

## **Wanted: Boldness**

by Mike Bonem

Those who are college football fans will remember the 2007 Fiesta Bowl as one of the most exciting games they have ever seen. The upstart Boise State Broncos came into the game with an undefeated record but as heavy underdogs to perennial powerhouse Oklahoma. After blowing an 18-point lead, Boise State rallied twice from 7-point deficits, ultimately sending the game into overtime and then winning 43-42.

In the post-game commentaries, one recurring theme was Coach Chris Petersen's play selection during the game's final minutes. His choices were unconventional, unexpected, and risky. One final decision captured the tone of the entire game. After Oklahoma scored a touchdown on the first play of overtime and kicked the extra point, Boise State again had their backs to the wall. Facing fourth down with their perfect season on the line, the Broncos resorted to a trick play to score the last gasp touchdown. Coach Petersen then had to make a decision: kick for one point and send the game into a second overtime, or try for a 2-point conversion that would give Boise State the win. He chose the latter, using one more razzle-dazzle play to seal the victory for his team. The word on everyone's lips as they described Coach Petersen: bold.

The game was notable because this kind of boldness is rarely seen in the high-stakes world of college football. Likewise, "go-for-broke" boldness is a rare commodity in ministry. Yet we are serving in an era when bold leadership is clearly needed. And through the Holy Spirit, we have a source of power and conviction that should give us much greater confidence than Coach Petersen. As Paul instructed Timothy, "God did not give us a Spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power and love and self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Where is there evidence of that Spirit in your ministry?

### **Do the Right Thing**

As parents, my wife and I have a clear desire to see our children grow into mature adults whose lives are centered in Christ and whose behavior is a testament of their faith. One of our mantras as parents is, "If you know the right thing to do, then do it." In other words, we know that we will not always be standing beside our children to tell them what to do. We want them to develop the moral and spiritual framework to make those decisions on their own.

How does "do the right thing" resonate in your ministry? I am not talking about obvious ethical boundaries, such as propriety in relationships or appropriate financial dealings. Instead, I am asking about the important, direction-setting decisions that will drive or influence your church's future. It's the clarion call of Bennis and Nanus in their book, *Leaders*; the oft-quoted statement that "managers do things right" and "leaders do the right things." We need leaders!

In most churches and most roles, it is much easier to just do things right. It is easier to recruit two new small group leaders to fill the existing needs than to acknowledge that the current small group approach isn't working and seek a new solution. It is easier to lighten the responsibilities of a staff member than to admit that you made a bad hiring decision and plan for his exit. It is

easier to stay busy with our many day-to-day responsibilities than to carve out a block of time for thinking about what the “right things” are in this season of ministry!

Even as you read this article, perhaps you need to put the paper down for a second and make a note about a “right thing” that you’ve been avoiding. Most of us, if we ponder for more than a few seconds, can point to one or more major challenges that God might be calling us to address.

### **“My Church Doesn’t Want Boldness”**

Perhaps you didn’t need the encouragement to make a note of the challenge that needs to be faced. You know what it is and you know that God would be honored and His Kingdom advanced if you successfully dealt with the issue. But you also know that many in your church are quite happy with the status quo and see no need to change.

We need to be clear on this point. Doing the right thing is rarely easy. I said above that we are ministering in an era when boldness is desperately needed, but many congregations don’t recognize this need and don’t reward or encourage boldness. This is a huge impediment, but bold leaders don’t give up at the first sign of resistance.

The Bible tells us to count the cost of following Christ (Luke 14:25-33). What is the cost of the new initiative that God is leading you to consider? How do you measure it? Perhaps your response is:

- “I know the cost, and I can’t afford it. The only way I can try this is if I already have my resume updated and have a good lead on a new job, because I’ll probably lose this one.”
- “I can’t count that high. It would be easier to turn an 18-wheeler around in my driveway than to engineer this kind of directional change in my church.”
- “I’ve heard that some churches get smaller to get healthier, but those must be churches that have plenty of resources to spare.”

The cost may be substantial, and we need to be realistic about the challenges we may face, but the same Scripture tells us that those who have the gift of leadership are to lead diligently (Rom. 12:8). If we know the right thing to do, we can’t stick our heads in the sand. And the Word also tells us that God can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20-21).

### **“I’m ‘Just’ a Second Chair Leader”**

Many of you hesitate to act boldly for a different reason: you’re not the lead leader. You know that any bold initiative in your church will only succeed with the approval and support of your senior pastor.

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. I am not suggesting that your conviction about a particular issue is an excuse to undermine your senior pastor’s authority. Those who have read *Leading from the Second Chair* know that an entire chapter is devoted to understanding boundaries in order to not overstep them. Boldness should not be manifested as a power grab or as insubordination.

At the same time, however, second chairs are still leaders, people who have the opportunity to use their influence with others to add value throughout the organization. In most cases, the first bold step is a frank conversation with your first chair to share what God has been showing you. Perhaps God has been stirring in the same ways in the heart of your pastor. Or perhaps it will take several conversations for you to come to a place of common understanding. Your first chair may get fully behind your idea or may give you a qualified go-ahead. Or you may be told “no.” Even if it’s the latter, you can continue to pray and prepare for the time when the answer will be “yes” or when God shows you a different direction.

### **Where is God at Work?**

Are you ready to take a bold step forward? Push the pause button for just a minute, and review the verse that started this article: God gives us the Spirit of power. In our journey to boldness, we need to be sure that we are walking in step with the Holy Spirit.

In their classic devotional guide, *Experiencing God*, Blackaby and King call for believers to “see where God is at work and join Him there.” We most certainly need more boldness in our churches and denominational bodies, but it needs to be Spirit-led and Spirit-filled boldness. Anything less than this is likely to be a destructive ego-trip.

For me, that means not acting immediately on every impulse that I may have. I can quickly compile a list of things that need to be done differently, things that would require boldness and decisive action on my part. And if I acted on every one of these, I would leave a trail of destruction and half-finished projects as my ambitions far exceeded my time and abilities. So I need to be prayerful about the things that I initiate. But when I am clear about the Spirit’s leading, I also need to move forward with conviction, not half-heartedly, and trust that God is going before me.

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I recently taught from Haggai and was again reminded of the importance of one obedient, bold, Spirit-filled leader. You remember the story. The first wave of exiles had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. They had rebuilt the altar and laid the foundation of the temple with great fanfare. And then the project ground to a halt and sat, untouched, for 16 years. But when God’s prophet, Haggai, arrived on the scene, it shook the leaders and the people out of their lethargy and the temple was completed in just 4 years.

How does God want to use you? In truth, I’ve written this article for myself as much as for any other reader. I could make a long and convincing list of the things that keep me from acting with more boldness. But I hope that you will join me in making the commitment to listen closely to the Spirit and to act obediently as we are led.