

Numbers 11 and a Pentecostal Theology of Church Leadership

Roger D. Cotton, Th.D.

*Professor of Old Testament at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
rcotton@agts.edu*

In this day of specialization, it seems we have a difficult time combining thorough Bible study and relevant practical application. Too often, practitioners do not get their principles from studying the Bible, and scholars do not produce relevant principles and practical application. I would like this essay to begin a dialogue that will bring these two together.

I will use Numbers 11 to demonstrate how we can derive relevant principles for our lives and ministry from an Old Testament text. My goal is to experience God speaking to us through such texts. The key is one of the distinctive attitudes of Pentecostalism—the Bible should be read as *precedent* for what God wants to do in our lives today. If God did it before He can do it again. To hear His voice clearly from such texts and apply their precedents the way He intends, we must read them carefully in context and see the principles in what God was saying to the original audience. Then, we can take those principles and, with the Holy Spirit's guidance, apply them appropriately to our lives today. God wants us to learn how He related to Israel in their situations and how they responded (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11).

This is how I believe we should do biblical theology. My definition of “doing” biblical theology, then, is determining the message of the biblical writers in their terms, letting them express their theology in their own literary and cultural language,

style and concepts. I believe biblical theology is the culmination of good exegesis or interpretation. It comes before systematic theology or doctrine, which is the application of the truths to our questions today. We must first strive to hear what the Bible writer was preaching to Israel in that day and then we can begin to hear, from the Bible text, what God is saying to us today. In this, I believe a Pentecostal approach also means we should be open in faith to whatever supernatural applications the LORD wants to make.

The Context of Numbers 11

In doing biblical theology, it is essential to describe carefully and analytically the context of a passage within the flow of the message of the whole book and, ultimately, within the message of the whole Bible. The broad principles of the message should be clearly articulated. I believe, then, we should understand the context of Numbers 11 as the journey of God's people, Israel, from Sinai, where they were established as his covenant nation, through the wilderness to the Promised Land, where God would use them to bring the Savior into the world. They were on a mission in this world with eternal purpose. They were God's newly established nation to provide a people through whom the Son of God, the Savior, could become incarnate. In Numbers 1-10, God instructed Israel through Moses on organization and holiness in preparation for the journey. With

his holy presence among them and leading them, they would come to the place where they would be able to fulfill God's purpose. The end of chapter 10 records they began with great faith and enthusiasm.

However, the inevitable trials and testing of their faith began in chapter 11 with some unspecified hardships. The people complained and were dealt with by God. Moses interceded, and the judgment ended. Then, stirred up by the dissatisfaction of some non-Israelites among them, the people wailed about the food they left in Egypt and the manna the LORD was graciously, miraculously providing for them in the wilderness. The LORD became very angry, and Moses, responding to both God and the people, became very troubled.

Moses, as the leader, began to focus on the pressures from the people, the circumstances and his own ability. In both Moses' and the people's complaints, the Hebrew uses the same word behind the NIV words "trouble" and "ruin." In their experiences of pain and hardship, leader and people had become complainers against the goodness of God. Moses listened to the demands of the people, looked at his own ability and resources, and concluded that the burden on him was too great and he would rather die than continue toward his "own ruin" (verse 15, NIV). He described it as a parent or nursemaid carrying all Israel like babies through the wilderness. His sense of divine calling and enabling for mission forgotten, Moses even expressed disbelief that the LORD could provide enough meat to feed the people.

God's Answer—Pentecost

God's answer was not simply to send meat, although he did so by a wind from him, which is the same word as spirit. Neither was it to answer Moses' request to kill him. The LORD's answer was to put his Spirit, which was on Moses, on seventy

other leaders. They were to help him bear the burden of the people, so they could continue on their mission. When the Spirit came upon the seventy, they prophesied, but did not continue to do it. Moses exhorted Joshua not to be jealous for him when two of the seventy leaders received the Spirit apart from the rest. Then he expressed the wish that all God's people would receive the Spirit and be prophets.

This is the first extended reference to the Spirit of God in the Bible. Contained in it is the only wish expressed by Moses, perhaps the only wish in the Old Testament for God's people's spiritual endowment: "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11: 29, NIV). The biblical idea of prophets was people who were privileged to have such intimate contact and communion with God that they were used as his spokespersons. Thus, this passage describes a significant interconnectedness of the Spirit of God and leadership and the ministry of God's people and prophetic activity. The result is that in Numbers 11, we have one of the most significant references to the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and the whole Bible. Numbers 11 should be viewed as the foundational Pentecostal/charismatic passage in the Old Testament, even though commentators generally have given little attention to it.

Therefore, I agree with the proposal of Wilf Hildebrandt and believe that the description of this event in Numbers 11 strongly suggests it is intended as a paradigm or prime example of what should be expected for all God-ordained leadership.¹ The principles here should be considered normative for all God's leaders. Furthermore, the wish that all God's people would experience the Spirit's prophetic empowering for ministry is precisely what Joel later predicted would happen and Peter

declared as being fulfilled at Pentecost. Hildebrandt and Stronstad see Moses' wish for the Spirit-gift for all as "programmatically" for the scriptural revelation of God's plan for all who believe in him, looking ahead to the New Testament age.² This pictured what God would provide in the "last days" through Christ. Further support for this intent in Numbers 11 can be seen in the occurrence of the two from the seventy prophesying in the camp. They were listed among the seventy elders but they did not go to the tent. God still put his Spirit on them, which elicited the concern of Joshua, to which Moses responded with the wish. This strongly suggests that God in His sovereignty wanted this empowering, prophetic, experience of his Spirit to move beyond any leadership establishment to the general population of believers. Numbers 11 provided for the leaders of Israel what God wants for all His covenant people. Thus, it was intended to be both paradigmatic and programmatic. Just as Numbers 11 involved empowering for ministry and facilitating the purpose of God for his people under the old covenant, so the Acts 2 event empowered the people of God in the New Testament to be his witnesses. As the elders of Israel were shown to have prophetic intimacy with God, so all God's people, after the coming of the Messiah, were to be so intimate with God that they would be "the prophethood of all believers,"³ as well as the priesthood of all believers. God desires an intimate relationship with all who will receive him that involves empowering by his Spirit to speak for him, be his witnesses, and fulfill his purpose in the world.

Implications/Principles

There are many implications here for the lives and ministries of God's people today. As I described the context and overview of the events of Numbers 11, probably various topics relevant to the lives of God's people

were evident to many readers. Teachings such as: the journey of God's people; group dynamics occurring on such a journey; challenges, trials and temptations to God's people on his mission; stresses in the ministry; the walk of faith; God's goals for his people; prophecy; the Holy Spirit; and the one I have chosen for this essay, leadership in the ministry of God's people can be derived.

I want to propose, based on careful study of Numbers 11, the following principles for us as leaders among God's people today. My hope is that the Holy Spirit will use this to stimulate your thinking in this area and that you will refine what I present, contribute more principles and communicate them with me. My greater purpose is to encourage you to do the same kind of biblical theological principizing of Bible passages in your ministries.

The first truth or principle I see in this text is that there will be problems on our "journey" for the LORD. Various hardships and challenges to basic needs will arise. God's people may turn on the leader and, out of fear or greed, make unreasonable demands. One common pressure will be the apparent discrepancy between the work needing to be done and the workers and resources to do it. The answer, as we have seen and will discuss further, is the gift of God's Spirit.

The second principle is that, in these problems among God's people on the journey, leaders are often tempted to focus on themselves for the answer. However, the text teaches that the answer is not in our resources or us but in God and his Spirit working in and through us. It may sound simplistic, but Numbers 11 says the answer to the problems of our ministries is Pentecost. God's ministry and mission are always accomplished by the working of his Spirit (as we affirm from Zechariah 4:6). But what does this mean in practical terms?

It means that we must keep turning our eyes away from the circumstances and ourselves back to God and never lose the sense of awe and dependence on his power and wisdom, and never let go of our belief in his goodness. In good Pentecostal tradition, we need to listen to God's voice, get a word from him and obey it in faith. Such a word will be in line with what he has already revealed in the Scriptures and will honor him for his holy character.

Third, the text teaches that all who are called by God have his Spirit at work in them. This is the implication from the sudden reference to the Holy Spirit here. According to Numbers 11:17, Moses had the Spirit on him all along to enable him to accomplish God's purpose even though nothing was said about the Spirit and Moses before this. Perhaps we should have picked up that this was an ancient assumption from the references to Joseph in Genesis 41:38 and to Bezalel and Oholiab in Exodus 31:3; 35:31. They were said to have God's Spirit given to them for wisdom and ability to carry out their important, leadership functions. Later passages, such as 1 Samuel 16:3, show that God sent his Spirit upon those he established as his leaders. Thus, we should realize that whether the Bible explicitly mentions the Spirit or not God intends us to assume the Pentecostal understanding that his work is to be done in the power of his Spirit. Again, the description of this event in Numbers 11 seems to be intended as a paradigm/example of what should be expected for all God-ordained leadership.⁴ The experience of this will be discussed later.

The fourth principle I see here is that it is no problem for God to distribute the burden among others beyond us (and the rest of the weary 10 percent who typically do 90 percent of the work of the church) and enable those others to carry the burden with us. He called for seventy elders to provide

the help Moses needed. That number was probably symbolic to them of the full representation of the group of people involved (see Genesis 10 and Exodus 1:5). God wants us to realize he can empower the full number we need. Perhaps he waits until we realize our need and are willing to relinquish our exclusive hold on the power, just like waiting to create Eve until Adam felt his need. We also must realize we lose nothing when God does this; we only gain.

The fifth principle, then, as we read on in the LORD's instruction to Moses here, is that leaders must gather the workers God wants from those already known to be leaders among the people. God did not force on the people new leaders who were strange to them. God calls us to recruit and to use wisdom in our organization of his people for effective ministry and mission. Note also that, throughout most of his ministry, Moses was mentoring Joshua to be his successor.

The sixth thing I see about God's answer is that it was not a quick fix for the immediate felt need but the long term solution to all such stresses in the ministry and missionary journey of his people. He did meet the immediate need but dealt with their sin with judgment. However, the focus was on the greater need—Spirit-empowered infrastructure.

The seventh principle is that God's leaders and people should expect the Pentecostal experience of prophetic empowering for his mission. Numbers 11 amazingly prefigures Pentecost. The LORD put his Spirit on the seventy, and they prophesied as he publicly established them in their support ministry with Moses. The prophesying was an observable sign to all the people that God was working supernaturally by his Spirit in their lives and had chosen them for this ministry. In this passage, the verb *nab'a*, to prophesy, is not in its usual form but in the *hitpael* stem. This form of the verb was used of visible,

physical demonstrations of some kind, involving prophetic speech, with no mention of the content. As in 1 Sam. 10:5-6, 10; 18:10; 19:20-24; and 1 Kings 18:29, the observable experience testified to contact with God's presence. Milgrom, Ashley, Walton and Matthews have observed that the choice of this form of the verb in Numbers 11 strongly suggests God used a visible, Spirit-empowering, prophetic event to confirm his authorization of,⁵ power upon,⁶ and intimate involvement in these leaders' ministries. To Wenham and Walton, the experience sounds much like that of the 120 at Pentecost in Acts 2. Wenham goes so far as to say, "As with Saul, the prophecy described here was probably an unintelligible ecstatic utterance, what the New Testament terms speaking in tongues."⁷ That seems to be a viable possibility here. However, the clear point is that some kind of observable prophetic experience was a known sign of the Spirit's empowering for leadership ministry.

Thus, as Stronstad has also pointed out,⁸ a divinely initiated, prophetic-speech event in both Numbers 11 and Acts 2 was clearly presented as evidence to the observers that the Spirit was working in those chosen for a ministry function. Therefore, I conclude that Numbers 11 strongly supports a concept of initial, observable evidence of the empowering of a believer to fulfill God's purpose as a witness for the Lord. The public demonstration in Numbers 11 was a one-time occurrence for a sign (verse 25). However, Levine makes a good point that, "Their ecstasy was a passing experience, but their status, and presumably their new competence, were permanent."⁹

The biblical idea of prophetic speech was that it was a communication flowing from an intimate communion with the LORD. Prophets were people who were privileged to have such intimate contact with God that they were allowed to be his

spokespersons. The experience of God's Spirit coming upon a person for ministry and mission is shown consistently to be a prophetic one of intimate communion with the LORD in the Spirit and communication from him by the Spirit.

The eighth point that needs to be made is that leaders must not think we can or need to control the distribution of the Spirit. In Numbers 11, not all who received this experience of the Spirit did so in the official way, at the designated place. God had called them to come before the place of his presence at the Tabernacle, before the congregation, but two did not make it. However, God still put his Spirit on them in the camp. Joshua called for Moses to stop them (verse 28). In contrast, Moses made it clear that there was no need to be jealous for his authority and he expressed the wish that all God's people would be prophetically empowered by the Spirit. Therefore, all leaders should relinquish self-serving, narrow-minded restrictions over who may minister. Of course, all workers and leaders must be proven, solid disciples, but we must not fail to release people to the ministries God wants for them because of our insecurities and clinging to control. Sometimes only 10 percent are doing all the work because leaders have an unhealthy need to be indispensable. We must be open to God working in ways that cut across our pride and rigid traditions. Pentecost has always offended extremely controlling types. Real freedom from the stresses of ministry comes when we give control over to God. Leaders are to bring order and direction to a group but they must not make those decisions on their own and must never think or act as though they have the power in themselves. We should simply act as obedient messengers from the LORD. Furthermore, no human is given authority to control the transfer of the Spirit to others.

God transferred the Spirit from Moses to the seventy; Moses did not do it.

Finally, the ninth important truth I see from Numbers 11 for us as leaders is that we must have the heart of God and look forward to His goals, as Moses did here at the end of this passage. Moses looked ahead to Pentecost and expressed the heart of God in the wish that all his people would be prophets and have the Holy Spirit on them to provide that intimate communion with Him and experience of his power for His mission in this world. Moses modeled a leader's return to the faith that focuses on God's promises and to leadership that helps the people move toward God's goals. If we will yield to the heart cry of God we will seek to see all God's people in ministry for him, empowered by his Spirit. If this is truly our heart's desire we will work to organize the church or ministry we lead in a way that encourages such a wide distribution of ministry. Pentecost is a grass-roots, non-elitist, movement. God's goal is that all his people would participate in his work on earth. When we are truly Pentecostal, we expect God to empower other people to accomplish the mission. That lifts the false

burden of self-sufficiency. Seeing God work supernaturally in his people also helps one keep perspective and faith. It seems to be a result of the Spirit-event of Numbers 11 that Moses resumed his patient intercession for the people. Ashley, in his commentary, suggests, "Perhaps the experience of the shared Spirit is ever the antidote for the weary, harried, threatened leader."¹⁰

Numbers 11 points us to Pentecost as God's answer to our stresses in ministry and challenges in leadership. It also helps keep us focused beyond ourselves on God's mission to reach the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I conclude that Numbers 11 teaches that the big question is not what will I be able to accomplish in my leadership ministry or will I come up with the "winning plan" for my ministry. It is rather, will I trust God and be led by him? Will I be thoroughly and consistently Pentecostal? Will I have God's priority of seeing all his people functioning as Spirit-filled, prophetic ministers?

Numbers 11 is truly a foundational passage for Pentecostal church leadership. What else do you see God saying here?

¹ Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 110.

² Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: 1984), 17, 22; Hildebrandt, 110, 157-158. "Paradigm" is an outstanding example, an archetype, a model, or a picture of what is intended for all in parallel situations. "Programmatic" refers to a plan or pattern of actions and experiences leading to a goal or desired result.

³ See Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of all Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology*. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

⁴ Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 110.

⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 380, 383; and Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 214.

⁶ John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 186.

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 109. Walton and Matthews, 186.

⁸ Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: 1984), 22.

⁹ Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 340.

¹⁰ Ashley, 217