



Serving behind the scenes

TN160 Training Notes series: Administration

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Two Bible stories have grabbed my attention in recent months. From the Old Testament I was asked to speak on the story of Naaman and Elisha where an unnamed slave girl plays a crucial role. A few months later I was asked to speak on Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus which includes the key involvement of an otherwise unknown disciple called Ananias*.

This set me thinking about the part played in key biblical events by otherwise unknown people. So let me take those two stories and apply some principles to those of us who play perhaps unrecognised but vital roles as behind-the-scenes workers today.

General Naaman and the slave girl

Read 2 Kings 5:1-15 where we hear about Naaman. He was a top ranking military leader in Syria (called Aram in some Bible translations), a friend of the king of Syria it would seem, a definite Somebody – but he had a really nasty skin disease. I am sure he would have had private health insurance but it doesn't seem to have done him much good.

However the person who stands out for me in this story is his wife's slave girl who had been taken away from Israel. She is so unimportant that we don't even know her name! She is just an anonymous foreigner in Syria. If Naaman is at the top of the pile, she is right down there at the bottom. Just a nameless young girl and a slave.

And yet without her involvement, Naaman would never have been healed. It is this slave girl who knows about Elisha and recommends that her mistress' husband should go to him for healing. This girl formed the link between the diseased general in Syria and God's prophet in Samaria and Israel.

*Not to be confused with the Ananias in Acts 5 nor the one in Acts 23-24. A common name it seems!

The general was a particularly proud man and it took others to persuade him to give this prophet's unusual remedy a try, but the girl's role had been vital.

Note two points. First, this was a 100% instantaneous healing with skin then described as being like that of a young boy in 2 Kings 5:14. God knows how to heal!

Secondly it looks like it led not only to Naaman's healing but to his 'conversion' too (v15). Read the story and you will see what I mean. Jesus refers to it in Luke 4:27 where he is making a different but controversial point as the subsequent verses prove..

Saul and Ananias

Read Acts 9:1-19. Here is the story of Saul on his way to Damascus to root out followers of Jesus. God breaks through his plans in the most spectacular way, but he needed someone as the link between Saul and God. So the Lord gives Ananias a vision with instructions.

What do we know about Ananias? What sort of disciple was he? Well, he is described in Acts 9:10 as just 'a' disciple. Not a leader, nor a renowned preacher, just a plain, ordinary, follower of Jesus Christ. It seems you would not have picked him out as special in a Christian crowd. When Paul retells the story in Acts 22:1-16, he describes him as devout, a law keeper and respected. But still only 'a' man and so just 'a' disciple.

What Ananias was called to do would have terrified him. He has a vision of the Lord calling him to drop round and see this chap Saul in Acts 9:10-12 but Ananias is quick to realise this is unlikely to be a cup of tea event. This is the man who was marching Christians off to prison and was now on a mission to do this in Damascus (note the force of this in Acts 9:1).

Ananias makes this point but is over-ruled. So he obeys the Lord and goes to meet Saul in v17. What a disciple! To cap it all he is given a gift of healing and a second one of prophecy (see Acts 9:17-18 and 22:14-16).

And what do we hear about this successful ministry that he was to be called to from there on? Nothing at all! Called to perform one job on one day. Then forgotten, in obscurity once again. It is worth a reread of the story to see it from Ananias' point of view.

No one is a nobody in God's work

Both the unnamed slave girl and Ananias, nobodies in the world's eyes, were called to do one specific job that played a key role in a story about a Somebody (Elisha and Paul). In both cases the role was so vital we are reading about it thousands of years later.

The slave girl opens up a key Old Testament reference to the Kingdom of God being for everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike (check out Luke 4:27 already mentioned and notice its context). The conversion of Saul who became Paul was the spiritual rebirth of possibly the greatest mission worker to Jews and Gentiles of all time.

How typical of God to do this. We are told elsewhere in Scripture that in the Kingdom the first will be last, the meek will inherit, those who lose their life will find it, that those who exalt themselves will be humbled** *. What a topsy turvy Kingdom! But our two stories illustrate these ideas perfectly.

So, what does this say to us in church life today? And in particular how might it encourage those of us who play supporting roles? I find it difficult to identify with a famous prophet or a great apostle. But the slave girl and Ananias sound much more in my league.

** See, for example, Matthew 20:16; Matthew 5:5; Matthew 10:39; Matthew 23:12).

Possible applications

Here are a few suggestions. See what you make of them. This now gets scary.

1 **Any Christian can be used for God's special purposes**

Character may be more important than standing. If God can choose to use a slave girl or just 'a' disciple, might he not use me at some point? If I work in a church office, might I be the one person on a given day who can support and help an enquirer who comes in? And it might well be that a similar situation never arises again. But if I was not there or not obedient to God, who knows what needy person might fail to meet with Jesus.

2 **The humblest of support roles still matters to God**

Even if the world sees it in a different light, even if my work email address starts admin@, even if most of the congregation never stop to think who laid out the chairs ready for the Sunday service or washed up after the church lunch, God knows. He values me as his child and loves the unseen work I do which is surely seen and valued by him. Note that there is a spiritual gift of 'helping' (1 Corinthians 12:28).

3 **Our ranking of people by status is mistaken**

God sees people in terms of character and need. He has a special place in his heart for today's equivalent of the widows and fatherless of biblical times. A leader may be seen by the world as more significant than a financial book-keeper but both are roles in the use of gifts, not a pecking order. Leadership in Scripture is a gift and a responsibility not a matter of hierarchy and importance. Just look at the people Jesus chose to spend time with and those he verbally attacked for their hypocrisy.

4 **When the call comes we must be ready and obey**

Did Ananias have an easy role to play that day when the Lord spoke to him in a vision? He was asked to go to a house to meet the man whom the believers most feared, and with good reason. But he went. Might the slave girl have found it easier to stay silent? But she spoke up. So when the moment comes our role is to obey God's voice, whatever the cost and whatever our own preferences. And in advance of that comes the need to be ready.

5 **The impact does not have to be as dramatic as in our two stories**

We should not expect to dream that our Ananias moment will produce a Paul but that does not mean that our readiness to obey a sudden call has to be any less than in our Bible stories. In God's topsy-turvy kingdom what seems the least important may well be the very opposite. We may not know it at the time, we may not even know it in our lifetime, but our response might impact many people for Christ.

Finally, a quote*** from a famous fictional character:

"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh", said Piglet at last, "What's the first thing you say to yourself?" "What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?" "I say, I wonder

***Winnie-the-Pooh by A A Milne chapter 10

what's going to happen exciting today?" said Piglet. Pooh nodded thoughtfully "It's the same thing" he said.

But is it? As we prepare for the day are we thinking of comfort (Pooh) or possibility (Piglet)?

Discussion questions

Here are some ideas for a group to work on together.

- 1 Think of other 'minor' bible characters who played a key role in God's plans. You could start with Nathan (OK, not so 'minor') in the Old Testament who was given a dangerous message to give to the king, and Joseph in the New (the Nativity one, that is) who has nothing to say in the biblical record but who obeyed in an embarrassing position, as it must have seemed.
- 2 How might we all get it into our heads that Kingdom values are often the opposites of what we might expect? How might this topsy-turvy world work?
- 3 Where in church life are we failing to see things in God's way and what might be the impact if we changed?
- 4 How can we prepare ourselves to be ready when the call to special service might not come for a few years yet?

And for church leaders

- 5 How could we encourage and honour paid staff and volunteers in our church who work behind the scenes in humble roles?
- 6 If character and obedience are key issues, what impact should this have on our preaching and teaching to support our congregation?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN160. See also Training Notes TN25, *The radical values that Jesus taught*, TN40, *Appointing an Administrator*, TN77, *Administrator wisdom*, and TN115, *Identifying gifts of administration*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN160 under Administration.

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