



In CRISIS or CONFLICT? AVOID ALLIES

By Al Ells, M.C.

Ally: A person that is associated with another person for a common cause.

Most of us are familiar with the popular TV show, *Survivor*, wherein stranded castaways must compete for 1 million dollars. The source of much drama on the show comes when players begin to form secret alliances and make deals with each other. The winner is often the one who forms the best alliances, even at the cost of lying and betraying fellow teammates.

That show has always bothered me. I don't like the behind the scenes manipulation, exaggeration and skewing of truth players often show in order to gain an ally and win. It reminds me too much of conflict in the church.

Typically when someone becomes offended with the pastor or a staff member, they readily share their grievance with family and friends. It's an attempt to garner support. The person's argument often convinces others to empathize and agree. The offended person now feels emotionally supported and more confident that he or she is right.

Leaders can also do this when in conflict. I once knew a pastor that rallied congregants and friends to call his Board of Elders to support his point of view in a conflict. Additionally, he challenged the Board Chairperson for taking sides against him, when the role of the Chairperson is to be an unbiased seeker of the truth. The pastor only wanted the Board Chairperson to empathize with him, and form an alliance with him so that he could win. The result was just the opposite, though. Everybody lost.

I think most of us are that way; we want empathy from others. We want people to feel like we feel, think like we think, believe in us, support us and see our side of things. We want an ally, and too often we want to win.

However, what is the healthy, responsible and Godly thing to do? Consider the following:

Jesus is the Model

We know Jesus to be kind, compassionate and perfectly understanding. He has walked in our shoes and He does know how we feel and think. He understands us completely. He is empathetic. Yet in the final analysis, He calls us to accountability, saying, “If you love me, keep my commandments”. He is able to connect with us wherever we are, yet lead us on to do the right and Godly thing. We must do the same and expect others to treat us in a likewise manner.

The Missing Ingredient

Most of us tend to miss the responsibility part. We don’t challenge ourselves and others often enough to focus on what is the moral, accountable, right thing to do. We want the empathy but not the responsibility. We want understanding without accountability.

In his book *Failure of Nerve*, Edwin Freidman says,

Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix argues that “the focus on empathy rather than responsibility lessens the potential for survival of both leaders and followers”.

We need leaders who will first embrace their responsibilities, leaders who do not require others to ally or empathize with them just because they are the leader. Great leaders accept the challenge to live to a higher Kingdom standard.

Scripture is the Guide

Consider 1 Corinthians 10:31, which admonishes us to use conflict to glorify God and bring peace to the situation. Matthew 7:5 and 7:18 also challenge us to first “get the log out of one’s own eye” and then go to your brother and be reconciled. Too often we go to others to gain empathy, agreement and allies but not to take responsibility for our own actions and discover our own blind-spots. People who are looking for concurrence and sympathy are not asking themselves ‘what is the right and Godly thing to do?’ It’s imperative that leaders first deal with their own “log” before attempting to take the “splinter” out of someone else.

Choose a Good Friend over an Ally

A good friend is one who encourages you in God (1 Samuel 23:16) and tells you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. People who tell you what you want to hear may only be empathetic and therefore not really helpful. A

good friend understands you, believes in you and helps you see and deal with your weaknesses and failings and exhorts you to do what's right (Hebrews 10:24). Successful leaders that sustain excellence cultivate quality friendships with peers who know them, care for them and offer them the hard, yet helpful truths they need to hear.

How to Find a Good Friend

Cultivate at least one relationship with an older man or woman of God, a proven, Godly person. There is no substitute for the life experiences gained through walking with God over time. Our fathers and mothers in Christ possess great wisdom and perspective, and we as children in faith can tap into that wisdom. One of my close friends is an older man who has witnessed the rise and fall of various men and women of God. He continually anchors me in the truth, for instance, the importance of admitting and repenting of my sins as we are taught in 1 John 1:8-10.

Look also for like-minded peers that understand your role and place as a leader. They already empathize and can help you see your part in the crisis or conflict. In 2003 I wrote a book with one such peer, Gary Kinnaman, called *Leaders That Last: How Covenant Friendships Can Help Pastors Thrive*. The principles discussed in this book are the foundation of my ministry today, and have proven to be practical and relevant over the years. The notion that a good friend can make all the difference has truly stood the test of time.

Pray for God to provide you with relationships that will help you fulfill God's purposes in your life and finish well. (Hebrews 12:1-3).