

Courage & Critical Decisions

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Palm Beach Baptist Network Pastors Cohort

F. A. Golder recounts Pavel Miliukov's question as the wheels of the Bolshevik Revolution began to turn: "Is this stupidity, or is this treason? Choose either one, the consequences are the same."¹ Richard Weaver's famous thesis, "Ideas have consequences,"² showcases Miliukov's question but we may take it a step further: our *decisions*, whether or not we remain faithful to our mission, have lasting consequences. We may have sharp ideas and assent to biblical ideals but those are not guarantees that we will 'play the man' when the day of battle arrives.

Philosopher John Hittinger comments on the Socratic definition of courage: "Courage is the preservation of the opinions established by law and education about what is to be feared (*Republic* 429c)."³ As Christian leaders we have a glorious mandate to make disciples of all nations, a call that goes far deeper than horizontally established law and education. Editing the mission is not on the table. The risen Jesus has charged us with a global mission. We would do well to remember that we will make critical decisions. We cannot not choose. The question for us is not whether we will be faced with critical decisions but whether we will be courageous when the time of decision comes. Leadership, specifically Christian leadership, has always required courageous backbone. We know this all too well. We're all confronted with critical ministry decisions and well acquainted with the plethora of pressures that accompany the hot seat of leadership. Yet we must remember how our world, families, and churches desperately need men willing to stand on the truth and lead for the future.

John G. Stackhouse writes, "Christian wisdom, I suggest, is the real aim of evangelical theology."⁴ I do not give this talk as a subject matter expert or, as the Apostle Paul, "*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect*" (Phil. 3:12). Rather, I speak as a fellow practitioner in the quest for courageous Christian wisdom. Since this gathering is a best practices cohort for peer-to-peer learning, here are 12 suggestions for courage in the inevitable critical decisions that we will all face.

Courage (and Fear) and Critical Decision-making

1. Put insecurity to death. People can smell it. Seek and destroy insecurity.

We should seek the approval of God and our wife. Remember that Jesus smiles on your faithfulness so we have no need to be threatened by fellow soldiers in the same army who serve in a more visible command or region. The need is too great and the time too short for us to live as insecure men. We have to do whatever needs to be done to slay the dragon. Whether we watch Rocky or Rambo, go to counseling, take time to fast and pray, we must get beyond a comparison calculus where the formula is: Larger ministry, cooler music, etc. = greater value. It's simply not true. Little is much when God is in it.⁵

2. Study the persecuted church and the church outside the West.

Read Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*... frequently. Few things stir my affections towards courage like remembering those who stayed faithful to the point of death. John Leaf, John Wycliffe, Tyndale, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr to name a few. Remember the ones who faced lions in the Coliseum when you face a hostile board or church members dissatisfied with the music volume.

3. Routinely preach that certain things are not up for vote or debate.

As his first act as pastor, a man I know called a church vote on whether to have an evangelism program. The church voted down the motion and he was understandably frustrated. The problem wasn't the vote. The problem was that the Great Commission was brought to a vote. Remind your people that we don't have the authority to vote on the Great Commission but we do have a responsibility to implement it.

4. Never underestimate the power of telling your church you love them.

In my first church I was warned of an older lady who had given previous pastors a difficult time. During college I saw the power of telling your church you loved them every week by Dr. Mike Orr, pastor of First Baptist Church of Chipley, Florida. Upon starting as pastor of my first church I would mention, "I love you all" during the close of each service. Something interesting happened. This lady became a very vocal proponent of the new pastor. I wondered why. I was far younger and had quite a different communication style than any of the previous pastors. Then in a discipleship seminar she mentioned her husband never told her he loved her, "But I know he did..." she said nervously as if to convince herself of the truth of what he never said. Then it clicked: Could her new mantra, "Our new pastor is wonderful" be because of her follow up line "He tells us he loves us?" I'm certain that a simple reminder of my love for the church was what changed her heart from a pastor persecutor to a pastor protector.

5. Never underestimate the power of the question: What are your thoughts?

Simply put, the power of listening is a leadership stock that yields substantial dividends. Even if you're sure you have an ironclad idea it is still wise to ask certain people their thoughts. Richard Blackaby said, "Wisdom comes from a lifetime of asking questions when you would have preferred to make a statement."⁶ This is social skills on steroids. We're surrounded by people who love to share their thoughts. Think of how valued you feel when someone genuinely asks you your thoughts and actually gives you time to respond. Feels good, doesn't it? Imagine the impact of when you, as a leader, extend this blessing to those you lead. This has real world implications. For example, in Travis Bradberry's article, "7 Things Great Listeners Do Differently," he reports, "A recent study conducted at George Washington University showed that listening can influence up to 40% of a leader's job performance."⁷ As Alfred Brendel once wrote, "The word listen contains the same letters as the word silent."⁸ Proverbs provides copious examples of the power of listening. This will create groundwork support for the time of critical decisions because an informal but very real coalition has already been built because of your willingness to put insecurity to death and even allow others to have the spotlight for the good idea.

6. Lead: Remind them why they called you as their pastor.

It's been said that churches want to grow they just don't want to change. Courageously reminding your church why they called you as their pastor is a low-cost high-yield tool in critical decision-making. Chris Norman, one of the men who stopped a terrorist attack on a French train, said, "Once you start moving, you're not afraid anymore."⁹ Start moving forward by helping your people look back not just to why they hired you but why your church exists in the first place.¹⁰

7. Identify and recruit as many offensive linemen as possible.

Paul instructs us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). Identify influencers who truly want to see the ball moved down the field for the kingdom of God through your church. Enlist them and cast your vision and let them help you drive it. Sure there are people who attend church for the wrong reasons, but I believe many want to see lives changed.

8. Don’t confuse machismo with confidence or courage.

I know a pastor who refers to himself as having a “Lion” style of leadership. He sees himself as Simba but those who have worked for him view him more like Scar with a messiah complex. With all the talk about leadership we should remember that courage is a necessity where leadership style is not. We can all be courageous but we cannot all lead courageously in the same way unless we wish to create unnecessary problems. If we try to be someone we’re not, we’ll risk coming off as a jerk or disingenuous. Know your own temperament. I’m sure Barnabas was just as ironclad committed in the face of critical decisions as Peter, yet I believe they led differently. If you’re naturally bold beware of fleshly bravado masquerading as confidence. If you’re naturally reserved beware of procrastination disguising itself as contemplation. If God has given you a gentle spirit then don’t allow yourself to be forced into a boisterous style. Saul’s armor didn’t fit David so he cast it aside and used what he was comfortable with to slay the giant.

Francis Schaeffer wrote: “The word minister is not a title of power but a designation of servanthood. There is to be no Christian guru. We must reject this constantly and carefully. A minister, a man who is a leader in the church of God (and never more needed than in a day like ours when the battle is so great) *must* make plain to the men, women, boys and girls who come to places of leadership that instead of lording their authority over others and allowing it to become an ego trip, they are to serve in humility.”¹¹

9. Be magnanimous to haters.

Try to find something you can affirm about a naysayer when their name arises. Even if you’re scratching the bottom of the barrel and still coming up empty, be clear about your desire for their wellbeing. In doing so you will exquisitely display Jesus’ command to love your enemies (Matt. 5:43-47).

10. Spend time developing conversational/people skills.

Not long after I became a Christian I recognized my Napoleon Dynamite-esque difficulties with effectively conversing with another person unless I already knew them. I knew that evangelism and leadership required conversational skills so I took the only next step I could see: I checked out Larry King’s (the king of suspenders) book, *How to Talk to Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere: The Secrets of Good Communication* from the college library.¹² It was the first step in a lifelong process of honing conversational and general people skills. It’s not simply an issue of being likeable so you can drive your own agenda: it is taking advantage of every available tool to more effectively lead people to embrace God’s plan for their lives and your church. This is so that when the day of critical decision comes, the sheer force of your personal character is a crucial factor in helping you guide vital truths around others’ mental roadblocks.

11. Front-load your business meetings.

Before any major meeting you should take a few minutes and front-load your meeting. Here's what I mean: Remind everyone present why your church exists. Remind them of the lostness surrounding you. Point out not only the beauty of unity but the prayer of Jesus that His people be unified (Jn. 17). Then warn everyone of the horrific impact of spreading a bad report or affecting the spirit of the meeting with the spirit of the enemy. Remind them that people talk and what they say and how they say it will echo in the living rooms of people on the Highway to Hell. I always find it interesting when unchurched people are aware of church drama. How do they know about it if they don't attend? It's quite simple: people talk. If you celebrate wins, remind of why the church exists, and warn of negativity's dire effects, you essentially front-load the meeting. This way if someone plays the part of the Accuser they're essentially calling themselves out. If you take those valuable few minutes you'll find the Gospel-focused people and new believers will respond positively and the naysayers will be more inclined to hold their tongue. In doing so you'll establish a protective perimeter around the vital morale of your church.

12. Don't make a decision before you have to.

In H. G. Wells' classic, *The Time Machine*, the Medical Man counsels, "It sounds plausible enough to-night . . . but wait until to-morrow, wait for the common sense of the morning."¹³ Sometimes waiting until the next morning to pull the trigger on a critical decision can make all the difference in the world. Don't go until its Go Time. But whenever you're finally at that point, in the words of Davy Crockett, "Make sure you're right, then go ahead."

¹ F. A. Golder, *Documents of Russian History*, 165. In W. Bruce Lincoln, *Passage Through Armageddon: The Russians in War & Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1986), 300.

² Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948, 2013).

³ John Hittinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*." *The Saint Anselm Journal* 8:2 (Spring 2013): 5. <https://www.anselm.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Institute%20of%20SA%20Studies/Hittinger,%20The%20family%20and%20the%20polis.pdf>.

⁴ John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 90.

⁵ Kittie L. Suffield, *Little is Much When God is in it*, 1924, https://hymnary.org/text/in_the_harvest_field_now_ripened.

⁶ Richard Blackaby, *Facebook*, January 31, 2017.

⁷ Travis Bradberry, "7 Things Great Listeners Do Differently," *Talent Smart: The World's #1 Provider of Emotional Intelligence*, <http://www.talentsmart.com/articles/7-Things-Great-Listeners-Do-Differently-386889568-p-1.html>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Owen Strachan, "Four Americans Show the World What it Means to be a Man," *The Stream*, August 26, 2015, <https://stream.org/four-americans-france-show-world-what-means-be-a-man/>.

¹⁰ Mike Myatt writes, "Another aspect that needs to be factored into the decisioning process is the *source* of the input. I believe it was Cyrus the Great who said "*diversity in counsel, unity in command*" meaning that good leaders seek the counsel of others, but maintain control over the final decision." Mike Myatt, "6 Tips for Making Better Decisions," *Forbes*, March 28, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/03/28/6-tips-for-making-better-decisions/#59d0c96534dc>.

¹¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, "No Little People, No Little Places," Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Little People: Sixteen Sermons for the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 19.

¹² Larry King, *How to Talk to Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere: The Secrets of Good Communication* (New York: Three Rivers press, 1994).

¹³ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 12.