

## MORAL AUTHORITY

*Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing.*

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

**W**hen I was twenty years old, I went to work as an intern for the youth minister at my dad's church. This was my first official ministry position. I knew absolutely nothing about youth ministry. However, I knew a great deal about being a youth. And that's probably why Sid hired me.

After a few weeks of following Sid around, trying to figure out exactly what an intern was supposed to do, he sat me down for a heart-to-heart.

"Andy," he said, "you are a leader. I need you to lead."

Lead? How could I lead? I didn't know anything about youth ministry. "But you are the youth minister," I said.

I'll never forget his response.

"Andy, there is a difference between having position and having influence. I have a position. But you have influence with the students. They will obey me because of my position. But they will follow you because of your influence. Now I need you to use your influence and lead. Don't be afraid. Lead."

Your influence is far more critical to the success of your vision than

your position. Generally speaking, it is not men and women of position that give birth to and deliver great visions. A visionary often has nothing to leverage other than his influence. It is the influence of the visionary, regardless of how limited it may be, that serves as his platform and podium. Influence is often the only vehicle available for moving others to act. In many cases, influence is enough.

Influence is a funny thing. It's hard to define. It's hard to describe. But you know when somebody has it. And you know when somebody doesn't. No doubt you are aware of the people who influence you. But you may not be sure why they have so much leverage in your life.

Visionaries must be influencers if they are going to see their visions through from start to finish. You must be able to move people from where they are to where you believe they could and should be. Position is optional. Influence is essential.

Often the passion that accompanies a clear vision from God is all it takes to elevate a visionary's influence. That was certainly the case with Nehemiah. He was merely the cupbearer to the king. But once his burden for Jerusalem began to burn in his soul, he became an influencer. He influenced a king. And he went on to influence a disorganized, hapless group of strangers in Jerusalem.

There are other dynamics that elevate a man or woman's influence within a particular sphere. Some are apparent: wealth, rank, communication skills, education, accomplishment, performance. But there are people who have none of those things who still wield great influence. Again, influence is a tricky thing. You know it when you see it. But it is not always clear why certain people have it.

As adults, the people who influence our lives often have little authority in the traditional sense. They rarely carry a symbol of power. They don't have to. Something about their lives gives them authority that translates into influence. We find ourselves drawn to them. We want to be like them. They almost demand our respect. Not because of their position. It is something else.

But what? What is it about the people we allow to influence us that opens us up to their influence?

## THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT

If God has birthed a vision in your heart, chances are you have already begun to exploit the arenas in which you believe you have influence. But in order to gain and maintain the influence required to deliver on your vision, there is one quality that is a must. Without this, whatever influence you perceive you have will eventually evaporate.

Every great leader, every successful father and mother, anybody who has ever received and followed through successfully with a God-given vision has possessed a form of authority that rests not on position or accomplishment, but on an inner conviction and the willingness to bring his or her life into alignment with that conviction. It is the alignment between a person's convictions and his behavior that makes his life persuasive. Herein is the key to sustained influence.

The phrase that best captures this dynamic is moral authority. To gain and maintain your influence you must have moral authority. Moral authority is the critical, nonnegotiable, can't-be-without ingredient of sustained influence. Without moral authority, your influence will be limited and short-lived.

Moral authority is the credibility you earn by walking your talk. It is the relationship other people see between what you say and what you do between what you claim to be and what you are. A person with moral authority is beyond reproach. That is, when you look for a discrepancy between what he says he believes and what he does, you come up empty. There is alignment between conviction and action, belief and behavior.

Nothing compensates for a lack of moral authority. No amount of communication skills, wealth, accomplishment, education, talent, or position can make up for a lack of moral authority. We all know plenty of people who have those qualities but who exercise no influence over us whatsoever. Why? Because there is a contradiction between what they claim to be and what we perceive them to be.

We will not allow ourselves to be influenced by those who lack moral authority in our eyes. Inconsistency between what is said and what is done inflicts a mortal wound on a leader's influence.

For this reason, moral authority is a fragile thing. It takes a lifetime to earn. But it can be lost in a moment. And once it is lost, it is almost impossible to restore.

If others are aware of a discrepancy between what you say you believe and what you do, or between what you do and what you want them to do, you will have little moral authority. If people recognize alignment between your beliefs, actions, and expectations, you will have moral authority. It is all about walking your talk.

As a visionary, the one thing you can control and must protect at all costs is your moral authority. Moral authority makes you a leader worth following. Moral authority positions you to influence people at the deepest level: heart, mind, and conscience. For this reason, your moral authority will enable you to maintain your influence with those who feel called to follow you.

Family is a realm in which the significance of moral authority is easily evaluated and understood. Think for a moment about your parents. Were they (or are they) leaders worth following? Do thoughts of Mom and Dad elicit feelings of respect?

If so, it is because you perceive consistency or alignment between what they say and what they do. Your respect for them is not determined by their financial, academic, or social accomplishments alone. In fact, you may hold them in high regard in spite of their financial, academic or social standing. They have moral authority.

If, on the other hand, you have little respect for Mom and/or Dad, your feelings probably stem from what you perceive to be an inconsistency between what they said and did, what they claimed to be and what they truly were. And all the financial, academic, and social accolades in the world cannot compensate for the inconsistency.

Think for a moment. Isn't it true that as their inconsistencies became more and more apparent, you found yourself less and less open to their influence? As they lost their moral authority, they lost their influence. On the other hand, parents who maintain their moral authority are able to maintain their influence throughout their children's lives. Such is the power and potential of moral authority.

This same dynamic is at work in every marriage. As a husband, my ability to influence Sandra hinges on my competency and my moral authority. And the same is true of her influence over me. By being competent in an area, she can trust I know what I am talking about. But my moral authority, the alignment between what I say and do, is what enables

her to trust my motive. My moral authority determines whether or not she believes I have her best interests in mind.

All the ability, talent, and charisma in the world cannot take the place of moral authority. What you have seen happen in your own family, good or bad, has the potential to be repeated in your relationship with those who have chosen to partner with you in your vision.

### NEHEMIAH'S BIG DECISION

The last time we looked in on Nehemiah, he had just successfully navigated the inhabitants of Jerusalem through a complex civil and economic crisis. As you recall, things climaxed in a heated confrontation between Nehemiah and the city officials.

Nehemiah challenged the most powerful people in his community about using their wealth to take advantage of the workers. When Nehemiah was finished with them, they tucked their tails between their legs, apologized, returned what they had taken, and went away. As he tells it, "Then they were silent and could not find a word to say" (5:8b).

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the outcome of Nehemiah's confrontation seems a little unrealistic. How is it that these powerful, wealthy nobles and city officials immediately backed down and agreed to mend their ways after one confrontation with Nehemiah? Surely there was more to it than that. Real life doesn't work that way.

Actually, there was more to it than that. In the verses following Nehemiah's clash with the nobles, we discover something about Nehemiah that positioned him to win the showdown with such ease. Nehemiah had moral authority. Moral authority that was twelve years in the making.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he was one in a long line of governors assigned by the Persian government to oversee that territory. Previous governors had used the position to enrich themselves at the expense of the people. With their appointment came the right to levy taxes at their discretion. In addition, they had a right to a portion of everything that was harvested by the farmers in their region.

Nehemiah wisely chose to forgo those privileges. By doing so, he set himself apart from his predecessors. But more importantly, he demonstrated his heartfelt commitment to the project and to the people of Jerusalem. Nobody could accuse him of being in this for personal gain

He was there to restore Jerusalem to a place of honor and influence among the nations. He was there to fulfill God's vision for his nation.

Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.

But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people. Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people. (5:14-19)

It is easy to see why Nehemiah's words carried such weight with the nobles and officials. No wonder they backed down. They must have been humiliated. Think about it. Nehemiah actually had the right to take advantage of the people in Jerusalem. His position entitled him to exploit those he led. Besides that, every governor before him had done so. Yet he went out of his way not to place a hardship on the people.

The nobles and city officials had no right to do what they were doing. They were actually breaking the Law. And by breaking the Law they had placed a hardship on, of all people, Nehemiah. For if you will remember, he had to take his own money and buy back the Jews the nobles and city officials had sold into slavery. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be to face Nehemiah having done what they had done? His lifestyle shamed them.

Take note. It was not Nehemiah's position that gave him the leverage with the nobles and city officials. It was his moral authority. He had walked his talk since the day he arrived and announced his intention to rebuild the wall. There was alignment between his beliefs and behavior. He lived a life in keeping with his vision.

### THE SOURCE

Moral authority is not a method. It is not a way to get things done. It is not a means to a prearranged end. Genuine moral authority is not something a leader sets out to develop in order to become a better leader or to gain influence with people. Leaders and influencers who are driven purely by a desire to be leaders and influencers rarely maintain their moral authority. Why? Because great leadership is rooted in something other than a desire to be a great leader. Influence is rooted in something other than a desire to be an influencer.

Nehemiah's decision to forfeit his right to the governor's allotment of food was not driven by a conscious desire on his part to bolster his moral authority among the people. And he certainly could not have anticipated his confrontation with the nobles and city officials. His decision stemmed from his reverence for God and his commitment to the vision: "But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall" (vv. 15b-16a, NIV).

Nehemiah did not consciously choose to forgo his rights as governor to gain influence with the people in Jerusalem. He did what he did in order to maintain a blameless walk before God. After all, God had not sent him to Jerusalem to become a wealthy landowner. God had not worked on his behalf so he could become a governor. His appointment as governor was simply a means to an end. He was there to rebuild the wall and to remove the reproach from the city.

Nehemiah was on a mission from God. In light of that, it would have been counterproductive for him to have levied additional taxes on the people. They were burdened and distracted enough as it was. Claiming what was "rightfully" his would have interfered with the reconstruction.

For Nehemiah, gaining and maintaining moral authority was not a leadership ploy. It was a natural expression of his devotion to God. It was

the logical choice in light of what he felt called to do.

Moral authority is a reflection of a man or woman's commitment to something outside the realm of influence and leadership. Moral authority is the result of a commitment to do what's right. Regardless. Men and women who maintain their moral authority are not playing to the crowd. They are not driven by a desire to gain influence. Their number one concern is doing the right thing—even if doing the right thing appears to jeopardize their influence.

But it goes further than that. Here is where so many people with "God" ideas veer off course. As a leader, you must be willing to do the right thing even if it jeopardizes your vision.

You probably need to let that sink in for a minute.

The day will come when you will be faced with a set of circumstances that on the surface will seem to dictate that you compromise ethically or even morally for the sake of seeing your vision through to completion.

Chances are, when it happens, you will be so far down the road with your vision that the temptation to compromise will be almost unbearable. Those who have journeyed with you will urge you to press on at any cost.

The Scriptures are full of examples. Abraham finally had a son and God said, "Sacrifice him." Abraham's dilemma was not unlike the one you will eventually face. Do I obey God, or do I do what appears to best serve the completion of the vision?

How about David standing in the shadows of the cave in Engeddi watching Saul relieve himself? God had promised him the throne. To the casual observer it seemed the only way to attain the throne would be to kill the king. His closest friends urged him to do so. It looked like it would only be a matter of time before Saul and his troops tracked David down and killed him. But it was against the law of God to kill the king.

So David stood there peering through the darkness pondering the question every visionary will face along the way: Is my ultimate allegiance to God or to the vision?

The point is, you must maintain your moral authority at all costs. Even if it costs you your vision. You must be willing to abandon your vision if that is what's necessary to maintain your moral authority. Vision is important. But maintaining one's moral authority must take priority over the pursuit of a vision.

Just as God intervened on behalf of Abraham and David, if your vision is truly a "God thing," he will intervene for you.

### SHORTCUTS

In addition to the temptation to breach your integrity, you will be tempted to take shortcuts. On the surface, these shortcuts appear to be a way of speeding up the vision. They are a way of getting things done or moving things along. After all, God doesn't want us to sit around and wait for things to fall into place, does he?

Moral and ethical compromises of any kind lead to the loss of moral authority.

Nehemiah faced an ethical dilemma. He was aware of the injustices being inflicted upon the people by the nobles and city officials. But he was also aware that this same group had the potential to have him run out of town. Their wealth gave them leverage with the people. They had the power to bring the reconstruction project to a halt.

But right is right and wrong is wrong. And Nehemiah could not in good conscience ignore what these officials were doing to the people. The vision was important. But he could not turn his back on injustice for the sake of getting the wall rebuilt. He took a risk by confronting the leaders the way he did. But to ignore what they were doing, to pretend everything was fine, would have been a compromise of integrity. So he put the vision on hold in order to address an issue of right and wrong.

### BUILDING BLOCK #14

#### ABANDON THE VISION BEFORE YOU ABANDON YOUR MORAL AUTHORITY.

When you face your moral or ethical fork in the road, here is the question to ponder: Would God lead me to embrace a vision that would force me to do something he forbids?

Of course not.

Maintain your moral authority at all costs. As a visionary, it is your primary point of leverage. Without it, you are no longer a leader worth following.

Your ability to gain and maintain moral authority with the people who are partnering with you will have far more to do with the condition

of your heart than your commitment to lead. Moral authority is rooted in a desire to please God rather than man. Moral authority is the overflow of character, not leadership ability.

Obey God at all costs. Hold your vision in an open hand. And watch for him to intervene.

#### MOTHER TERESA

In our generation, no one has demonstrated the power of moral authority more than Mother Teresa. She embodied her vision. She never required anyone to do anything she had not already done herself. Skeptics threw rocks at her theology but never her character. And for that reason, the stone throwers always came off looking rather foolish.

Her vision was to establish an order of nuns whose sole purpose was to care for those who live in conditions unworthy of human dignity. In 1948 she cast her vision to the Vatican and two years later the Missionaries of Charity was officially sanctioned by the Church. Their charge was to seek out and care for the poor, abandoned, sick, and dying.

Consistent with her vision, Mother Teresa chose the streets of Calcutta as her parish. It was there that she unintentionally carved for herself a reputation that would win the respect of the world.

In 1952 she and her Missionaries of Charity received permission from officials in Calcutta to use a section of an abandoned temple for their first enterprise: a home for the dying. Mother Teresa referred to it as Nirmal Hriday. Here, the poor of Calcutta, who often died alone in the streets, could find comfort and cleanliness in their final hours.

It didn't take long for word to spread that a group of Catholic missionaries had taken up residence in the neighborhood. Hindu priests were uncomfortable with a missionary organization so close to their temple. They petitioned city authorities to relocate the hospice.

On one occasion, priests from the KaliGhat Temple led a large delegation to the Nirmal Hriday and demanded that the missionaries leave immediately. It is reported that Mother Teresa came out and personally addressed the crowd with these words, "If you want to kill me, here I am! You can merrily behead me. But do not disturb my poor patients."<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, an opportunity arose for the Missionaries of Charity to demonstrate the sincerity of their call and the purity of their motives to

those who eyed them suspiciously. It was an opportunity most would have missed.

It came to Mother Teresa's attention that one of the Hindu priests was in the advanced stages of tuberculosis. Because his illness was untreatable, he had been denied a bed in the city hospital.<sup>2</sup>

In an unprecedented gesture of kindness and grace, Mother Teresa brought the dying priest to Nirmal Hriday. There, she personally cared for him until the day he died. The Missionaries of Charity then carried the priest's body back to the temple for Hindu rights.

This event captured the hearts of the people of Calcutta. Mother Teresa's willingness to live out her message broke down the theological and cultural walls that separated her from the people she had come to serve.

Throughout her life, Mother Teresa's primary credential was her moral authority. But that was enough to procure for her both audience and influence with the most powerful people in the world. But even when she found herself thrust into the unfamiliar and oftentimes hostile halls of power, Mother Teresa maintained the courage of her convictions. Her words were always consistent with the life she lived and the theology she held so dear.

Peggy Noonan, former special assistant to President Reagan, was an eyewitness of what was probably the most significant public demonstration of Mother Teresa's commitment to consistency of belief, word, and deed.

On February 3, 1994, Mother Teresa came to Washington and gave a speech that left the entire audience dazzled and part of it dismayed, including a United States senator who turned to his wife after Mother Teresa concluded and said, "Is my jaw up yet?"

It was the annual National Prayer Breakfast at the Hilton Hotel and three thousand people were there, including most of official Washington...By tradition the president of the United States and the first lady always attend, and on this day in 1994 Bill and Hillary Clinton were up there on the dais, as were the vice president and Mrs. Gore and a dozen other important people, senators, and Supreme Court justices...As she stepped

up onto a little platform that had been placed beneath the podium there was great applause. She nodded at it. Then she took her speech in her hand and began to read from it in a soft singsong voice....

The audience was composed of liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans, and moderates of all persuasion. Perhaps half were Christian members of the prayer breakfast movement, some quite seriously devout and some less so—there's a bit of this-world networking that goes on. The other half was a mix: Muslims, Jews, searchers, agnostics and atheists, reporters and bureaucrats, waiters and diplomats. A good-natured and attentive mix. And they all loved her. But as the speech continued it became more pointed.

"I can never forget the experience I had in the sitting room where they kept all these old parents of sons and daughters who had just put them into an institution and forgotten them, maybe. I saw that in that home, these old people had everything—good food, comfortable place, television, everything—but everyone was looking toward the door. And I did not see a single one with a smile on their face. I turned to a sister and I asked, 'Why do these people who have every comfort here, they are looking toward the door? Why are they not smiling? I'm so used to seeing the smiles on our people. Even the dying ones smile.'

"And Sister said, 'This is the way it is nearly every day. They are expecting, they are hoping that the son or the daughter will come to visit them. They are hurt because they are forgotten.'

She continued, "But I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because Jesus said, 'If you receive a little child, you receive me.' So every abortion is the denial of receiving Jesus, the neglect of receiving Jesus."

Well, silence. Cool deep silence in the cool round cavern for just about 1.3 seconds. And then applause started on the right hand side of the room, and spread, and deepened, and now the room was swept with people applauding, and they would not stop for what I believe was five or six minutes.

But not everyone applauded. The president and first lady,

seated within a few feet of Mother Teresa on the dais, were not applauding. Nor were the vice president and Mrs. Gore. They looked like seated statues at Madame Tussaud's. They glistened in the lights and moved not a muscle, looking at the speaker in a determinedly semi-pleasant way....

Now, Mother Teresa is not perhaps schooled in the ways of world capitals and perhaps did not know that having said her piece and won the moment she was supposed to go back to the airier, less dramatic assertions on which we all agree. Instead she said this:

"(Abortion) is really a war against the child, and I hate the killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that the mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? ... Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love one another but to use any violence to get what they want. This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion."

Mother Teresa now spoke of fighting abortion with adoption, of telling hospitals and police stations and frightened young girls, "Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Give me the child. I'm willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child."

Perhaps she didn't know, or care, that her words were, as they say, not "healing" but "divisive," dividing not only Protestant from Catholic but Catholic from Catholic. It was all so unhappily unadorned, explicit, impolitic. And it was wonderful, like a big fresh drink of water, bracing in its directness and its uncompromising tone....

And Mother Teresa seemed neither to notice nor to care. She finished her speech to a standing ovation and left as she had entered, silently, through a parted curtain, in a flash of blue and white.... She could do this, of course, because she had a natural and unknown authority.<sup>3</sup>

I love that story. I love the mental image it evokes. Imagine it. A tiny,

slightly stooped woman standing on a box so as to allow her to be seen over the lectern addressing some of the most powerful men and women in the world. And packed into that aging frame was enough moral authority to lay low anyone who dared raise a finger in opposition. Such is the power of moral authority.

As Christians, it is imperative that we develop and maintain our moral authority. We have been called to be influencers. And the world is watching. Christ didn't commission us to become authorities so we could tell people how they ought to live. He called us to be influencers by the way we live, so people would want what we have.

### THE RECIPE

Developing and maintaining moral authority requires three things: character, sacrifice, and time.

#### CHARACTER

Character is simply the will to do what is right, as God defines right. Nehemiah did not require the food allotment that was legally his because it was not the right thing to do under the circumstances. He confronted the city officials and nobles because it was his responsibility as the governor to protect the people. Nehemiah was first and foremost committed to doing the right thing. His commitment to rebuild the wall was secondary to his commitment to do the right thing.

The issue here is surrender. To be a man or woman of character requires you to surrender to God's standards, values, and principles. Character requires you to continue in a state of surrender when God's law makes sense and when it doesn't. It assumes you will abide by his Word when it benefits you and when it sets you back. Men and women of character do the right thing even when doing right delays or dismantles their visions.

On my first date with Sandra we ran out of things to talk about after thirty minutes. She is quiet by nature, and I was nervous. After a few agonizing moments of silence I blurted out, "So, have you done any modeling?"

I have no idea where that question came from. I could just picture Sandra getting back to her dorm that night, waking up her roommate and saying, "You've got to hear this one." I couldn't even make eye contact. For

all I knew, the girls in her dorm probably kept a list of tacky pickup lines. She was going to win some sort of prize at my expense. People would be walking up to me for months whispering, "So, have you ever done any modeling?"

To my surprise she said, "Yes, a little."

The tone of her voice told me there was a story. And her body language let me know this was a sensitive subject. But since we didn't have anything else to talk about, I pressed on.

"Really, tell me about it."

Soon after Sandra moved to Atlanta to attend Georgia Tech she was given an opportunity to do some modeling for the Atlanta Apparel Mart. That led to another opportunity and then another. Before long modeling became a part-time job. Besides being a good source of income, it was a lot of fun. And of course, it was very flattering.

A company in Atlanta was putting on a big costume party. Sandra and two other girls were invited to model costumes for the ladies who had been invited to attend the party. Each girl had several outfits to show to the mostly female audience.

Her first costume was something along the lines of an evening gown. But when she returned to her dressing room to change into the second outfit, she was shocked. Her second costume was... Well, it wasn't anything she wanted to be seen in. She took a look at the next one and it wasn't any better.

The way she tells it, she changed back into her own clothes, found the fellow in charge and informed him she could not go out on the runway dressed "like that." He was incensed. They were right in the middle of the show! And besides, it was "just a bunch of women."

Sandra didn't budge. She simply gathered her things and left.

Needless to say, I was impressed. Here was a woman who walked her talk in the most difficult of environments, even when it meant walking away from an opportunity that was profitable.

That is the essence of character. She did what was right regardless of the cost. What she didn't know was that her decision that afternoon would give her moral authority with hundreds of teenage girls in the years that followed. And someday it will give her moral authority with our daughter, Allie.



**SACRIFICE**

As we discussed earlier, a vision, by its very nature, requires resources that are not readily available. The man or woman who champions a vision must step up to the plate and demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice in order to deliver. Sacrifice is the clearest demonstration of your commitment to what could be.

Generally speaking, people will not invest more in a vision than the one who originally cast the vision. In order to get others to give sacrificially, you must lead the way.

When you make a genuine sacrifice for the sake of your vision two things happen:

1. The people around you catch a glimpse of what's in your heart.
2. You catch a glimpse of what's in theirs as well.

When you sacrifice for the sake of your vision, it is like letting go of the side of the rink and skating out into the center of the ice. You know you are committed. And those around you are assured of your commitment as well.

Untested devotion does little to move the hearts of others. But once you demonstrate your commitment by personal sacrifice for the sake of the cause, your potential for influence escalates considerably. Sacrifice penetrates the superficial, self-protecting resistance posed by those who are looking for excuses not to pitch in and support you. Sacrifice will often silence your critics.

Lane Jones, one of our pastors, told me about an incident that took place in a college speech class which illustrates the power of linking sacrifice with conviction.

Our assignment was to prepare a speech to persuade. The topics ran the gamut from selling products to defending Christianity. One of the girls in the class was a little older than the rest of us, probably 23 or 24. I knew her to be a Christian from other comments she had made in the class, and so it was no surprise when she chose to speak on the merits of the pro-life position.

I remember the tension. Much of her argument was from a

religious perspective. And as you would imagine, the class was very diverse in moral and religious persuasion. She went through the normal arguments against abortion. Then, having made all of her theoretical points (some that had already been made in other speeches—abortion was big that quarter), she finished by challenging the “accepted” exceptions of rape, incest, and endangerment of the mother's life. She said she didn't even agree with abortion in these extreme cases.

At that point, even the other pro-life advocates in the class were getting uncomfortable. And I imagine the pro-choice people were thinking they had an easy target.

But after she finished making her points she concluded by sharing how her own world had been shattered a couple of years earlier when she had been raped. The rape resulted in a pregnancy. She then produced a 5x7 picture of a small child of obvious mixed racial makeup and introduced him by name.

She said her son was the joy of her life and she couldn't imagine life without him. Then she reiterated her position that she believed that abortion under any circumstances was unacceptable.

As she finished I remember the silence that followed. Most of the other “controversial” speeches had been followed by more debate and partisan attacks. But not this time. There was nothing to debate. There was nothing theoretical about her position.

My professor made his way back up to the front of the class. Paused. And then made this comment. “The most powerful argument a speaker can make is one from personal experience.” I was reminded once again of the truth that an audience can disagree with a position, but they can't disagree with the reality of a conviction lived out.<sup>3</sup>

When you make a personal sacrifice for something you believe in, it gives you moral authority.

The pro-choice people in Lane's class may not have been convinced by the girl's story. But in the face of that kind of moral authority they knew better than to raise mere intellectual objections. They may have questioned her views, but not her integrity or authenticity.

There is something compelling in the words of men and women who have sacrificed for what they believe in. And the critic who responds with mere intellectual arguments generally comes off looking shallow and desperate.

### TIME

Moral authority is not achieved overnight. It is not something you can manufacture at will. Moral authority is developed through a proper response to circumstances, circumstances over which you have no control.

You can involve yourself in exercises and disciplines that will strengthen your character. But moral authority can only be achieved when your character is put to the test. Your response to these unexpected tests will determine your moral authority.

Nehemiah was a man of character before he chose not to take advantage of his position as governor of Judah. But his decision to forgo his allotment of food gave him moral authority. Sandra was a woman of character before she refused to model the costumes that afternoon. But it was her decision to walk out that gave her moral authority with the teenagers she disciplined later on.

Experience is a necessary component of moral authority. Therefore moral authority requires time. In Mother Teresa's case, it took a lifetime to develop the moral authority to make her address at the National Prayer Breakfast. Her moral authority didn't hang on one significant incident from her life. It was supported by years of selfless service to the poor of Calcutta.

There will be dozens of opportunities to demonstrate your commitment to walk your talk. Each time you publicly demonstrate alignment between the two, you become more credible, more believable. Your message becomes more compelling.

While you have control over your response to these opportunities, you cannot mark their arrival on a calendar. So you must be careful how you live. Every day represents another potential opportunity to develop or destroy your moral authority.

### HANDLE WITH CARE

When I was a teenager, there was a fellow in his thirties who agreed to disciple me and several of my friends. I'll refer to him as Jim. Jim was an

excellent Bible teacher. Hundreds of young people would gather every week to hear him teach. So we were honored that he was willing to spend time with a small group of us.

In addition to meeting with us at his home for discipleship and prayer, Jim took us camping and rafting. On our last camping trip together something happened that disappointed me so deeply I dropped out of his group and could not even bring myself to attend his Bible study from that point on. I didn't know what to call it at the time, but Jim made a decision that caused him to lose his moral authority with me.

We were camping in the north Georgia mountains. There were five of us. Jim, me, and three of my buddies. Jim owned some property that was part of a new golf and residential resort. There were no houses at that time, just raw, wooded land. The only real sign of civilization was a clubhouse, a swimming pond, and a man-made creek that was designed to function as a water slide. This water slide was made out of smooth stone. And the water actually ran out of the pond like a creek.

As you might imagine, the water slide was where we spent most of the afternoon. But we were not alone. Dozens of other families were there as well. Consequently, the line got longer and longer as the day wore on. Jim was not the most patient fellow in the world. Everybody knew that. And I suppose it was his impatience, combined with his love for adventure, that prompted the incident that followed.

Unlike modern water slides, there was really no way to close this one. After all, it was a creek. So, at six o'clock, they put a big sign on a chain that said, CLOSED. For most people that was all that was needed.

At about five, Jim gathered us up and said, "Look guys, they close the water slide at six o'clock. Let's go eat, and then we will come back after it's closed and play until dark."

I was shocked. Not at the idea of sneaking back to the water slide after it was closed. In fact, I'm sure I would have suggested doing that whether Jim was in on it or not. I was certainly not above bending a few rules for the sake of a good time.

What shocked me was the fact that Jim, our leader, would suggest such a thing. I couldn't believe it. I was so crushed that after dinner I didn't go with them. I chose to swim alone in the pond.

Looking back as a forty-year-old man, I believe I judged Jim too

harshly. But as a sixteen-year-old, I expected more from my spiritual leaders. From that point on, it was hard for me to listen to Jim speak. His talk didn't match his walk. At the time I didn't completely understand the dynamics of what had happened, but in effect, Jim had lost his moral authority with me. And he never knew it. His character had been tested, and he had made the wrong decision.

Moral authority is a fragile thing. It can be lost in a single decision.

### LOST AND FOUND

Whenever I speak on the subject of moral authority, I am asked whether it can be reestablished once it has been lost. I believe in many cases it can. But the price is high. Gaining forgiveness from people is one thing. Regaining your moral authority is something else altogether. Many stop with forgiveness and do not go the distance necessary to regain their moral authority. Let me explain.

Remember Zacchaeus? The wee little man? What if after his encounter with Jesus he had gathered the people he had wronged together and made the following remarks: "I have good news! I have met Jesus and received forgiveness of all my sins. I realize I have abused my rights as a tax collector, and consequently, many of you have been penalized financially. I want you to know how sorry I am. Please forgive me. I promise to be more careful from this point on."

How would you have reacted to a speech like that from a man who had enriched himself by overtaxing you? Would you forgive him? Maybe. Would you invite him over for dinner? Probably not. Would you take your family to hear him give his testimony at the synagogue the following Sabbath? I don't think so.

Even after a sincere apology, Zacchaeus would have had no moral authority. There were no actions to back up his words. Worse than that, for years his actions portrayed a heart of greed and deceit.

But imagine what the people in his community thought when he announced he was going to give half of his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8)! Half. Not a tenth. Half. The religious leaders didn't even do that. Nobody did that.

But that was just the beginning. In addition, he would pay back everyone he had overtaxed. But he wouldn't stop there. He would pay

each person he had cheated four times the amount he had taken illegally.

Zacchaeus went way beyond what was fair and equitable. He went way beyond matters pertaining to forgiveness. He made restitution. And nobody expected restitution of that magnitude. He went beyond what most people would consider reasonable. But when all was said and done, I imagine Zacchaeus had moral authority. People took his faith seriously. When he spoke about meeting Jesus, people listened.

Granted, Zacchaeus didn't lose his moral authority. He never had any to begin with. But I think you see the point. For anybody to take him seriously, he had to do more than merely ask for forgiveness. That was not enough.

If you have lost your moral authority, regaining it is going to cost you. Words alone won't get the job done. Rebuilding your moral authority will require the same three ingredients outlined in the previous section. But for you it will require more time and more sacrifice.

You must take full responsibility for your actions and the consequences of your actions. It is the second part of that equation that trips people up. Being sorry in your heart may gain you favor with God but not with man. To regain your moral authority you must take responsibility for the practical ramifications of your actions. That may mean restitution. It will most certainly mean some sort of sacrifice.

People with moral authority don't go unnoticed. Mom, Dad, maintain it with your kids at all costs. Leaders, live in such a way that your life punctuates your words and beliefs. There will always be people who won't believe what you believe. But don't give them grounds to doubt that you believe what you claim to believe. Our lives will always speak louder than our words. Like Nehemiah, let's make sure they are saying the same thing.

All great leaders, all successful fathers and mothers, all visionaries who ever received and followed through successfully with a God-given vision had credibility and influence because they walked their talk. Their lives were persuasive. They had moral authority.

## VISIONEERING

## PROJECT #13

1. Are there inconsistencies between what you say and what you do as it relates to your vision?

2. In light of your strengths and weaknesses, where is the greatest potential for inconsistency?

I am constantly encouraging the people of our church to invest in the lives of unbelievers with the goal of inviting them to an event where they will hear a clear gospel presentation. We refer to this as our "Invest and Invite Evangelism Strategy."

A potential inconsistency for me is to become so absorbed with "church people" that I don't invest in the lives of the unchurched. If that were to happen, I would lose my moral authority to champion that part of our vision.

3. Is there an arena in which you have lost or damaged your moral authority?

Think through the various roles and relationships in your life:

- What about your moral authority with your spouse?
- What about your moral authority with your children?

- What about your moral authority with the people you work with?
- What about your moral authority with those who have come alongside you to support your vision?

4. What steps do you need to take to rebuild your moral authority?