

On Following Models in Ministry

By PAUL J. SCHARF

I have learned from many different models in ministry.

These would include my own pastors, as well as all types of other Christian leaders.

Surely someone studying for the ministry should find, hopefully, more than one thing to emulate about each of his college and seminary professors. And, thankfully, that is my overwhelming testimony. In fact, my teachers have been some of the most influential people in my entire life (see Luke 6:40).

I have also benefited from the examples of many different preachers and other Christian leaders that I had initially seen only from afar. In God's providence, I have gotten to meet a number of them as well—and even to develop relationships with some of them. That, of course, added much greater depth than I could find simply by watching or listening to a recording, and has almost always served to reinforce the power of the witness that I had previously viewed.

You will notice that I am not naming any names in this article. I am doing so for several reasons. First, space would not permit me to do justice to those that I would name (I have written entire articles about some of these men). Then, I would unavoidably leave out the names of others—even though they have also made a vitally important impact upon my life. But, further, that is not my point here.

I am addressing the *concept* of following models in ministry.

One of the cardinal rules that is often impressed upon young ministerial students is that they must never copy their favorite preachers. Certainly, we have seen that tenet violated by some quasi-cultic fringe groups—and sometimes by those who are closer to our orbit. Perhaps such a caveat is needed because the temptation to model someone too closely is stronger in youth, before a person finds his own way. The practice of copying someone is also more insidious when it is done subconsciously.

With that warning intact, however, I believe that we can still maintain the value of following positive models in ministry.

“Imitate me,” Paul told the Corinthians, “just as I also *imitate* Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1; see also 4:16-17; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess. 3:9). Of course, this command pertains more to implementing the principles that Paul was teaching in this context, rather than to copying some type of ministry style.

When Paul addressed my subject head-on to Timothy, his primary trainee in ministry, his emphasis was on the content that he had committed to him—“the things that you have heard from me” (2 Tim. 2:2). Following this, Timothy could also then “be an example to” others (1 Tim. 4:12).

Yet, the New Testament indicates that more practical applications may be gained from our mentors, as well. Paul also reminded Timothy that he had “carefully followed (Paul’s) doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance” (2 Tim. 3:10). And Paul’s most extensive statement in this regard was given to “the elders of the church” at Ephesus in Acts 20:17-38.

Furthermore, the author of Hebrews exhorts us, “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct” (13:7).

Different types of leaders have taught me many diverse lessons—in various realms. I think about the significance of these men, and all that I have gained from them, often in the course of conducting my ministry.

As I encounter various scenarios and challenges, certain individuals come to mind. There are some who I would naturally emulate for one purpose, but never in another area. Often, I will think to myself, “What would _____ do in this situation?”

The methods employed by Christian leaders—to say nothing of their styles—are sometimes contradictory rather than complementary. Thus, it is incumbent upon me as an observer and a disciple to discern such differences and apply them at my own discretion, knowing that I am responsible as a steward in my own service to God, for “He who judges me is the Lord” (1 Cor. 4:4).

But it is at those times when I need to draw on such examples the most that I realize how richly God has blessed me. Then, I also remember how utterly responsible I am to live up to the standards He has entrusted to me (see Luke 12:48).

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