

Insights on Church Leadership

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Evaluation and Release

One way to evaluate our service as church leaders—although not a perfect way, since only the Lord is able to evaluate perfectly—is to observe the lives of those individuals we serve, and see the strengthening their faith and testimony. Of course, we cannot judge the success of one's service by this standard alone. For example, Noah's ministry can be considered successful even though as far as we know only seven of his investigators were saved from the great flood.

Some individuals may respond negatively to our service. But that is apparently inevitable, since even the Savior had this experience during his mortal ministry¹. Perhaps some of the saddest experiences we will have in our service will involve those individuals who will not want to come unto Christ to receive the joy that comes through the Spirit of the Lord. Our minds should always be concerned with them and we must always remember them in our prayers, because, as the Lord himself indicated, "... ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them."²

Evaluating Ourselves

The first evaluation we must perform deals with ourselves, both as individuals and as the Lord's representatives. We must evaluate our behavior while serving the people to make sure that we are not becoming stumbling blocks³ to others. As we consider whether our actions as leaders are correct, let us remember this passage of scripture:

"Then Jesus was taken up into the holy city, and the Spirit setteth him on the pinnacle of the temple. Then the devil came unto him and said, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."⁴

¹ John 6:60-61,66-67

² 3 Nephi 18:32; see also verses 28 thru 34.

³ Romans 14:13; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13; Alma 4:10; 39:11-12

⁴ JST Matthew 4:5-7

We must analyze our attitudes and ask ourselves whether we are willingly making mistakes under the assumption that the Lord will fix whatever we do wrong. To do so is to tempt God and to abuse of the principle of justification⁵. Because of our mortal imperfection we will at times make unintentional mistakes. Our misunderstandings, misjudgments, oversights and miscalculations can "... dash (someone else's) foot against a stone."⁶ Therefore, as leaders we have the responsibility of being critical of ourselves before being critical of others. We must study the scriptures, the words of the living prophets and always look for better ways of thinking and judging situations, and above all, we must be open to change.

President Heber J. Grant once had a great experience in connection with change. As a new--and young--Apostle he was faced with a decision of consenting on the rebaptism of a former prominent member. Initially he refused to consent, and when asked why, he told President John Taylor: "... I can tell the Lord that he [the former member] had disgraced this Church enough, and that I did not propose to let any such man come back into the Church ... when a man can lie to the apostles, and when he can be guilty while proclaiming repentance of sin, I think this Church has been disgraced enough without ever letting him come back into the Church."⁷ And he added: "While I live I never expect to consent it if it is left to my judgment." President Taylor replied: "Well, my boy, don't you vote for him as long as you live, while you hold those ideas; stay right with them."

At lunch time he read a passage in the Doctrine and Covenants that said: "Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord. ... I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men."⁸ In his own words he described what happened, and that shows how far we ourselves should be willing to change: "... I closed the book and said: 'If the devil applies for baptism and claims that he has repented, I will baptize him.'⁹"

I also remember the words of the Apostle Paul: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."¹⁰

I am often impressed by the idea of walking in "newness of life". After our baptisms our lives were "new" for a while; but after some time, these "new" lives became old, and we had to change them. That change came because we learned new truths, or new ways of achieving higher or more perfect levels of

⁵ D&C 20:30

⁶ Matthew 4:6; parentheses added.

⁷ Gospel Standards, p.260-261; brackets added.

⁸ D&C 64:9-10

⁹ Gospel Standards, p.261. Narrated in October, 1920. On his return to his office, he told President John Taylor of his change of heart. President Taylor then responded that he wanted Elder Grant "... and some of the younger members of the apostles [to] learn the lesson that forgiveness is in advance of justice where there is repentance; and that to have in your heart the spirit of forgiveness and to eliminate from your hearts the spirit of hatred and bitterness, brings peace and joy; that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings joy, peace and happiness to every soul that lives it and follows its teachings." Brackets added.

¹⁰ Romans 6:1-4

performance in keeping the commandments. This type of change must occur in our lives from time to time, so that we can continue walking in "newness of life".

Again, our leadership calling ask for this type of self-analysis. We need to take a good look at ourselves, and be open to others' comments about us. In my particular case, my wife has always a lot to say about my performance whenever I ask her. I am particularly interested in her words when she answers that I am "ok". She uses this "ok" as a way of saying that although I have been doing my best, I still have to mend a few things. "Already doing my best" is not enough for those who believe in eternal progression and in the possibility of becoming like our Heavenly Father. There is always something better beyond our mortal and imperfect perceptions of what the "best" is.

Evaluating our Service

While evaluating the our service, as well as the service performed by our fellow servants, we must avoid the thought that if something is wrong then we or someone else must be immediately released. Except for situations involving an infirmity, a family problem, or gross wickedness, releases should not be used as a quick-fix.

Our feelings that things are going wrong may sometimes be a consequence of our lack of understanding of the ways of the Lord. We can trace an interesting parallel between our position nowadays and Moses' position during his mortal ministry. Just like him we have also been called to gather the Lord's covenant people out of a spiritual Egypt or Babylon¹¹, and commanded to organize them and lead them into a promised land that we by convention call "celestial kingdom." However, by continuing within this analogy, we also have to acknowledge that not everything will run smoothly: there will be problems caused by our actions, and the miracles sometimes will come only after some tribulation.

When the Lord called Moses, he explained that his mission would not be easy; he told that Pharaoh would let the people of Israel go free only after a show of force¹². By the account in the book of Exodus it is unclear whether Moses told this part of the plan to the Israelites, and he himself was amazed when Pharaoh increased the burdens over the people. We don't know how long the show of force lasted, but it seems that it probably took a rather long time.

Sometimes we get used to seeing films like Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," in which the plagues over Egypt last (in projection time) just a few minutes. The problem here is that what we see in a motion picture is shown in a compressed-time mode, where the events of an entire month can be shown in 720 frames (or 30 seconds). We don't know exactly how long it took to deliver the Israelites from bondage, but some scholars believe that the plagues over Egypt could have come over a period of six or seven months¹³. During that time, the Israelites were under an increased burden, and they were complaining that Moses had promised one thing and accomplished another. In fact, at first they got so angry that they just didn't accept Moses as a true Prophet¹⁴.

It takes time to deliver a people from bondage; it takes time to help them organize themselves; and it takes time to help lead them into a promised land. There are some inevitable problems: being

¹¹ D&C 1:16; 133:14

¹² Exodus 3:19-20

¹³ Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, pp.1:481,493

¹⁴ Exodus 6:9,12

imperfect, some will leave because of sin; others will misunderstand us, be offended and leave. In other occasions our actions will apparently backfire¹⁵.

We also have to understand that there are two phases in this liberation: first, there is a physical liberation and later, a spiritual liberation. Israel of old was physically liberated when they left the land of Goshen. However, their spiritual liberation took much longer to happen. Some of those folks didn't have enough faith to be liberated while in the flesh, and had to be taken to the spirit world to have the process completed.

Centuries after Moses, in another age of restoration, Nehemiah lived what seemed to be an administrative nightmare: full-time priests leaving their duties in the temple to find jobs, merchants offering their products and the covenant people purchasing them on the Sabbath, among other serious problems¹⁶.

As leaders we must realize that today the process is still, at least in principle, very similar. We are physically liberated when we join the Church of Christ and change our habits, our physical appearance, our activities, our language, etc. The spiritual liberation will come when, like it happened with the brother of Jared, we are "... redeemed from the fall ... and brought back into [the Lord's] presence ..."¹⁷

Preparing to be Released

Inevitably, the day will come when we will be released from our leadership callings, and there are a few acts we should perform in preparation to that event. The word of the Lord to Moses provide a pattern to be followed: "... charge Joshua, and encourage him, and strengthen him ..."¹⁸

In most occasions we won't know long beforehand that we are going to be released. Therefore, in these cases the best strategy might be to prepare several of our fellowservants to perform their duties without our presence--by charging, encouraging, and strengthening all of them. This way, when the time to be released comes, there will be no interruption in the work. In those occasions when we will be informed beforehand the date of the release, and also who will replace us, we may not only do what Moses did with Joshua, but we may also try, if convenient, to do what Elijah did to Elisha. Elijah allowed Elisha, his appointed successor¹⁹, to walk with him²⁰ and even to observe him while he worked a great miracle²¹. Right before he was translated, Elijah offered Elisha the opportunity to ask for a blessing:

"And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And

¹⁵ Exodus 5:22-23

¹⁶ Nehemiah chapter 13.

¹⁷ Ether 3:13; brackets added. See also D&C 67:10-14; 88:63,68; 93:1

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 3:28

¹⁹ 1 Kings 19:16,19

²⁰ 2 Kings 2:1-2,4,6

²¹ 2 Kings 2:8

Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more ...²²"

The result of this strategy was splendid. As soon as Elijah had been translated, Elisha was ready to serve, to the point of performing miracles similar to those performed by Elijah:

"He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? And when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him."²³"

After the Release

Our attitude after being released from a leadership responsibility is perhaps one of the most meaningful lessons we may teach in the Church of Christ. If we resume our duties as members of the Church humbly--by supporting our successor, and by encouraging others to do so--we will help them feel comfortable and confident in their callings sooner, and we will help those they have been called to serve to trust them faster, thus avoiding undesirable interruptions in the work of the Lord.

Later, we must also avoid the temptation of judging the performance and the quality of the decisions of our successors. We must remember that although the challenges may be the same, surely there will be new aspects, new elements that we may not be aware of; and the Lord will certainly inspire his servants differently than he did with us. As we have discussed before, by no longer possessing the "mantle" of member of a presidency, we will hardly be able to make a righteous judgment.

Our position, then, must be one of unconditional support, so that by our prayers and faith the new leadership may teach us those principles that will enable us to further advance in the knowledge of God and in the doctrine of Christ.

²² 2 Kings 2:9-12

²³ 2 Kings 2:13-15

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master’s degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor’s in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.