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Ethics, stewardship, and the illusive hidden agenda¹

Centuries ago, a friend of Jesus' came to a crossroads experience with God. Things were not turning out as well as he had hoped. He had spent time with Jesus—a lot of time. They traveled and dined together. He was a religious man, part of the inner circle; he was smart, ambitious, and talented, trusted and admired by others. He had seen some amazing miracles at the hands of Jesus. What he did not know, what he refused to recognize, was that he had a demon. Eventually that demon would lead him to compromise his integrity, lead him into deceitful actions, and ultimately destroy everything he had hoped to gain. The damage from such compromise hurt not only him but others as well.

In the book *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White shares some intriguing and instructive insights about Judas, the betrayer:

- Judas had not always been corrupt enough to do such a deed.
- He had an insatiable appetite for money until it became a ruling motive of his life.
- He felt a desire to be changed in character and wanted to connect with Jesus, but he did not come to the point of surrendering himself fully to Christ.
- He cultivated a disposition to criticize and accuse.

- He looked upon his brethren as greatly inferior. He saw himself as the one with business acumen—the one they really needed.
- For Judas, material solutions were the logical solutions, not the kind of solutions that Jesus offered, such as those in His sermon regarding the Bread of Life.
- Feeling highly qualified but unappreciated, he paid himself from the meager funds gathered for the poor. He did this because it was logical to pay himself back for the time and sacrifice he had given in service for others.²

Judas was dominated with thoughts about himself; his own ethics, ideas, disappointments, hurts, and frustrations took center stage. His worldview was no bigger than himself: it was all about him! He had not learned to give of himself or of his means without expecting something in return. In the end, the path Judas followed led to the unethical and manipulative behavior that eventually brought his own destruction.

Self-centeredness in an organization

Dee Hock, founder and CEO of the Visa credit card association, noted four character traits that could lead to personal demise and even take down

organizations that the association had been hired to help prosper. The four, often misdirected, personal attributes that Hock observed at work in the business world are as follows:

1. *Ego*—a strong sense of “self-importance”
2. *Envy*—a feeling of discontentment because of the possessions, qualities, or “luck” experienced by others
3. *Greed* (avarice)—a manifestation of subversive greed for wealth or material gain
4. *Ambition*—a determination to achieve success or possessions at any price³

Unfortunately, these self-centered personal characteristics are seldom kept in isolation. Marianne Jennings, an attorney internationally known for her work in the area of corporate ethics, warns that “the moral fiber of an individual matters if the company is to have an ethical culture.”⁴

Decades earlier, Ellen White presented a similar thought when she wrote, “True Christian principle will not stop to weigh consequences. It does not ask, What will people think of me if I do this? or how will it affect my worldly prospects if I do that? With the most intense longing the children of God desire to know what He would have them do, that their works may glorify Him.”⁵

Pressure from social expectations and financial needs must bow to a higher standard. A guiding ethical principle, simply stated by Jesus, moves the attention from self-centeredness to self-integrity: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12, NIV).

Redefining what is right

It is when circumstances seem to be overwhelming, however, when the efforts of others seem inadequate, that taking matters into our own hands appears to be the right thing to do. Such was the case in the time of the judges. Having forgotten what the Lord had done in the past, God’s chosen people turned away from Him and toward the idols of their day (Judg. 2:10–13). The Lord raised up leaders, referred to as judges, to save His people from their own schemes, but “they would not listen” to the judges. “They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (vv. 16, 19, NIV). Without their Guide, “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judg. 17:6, NIV). Circumstances, rather than God, defined what was right. Personal integrity was sacrificed for selfish interests, and the corporate whole paid a terrible price. Not all selfishness, however, is visible on the surface. Motives are often not immediately seen, but their effect is harmful nevertheless.

Transparency and the hidden agenda

The daunting question haunts many organizations, “Why do good, smart, sincere, people do dumb things?” So often they have an ulterior motive, sometimes called a “hidden agenda,” which suggests that a less-than-transparent position is necessary to accomplish a desired result. As Jennings points out, “No one wakes up one day and decides, ‘You know what would be good? A gigantic fraud!’”⁶ The person’s pietistic or spiritual objective, such as the one Judas had in betraying Jesus, takes priority regardless of the immediate cost. The hope is that time will prove that the individual was right after all. The end, it is felt, justifies the means. Such ethical

reasoning inevitably leads to a moral collapse and impacts many in its wake.

Research suggests that there are three primary aspects of transparency that every organization should practice: (1) information disclosure, (2) clarity, and (3) accuracy in their communications with stakeholders.⁷ The degree to which these three principles are practiced is a statement about the integrity of the organization and its leaders. Transparency

can be painful, and if the revelation is new and not pleasant, it can prompt an angry and, at times, a threatening response. Yet true transparency will present as objectively as possible the full truth so that right decisions can be made. Ellen White addressed one challenge this way: “Many times when the Lord has opened the way for brethren to handle their means to advance His cause, the agents of Satan have presented some enterprise by which they were positive the brethren could double their means. They take the bait; their money is invested, and the cause, and frequently themselves, never receive a dollar.”⁸

The intentions may be good, but speculation, a lack of full disclosure, and the belief that the end justifies the means can lead both the organization and the individual to an ominous, if not destructive, end. The desire to accomplish good while compromising truth by distortion or partial revelation assumes we know better than God—an assumption that Judas also made. There is a better way.

A great need

The Bible makes it clear that personal integrity impacts the effectiveness

of the leader and what God can do through the leader for His people. Joseph, Samuel, and Daniel were men called to their posts at historically critical times. Such is the need today. The challenge is clear. “Men of tried courage and strong integrity are needed for this time, men who are not afraid to lift their voices for the right. To every laborer I would say, In all your official duties, let integrity characterize each act.”⁹

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Such counsel is needed. True, lasting, effective, and visionary leadership is not dependent on human devising. The effective leader is God’s steward, not only of His material resources but as an example by revealing the highest level of ethical forms of motivation and practice.

Judas had much to offer; unfortunately, things did not work out as he had hoped. Much can be learned from his sad example. ❧

1 This article is based on Larry Evans, “The Steward and Ethics,” *Dynamic Steward* 19, no. 3 (July–September 2015), 29.

2 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 716–722.

3 Dee Hock, *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Pub., 1999), 193.

4 Marianne Jennings, *The Seven Signs of Ethical Collapse—How to Spot Moral Meltdowns in Companies . . . Before It’s Too Late* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 35.

5 Ellen G. White, *My Life Today* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1952), 256.

6 Jennings, *Seven Signs of Ethical Collapse*, 4.

7 Andrew K. Schnackenberg and Edward C. Tomlinson, “Organizational Transparency: A New Perspective on Managing Trust in Organization-Stakeholder Relationships,” *Journal of Management* 42, no. 7 (2016): 1784–1810, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0149206314525202](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314525202).

8 Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 235.

9 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948), 141.