True Leaders Foster the Dignity of All

Lawrence E. Frizzell, *Seton Hall University*
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Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

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Lawrence E. Frizzell

A few decades ago experts in business management have listened to those investigating Japanese methods of structuring their organizations. This interest has led to the development of new theories and practices among those competing for world markets. Rather than running scared in the face of rapid changes, some executives are willing to make radical shifts in their approach to running business. They might also look to their own cultural roots to discover a more humane way of exercising authority. But who would consider that the biblical heritage might have something to offer?

Does the executive team impose decrees from the lofty heights of corporate offices or do the rank-and-file have any contribution in the very process of making decisions? Does the CEO jealously play one vice president against the other to maintain control or does a spirit of trust prevail among those representing the lines of the organization chart? People might well look to the great leaders of the past as they face these issues.

The personality of Moses dominates the Books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Yes, he was a forceful leader, passionately dedicated to his task. Yet he was without self-interest and refused to perpetuate his own line as a dynasty to govern the twelve tribes. He acknowledged that he was but a weak servant of God, needing help to govern the people of Israel. His strength came from God and was nurtured by prayer.

The Book of Numbers describes God's command that Moses choose seventy esteemed members of the community to assist in the task of providing for the people. "I will take some of the spirit that is on you and will bestow it on them, that they may share the burden of the people with you" (11:17). The results of this delegation of authority included the gift of prophecy. In the first instance this meant a capacity to teach and admonish the people so that they would remain faithful to the Covenant. Secondarily, it involved an insight into the future plan of God for Israel and all creation, inasmuch as an understanding of goal is necessary for fruitful activity.

For some reason two elders missed the convocation, yet they too manifested the charisma of prophetic teaching. Those devoted to Moses called for him to stop what might be considered usurpation of his prerogative. Moses asked: "Are you jealous for my sake?" Then he exclaimed: "Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his Spirit upon them all!" (11:29). Thus did Moses show his understanding that all true leadership involves the process of enabling everyone to exercise fully the dignity of being in the divine image, according to each individual's vocation.
The disciples of Jesus tried to maintain an exclusive right to the power that Jesus shared with them. "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we tried to stop him because he is not of our company" (Mk 9:38). Like Moses, Jesus could tolerate the knowledge that other might try to serve in imitation of his example. Of course, he presupposed that the man was sincere. "No man who performs a miracle using my name can speak ill of me at the same time. Anyone who is not against us is with us" (9:39-40). Because miracles were a sign of divine approbation, Jesus knew that some people would listen to anything that a wonderworker taught. Therefore, he moved the discussion to a reflection on the serious responsibility of all who aspire to lead others. "If anyone leads astray one of these simple believers it would be better if he were plunged into the sea with a great millstone fastened around his neck!" (9:42). These words should echo through the halls of every home and the corridors of every school; they should reverberate through the offices where decisions are made about promoting films and television programs, musical and other forms of entertainment. Like leaders in the business world, educators and entertainers must be challenged to ask if they are contributing consciously to the uplifting of the human spirit. Any other intention is inadequate if not worse. These points of the Gospel message are needed especially by all whose decisions influence the physical and spiritual wellbeing of others.