

## The Statesman Recognizes the Value of the Opposition

Among the most critical relationships in the life of the government decision-maker is those who see things differently than we do – those in the opposition.

In democratic governance, the majority has the responsibility to shepherd the whole population, not just those within the majority. Therefore, the majority must make sure that everyone's basic interests are cared for, including those in the minority. In other words, those with the authority to govern must be sensitive to ensure that the minority does not feel left out and, therefore, second-rate members of society. The majority must make sure that the minority feels included, even if everything it advocates cannot be. The majority must always ensure that the minority maintains hope and confidence that its voice is considered valid. This is fundamental to servant leadership.

A few years ago, I saw a serious misunderstanding of this responsibility when one incumbent President campaigned with these words, "Let not those who fail to vote for me expect that they will receive anything from me." That is not servant leadership!

How does our Creator envisage that the opposition and majority should relate to each other in governing?

King Solomon left for us the benefit of his wisdom in the following advice as it relates to making decisions within government:

*Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed (Proverbs 15:22).*

*You should wage war with sound guidance — victory comes with many counselors (Proverbs 24:6).*

*Prepare plans by consultation, And make war by wise guidance (Proverbs 20:18).*

King Solomon advocated broad consultation in the decision-making process, apparently drawing upon the broadest array of thinking available. Although Solomon operated in a monarchy, his advice applies to democratic governance.

Let us look at a key principle from our Creator's instruction book that applies to both the majority and the minority – persuasion. Engaging in persuasion in seeking to change the way that one who thinks differently from me means that I recognize that he also is created in the image of God. It reflects the desire that together we can come close to understanding the mind of our Creator on this issue, recognizing that by ourselves we do not fully understand His mind, as our Creator made clear:

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways." This is the Lord's declaration. "For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).*

What do we learn from our Creator's instruction book about persuasion? Let us look at the use of persuasion in the life of another of His servants, where he expressed this principle, even though in a different context:

*Therefore, because we know the fear of the Lord, we seek to persuade people (2 Corinthians 5:11).*

King Solomon testified how he viewed persuasion working, essentially in his own governance:

*A ruler can be persuaded through patience, and a gentle tongue can break a bone*  
(Proverbs 15:25).

How does this work practically? One friend was a child at a time when his father was the Leader of the Opposition immediately after independence. In Parliament, his father strongly opposed the Prime Minister on certain issues. My friend was confused when after the family returned to the capital from visiting their constituency in the rural village, the father would take bushels of vegetables to the Prime Minister at his residence. Privately, they were close friends. They disagreed on many policy issues, but they deeply appreciated and respected each other. I am convinced that this is the way our Creator would have us work with those we disagree with – not to view them as our enemy but as one also created in the image of God, whom we may view at best as misunderstanding. It also leaves room for us to be teachable and to recognize that we, as humans, may be misunderstanding the mind of our Creator, as we seek to persuade each other in attempting to reach the truth together.

A difference of opinion does not need to mean an adversarial relationship. We learn much more from our critics than from our supporters and allies. A healthy democracy requires dialogue from the broadest segments of society. In fact, the leader is charged by our Creator with unifying the nation and moving the whole ship ahead, not just the majority component. A true understanding of democracy and servant leadership does not require that we be adversaries with those of different views, especially politically. The Head of Government has been given the mandate to give direction to the government, not to strangle all others or to stifle those with differing perspectives. The Head of Government must see the opposition as precisely as that: those who see the problem and/or the solution in a different way. It is sad that we could make such a person into a personal enemy and, from there, into an enemy of the State.

I was encouraged to see President Nelson Mandela apply this principle. On one occasion, when he needed to be out of his nation, he appointed his rival Mangosuthu Buthelezi as Acting President. I am convinced too much energy is wasted in polarizing of political camps. After all, it is not our party that is so important; it is our nation. And I am convinced that no nation can achieve the quality of life our Creator intends for it until this principle is applied.

President Abraham Lincoln impressed me when he brought into his cabinet several strong politicians who had opposed him in seeking the presidency, including William Seward as Secretary of State and Salmon Chase as Secretary of the Treasury. Lincoln knew that he was inviting risk because there was the likelihood that they would use their positions of authority to challenge him for the leadership. However, he was convinced they were the best individuals available for their responsibilities and the nation could benefit from their expertise. Mid-way through his term, the risks materialized. Chase attempted to dislodge Seward, apparently as part of his challenging the President. The easiest way for Lincoln to resolve this dispute would have been to dismiss one or both of them. Lincoln decided that he needed both of them in his cabinet so he dealt with the conflict in this way: He requested and received resignations from both of them. Then, Lincoln rejected both of the resignations. The conflict died and never resurfaced.

A commitment to the important relationships with those in opposition to us requires that I recognize that I do not have all knowledge. This is humbling but it is realistic. Behind this is an attitude of appreciation for each other, regardless of our viewpoints. Our Creator

explains our ability to do this as being driven by two great commandments as expressed by Jesus, God in human form:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).*

Loving God involves embracing Jesus' death on the cross as the substitutionary payment for my sins which separated me from our Creator, as confirmed by His resurrection from the dead. As Jesus made clear:

*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me (John 14:6).*

Then, based upon the power of God working within me as a result of my relationship with God through Jesus, the overflow of this is to love my fellow human. I believe this is essential to our ability to appreciate and respect those who disagree with us in the administration of affairs of State. Furthermore, it is satisfying to be assured that whenever we attempt to obey our Lord in something difficult, He adds His power to our efforts in order to help us:

*For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out His good purpose (Philippians 2:13).*

### **CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STATESMAN**

Am I willing to sit down with those who disagree with me and engage in persuasion to seek to arrive at the correct approach together?

Have I embraced my Creator's forgiveness as a part of loving Him, as the basis for loving my fellow humans, including those whose perspective is different from mine?