

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (London), p. 122.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids), p. 26.
3. Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* Vol.1 (London), p. 226

4. Eugene H. Peterson, *Ibid.*, p. 15.
5. *Scotsman*, (5th. December, 1992).
6. Quoted in Keith W. Clement, *Faith* (London), p. 37

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Ezekiel's 'Leadership Training Seminar': Ezekiel 11-14

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Five years ago I spent many months expounding the book of Ezekiel on Sunday mornings at Godmanchester Baptist Church. Because of the sheer volume of the book I quite naturally divided it up into sizeable sections. However when it came to allocating a title for each section, the job was not always an easy one: especially in the case of Chapters 11-14. When I took a closer look at this section though, I was struck by the apparent emphasis on the theme of leadership. Different kinds of leaders were judged by God for unhelpfully influencing the people. The material I am going to share here is based on that teaching content.

In contrast to much 'leadership training' today I hope it succeeds in avoiding two potential pitfalls. The first is a focus on rather predictable well-worn passages of Scripture. Hopefully a fresh source can pour forth truth in a new and living way. Second, a lot of books and seminars on leadership today seem to concentrate on techniques (eg. relating management skills to church leadership). Valuable though this may be, character seems to be even more foundational and vital. Whether I have succeeded in these aims or not the reader must decide (and will! . . .). Let us begin by looking at each chapter through a slightly different 'leadership lens'. Chapter 11 begins by outlining the issue of lifestyle.

1. The Leader's Lifestyle: Alternative or Conforming?

As the curtain rises on chapter eleven the scene is set at the east gate of the Temple in Jerusalem. Twenty-five men are in the spotlight. Two of them, Jaazaniah and Pelatiah, are explicitly identified as 'leaders of the people' (verse 2). The remaining twenty-three are obviously 'influencers' of some kind, used to 'giving

advice in the city' (verses 2-3: of the wrong kind though! . . .). Pelatiah in particular dies abruptly (verse 13) as a sign of God's judgment upon the people—especially their leaders.

In effect then, a large number of people in the city were used to 'taking their cue' from this team of leaders. However if one acid-test of leadership is 'Who is following you?' a second is 'What kind of lead are you giving?' God's verdict on 'the Jerusalem 25' was that they had 'conformed to the standards of the nations around (them)' (verse 12).

Their lifestyle then was a bad example to the people of compromise—in thought, word and deed (as our Anglican brethren would say). God was well aware of their inner thoughts, not merely their words (verse 5): their mental processes were geared towards 'plotting evil' (verse 2). Speech-wise they were prone to 'giving wicked advice' (verse 3): contradicting God's word of judgment by encouraging the people to make themselves at home in the city. All twenty-five had initiated a 6th century BC version of 'The Killing Fields' in Jerusalem: 'You have killed many people in this city and filled its streets with the dead' (verse 7). All in all, this is not the kind of lifestyle worth emulating! In particular this group of leaders were saying that they 'belonged for good' in the city—unlike the people already exiled who were like the entrails and hooves of an animal: unfit for the pot! (verse 3). Because of their 'home sweet home' philosophy they were actively encouraging a boom in the house building industry. In practice though, such stability was reserved for them and not for the vast majority of inhabitants (many of whom had actually lost their lives!! . . .). Leadership always runs the risk of 'elitism': making sure we are catered for abundantly while others suffer deprivation. What a contrast to Paul and his team's leadership style:

'Death is at work in us (Paul, Timothy and others), but life is at work in you' (2 Cor. 4:12).

The key thought in this chapter is found in verse 12. Twice God has warned these leaders that they will know that he is the Lord (verses 10, 12) through judgment and exile. Why?—because 'you have not followed my decrees or kept my laws but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you' (verse 12). For example, both the Egyptian and Babylonian superpowers displayed a 'might is right' approach to international relations. This was reflected in the violent behaviour of the twenty-five leaders within the city of Jerusalem (verse 6). Jesus said that 'all who draw the sword will die by the sword' (Matt. 27:52 cf. verses 8, 10). The immediate impact of God's Word was the death of Pelatiah (verse 13). Serious compromise among leaders is not left unchecked! . . . In passing it is also good to note that not all the blame can be placed at the door of this group of influencers. The general populace was partly to blame for giving such credence to their lead. As Douglas Stuart comments, 'All societies . . . allow to rise to leadership the sorts of people who reflect, appeal to, and will carry out the values and expectations of the majority'.¹ In summary then 'the Jerusalem 25' refused to live an alternative lifestyle by following God's decrees and keeping his laws. Instead they let the world around squeeze them into its own mould. They conformed to godless standards and subsequently reaped the consequences. Paul's exhortation to all of God's people in the light of his mercy is this: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rom. 12:2). This is even more crucial for Christian leaders. For example, the apostle urged the newly planted church in Thessalonica 'to live lives worthy of God'. The basis of such an exhortation was his and Timothy's example of a lifestyle that was 'holy, righteous and blameless' (1 Thess. 2:10–12). Paul realized that a leader's example will always be followed to some extent—for better or for worse! . . .

The gods of our age are said to be 'money, sex and power' (in the words of Richard Foster).

Thus the church's credibility and God's reputation are damaged by financial scandals. A fellowship I previously served had one such episode in its history. The sexual misconduct of the Rev. Chris. Brain (Nine O'clock Service, Sheffield) did little to inspire a godly approach to sexuality among God's people. As for power, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'—even in the church sphere sometimes. So called mini-popes appear to exist regardless of denomination! No wonder James forthrightly said: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers my brothers because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly' (Jam. 3:1).

The first vital question addressed to leaders from Ezekiel 11 is this: Do we display radical obedience to God or merely 'ape' the world around us?

2. *The Leader's Authority: Use or Abuse?*

Ezekiel 12 focuses our attention, not on a sizeable group of leaders as previously, but on one individual: described throughout as 'the prince' (eg verses 10, 12). This term is regularly used in the book of the currently reigning king. Here it refers to Zedekiah, the puppet king installed by the Babylonians after the surrender of King Jehoiachin in 598 BC. A modern parallel would be the Soviet-appointed ruler in Kabul after the fall of Afghanistan to the USSR in 1978. Returning to Zedekiah, he was 'Babylon's man'. Despite this he eventually went south to Egypt for help in his difficulties. This was his eventual downfall—he was made to pay for his actions by Babylon and more importantly by the Lord himself (17:11ff). God-given authority used in a godless way!

The overall message of this particular chapter is that 'the prince' and his subjects will eventually go into exile—as symbolized by Ezekiel himself in verses 3–7. Judah was about to be destroyed as an independent state (at least for the time being). Despite the people's 'delaying tactics' (verses 22, 27) God's word would soon come to pass.

Considering this with an eye on the theme of leadership we can notice the following: according to the Bible all authority is God-given (eg Rom. 13:1–7). The question here though is this—how did Zedekiah use such authority in the course of his eleven year reign? Clearly he was an integral part of 'a rebellious people' (verse 2), and together with them was subject to God's judgment. Elsewhere his track-record is outlined in 2 Kings 24:19: 'he did evil in the eyes of the Lord'. Thus the people experienced God's anger in the form of exile. Zedekiah's reign represented an abuse of authority. . . .

Interestingly nothing explicit is said in this chapter about Zedekiah's behaviour. However, if the proverb 'like father like son' is true, so is its corollary 'like monarch like subject'. There are clear hints of the impact of Zedekiah's rule in the lifestyle of his people: In relation to their fellow city-dwellers the people are described as engaged in widespread 'violence' (verse 19). Even the leaders among God's people are not immune from this! (cf. 11:6). With respect to their God they are portrayed as unbelieving, relegating the fulfilment of his word to the distant future (verses 21–28). The king had obviously done nothing to stop the perverse proverb of verse 22 from gaining credence among the people—'The days go by and every vision comes to nothing'. Above all though, Jerusalem's inhabitants are described four times as 'rebellious' (verses 2, 3, 9, 25): they hear God's voice but refuse to listen (verse 2). In part this may well be a reflection of the rebellious nature of their monarch. In Zedekiah's day God was clearly using Babylon for his purposes of

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judgment (and eventual blessing). The king however responded by trying to 'throw off' God's purposes by seeking help from Egypt. The outcome for him personally?: death in exile (verse 13).

A 'rebellious house' (verses 3, 9, 25) and a rebellious prince over it. God-given authority misused by resisting the Lord and his sovereign purposes. 'Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

Sadly authority can be wrongly used in church leadership too. Jesus warned the twelve apostles of the danger of using authority to 'lord it over' people (Mark 10:42ff). His example was sacrificial servant-leadership. One of the twelve, Peter, reiterated the same message thirty years later: he urged the elders of the Asia Minor churches to shepherd God's flock, 'not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock' (1 Pet. 5:3). Paul too displayed this kind of leadership, lifting the Corinthians up by lowering himself (2 Cor. 11:7)—unlike the bogus apostles who elevated themselves by putting others down (2 Cor. 11:20).

Authoritarianism is still a problem in the church at the end of the twentieth century. 'Heavy shepherding' may be a phrase from the 70s and 80s that is now out of vogue. The reality though is still alive and kicking! At root the vital question is: Do we dominate people or serve them? Even those with authority in the political realm in the UK are called 'Ministers'; the top person being 'Prime Minister'. To create an important balance Christians are encouraged to 'obey your leaders and submit to their authority' (Heb. 13:17). This assumes though a godly use of God-given authority (NB the qualifications for leaders in 1 Tim. 3:1–13). A summary of biblical teaching on this issue could be: 'authority from above to serve from below' . . .

To close on a note of encouragement, Ezekiel doesn't focus negatively on Zedekiah and then leave us in the doldrums. Later he speaks of another 'prince' to come, his servant David (34:23–24)—clearly a reference to the Lord Jesus. Unlike Zedekiah he is described in submissive terms as 'my servant'. He also displays the gentle qualities of a shepherd who will 'tend them'. There is hope for a godly use of authority—both in the coming of Jesus himself and in his appointed leaders. A second key question then is: How do we handle God-given authority?

3. The Leader's Message: True or False?/Occasionally Unpopular or Popular?

The next chapter highlights the role of 'the prophets of Israel' (verse 2)—both male and female (verses 17ff). They exercised leadership by bringing the word of the Lord to his people. In Ezekiel's day there were a few prophets who faithfully brought God's word. However there were many others who had over-active imagina-

tions and so led the people astray. The latter were represented as those who whitewash flimsy walls! (verses 10–16). Conversely the true prophet Ezekiel warned of God tearing the wall down—and them too. . . . (verses 13–16).

Two contrasting messages emerge in this chapter: the 'soft' prophecy of peace (verse 10) and the 'tough' prophecy of judgment (verse 13). In all generations the first is liable to get a greater following: palatable peace is preferable to juggernaut justice! Fascinatingly too, both kinds of message are prefaced by 'God says' (cf. verse 7 and verse 13). It is probably helpful to survey this chapter by asking three questions of these prophets and their respective messages: What is the source, the content, and the effects of these purported words from God?

The source of the false prophet's message is 'out of their own imagination' (verses 2, 17). Essentially they 'follow their own spirit and have seen nothing' (verse 3)—despite their many claims to visions (verses 6, 7, 8, 9, 16). For the true prophet however, 'the word of the Lord came to me' (verse 1). It was received from above, not generated from within! Ezekiel then could confidently say, '. . . this is what the sovereign Lord says' (verse 8, 13). Leaders need to watch out for the dangers of an over-fertile imagination, checking that they are always under the authority of the revealed word of God in Scripture.

Content-wise the two sets of messages are poles apart: peace where there is no peace (verses 10, 16) and fierce judgment and wrath (verses 13ff). One false, the other true. One unfulfilled (despite expectations!—verse 6), the other fulfilled. Judgment executed will eventually prove beyond doubt that he is the Lord (eg verses 9, 14, 21, 23). 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating.' There is good news of salvation but it is always preceded by the call to repentance (verse 22). Practically speaking leaders need to be wary of 'papering over the cracks'—even for reasons of apparent kindness. A fresh coat of Dulux exterior paint is a waste of time for a house about to disappear through subsidence.

The effects too of both kinds of message are instructive: False messages bring bogus security (verses 10, 13) and eventually ensnare people (verses 18, 20). The truth may hurt on occasions but it alone brings ultimate liberty: 'Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free' (John 8:32). According to Ezekiel an absence of truth disheartens the righteous and encourages the wicked (verse 32). The former shouldn't have experienced grief. The latter need to experience what Paul described in 2 Corinthians 7:10: 'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret . . .'

So what is the leadership issue in Ezekiel 13? Basically it concerns what we convey to others verbally.

Leaders are often sensitive-hearted people with a genuine concern for others, coupled with a desire to be liked. This desire, although understandable, can be a snare: gaining popularity through a distortion of the truth, making the word more palatable in order to 'win friends and influence people'.

Probably the closest parallel in the New Testament is Paul's charge to his trainee leader Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1-5. The context in which his 'second lieutenant' is to preach the Word is one in which 'men . . . will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear' (verse 3). Fairy stories will be the order of the day! (verse 4). With this as a backdrop and in the light of our being judged by the coming Lord Jesus, Paul's charge is simple: 'Preach the Word' (verse 2). This Word was not generated in Timothy's imagination—rather it was 'the pattern of sound teaching' received from Paul (2 Tim. 1:13). In Ezekiel's day and Paul's the issues are much the same—the soft message of the majority (eg 'a great number of teachers'—2 Tim. 4:4) or the tough message of the minority (Ezekiel and a handful of colleagues; Paul and his assistant Timothy). Opinion-polls are not always an accurate guide to truth!!!

The specific problem in Ezekiel's day is very pertinent today: judgment being omitted or even soft-pedalled. The doctrine of hell has never been a 'seeker-friendly' doctrine. Of course it must be preached with tears of compassion. Nonetheless the alternative is an apparently attractive but ultimately ensnaring 'peace where there is no peace'. The truth of judgment though leads on to the glorious reality of Jesus 'making peace through his blood shed on the cross' (Col. 1:20).

In summary the important question to ask ourselves is this: 'Am I now trying to win the approval of men or of God? . . . If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ' (Gal. 1:10). Do we want the 'whitewash' of Ezekiel 13:10ff or the 'Word-wash' of Ephesians 5:26?

If the leaders fail in this area and this failure impacts the people of God, the Lord's aim is always to 'recapture the hearts of the people of Israel' (verse 5). The inner heart of leaders then is of vital importance (cf Prov. 4:23).

Leaders are accountable for their own inner spiritual state. They also have a responsibility for the people they influence. 'Like begets like.' Relating this to late twentieth-century church leadership one encouragement is the increasing number of books being published on the inner life of leaders (when there is a multitude on techniques, style, practicalities . . .). *Ordering your private world* by Gordon McDonald was a great stimulus to me personally in this area: his story was a typical one of the dangers of focusing over-much on externals to the detriment of internals. Douglas Stuart comments helpfully: 'Because we are told that this idolatry was "in

their hearts" it is likely that the people had not yet openly practised it. Rather they found that living among the Babylonians . . . increasingly influenced them to imitate Babylonian ways²'. Confronting leaders first can mean 'a stitch in time saves nine'!

Finding a New Testament parallel is not too difficult: Simon the sorcerer from Samaria (Acts 8:9-25) was similar to the elders in Ezekiel 14. Outwardly he had 'believed and was baptized' (verse 13) under Philip's ministry and subsequently attached himself to the mission team. Observing Peter and John's ministry of laying on of hands to receive the Spirit made him want the same ability. What an asset to God's works in the 'virgin territory' of Samaria! The apostle Peter though saw right through his spiritual veneer. Simon needed to repent thoroughly because, as Peter said to him 'your heart is not right before God' (verse 21 *underlining mine*) Externally open to gospel and Spirit; internally 'full of bitterness and captive to sin' (verse 23). Whatever our assessment of Simon's apparent conversion, there was clearly a hang-over from his past life centering on the issues of prestige and power (verses 9-10). While there are residual idols on the inside Simon can 'have no part or share in this ministry' (verse 21).

A massive temptation for leaders in the public eye is to lack integrity. What we are in private can be quite different from our 'public face'. The jibe about some preachers illustrates this well: 'He's an angel in the pulpit but a devil in the home.' If attention is not continually given to one's internal life the ministry can quickly become a facade—acting out a role rather than living out a life. No wonder Paul says to Timothy: 'Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers' (1 Tim. 4:16). All Christians, especially leaders, need to heed Peter's advice: 'But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord . . .' (1 Pet. 3:15).

The final question for leaders then is a searching one. To what extent is there a 'match' between the inside and the outside, between the altar of my heart and the words of my mouth? Hypocrisy needs to be repented of. God sees through it. Others are affected by it. Get real!

4. *The Leader's Spirituality: Godly or Idolatrous?*

Ezekiel 14 begins with a group of Israel's elders seeking an audience with the prophet—apparently at his home in Babylon. We began this overview with 25 'elders' in the first chapter (Ezekiel 11). Now we are back to 'some of the elders of Israel' (verse 1). The key issue raised is the genuineness or otherwise of their personal spirituality.

These leaders then are outwardly pious. Their

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intention is to 'enquire' (verse 3) of the Lord. They want to hear from God! His response though is somewhat unexpected: he will answer, but in keeping with their idolatry (verse 4). Why?—because internally a completely different 'story-line' is running: God substitutes have been enthroned! Ostensibly these leaders are seeking God. Actually they are worshipping idols. As Isaiah said, quoted by Jesus himself: 'These people come near to me with their mouths, and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' (Isa. 29:13; cf. Matt. 15:8-9; Mark 7:6-7). Clearly there was no correspondence at all between what was going on 'outside' and what was occurring 'inside'. Others may have been fooled but God wasn't! 'Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts. . . . Should I let them enquire of me at all?' (verse 3).

One particular feature of this chapter is the clear link between the idolatry of the leaders and that of the people. The average Israelite in verse 4 was obviously following the lead of the elders in verse 3: exactly the same expressions are used of both! The people at large had evidently 'followed suit'. . . . God's concern then was to recapture the hearts of the people (verse 5). His strategy is outlined in verses 9-11 (where a different kind of leader is in view—'the prophet'). If a prophet is consulted by an Israelite or alien (verses 7-8) and he responds, the outcome will be guilt and subsequent destruction. For what purpose? 'Then the people of Israel will no longer stray from me . . . They will be my people and I will be their God, declares the Sovereign Lord' (verse 11).

God then is deeply concerned about the inner hearts of the leaders (verse 3) and of the people (verse 7).

In conclusion two final words about leadership:

First a word of challenge: James says that teachers 'will be judged more strictly' (3:1). This certainly

happens in the four chapters we have just been looking at. In successive chapters bad leaders are severely judged: twenty-five compromising elders will 'fall by the sword' (11:10); the rebellious prince will die in Babylon (12:13); the whitewashing prophets are 'gone' (13:15—like the wall they whitewashed!); and inauthentic elders will be cut off from the people (14:8). Leadership in God's eyes is a serious business. It needs to be exercised with a real sense of responsibility. So is there any encouraging news?

Second a word of hope: Later in Ezekiel's prophecy chapter 34 highlights God's displeasure with the leaders (described as 'the shepherds of Israel'—verse 2 etc) in verses 1-10. Because of this God says, 'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them' (verse 11). How will he do this? Essentially by means of the promise of verse 23: 'I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; . . . and be their shepherd'—clearly a reference to David's 'greater son', the Lord Jesus! Such leadership will result in incredible blessing for the people (verses 25-31). So Jesus Christ is God's true leader, followed by his trainee leaders, washing one another's feet as he did theirs (John 13:1-17). There is hope for good leadership in the church today. . . .

Footnotes

1. 'Ezekiel' Douglas Stuart (The Communicator's Commentary Series Word © 1989) p. 102
2. *Ibid*, p. 127

Andrew Whitman was until recently the Senior Pastor of Godmanchester Baptist Church.

Celtic Spirituality

The following three articles offer several different perspectives on the burgeoning interest in Celtic spirituality.

The excerpt from Philip Sheldrake's book offers a scholarly assessment of the current 'scene' and, without being unduly negative, emphasizes some of the fundamental weaknesses that characterize much current interest in the subject.

Nicholas Beddow, the current vicar of Escomb, one

of the old Saxon churches of Northumbria, offers some comments on a visit to Iona. He suggests that there is a danger that 'Celtic Spirituality' can today be in danger of losing touch with its historical and Trinitarian roots and cease to be truly Christian.

The brief 'thumb-nail' reviews by the Editor are intended to offer some guidance in reading amid the wealth of current literature on the subject. . . much more could have been included!