

Sanctuary Principles for the Successful Church Community

Roy E. Gane
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

In ancient Israel, the Lord governed his people from his sanctuary, which served as the headquarters of his administration at the center of Israelite life and worship. The ways in which God's Presence interacted with his people there teach us enduring principles for success that apply to his "new covenant" church community as he guides, unifies, and empowers it to reveal himself to the world. Following are some of these principles.

Do Not Take God for Granted¹

When Aaron and his sons inaugurated worship at the sanctuary by performing their first priestly officiation, the Lord's glory appeared and he consumed the sacrifices with fire to complete his acceptance of the sanctuary (Lev 9:23-24). Somewhat similarly, the Sumerian Cylinder B of the ruler Gudea describes initiation festivities when the god Ningirsu and his consort Baba, as represented by their idols, were settled into their new temple. Their entrance was accompanied by offerings, as well as purification and divination procedures. Gudea presented "housewarming gifts" to the divine couple (cf. Num 7), prepared a banquet for Ningirsu, and offered animal sacrifices.²

¹ Adapted from R. Gane, "Leviticus," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming), vol. 1 on the Pentateuch, comment on Lev. 9:23.

² R. E. Averbeck, "The Cylinders of Gudea" (2.155), in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997-) 2:431–432.

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Comparison between the Israelite and Sumerian procedures yields a stunning contrast. The protocol for Ningirsu and Baba followed the standard ancient Near Eastern pattern: Installation of deities, represented by images, was part of a ritual process carried out by human beings. But Israel's deity moved himself, not his image, into his tabernacle *before* any consecration or inauguration rituals were performed (Exod 40:34–35) to rule out the possibility that anyone could think that humans had moved him in! By implication, of course, he could also leave on his own if he chose to do so because his people rejected him (Ezek 9–11). God wants to be with his people (Exod 25:8), but they should never take him for granted.

Make God the Unifying Center of His Community³

Our modern culture revels in personal independence. Commercials from all directions reinforce what we already know: We are the center of the universe and our desires govern it. However, the second chapter of the book of Numbers disagrees with our egocentric worldview. In the Israelite camp, the Lord spatially demonstrated the only proper place of the Most High: at the center. The wilderness war camp formed a hollow square, with the tabernacle of the divine Presence in the middle. He was the Source of strength, the “nuclear reactor.” God's people were not islands of destiny, but a community under God, with each individual and every subgroup fully accountable to him.

At the center of ancient Israelite life and worship was holy fire. At its core, the religion of God's people was not a social club, political bloc, or system of dogma. It was an ongoing encounter with the divine. For this experience to continue, the “pilot light” had to remain lit (Lev 6:8-13 [Hebrew vv. 1-6]). Sparks of any other kindling were ruled out. God's response to Nadab and Abihu's unauthorized fire (10:1-2) showed for all time what he thought of that approach, which puts man in place of God at the center of worship.

As in Old Testament times, God's ministers of the 21st century A.D. are to be keepers of the flame and teachers of instruction (Torah) from the Lord, not lighters of the fire and inventors of their own doctrines. Like the Olympic torch, God's Gospel fire is to be relayed around the

³ Adapted from R. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 150-151, 505-506. Note that most of the present article consists of adapted selections from this commentary.

world in all kinds of ways, but it must come from the source—the sacred, eternal flame.

Worship God in *His* Way⁴

In the book of Leviticus, God instructed the Israelites how to approach him in worship at his sanctuary. Because the Lord is the superior party, he controls protocols of interaction with him. Unlike Cain's vegetables (Gen 4) or the Israelites' golden calf (Exod 32), our worship should approach God according to his principles so that he will want what we have to offer.

Divine principles of worship allow for tremendous variety, including cultural diversity. The Psalmist's "joyful noise" (e.g. Ps 95:1-2; 98:4-6) is as legitimate as Habakkuk's silence (Hab 2:20). However, usurping divine prerogatives, failing to exalt God as the supreme center of our worship, or misrepresenting him by violating instructions for religious practice that he has specified constitute serious problems.

For example, after Gideon's divinely empowered military victory, he made a golden ephod, which was a garment worn by priests (Judg 8:27; cf. Exod 28:6-14). It was not long before this unauthorized *instrument* of worship became the *object* of worship, an idol.⁵ The medium overpowered the message. Once people focused on the instrument more than on God, they lost sight of him, and it was easy to switch gods and turn to Baal worship (Judg 8:33-34).

What happens when church buildings, liturgies, music and musicians, sermons, and ministers of the Gospel themselves become the focus of attention? All of these may be wonderful and legitimate by themselves, testifying to the quality of that which they honor. Indeed God himself is the founder of fine aesthetics. According to the book of Exodus, it was he who directed the Israelites to make gorgeous high priestly vestments and a magnificent tabernacle for impressive ceremonies (cf. Eccles 50:5-21). But how do the infrastructure and procedures of our worship shape attitudes toward God, who should be at the center? True worship is like the ministry of John the Baptist, who said of Christ: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

⁴ Ibid., 72-73.

⁵ R. Gane, *God's Faulty Heroes* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1996), 80.

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Follow God's Leading⁶

For the Israelites in the wilderness to be with God's resident Presence, they had to move with him. It was no use lingering to venerate the spot where he had been or running ahead to be where he might go next. The important thing was to know where his cloud was and to follow it (Num 9:17-22; 10:11-13). God's leadership calls for readiness to move at any time, and also patience to stay put until he directs otherwise.

It is not that divine leading is a shortcut to do away with decisions and risks. "Indeed, God wants us to develop good judgment, and there is no way to develop it apart from a process that involves choices and risks."⁷ But his guidance serves as a Global Positioning System, a dynamic reference point and framework for navigating the challenges of the way.

The Lord doesn't merely give his people a detailed map of their "journey"; he himself is their map.⁸ To avoid getting lost, we can find out where God is leading and follow him. Although we have no visible divine cloud to follow, we can discern his will through a combination of avenues, such as his Spirit (including his Spirit of prophecy), our consciences, the Bible, providence, and balanced counsel from mature believers.

Cooperate with God in an Orderly, Efficient Manner⁹

The census and organization of Numbers 1-2 were important steps to make a mob of ex-slaves into a focused, disciplined, conquering army. Around the fully functioning sanctuary of the divine King at the core of the war camp, every able-bodied man was in his place and accounted for. All was in order for efficient and effective deployment.

God provided all the order, efficiency, and power the Israelites needed, and to him went the glory for every victory, but he did not do for them what they could and should do. Canaan was his gift to them, but they could only receive it if they would go up and take it. When they did go up, they needed careful strategy and precise execution of plans to get the most "shock for the shekel." Today, as at Jericho and Ai (Josh 6-8), confidence in superior numbers leads to sloppy arrogance, but victory

⁶ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 567-568.

⁷ J. Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 142.

⁸ Cf. H. T. Blackaby and C. V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 20-21.

⁹ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 503-504.

comes through cooperation with the Lord, who empowers fully utilized and well-ordered human intelligence and strength.

Value Every Contribution to the Lord's Work¹⁰

At the ancient Israelite sanctuary, the Levites did what appeared to be menial labor: maintenance, guarding, packing, and hauling (Num 3-4). But all of it was honorable and vitally important because it was for the divine King. Similarly, the smallest and most insignificant task that contributes to God's work today is important: Cleaning the church, changing its light bulbs, preparing food for a social event, visiting a sick person, teaching a scripture song to a child, encouraging a neighbor, and so on.

Just as Levites were specially set apart to do tasks for the benefit of the priests and the Israelite community (3:6-7; 8:5-22), deacons were set apart to serve the Christian community by doing administrative tasks so that the apostles could be free for spiritual leadership (Acts 6:1-6), devoting themselves "to prayer and the ministry of the word" (v. 4). Just as the dedication of Levites involved laying hands on them before the Lord and standing them before the priests (Num 8:10,13), when the Christians chose deacons, "They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them" (Acts 6:6).

As in the days of the apostles, social and administrative problems can drain a modern pastor's time and energy so that he/she has little left for crucial spiritual leadership. Why not return to the early Christian solution by resuscitating the original job description of deacons? They were administrators and social conflict managers, not simply ushers. As such, they freed spiritual leaders to spiritually lead. This contributed to the explosive growth of the church.

Touch Those in Need Without Fear of Contamination¹¹

Leviticus 11:29-38 lists eight crawlies and creepies, including several kinds of lizards, and then proceeds to describe how their carcasses defile all kinds of nonhuman objects. However, verse 36 says: "A spring, however, or a cistern for collecting water remains clean . . ." A source of purity cannot be made impure. This principle explains how Jesus could touch lepers and a woman with an impure hemorrhage in order to heal

¹⁰ Ibid., 516-517, 560-561.

¹¹ Ibid., 151, 215-218.

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them, without becoming impure himself (e.g., Matt 8:2-3; Mk 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48).

Although God is the ultimate Source of purity and life, Christ makes his followers into secondary sources. Jesus said: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). Thus, his disciples performed miracles of healing and deliverance as he did (Matt 10:1,8; Luke 10:9,17; Acts 3:1-10; 9:36-42; 16:16-18; 19:11-12). When God’s people are sources of his purity and healing in the world, they do not need to worry about being defiled as they mingle with those in need.

Motivate and Mentor God’s People to Success¹²

At the beginning of Israel’s history as an independent nation, the Lord employed several strategies to turn his people into a winning team:

1. First, he showed that he was a winner. By defeating Egypt (Exod 7-14), he showed the Israelites that if they were on his team, they would be winners, too.

2. In simple ways regarding practical matters such as food, water, and physical security, God emphasized the foundational principle that winning comes through trust in him.

3. The Lord tested his people over their basic lessons by giving them opportunities to demonstrate what they had learned (e.g., 15:25—at Marah “he tested them”).

4. When the Israelites flunked a test, God repeated it until they could pass. Thus, they encountered lack of drinkable water at Marah (15:23), Rephidim (17:1), Kadesh (Num 20:2), and on the Red Sea road detour around Edom (21:5). Each time they faithlessly grumbled. Finally, at Beer they trusted the Lord (vv. 16-18). At Kadesh they refused to go with God into Canaan and then tried to take it by themselves, as a result of which they were beaten as far as Hormah (Num 14). Decades later they came back to Kadesh (20:1) and were tested by an attack from the king of Arad, which became Hormah, but this time they relied on God and won (21:1-3).

Delegate Responsibility Rather than Hoarding It¹³

Dwight L. Moody understood the value of delegating. He said, “I’d rather get ten men to do the job than to do the job of ten men.”¹⁴ God

¹² Ibid., 683.

¹³ Ibid., 789-791.

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delegated Moses to run a nation, and Moses in turn had to delegate, although this was not always easy for him. Jethro found him trying to do the job of ten men and urged him to appoint judges, which he did (Exod 18:13-26). The Lord found him crushed by the burden of leading the people and instructed him to choose seventy elders, which he also did (Num 11).

Theodore Roosevelt said: “The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.”¹⁵ This is what Moses did. When he assigned a job, he delegated the authority necessary to accomplish it. He did not over-manage by hovering over and interfering with his subordinates, but he expected and demanded that tasks be done right for the sake of God and Israel (e.g., Lev 10:16-18; Num 31:14-18). The leadership style of God through Moses teaches us that while we are bound for our Promised Paradise, we are not to hoard tasks or the authority that goes with them, but to pass them on.

Teach Wisely as God Does¹⁶

In Numbers 9:1-14 we see several aspects of God’s character at work. First, he took the trouble to remind the Israelites that Passover was coming again. Second, he was flexible in his requirement to observe the festival, bending the religious calendar for those who were stuck in a dilemma because of their unavoidable impurity. Third, he was generous and farsighted, going beyond the immediate need by also providing for people on long trips to celebrate Passover at a later date. Fourth, he was economical, setting up ongoing rules as answers to similar questions in the future. Fifth, he was not susceptible to manipulation, but emphasized that exceptions applied only to those who actually needed them. Sixth, he allowed guests (non-Israelites) to participate, as long as they followed the same rules as everyone else.

In short, the Lord sounds like a wise and well-balanced teacher! He is caring, recognizing the weaknesses and challenging circumstances of his “students.” He is reasonable and fair, but firm about extending deadlines listed in his “syllabus.” He foresees potential problems and systematically preempts them in advance. Finally, he lets “auditors” experience

¹⁴ Cited by H. Finzel, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1994), 100.

¹⁵ Cited by *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 566-567.

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the “class” if they are serious about it and do not disrupt things by irregular behavior. Here in Numbers 9 we learn about God’s effective “teaching style,” which would tend to encourage his “students” to remain committed to his “class.”

Whether we are raising our own children, teaching, ministering, administering, interacting with others at work, or socializing, we would do well to follow God’s model. Are we considerate, flexible, reasonable, fair, patient, far-sighted, generous, organized, economical, and firm as he is? Do we give second chances, as he extends another opportunity for the redemption that Passover symbolized to those whose life journeys have taken them far away from home (cf. the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-24)?¹⁷

Encourage and Protect Leaders¹⁸

In the Bible, the Lord is hard on some kinds of people, but he is remarkably gentle and encouraging to stressed and burned out pastors. For instance, at Kibroth-hattaavah, God did not berate Moses for his negative reaction to complaints. Instead, he addressed the problems that had brought undue pressure to bear on Israel’s human leader (Num 11).¹⁹

The Lord expects his people to follow his example in supporting their leaders. Privilege and influence carried responsibility not only for Israelite leaders but also for members of their families to rightly present the Lord’s character to the people. Any PK (priest’s kid) was supposed to be exemplary, much like a preacher’s or politician’s kid today. Failure of a child would harm the influence of his/her father (e.g., Lev 21:9—“she profanes her father”). So the spirit of the exhortation in Leviticus 21:8 for the Israelites to respect the holiness of priests would include the idea that laypeople should help all members of priestly families bear the burden of exemplary living. Don’t undermine their distinctiveness out of jealousy, in order to lower them to your level, whether by unjust criticism, competition, ridicule, deception, or obstruction. Attempting to destroy or compromise those who intercede for you is self-defeating.

Ministers must take responsibility for their actions like everyone else, but trying to trip them up is unconscionable and self-defeating. A ministry is a terrible thing to waste. On the other hand, it is a wonderful

¹⁷ Cf. E. Feldman, “The Second *Pesah*: Mitzvah as Paradigm,” *Tradition* 24 (1989): 43.

¹⁸ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 377-378, 584.

¹⁹ Other examples are God’s encouragement of Elijah (1 Kgs 19) and Isaiah (Isa 6).

thing to nurture. Rather than exhausting valuable creative energies in contention and criticism, congregations benefit themselves, their communities, and the cause of God by focusing their energies on upholding dedicated leaders and walking with them on the path of holiness.

Respect and Value God's Children of Different Races²⁰

The fact that Moses' wife is described as "Cushite" (Ethiopian) only in the context of derogatory talk regarding her by Miriam and Aaron (Num 12:1) suggests that they looked down on her for having darker skin (cf. Song of Solomon 1:6). While a racial slur was only on the "skin" of an underlying issue of status and control, the Lord's punishment of Miriam indicates that he took her xenophobia very seriously by making her skin flaky and/or ghastly white (Num 12:10). It is as though he were saying to her: "Miriam, if you can't get used to the idea that dark is beautiful, see if you like your own skin, which pales by comparison!" After wishing to socially exclude Moses' wife, Miriam herself was physically excluded from the Israelite camp.²¹ God's devastating reaction implies that he regards such an attitude as intolerable moral "leprosy."

As in the story of Miriam and Aaron, racism is always about status and control, and it is always an insult to God. Putting someone down for his/her intrinsic genetic nature has the goal of boosting oneself and implies that God makes inferior products in his image (cf. Gen 1:26). Racism is a grossly unfair low blow for exactly the same reason that it is attractive to those who are attempting to get the upper hand at any cost: People are born with their race and cannot change it (Jer 13:23).

Racism is natural in a sinful world and respects no boundaries. It preys on any racial group in the world and can quietly flourish and spread like "leprosy" under the beautiful surface of a Christian business, school, or church (cf. Lev 14:43-44). Combating it requires continual vigilance by everyone. Anyone who claims to be exempt from the potential of a problem in this regard should read Numbers 12:1, where even Miriam and Aaron failed.

No doubt Moses' wife would have endorsed the ideal articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "I have a dream that my four little children will

²⁰ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 594-595.

²¹ B. P. Robinson, "The Jealousy of Miriam: A Note on Num 12," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 101 (1989): 431-432; P. Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 22.

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one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”²²

Keep Church Problems “In-house”²³

God intended for non-Israelites, such as Balaam and the Moabites, to know and respect his blessing on the descendants of Abraham (Gen 12:2-3; Num 22:12).²⁴ Even though the Israelites had given their beneficent deity a hard time, many individuals had lost out on the benefits of the covenant due to their disobedience, and those who remained were still far from perfect, God’s plan to fulfill the divine promises to and through his corporate chosen people was unshaken and unshakeable.²⁵

The imperfections of the Israelites were between them and God. While he disciplined them within their corporate boundaries, he did not air their “dirty laundry” in front of people from other nations, such as Balaam and Balak (Num 22-24). To non-Israelites he showed only monolithic support for those he protected as his special possession. To attack them was to assault God.

The Lord’s firm resolve to bless the children of Abraham is also for Christians, who are “Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29). Since God’s people are a channel of divine blessing to the world, it is to the benefit of others to accept them and counterproductive to reject them. It is also counterproductive and contrary to God’s example for his people to unnecessarily open up their problems to the outside world (cf. 1 Cor 6:1-8).

Faithfully Carry Out Discipline when Necessary²⁶

When it comes to the deceptive inroads of apostasy into the church, Christians may need to face some corporate core conflicts head-on, as Phinehas did in Numbers 25. When Jesus drove out those engaged in business at the temple, “His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (John 2:17). The rest of the verse from Psalms cited here reads, “. . . and the insults of those who insult you fall

²²In M. Water, compiler, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 854.

²³Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 705-706.

²⁴Cf. J. Sailhamer *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 405-406.

²⁵Cf. J. H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 100.

²⁶Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 727-728.

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on me” (Ps 69:9 [Hebrew v. 10]). Like zealous Phinehas, Christ identified with God to the extent that there was no difference between defending the Lord’s honor and that of himself.

In an emergency, when God’s people are in imminent danger of losing their connection with him, it may take the swift, accurately focused, decisive leadership of a faithful and wise (not fanatical and unbalanced) person to “spearhead” a defense. We are not living under a theocracy that metes out capital punishment, so a modern “Phinehas” must make his/her point verbally rather than with a literal spear. But there may be occasions that call for removing flagrant sinners from membership in the church (disfellowshipping, not dismembering) so that the Lord’s reputation, people, and work can be preserved (e.g. 1 Cor 5).

Maintain Loyalty to God²⁷

At the Israelite sanctuary, the Lord provided ritual remedies for the imperfections of his people as long as they were loyal to him. However, if they defied him, spurned his remedies, or failed to demonstrate loyalty on the Day of Atonement, they were condemned (Lev 23:29-30; Num 15:30-31; 19:13,20).

God does not reserve salvation for perfect people who have never sinned. It is too late for that because all have already sinned (Rom 3:23). He knows that his people are faulty: mortal, weak, prone to fall, and unable to make themselves perfect. So he does not judge them simply on the basis of whether they have faults or not. Rather, what he requires is loyalty to himself, the only one who can heal their faultiness.

Loyalty is a matter of relationship, not merely of performance. Obviously what we do to other people or to God reveals our attitudes in ways that help to shape our relationships with them, but the focus is on the health of the relationship.

Conclusion

By examining ways in which the Lord interacted with the ancient Israelites from his sanctuary headquarters, we have found a number of enduring principles for success that apply to our modern Christian faith community: Do not take God for granted. Make God the unifying center of his community. Worship God in *his* way. Follow God’s leading. Cooperate with God in an orderly, efficient manner. Value every contribution to the Lord’s work. Touch those who are in need without fear of

²⁷ Ibid., 629.

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contamination. Motivate and mentor God's people to success. Delegate responsibility rather than hoarding it. Teach wisely as God does. Encourage and protect leaders. Respect and value God's children of different races. Keep church problems "in-house." Faithfully carry out discipline when necessary. Maintain loyalty to God.

Roy Gane is Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Languages at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He finished his Ph.D. in Biblical Hebrew Language and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1992 and taught in the Religion Department at Pacific Union College from 1992 until he joined the Seminary in 1994. He has authored a number of articles for scholarly and lay readers, Adult Bible Study Guides on Judges (spring, 1996) and Isaiah (spring, 2004), and six books: *God's Faulty Heroes* (Review and Herald, 1996), on the book of Judges; *Altar Call* (Diadem, 1999), on the biblical sanctuary; *Ritual Dynamic Structure* (Gorgias, 2004); *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2004); *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Eisenbrauns, 2005); *Who's Afraid of the Judgment?* (Pacific Press, 2006); plus the Leviticus portion of the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary on the Old Testament* (forthcoming).
gane@andrews.edu