

Sharing the Load

Mark Heath, 15th Jan 2005
Exodus 18:1-27

This brief episode in the life of Moses is fairly well known. It is often presented as an example of how important it is to have a well organised hierarchical structure of leadership. Some have even attempted to elaborately reconstruct Jethro's scheme in their own churches. But this passage has more to give us than a model of church organisation. Very few people would doubt the need for a pragmatic approach to structuring any group of leaders. This story shows how Moses was willing to take advice and criticism, and teaches some principles for how to find and integrate new leaders to a team. Any church that is growing must face the challenges of the ever-increasing workload on their leaders, and find suitable helpers to share the load.

Only One God

Moses had married Zipporah, a Midianite girl, and his father-in-law, Jethro was none other than the priest of his people. No doubt this was somewhat awkward, especially since Moses was insistent that there was only one God – Yahweh; and all other gods were false. Perhaps he had heated debates with Jethro over the relative merits of their religions, but it would seem that they still maintained a good relationship.

At this time, Zipporah had been sent back by Moses to stay with her father for a while along with their children (v2). It is not clear exactly when she went back, but doubtless she would have experienced the tension of living in the house of her pagan father while trying to bring up her children as worshippers of Yahweh.

Finally, an opportunity arose for them all to meet up again together in the desert. When Jethro arrived, we are told that “Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him” (v7). Here we see how respectful Moses was to his pagan father-in-law. Despite their significant differences, he was willing to be courteous and hospitable.

Offering people a generous and cheerful welcome will make them much more readily accepting of what we have to say to them, as Jethro's response demonstrates. As Jethro hears of what the Lord had done in rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he was delighted. He not only praised the Lord, but grasped a significant truth “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly” (v11).

Could this be the moment that Jethro converted to being a follower of the God of Israel? His very next action was one of worship and sacrifice (v12). As a priest, Jethro would be well aware of the significance behind the sacrificial system. Here he was bringing a burnt offering, signifying not only his reverence for the Lord but his need of forgiveness.

What You are Doing is Not Good

The next day, Jethro observed as Moses spent the entire day serving as a judge (v13). Doubtless Jethro and Zipporah would have liked to spend some time with him themselves, but he was too busy. Moses explained that what he was doing was important. The people wanted to know God's will, and Moses needed to inform them of God's decrees and laws (v15,16). Sure it was time consuming, but who could argue against such a noble task? And surely Moses should be congratulated for his servant heart, giving himself so wholeheartedly to serving others.

But even though Moses had just taught Jethro the greatest lesson of all, Jethro had something to teach him. In verse 17, Jethro says quite frankly “What you are doing is not good.”. First, it was *not good for Moses*. The workload was too heavy for him (v18), and it would result in his exhaustion. He had a very important role as leader of the people, and would not be able to execute it properly if he was persistently tired and overworked. It was also *not good for his family*. Here he had a chance to spend a day with his wife and children, who he had not seen for ages, and he was too busy.

Third, it was *not good for the people*. The quality of Moses' work would inevitably suffer as he got more and more tired, and people were growing frustrated at the long times they would have to wait for an appointment (v18). Not only that, it was *not good for the future*. No new judges were being trained up and when Moses died, a huge vacuum would be left in the legal system.

It is all too easy for church leaders today to find themselves in a similar situation to Moses. They end up far too busy for their own good. They don't spend enough time with their families, and the quality of their work suffers because they simply don't have the time to adequately prepare themselves. They jeopardise the future of their churches by failing to train up others to do the work, and the church members suffer the drudgery of following jaded leaders who have lost the fire and vision they once had.

And it's not just pastors or elders who are liable to this behaviour. In any modern church there are a variety of ministries – the worship, the youth work, the teaching and training, the evangelism, the administration, the finance, the cleaning and so on. In each area, the one person who has overall responsibility can fall into Moses' trap of being overworked.

Taking Advice

But how did Moses let himself get into this situation in the first place? It may have been the problem of *pride*. There is a natural tendency for anyone with responsibility to think “I have to do it all”. Such a person is always saying “If you want a job done well, you have to do it yourself”. And perhaps they have had one too many bad experiences of what happened when they last let someone else “have a go”.

But thankfully if there was pride in Moses' attitude, there was also some *humility*. He was prepared to listen to advice, even from such a new convert. Jethro's suggestion was hardly rocket science, but somehow Moses had not thought of it as a practical way to reduce his workload. Perhaps he doubted people's ability to help, or the thought of asking for help actually seemed like more work in his mind.

It is vital for those with responsibility to be able to both take and evaluate advice. On the one hand are people who too readily accept advice, and end up going all over the place trying to please all the people all the time. But the opposite danger is to imagine that you don't need any advice at all, and to reject everything you hear without even giving it consideration. Jethro's idea could have been shot down in flames by Moses before he had finished hearing it, but Jethro had some good ideas about how it could be implemented which Moses patiently listened to.

Jethro also demonstrated shrewdness about the way he offered his advice. He reinforced Moses' role and calling (v19,20) before moving on to suggest what Moses could hand on. Moses still had a vital and important role. In asking for help he was not in any way abdicating the authority and ministry that God had given him alone.

Getting Help

Jethro had clearly given some thought to his plan during the course of the day. There were some potential objections.

- Won't many volunteers be the type of people not suited to the task?
- Where will we find qualified people?
- How will all this be organised?
- What if there are cases too difficult?

Although Jethro gave careful consideration to the numerical aspects of organising a team of judges and the hierarchical structure, the bulk of his advice was about the selection of suitable people. As we have seen, Moses probably doubted the existence of enough capable people, but Jethro was not so pessimistic. He gave Moses some guidelines for their selection.

First, *they needed to know God's law*. In verse 20 Jethro outlines the main tasks of a judge. He must warn people about the commands in God's word, set an example of how to live and give practical advice on what God required people to do. A good knowledge of the Scriptures was essential for those who were to judge according to God's law, and is still a vital qualification for many areas of Christian service. Of course, in Jethro's plan there was provision for difficult case to be dealt with by someone more experienced, but asking people to judge who didn't know God's law would be a recipe for disaster. We see that Moses took this task seriously as he summarises in Deut 1:16-18 the training and advice he gave to these leaders.

Second, *they needed to be living godly lives*. In verse 21 Jethro insists that they fear God, are trustworthy, and hate bribes. Someone who fears God will take their ministry seriously, knowing they are accountable to him for how they conduct themselves. These people needed to be trustworthy and dependable – if they were not, the whole idea of reducing Moses' workload would be undermined. He needed to know he could let these people get on with their task without having to check up on them all the time. Finally, they should hate bribes. Those with authority can have their principles compromised by bribes, or flattery or other types of pressure. So Moses should choose people who were incorruptible – because they were living for God, not money.

Third, *they need to be given responsibility in proportion to their capability*. Jethro was quite willing to acknowledge that not all would have the time or ability to act as judges over large groups. Some would govern thousands, others hundreds but some of fifties or tens. Those who proved trustworthy and capable in small matters could then be entrusted with greater levels of responsibility.

Finally, *they needed to be under authority*. It is not clear to me how many levels of leadership Jethro envisaged. Some think that the leaders of tens reported to the leaders of fifties, who reported to the leaders of hundreds and so on. In any case, none of them were to act alone, for the important cases were to be handled by Moses (v22). However wise and capable these people were, they needed to remember that they were under authority and were not to presume to make decisions that were not theirs to make.

Conclusion

Those in authority should follow Moses humble example by acknowledging that they don't have a monopoly on wisdom, and neither are they the only ones capable of serving in any given area of ministry. A willingness to include others will result in benefit for everyone. But care must be taken that appropriate people are chosen for the task and suitable levels of responsibility are given.

Those who desire to exercise authority should demonstrate their readiness to do so by their careful attention to God's law, their consistent godly lives, and their respect for God-given leadership. Above all this passage teaches a humility that all should aspire to – a humility that accepts criticism and advice, and a humility that submits to God's Word and his delegated authority, and a humility that desires to serve rather than be served.