

# Subject to change: A plea to young men

## Young men in the balance

If you are a ministry-minded young man, you are “in the balance.” Living in the information age affords access to more competing ministry philosophies than ever -- so many blogs, tweets, posts and persuasive personalities to sort through. Sooner or later, you will face a fork in the road – in the words of former president George W. Bush – a “decision point.” While your own life is made of your choices, when you begin to guide others, the impact of your resolutions expands, affecting people -- profoundly.

Scripture addresses young men repeatedly, with the book of Proverbs first coming to mind. The Apostle Paul invested in the personal training of his young associates. While many other examples could be cited, consider the scenarios affecting three different younger men during several chapters of I and II Kings. I believe that these accounts provide helpful instruction both for young men and those influencing them.

In I Kings 12, newly appointed King Rehoboam faces a choice between two opposing leadership philosophies. He receives conflicting advice from two sources – the first from aged men, and other from his youthful peers. To his detriment, he chooses the advice of his contemporaries. Rehoboam stands as a warning -- a young leader ruined by the advice of younger advisors.

I Kings 13 recounts a young prophet carrying a message from God. This man meets an unnamed old prophet, and a kind one at that. Even while claiming authority from God, the old prophet persuades the young prophet to act contradictory to God’s directives. The young prophet’s life suddenly ends in tragedy, while the deceitful old prophet lives on. The young prophet was deceived through the duplicity of his older “prophet-friend.”

From II Kings 6 yet another lesson for young men emerges. A fearful young man expresses despair at the sight of an army of horses and chariots surrounding his city. The prophet Elisha assures his young servant that God’s forces outnumber the enclosing army, and then simply prays, “Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see.” The verse continues, “And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw...” In answer to the prayer of a prophet, a young man understood *for himself* the power of God. There stands a young servant safe and secure -- pointed to God by a faithful, older saint.

Certainly, we want our sons *and* our sons in the faith to see God and His timeless truths for themselves. No one disputes this. To accomplish this, a young man needs courage to

recognize error in his persuasive peers, and to stand against it. But he also at times needs to discern the faulty direction of disobedient men, even though they are older, carry a title, and are very kind to them.

Don't you share in this prayer of Elisha – *open his eyes* - for those you influence? I do. I pray this for my two sons. I pray this for the students I teach. I pray this for myself. Psalm 119:18 says, "Open thou **mine** eyes, that **I** may behold wondrous things out of thy law." Every believer needs his spiritual eyes opened *personally* to God's truth. Young men, impressionable, and susceptible to altering course, find themselves in the balance – a place of decision about ministry philosophy.

A young, moldable man will receive a myriad of influences and an array of philosophies. But he is not without hope or direction, because when an immutable God opens a young man's eyes to His unchanging Word, many practical ministry decisions are determined, such as deciding between new vs. old, or traditional vs. contemporary. When you find yourself fascinated by the bandwagon of the latest, remember foolish Rehoboam. On the other hand, learn the lesson of the demise of the young prophet who placed his confidence in the older, kindhearted prophet, but in so doing forsook God's way.

Before embracing a new ministry philosophy, consider these four areas of concern:

#### 1. The significance of the shepherd

Upon the shoulders of a shepherd lies a vast measure of responsibility. And why is this? Because shepherds guide sheep. The function of a *pastor* correlates to the job of a shepherd, but rather than leading sheep, pastors guide people. Just as sheep are to follow the voice of their shepherd, congregations are commanded to follow their pastors, as they follow God. And just as actual sheep learn to trust *their own* shepherds, so it is natural for church members grow in confidence toward their pastors. Certainly, a pastor will give account for his people, and this accountability weighs on a pastor in a way that many church members cannot fully understand.

To go one step further, pastors do not influence just their own congregations. A pastor who writes, posts sermons, or streams his services can affect many others. Churches host conferences where new ideas are proposed and discussed. And when a man "experiences success," others migrate toward him. That is a part of the history of the independent Baptist movement. The ability to exert influence beyond the four walls of one's church has never been greater. Along with heightened awareness of new movements and growing ministries comes the allurements to react by shifting one's positions.

Consider the burdens facing a pastor who chooses to lead his congregation into a philosophical change. First, he must get his own congregation on board with him, and that is not without some level of unrest, and in a discerning, disciplined church, may prove a daunting task. Next, a leader who shifts positions also forces the hand of his “spiritual fathers.” His “mentors” love him and do not wish to lose influence on him, yet they are forced to respond to his shift. What are their options? First, they could label his changes as wrong, thus losing influence over him and possibly his affection. Second, they may accept it and join in with the new positions. Third, they may attempt to overlook it -- a “temporary fix” at best. One way or another, a shift toward the contemporary must eventually be addressed. With the understanding that *all decisions have consequences*, young pastors must be extremely cautious of the talk of the “new.” New is not always better, nor is it free from broad effects.

## 2. *Caveat emptor*

*Caveat emptor* - “Let the buyer beware.” Before you “buy into” the latest wave of change, you do well to follow the Bible admonition to “count the cost.” Every decision has a consequence, but ministry decisions, because of their nature, result in multi-faceted ramifications. The scripture implores us to “Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.”

When a leader embraces a ministry philosophy that includes a readiness to shift positions and practices, he needs to understand that he is not just gaining that new method or practice but also losing something as well. Introducing new tastes and styles to a church has permanent consequences. You will surrender ground that will never be regained. Amen for gathered crowds, but don’t be so shallow as to embrace ministry change due to the ideas of successful crowd gatherers. There’s a driving force behind every ministry. Independent Baptists state that the Bible is the sole authority, and rightfully so. But how that Bible is to be applied in 2019 requires careful discernment. No one wants to be misled, but how can a person “foresee” the direction a shift in ministry position will take them?

## 3. Identify the guide

Whether we care to admit it or not, we all have guides. There are no self-made men. Furthermore, men need guides. So, men have and need guides. Understanding this truth proves invaluable when considering ministry shifts, because by identifying a man’s guides, you peer into his future. Shouldn’t we be aware of what’s ahead? Shouldn’t we “vet” direction, at least to be aware of what lies ahead? So before mimicking a change suggested by someone’s ministry, note his guides.

A man’s associations guide him. Who are his friends in the ministry? Everyone knows the basic truth about friends – “you are now or you soon shall be what your friends are.” None

of us are escaping that fact. Look at a man's friends. They are affecting him. My friends affect me, and yours influence you.

The books that a man reads become his guides. Many men post reading lists. They may list the books they have read recently, or even their personal recommended reading lists. Without a doubt all reading requires discernment. Even the best writers are at best just men. But when it becomes apparent that someone with influence is championing the writings of those who have "already shifted," take note.

Learning who a man's friends are and seeing who he reads will go a long way in explaining the reasons behind the changes a man makes in his ministry. It is analogous to the law of sowing and reaping. The fruit of a man's ministry stems from the seeds he has allowed to be planted – his friends and books.

#### 4. Proper position, but poor practice

Those who "say and do not" lay stumblingblocks before young men. Leaders who preach holiness and accompanying standards while living contradictory lives are used as a reason for many young men to abandon their heritage. Young men peg gilded ministries well. A young man may conclude that "although the contemporary church may not have the standards I was taught, or conduct their worship service the way I learned, they certainly model the Lord in their attitudes and their words. I'll take that over hypocrisy." Though not the only contributing factor in the migration of ministries from their origin to contemporary, disingenuous "traditional" ministries certainly contribute to it.

First, to think that shifting to any other church will insulate one from hypocrisy is naïve. Read any Christian news website to see this. Second, this response is anthropocentric, driven by a man's adherence or lack thereof to what he says he believes rather than by the scriptural legitimacy of the position or practice itself. In this situation, the resulting shift (for example, away from "traditional" to "contemporary") is a reaction founded not primarily on the scriptures, but in protest of an undesirable or hypocritical ministry.

And so, a final word to all young men desirous of a faithful ministry: since the privilege of leading people is great, count the cost of every ministry decision you make. Learn to identify the direction of a ministry by identifying the "guides" of that ministry. Be ready to "stand against" pressure from peers. Don't be fooled by an older man who takes you under his wing, while pointing you away from what is right. Consequences lie ahead, both in this life and in eternity.

I count as my strongest influences men who cared to caution me. I hope you will, too.