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***LEADERSHIP REFLECTION:***  
**LEADERS DO THE RIGHT THING: A POPULAR PHRASE OR A  
REAL PRACTICE?**

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A band of extremists carried out a plan they believed to be the right plan executed in the right way at the right time. Their concept of right meant 2,993 people died as two planes flew into New York's Twin Towers, and a third plane crashed into a Pennsylvania field on September 11, 2001, a day that will forever be remembered. Citizens of the United States, and many other nations around the world, stood in total disbelief that something so wrong could have been perpetrated on humanity, while other parts of the world celebrated the event as right and just. The age-old philosophical argument over what is right and wrong once again led to the tragic reality of war with thousands on both sides paying the ultimate price.

The question of what is right and wrong is one we deal with everyday. We walk through life lavishing praise and casting blame in our constant moral evaluation of who is right and who is wrong. The statement, "Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right," is often quoted to make a distinction between managing processes and leading people.<sup>1</sup> The obvious implication of this

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Bennis, *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1994), 78.

statement is that leadership is about always doing the right thing. This is, no doubt, what every leader aspires to do, but can anyone always do what is right? To do the right thing naturally requires knowing what is right and, conversely, what is wrong. Problems arise when what one person perceives to be right does not align with right as defined by someone else.

It is easy for leaders to approach the responsibilities of leading from a competency perspective. If the right theories and principles are applied at the right time in the right situation, then right decisions are made and the leader does the right thing. If only this were true. The problem with this way of thinking is that right is still determined by the leader and his or her application of these competencies. Right is still determined by the person and not by a less subjective standard; a set of absolutes that may define right in a manner much different than those prescribed by a set of leadership concepts and principles. This means right is not determined by competencies, but by alignment with an unchanging standard that must be written on the heart, and not just the mind, of every man and woman who accepts the responsibility of leading.

Leaders can live in a lonely and dangerous place where right, as defined by their own personal preferences, is never challenged. The positional power that accompanies the leader's role too often serves as insulation from correction and critique. This can be dangerous for a leader, since it is a human tendency to believe the way we see the world is correct and the decisions we make are based on sound logic and right thinking. This desire to be right is driven by strong innate cognitive and emotional processes that continually interpret what we are experiencing. Attempts to better understand these often reflexive processes have continued for centuries.

## I. A NATURAL STANDARD FOR RIGHT

Four hundred years ago, Sir Francis Bacon discussed a concept psychologists today call *confirmation bias*. Bacon said, "The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects; in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate."<sup>2</sup>

Confirmation bias causes us to hold tightly to what we believe even when there is abundant evidence our beliefs and perceptions are incorrect. Contemporary research has confirmed the anecdotal observations made by Bacon centuries ago. Kuhn found that both children and adults, when presented evidence of discrepancies in a theory they accepted, failed to acknowledge the discrepancies or addressed them in a distorted manner. "Identical information was interpreted one way in relation to a favored theory and another way in relation to a theory that was not favored."<sup>3</sup> In fact,

<sup>2</sup> Francis Bacon, "Novum Organum," in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burt (New York: Random House, 1939), 24-123.

<sup>3</sup> Deanna Kuhn, "Children and Adults as Intuitive Scientists," *Psychological Review* 96 (1989): 674-689.

confirmation bias actually causes people to become more firmly entrenched in their way of thinking when presented with strong evidence their way of thinking is flawed. Research done at Emory University used brain scans to study this phenomenon. Parts of the brain associated with reasoning showed almost no activity when participants were given information contrary to what they believe, while large amounts of activity took place in those feeling and emotion centers of the brain that create a sense of reward or relief.<sup>4</sup> This suggests confirmation bias is real and quite subliminal. People are often more motivated to escape negative feelings and emotions than to change their opinions, even when logical and rational evidence says they should.

Peter Senge (2006) discusses a similar phenomenon with his concept of mental models. Senge says, "Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action."<sup>5</sup> Senge also points out that we often have no conscious awareness of mental models or the effect they are having on our behavior and thinking. We judge people and situations based on the mental models we have formed over a lifetime, and changing these mental models is difficult to do on our own. Senge says changing mental models requires "the ability to carry on 'learningful' conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others."<sup>6</sup> Opening up to this kind of scrutiny can be most difficult for leaders who believe being right is their number one priority. Right or wrong, their mental models often persist throughout the organization.

Unfortunately, confirmation bias and mental models can dictate how leaders see the people around them. Mistaken perceptions of those they lead can be embraced as an accurate assessment of the followers and their contribution to the organization. This can be devastating for the followers who gain knowledge and skills to increase their contribution to the organization only to have the leader constantly see them as they were and not as they are. These often erroneous but firmly held perceptions can keep leaders from practicing what French philosopher Gabriel Marcel called *creative fidelity*.<sup>7</sup>

Creative fidelity is the willingness to be faithful and committed to someone because of who they are today and not who they were in the past. In a marriage relationship, fidelity to a spouse does not end because that person no longer looks or acts as they did years before. Creative fidelity is the result of a decision to love and honor that person though they have changed over time. The same principle applies with parents, friends, and even colleagues at work. The term creative fidelity seems contradictory, since fidelity implies constancy and creative implies change and adjustment. This is what makes Marcel's concept so intriguing. It points out the contradiction leaders are so often required to embrace. It is much easier to see a person in the role they have held in the organization for years rather than seeing them

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<sup>4</sup> Drew Westen, Pavel S. Blagov, Keith Harenski, Clint Kilts, and Stephan Hamann, "Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Partisan Political Judgment in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 18, no. 11(2006): 1947-1958.

<sup>5</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of a Learning Organization* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 2006), 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

as the person they have become. Creative fidelity means a leader must allow people to grow and change. Right would then be based on what is best for the follower today and not on preconceived notions from the past.

## II. WHO IS QUALIFIED TO DETERMINE RIGHT?

Perhaps these concepts are being addressed in Matthew 13 when Jesus told the parable of the weeds. In that parable, the enemy sows weeds among the wheat while everyone is sleeping. The wheat and weeds sprout together prompting the servants to ask the owner of the field if they should pull up the weeds. The owner instructs the servants to let the wheat and weeds grow together or else wheat may be pulled up with the weeds. The weeds would be removed once the wheat is mature. This parable has implication for leaders, since it makes clear that deciding who is wheat and who is a weed is not a decision made by human understanding and intellect. Indeed, at points in the maturation process, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds. This is God's job, and in time He will reveal right and wrong, good and bad. In this regard, confirmation biases and mental models are only reminders that creative fidelity or any attempt to see people in the totality of their intentions and motives, is beyond human capability. It requires Divine input and a willingness to submit our flawed perceptions to the perfect knowledge of an omniscient God.

The willingness to examine self and these internal processes on which we base our definition of right attitudes and behaviors is not a natural and spontaneous disposition for most people. This is especially true for those who lead and often feel an extra pressure to meet the expectation from others that they always know what is right and respond correctly in any given situation. After all, is this not what leaders do? At the very least, this is what leaders should aspire to do, which makes it imperative that right is determined by an absolute standard and not the often fickle thoughts and feelings that accompany human decision making. Doing the right thing then becomes a decision based on truth and not feelings. We see a Biblical example of right decisions in the life of Barnabas, who chose to overcome his confirmation biases and mental models to practice creative fidelity in his relationship with the Apostle Paul.

## III. A HIGHER STANDARD OF RIGHT

When great leaders in the Bible are discussed, Barnabas is rarely mentioned. He did not lead armies, create a great personal following, or do any other exploits commonly associated with leadership greatness. What he did do was make right decisions when making wrong decisions would have been easier and more highly endorsed by others.

We see in Barnabas a key characteristic of measuring right. Barnabas was a man who looked for and celebrated evidences of grace rather than measuring right through the lens of criticism. In Acts 11, we see this lived out in Barnabas. When the church in Antioch began to grow, it was Barnabas who was sent by the church in Jerusalem to be an ambassador of encouragement in Antioch. "When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain

true to the Lord with all their hearts.”<sup>8</sup> Barnabas focused on the evidence of grace he saw in what was being done right rather than negatively focusing on what was wrong in this young and developing Antioch church. This is the same characteristic we see in the way Barnabas embraced Paul, a man radically transformed by his conversion experience on the Damascus road.

When others could see Paul only as the persecutor of the Christians he had once been, Barnabas chose to see him in the light of grace as a man changed and called to an effective work for the cause of Christ. It was Barnabas who brought Paul into the fellowship of the church in Jerusalem when the Christians there did not trust that his conversion was real.<sup>9</sup> It was Barnabas who would, years later, bring Paul to Antioch to become part of the leadership there. It was Barnabas who joined with Paul to form the church’s first missionary team. It was Barnabas whose leadership during this critical time in the New Testament church was instrumental in raising up the man who would become Christianity’s chief theologian and one of the most significant figures in all of Christianity. History has shown Barnabas made right decisions concerning Paul, but what must he have overcome to do so?

The earlier discussion of confirmation bias and mental models shows how these processes can be innately driven by the natural default settings of our mind and emotions. There is no reason to believe the same natural processes were not at work in Barnabas. He, no doubt, had tangible evidence of Paul’s mistreatment of Christians, but he also knew firsthand the transformative power of Jesus. His definition of right, in regard to Paul, was not based on the opinions of the Jerusalem church or the natural inklings of his humanness. Barnabas was a man of faith who understood the workings of the Holy Spirit.

The way Barnabas walked out his faith has implications for leaders today. It was his willingness to walk as a man of faith directed by the Spirit that compels us to see him as a model leader. His faith was tangibly expressed in his constant focus on others and not self. His real name was Joseph, but his generous gift to the church with the money he received from the sale of a field earned him the name Barnabas, son of encouragement. It was this same selflessness he showed when coming alongside and endorsing Paul. It was also an act of selflessness on the part of Barnabas when he stood in support of John Mark after a dispute arose between Paul and Mark.<sup>10</sup> This resulted in Barnabas and Paul going their separate ways. Just as Barnabas saw potential in Paul, he also saw potential in Mark and chose to invest in him just as he had in Paul earlier. For Barnabas, the role of leading was to mentor young leaders. Doing the right thing was doing what was best for others and not for self.

Did Barnabas make the right decision with Mark? Historical evidence would say yes. His investment in Mark was not wasted and Mark became a valuable part of the church. Paul eventually referred to Mark as his “fellow worker.”<sup>11</sup> Near the end of his life, Paul found himself imprisoned, discouraged, and abandoned by all but his closest

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 11:23.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 11:26-27.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 15.

<sup>11</sup> Phlm 1:24.

friends. It was at this low point Paul wrote to Timothy and made this request, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me."<sup>12</sup> Barnabas chose to overlook the past failings of both Paul and Mark to see through the eyes of the Spirit who they were now and not who they had been in the past. This was creative fidelity in practice. He exercised creative fidelity and overcame the natural tendency toward confirmation bias and mental models that can determine how we judge right and wrong. Barnabas chose to focus on the evidence of grace in Mark's life rather than critically focus on mistakes made, just as he had done with Paul.

#### IV. THE ULTIMATE MEASURE OF RIGHT

Leaders are not perfect and none have the definitive answer to what is right and wrong in any and every situation. Maybe we are now narrowing in on what it means to do the right thing. It is not the result of following a prescribed method or the correct administration of five steps to right thinking and behavior. The life of Barnabas would teach us that leaders do the right thing when their concern for others is greater than their concern for self. Right decisions are made when we allow people to change and no longer judge them for who they once were but accept them for who they are now. Doing the right thing is looking for evidences of grace so we can focus on the good in people instead of assigning ourselves to the role of critic and faultfinder. Doing the right thing is to be a faith-filled leader who recognizes the Holy Spirit is always right, even when our confirmation biases and mental models tempt our mind and emotions to see people and situations in a contrary light. This is the absolute on which right and wrong must be determined. We have learned from Barnabas that the fruit of doing right, as determined by the Spirit, may not be instantly revealed, but it will be revealed in time. A day will come when the Owner of all things will say the wheat and the weeds are fully grown and the wheat is ready for harvest; pull up the weeds and harvest the wheat. What is absolutely right will be fully known on that day.

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#### About the Author

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Tm 4:11.