variations of the word leader appear more than 200 times in the Bible, but never is there a mention of a committee. The only mention of the elders acting together comes with Timothy's anointing. I am not certain eldership is an adequate translation that communicates what was happening in that biblical text. The way the word is used in many churches today, eldership really means elder committee (as a group).

Committees have trouble developing long-range blueprints, master strategies for reaching the world, and bold aggressive plans that will make disciples of all the nations. In the place of leaders, our elderships end up with bureaucracy, group-think, delegation to maintenance tasks, and more committees.

It is time to go on offense. This is not about protecting what we already have and know, this is about winning the world for Christ. The Acts 2 leaders went everywhere, acting boldly to be witnesses, even to the end of the earth. Why does the church have so much trouble today in duplicating the witness to the ends of the world? Why is it so hard to develop multiplying disciples and multiplying churches in every place? Why is it so hard to advance the kingdom, the work and the mission God has given his people, to take the whole world for Christ? Leaders are those who help people move from here to there. Our "there" is to capture God's vision, to inspire the church, to sacrifice for the vision, and to fight to make it a reality.

We need a new system. We need new structures. We need fresh leadership. We are blocked with unbiblical expectations. We have a tradition; and in most congregations, we have trouble escaping that tradition.

Six important ideas for leaders: develop a vision consistent with God's mission, develop leaders to help reach the vision, identify the objectives for the vision, share the vision, implement the vision, continually assess and re-vision.

First, develop a vision. God's leaders continually ask themselves the question, "What is God calling this church to do for his mission to reach the whole world for Jesus?" God is the one who defines the mission; local churches must identify the strategies. Said another way, God has already given the church the "what"—the salvation of the world, the church must identify the "how" on the basis of its own ministry context and opportunities. Identify the vision, be specific, get on offense to win the world for Christ! Along the way, the church is going to be involved in some related areas of service and ministry, always keeping in mind the primary goal.

For example, the local church that keeps God's mission in mind is going to ask itself how it should address matters such as these: the turn away from God and the increasing godliness and evil in our nation, the decline of the church in US society (in numbers and in influence), the move toward defining Christianity by membership more than discipleship, the move away from evangelism in the church, the need to renew discipleship, how to develop disciple-making disciples, and how to deal with the lack of concern for those who are spiritually lost.

A big, broad vision will lead to startling new missions and ministries, yielding new solutions.

Second, identify the people. Appoint those who will be in charge and accountable, make them responsible for goals, objectives, strategy, and effective use of resources. Insist on accountability. Identifying those who will be responsible for bringing the vision to reality requires two things. The goal must be important in the vision and overall purpose of the church; the person must see the goal as important. The person should be chosen based on gifts or abilities to bring the project to fruition. Get the right person(s) at the helm for each project that is part of the vision. In a local church, this will

include the preacher, the leaders (official and unofficial), and those who will take responsibility for specific parts of the vision.

Third, develop the strategy. The strategy must be more than a general idea of how the church is going to function or proceed. The strategy must be fleshed out with objectives and specific plans that will be used to bring the vision to reality. The process is vision, people, strategy. The people who have been charged with bringing the vision to reality must develop a strategic plan. The strategic plan must include funding methods. Funding is tied to strategy. General funding is difficult to find. Funding that will be devoted to specific causes and actions is easier to find. The strategies that will be employed are diverse and depend on the context. Each local church must determine the strategies that are consistent with the ministry context.

Fourth, sell the vision and the plan. Bringing the vision to reality by implementing the plan will require resources, both financial and human. People must be brought “on board.” The beginning place for advancing the vision is in the problems that the church faces, not the proposed solution. Many church members do not have any preference about the vision or specific strategies, but they share concerns about the problems. The vision must be tied to the problems, the vision must make clear how the problems will be solved by implementing the strategies and the plan. “This is one way to solve the problems” is a beginning point for selling the vision and the plan. An important part of selling the vision and the plan is to help others understand the process by which one can “buy in.” Be sure to listen. Sort out the best feedback and be willing to adjust the plan.

Fifth, implement the vision. It is now time for action. Action must include as many as possible and practical. Vision, plans, and strategies are not implemented by one person or a small group. One of the most obvious steps in implementation is funding. Give people the opportunity to share. When people willingly share, make certain that something happens relatively soon. Implementation is a process, but the first evidences of implementation must not be delayed. Much more is involved, but additional details are beyond the scope of this brief overview.

Finally, always assess, evaluate, and re-vision. Regardless of how good the vision may be, how capable the personnel in charge are, how effective the strategy is, how extensive is the buy-in, and how coordinated may be the implementation, there is always a need for continuous assessment, evaluation, and new dreaming. Many churches fail because they are still doing what they were doing 5, or 10, or 15 years ago. There has not been renewal, rethinking, redirection. A stale vision is soon perceived as lack of vision.

Leaders – those who constantly dream and develop new visions of the possibilities in our world, those who effectively identify the workers most capable of advancing the vision, those who insist on thoughtful and workable strategies that include accountability, those who can excite God’s people about the plan, those who understand the actions steps required for implementing new dreams, and those who are constantly open to hearing God’s word as it challenges us to new heights. These leaders will never lack for followers, for they are helping God’s people align their lives with God’s eternal plan and purpose.