

### The Great Debates: Part 3

A couple drove down a country road for several miles, not saying a word. They were insanely, steaming mad at each other. An earlier discussion had led to an argument and neither of them wanted to concede their position. As they passed a barnyard of mules, goats, and pigs, the husband asked sarcastically, "Relatives of yours?" "Yep," the wife replied, "in-laws."

Don't you just love gene pool jokes!

Did you hear the one about the man who paid a genealogist \$500 to look up the family history....then paid him another \$1000 to keep quiet about it!  
We've got to be careful about criticizing the relatives, though, because it's amazing how much we are like our relatives who get on our nerves so much!

This matter of genetics, this matter of heredity leads me to comment on a debate which has been prominent, in the forefront of our culture for years. I'm referring to the nature verses nurture debate.

Have you ever wondered why your weird, idiosyncratic, eccentric, peculiar, lost more than a few marbles Uncle Harry is the way he is? Is it because of his poor gene pool or was he just born that way? Was he just born a jerk, a numskull, a nincompoop, knothead, creep, jacksass? Or is Uncle Harry the way he is because Uncle Harry was raised by his parents, George and Martha who were raised by Henry and Ellen who were raised by Fred and Louise? As they say, the problem with parents is they had parents.

I remember when Will was born and the initial excitement of the birth was over and we had brought him home and of course, I had already investigated what recording device to buy, and we had the camcorder ready. Scene 1, roll tape, and action. But there was no action. We waited and waited and waited for something to happen and mostly it was spit-up, snot and poop.-----  
-Yeah, the little booger from time to time would smile and coo but we weren't exactly getting what I would call a highlight reel. But----but on the other hand, isn't it interesting how from the very beginning babies have personalities.

From the very beginning I said, looks like his father, acts like his mother. Yes I said that. And in my mind, there's no doubt that nature, gene pools play a prominent role in our formation but--  
--and this is where I come down in the debate----but nurture also has its say.

Of course, the nature/nurture controversy is of special interest to this congregation because there's a mob of folk out there condemning people in this sanctuary for the way you were born, the way God created you. But as one Wedgewoodian says, now tell me, on what day at what time did you choose your sexual orientation?

Nature verses nurture, it's a big debate. It's a crucial debate with important ramifications. In the Bible there are some very important debates too. I've already introduced you to some non-important debates: a debate on how to cook the Passover lamb. I've also outlined what I feel is not a significant debate, a debate about God's sanctuary and the practice of worship. I'm

aware there are some Christians who get all out of whack about worship but that stuff is mainly personal preferences and power plays.

Today I want to share with you a debate within the Bible that I feel is crucial. And I say it is crucial because where you come out on this debate can greatly impact your life and those around you.

This debate has to do with leadership, with leadership style. To be specific, it has to do with a debate about Israel's king, or the debate about what type of leader Israel would have, or a debate about even if Israel should have a king.

First, a comparison. The nation Israel was born in Egypt, a country in which its leader, the pharaoh was considered not a mortal, but a god. Israel, however, did not accept the ideology of divine kingship. Some in Israel did, however, refer to Kings as sons of God. We find this designation in the Psalms and in the historical books like 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. The main function of the King from this perspective is to establish righteousness and justice. Or put another way, the King's mission is juridic. King Solomon, you recall, heard the case between two women arguing over who was the mother of an infant. The King in this paradigm also can serve as High Priest on important cultic occasions. For example, when King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem you will recall he not only did a little jig, a little dance, a little grooving and moving, King David also offered sacrifices and blessed the people like a priest.

When we turn to the Torah, though, we see an absolutely different description of the King and his statutes. In Deuteronomy there is nothing divine or sacred about the King. The Torah has a different son of God. It's not the King. Rather the people of Israel as a whole are described as the son of God. And in the Torah there is a rejection of any combination of political and priestly rights. In fact, try to function like a Priest and you take your life into your own hands. Numbers 16:35 describes 250 chieftains who did exactly that and they ended up being consumed by fire. King Uzziah tries to act like a high priest and he ends up struck by God and his forehead becomes leprous.

Any of you thinking about taking over any of my functions? Don't mess with me. Don't even think about coming onto my turf or wearing my crown or sitting on my throne.

According to the Torah, political leaders, Kings are not allowed to enter into the temple, neither to bring incense before the Lord, nor to sacrifice (Num. 16:35).

And here's one more twist, one more voice in the debate. Another group in Israel believed that only God was king and that a human king was not needed. According to Gideon's view in the book of Judges there is no place for a royal dynasty in Israel. A similar ideology is in 1 Samuel.

So there's the debate. It goes from Kings being sons of God and engaging in cultic rituals to Kings having no role in the cult and being just like everybody else to no Kings being necessary, to having a king being a rejection of God's kingship. Those positions are all over the map, aren't they!

So what does this debate have to do with you and me? Well, this King debate was a debate about what type of leadership Israel would have and you and I have to deal with leaders and leadership styles all the time, don't we? What are your thoughts and feelings on leadership. Who are some of the best leaders you have known?

What qualities did they have?

Who are some of the worst leaders you have known?

What was it about them that made their leadership so undesirable?

The debate about leadership style is always, always an important debate. I don't think you will disagree with me on the importance of leadership style because the type of boss you have, the type of parent you have, the type of preacher you have, the type of politicians you have can make your life miserable or make your life blessed. If you agree say Amen.

On political leaders none other than Elvis Presley hit the nail on the head. Elvis said, "I don't like people who are in politics for themselves and not for others. You want that, you can go into show business."

Leaders who are in it for themselves, who have to be at the center of the universe, leaders who have to be seen and heard all the time are dangerous.

Let me tell you something else. Leaders who think they are smarter than everybody else and don't realize that everyone is both a teacher and a student, leaders who don't trust or rely on colleagues also are dangerous.

Jim Stuart in his article "Voices: The State of the New Economy," writes "I've led from a place of servant leadership, and I've led from a place of top-down leadership -- and there's no question which kind of leadership is more effective. My classmates at Harvard Business School used to call me the General: For many years, that was my approach to leadership. Then I was hit by a series of personal tragedies and professional setbacks. My wife died. A mail-order venture that I had started went bankrupt. The universe was working hard to bring a little humility into my life. Rather than launch another business, I accepted a friend's offer to head an aquarium project in Tampa.

I spent the next six years in a job that gave me no power, no money and no knowledge. That situation forced me to draw on a deeper part of myself. We ended up with a team of people who were so high-performing that they could almost walk through walls. Why, I wondered, why was I suddenly able to lead a team that was so much more resilient and creative than any team that I had run before? The answer: Somewhere, amid all of my trials, I had begun to trust my colleagues as much as I trusted myself.

Leaders who value others. Leaders who practice humility.

Henri Nouwen's in his book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, writes of

his journey to l'Arche Community in Canada to work and live among the mentally disabled. Nouwen reflects on how he was teaching at Yale and Harvard preparing "the brightest and the best" among this world's students and yet here he was, close to burn-out, mentally exhausted and far from an intimate relationship with God. He was also well-known, lauded as a superb lecturer and writer, acclaimed among the highest and wealthiest academic institutions in the land. He left it. He left it all to live and work among some of the most marginalized in our world. And he claims that through living among the mentally disabled, as part of that community, they nurtured him to regain emotional integration and health. They treated and accepted him as one of them - unaware as they were of his former status and writings - they restored him to healing, wholeness and newness of life. Nouwen writes, "This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self - the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things, -and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of my accomplishments.

Watch out for leaders who are building a resume, leaders who are doing things, proving things, building things to add to their long list of accomplishments. Watch out for them because they may build their resume at your expense and the expense of others.

On our retreat this year at the opening session Jose asked us some fun questions but also some difficult questions, one of the latter for me being what was something for which we had deep regret.

At my first church, Bethel Baptist in Chapel Hill I proudly led the church to have women deacons for the first time. Of course, it was the right thing to do. I strongly believe in providing leadership to rid the modern Church of sexism. And I'm aware that change for the better in the steeples is almost always painful. But having said that, even though I did the right thing at Bethel I did it in a wrong way.

The truth is our motives are usually mixed motives. I wanted to be able to proudly add to my resume, liberal Baptist preacher leads church to have women deacons. Look at me. Aren't I great! But my accomplishment came at the expense of one church member I'll Larry who hadn't been attending church that much and folk were considering voting for him just because he was a male and his family had been in the church since the time of Moses. They seriously considered voting for Larry instead of voting for women who were active and faithful.

Judging folk for not being faithful to a church is something I bend over backwards not to do because the point is not the church. The church is not the point. Somebody say amen. But I also don't get on folk for not doing this or not doing that because of Larry, this person I hurt.

Larry was going through a difficult time in his life and when he most needed grace he got judgment.

Watch out for leaders who are building their resumes.

Jesus, on the night he ate at the table with his disciples all of whom would betray him, taught them a very important lesson about leadership. And he did it with a towel, a towel to wash feet. It was his way of saying leadership is to be for others, leadership must take the form of being a servant, leadership practices grace, not judgement.