
A CROWD ISN'T A CLOUD

God's Leading Isn't the Same for Everyone

by Daniel A. Brown PhD

On a recent trip to Norway, I heard of a newly married couple that spent their honeymoon with in-laws—building a small chapel in Eastern Europe and using materials they had purchased with the “wedding gift” cash they requested instead of toasters and bath towels. Their home church was pioneered by a friend of mine in Oslo, far away from the doctrinal preoccupations in North America and seemingly, unconcerned with the prominent locations where we are told God is moving.

Whenever I learn of sacrificial ministries like this young couple or my friends who have labored to build a church in post-Christian Scandinavia, I have mixed reactions. Mostly, I celebrate their obedience to their calling and I enjoy the thought that I'm a relative of theirs—much like my daughter's friend who wore a big smile the week after her uncle, Mike Holmgren, won the Super Bowl.

My other feeling is sometimes one of doubt. Marveling at other people's ministries causes me to second-guess the legitimacy of my own. I don't mean that I am especially tempted to compare my labors with theirs in terms of who's is greater—though carnal bragging rights are occasionally a vain question. *Whose work for God is better?* But that question isn't the one that primarily torments me as a pastor. There is another question that I really do care about: *Have I missed what God had for me?* It is a question born of sincerity, not insecurity—a desire to be and do everything God has in mind for me, and my service to Him.

The less my ministry resembles the details of another's testimony, the more I wonder if I am wasting my time or missing the boat. That's when I try to remember the cloud of witnesses—spiritual patriarchs and matriarchs who accomplished so many different sorts of things by faith. *Not everyone gets told to build an ark.*

INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

God's approval is not attached to a particular feat or to one of His promises over another. We gain our testimony by obeying His unique set of instructions to us—not by eavesdropping in on and aligning ourselves with His instructions to someone else.

But when I hear about someone building an ark, I secretly wonder if I should, too. When I go fishing, I want to find out what bait everyone else is using. Maybe it's normal to think others know better than I do. I feel rather unspiritual most of the time anyway, so when spiritual-seeming manifestations break out elsewhere, it is especially tempting to presume that I've missed something that I better not chance missing again.

I suspect church and ministry leaders everywhere face the pressures of that nagging uncertainty. Because we know our labors are in vain unless they correspond with what God is building, we are desperate to know *what* He is building. We want to get it right. So, we seek, pray, study, and look for any clue that will help us align our hearts and hands with His.

That's why books about God's will for our life are so popular and why we attend so many seminars about church. We want to discover His will for our ministries and for ourselves.

CROWDS ARE COMPELLING

When I re-entered the U.S. after my Norway trip, I waited in a large room with several hundred passengers from various other flights while the customs agents checked our passports. At one point, there was a commotion on the far side of the room, and everyone turned to see what was happening.

That's how crowds work. Individuals spontaneously respond to the movement of the crowd. If the crowd starts going in one direction, most everyone goes along. A few people looking to the back of the room soon have the whole crowd looking there because everyone else is looking. There may be nothing to see. Crowds have a natural momentum to them.

Sincere spiritual leaders constitute a sort of crowd. Our eager, almost desperate search for what God is doing can easily be swayed by the momentum of those around us. When several leaders are led in the same direction, or when an especially visible flow of grace manifests in the ministry of other leaders in the crowd, a movement develops.

That activity can be very compelling to the rest of us who are a trifle unsure whether or not we have been correctly following our directions from God. We don't want to miss God, so when lots of other people seem sure about the direction they are to take, we are tempted to abandon the uncertain

direction in our own heart in order to follow the more certain-seeming directions that the other groups are following.

We often deal in the realm of the unseen, and so we long for substantial confirmation that we are on the right track. Thus, when tremendous physical evidence (numbers, manifestations, etc.) attends someone else's ministry, style or city, it is hard to resist the momentum that draws us toward such tangible *assurance*.

If we are not careful, our desire to find what God wants for us individually can become confused in the midst of thousands upon thousands of other leaders who are asking the same question. Though spiritual leaders should be asking the same question, they will not necessarily be receiving the same answer. Jesus tells Peter that John's assignment will be different than his—Peter's focus should just be on following the instructions he hears for himself.

REMEMBERING INDIVIDUALS

I want to be careful to side step the usual discussion about various revivals, renewals, movements, and cities that have captured so much interest among spiritual leaders. Rather than offering my limited assessment of what is or is not happening in other quarters, I want to focus on the subtle and dangerous pressures that plague leaders like me, who may be waiting with the crowd in the same large room to have our passports checked.

I might be waiting in a line mostly comprised of travelers who arrived back in the U.S. on a different flight than mine, and maybe the three individuals in front of me are all going from this port of entry to Atlanta. Their excitement about Atlanta, or their reports on what they saw overseas, shouldn't cause me to change my travel plans—or to regret that I didn't travel where they traveled.

It's fun to swap stories about what we've seen on our respective trips, and I might even long, one day, to visit where these fellow travelers have journeyed. But spiritual leaders aren't traveling without itineraries: God has sent us on various trips with particular destinations in mind. We aren't really free to go wherever we want to go.

Meeting me when I arrived back at San Jose, CA were two wonderful members of my church who had so much to tell me about their ministry dreams. It confirmed my sense of direction for our church—a direction that has little to do with the large ministry rivers that are capturing so much attention. I'm excited about where God is taking us, but I am even more thrilled to be going there with the people who call me pastor.

If I went to Atlanta with those guys in the customs line, who would have flown to San Jose to hear this couple's ministry dreams?

Right now, in the worldwide body of Christ, there are numerous large-scale ministry orientations—not to mention hundreds of doctrinal and denominational groupings. Godly men and women espouse widely divergent ministry priorities—from racial reconciliation to prison reform, and from worship renewal to spiritual mapping. There are those who think cell groups are the answer, those who urge us to more prayer, or have more activism, more worship, more friendship evangelism, and more discipleship. Concern for the unborn, relations with Israel and men's ministries are priorities for different leaders and Christian groups.

MULTIPLE PLAYERS AND POSITIONS

Which of these are moves of God? If I want to align myself with what God is doing, which of these *streams* should I follow? Of course—all of them, but I cannot fully give myself to even most of them—there isn't enough of me to spread around.

It reminds me of soccer. Though the untrained eye can't readily see it, the players have definite positions (and responsibilities). In my sincere desire to play my best for the Lord, I am tempted to think I ought to play the positions I see others play. A team has many positions, and if everyone plays the same one, the team will lose.

Being on the same team rarely means playing the same position; spiritual leaders need encouragement to remember that simple truth. Our zeal to “get it right” often leads us to a preoccupation with what others are called to do.

About two years ago the Lord gave me one of those *I'll-never-forget* encouragements to listen carefully to Him. I received invitations from three different and noteworthy ministries to attend events during the same two-day period. I would have been eager to follow the momentum that had developed around each of them because they were each dynamic works of the Lord whose leaders modeled everything I hoped to have been true in my own life.

I was frustrated that my schedule forced me to choose which invitation I should accept. All would have been excellent opportunities for me to learn and share, but I couldn't make it to all three. In all fairness, I must add that none of the three ministries were very close to anything I had been led to be involved with in my ministry, but I wanted to be open to “*new wine*,” and not miss whatever the Lord wants to do with me.

Besides, recent discouragements and setbacks related to things He had called me to develop, probably made me more eager to abandon the old course (stuff I had been plodding on with in day-to-day ministry) for a new one. So, I asked the Lord which of the three invitations I should accept.

His answer was quick and clear: *None!*

HIDDEN RIVERS

With the answer came a picture of a small mountain valley and a river peacefully winding its way through meadows and stands of trees. The river wasn't big enough (like the Mississippi is) to show up on a world map, nor was it note-worthy enough (like the Feather River is) for water sports or fishing to be identified on a national map.

Additionally, in the mental picture drawn by the Lord, I could sense three large rivers flowing powerfully in other parts of the country, but they were a long way off from this little valley (where I live). Instantly, I got the point: not all small rivers are tributaries; in their God-assigned course, they neither flow to, nor from, larger ones.

Just because the Norwegian newlyweds don't show up on a macro-level spiritual map, doesn't mean they have missed the move of God. In fact, given the Lord's predisposition to work with insignificant and unimpressive things, I'm inclined to join them more than to join some of the larger-scale movement I see.

Our nation has several large, distinct river systems (i.e. the Columbia, the Colorado, the Ohio); so too does the body of Christ. Churches can be grouped according to their denominational affiliation, ministry philosophy, service style, as well as according to their priorities. And even among similar type ministries, there can be a wide divergence of mission. For instance, church planting may have a higher priority than crusade evangelism; revival centers aren't like training centers.

I'm not at all denying that God does sovereignty capture the attention of His Church and bring us to times of collective awareness, like He did using prophets of old. He uses individuals and notable movements to heighten our understanding of worship, spiritual warfare, the plight of the unborn, family, hidden people, and next-generation outreach. Many church leaders—but not all—will feel God's leading to align themselves with prominent leaders and/or with major causes.

NON-CONFORMING ALIGNMENT

Spiritually discerning leaders will find themselves drawn again and again by the Holy Spirit to see vital themes and causes as reference points—the way that players on a football team align themselves with their teammates. But those players never confuse alignment and teamwork with conformity! If the whole team stays huddled around the quarterback, it won't gain many yards.

No one means to do it, but when people talk about a *mighty move of the Spirit*, or renewal and revival in conjunction with particular events or experiences, it exerts crowd pressure for everyone else to follow certain examples in our meetings and our services. American Christians are so oriented toward large meetings, rather than one-on-one discipleship settings, that we tend to look for validation and spiritual commendation in what happens in those meetings.

Sincere pastors easily fall prey to an unintended legalism emanating from glowing testimonies, ministry newsletters, Christian periodicals, conference speakers and the ever-present grapevine. Spiritual *happenings* (like revival in one country or a uniquely focused para-church ministry) get highlighted through the conversations and ministries of prominent leaders, and the rest of us wonder what's wrong with us? This puts a pressure on pastors to match their church program with "what God is doing" elsewhere. And, that may not be God's plan at all.

EYES DON'T HEAR

When medical researchers announce a tremendous breakthrough in the treatment of diabetes, other scientists and doctors studying cancer, brain disorders and Alzheimer's disease pause to rejoice. It is unlikely that the discovery about diabetes will have any direct effect on their research. How foolish it would be if they left their specialized studies in order to get in on the diabetes breakthrough; they might be very close to discoveries of their own. The same is true for ministry leaders: what we are doing faithfully today may be the very seeds of tomorrow's great harvest.

The point is that the global body of Christ needs even more ministry variety and "body" parts than a local church does. All are neither eyes nor ears. The biblical secret for a healthy and growing church (whether it is local, national or global) is found in *Ephesians*:

"...The whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." ~Ephesians 4:16

Pastors and ministry leaders will gain new courage to keep up with their unique assignments from the Lord the more that they remember the real point of all ministry—the eternal consequences.

Despite all the incredible large-group happenings in the body of Christ, the call to affect people with the Gospel—the mandate to make disciples—is given to *individuals*—not to movements or to revivals.

Most of the talk about what God is doing in the world today has little bearing on what He is doing in our local churches. It's like the national economic picture: it is interesting on the macro level, but it doesn't really affect most people's monthly budget.

The more we recognize the enormity and complexity of what the world-wide church has been given to do, the more we will realize that it will take millions of us being obedient to our unique callings. In our zeal to find the move of the Spirit in our day, let us not forget He resides within, and gives directions to individual believers who have distinct parts to play.

It is one thing to be encouraged on our way by the cloud of witnesses surrounding us—it is something else to be caught up in the crowd pressing us to abandon our position in favor of theirs.