

Covenantal Succession: Surviving the Founder's Syndrome

by George Grant, Parish Presbyterian Church

In 1564, Theodore Beza accepted the unenviable challenge of succeeding his friend and mentor, John Calvin, as the pastor of St. Pierre's Church, and as the leader of the Reformation in Geneva and throughout the French-speaking world. It is never an easy thing for even a proven, capable leader to follow a great visionary, a beloved founder, a successful reformer and a soaring intellect. Calvin was all of those things and more. Beza, on the other hand, was anything but a proven capable leader.

Prior to coming to Geneva just nine years earlier, Beza was an articulate and gifted proponent of Reformation ideas and ideals, but he had not enjoyed much outward or visible success. His efforts to establish academies of learning in Tübingen and Lausanne ultimately failed. His ambassadorial efforts amongst the Piedmont Waldensians, at the Colloquy of Worms and with Peter Viret and William Farel in Berne were stymied by incessant conflict, controversy and dissent.

Even after Calvin finally took him in and provided him with a measure of security and stability in Geneva, Beza's life and ministry remained mired in difficulty and frustration. His efforts to establish an academy there were delayed for nearly four years. His literary ambitions were likewise subject to constant interruptions and obstructions. And he was thrust into a host of protracted personal and doctrinal hubbubs that almost exhausted his time and resources.

At Calvin's death, everyone had good warrant to expect that Beza would ultimately wilt

and wither under the white hot spotlight of international scrutiny. Calvin's shoes were too big for anyone to fill—much less a perennial also-ran like Beza.

Instead, against all odds, he actually succeeded remarkably. Over the course of the next

Reformer began preparing his disciple, embracing him publicly as a partner in ministry and in life. As one biographer asserted, "Calvin's obvious affection for Beza, his trust in the younger man's abilities, and his willingness to yield to his charge wide-ranging

It is sometimes hard to remember when our schools are still in the day-to-day-survival stage that we need to be planning for the future—a future when our founders, our stalwart board members and our lead teachers are no longer on the scene.

four decades, he would solidify, strengthen, expand and unify the church in Geneva and its reforming movement. He confirmed Calvin's legacy. He celebrated Calvin's leadership. He upheld Calvin's ideals. And in so doing, he made his own substantial contribution to the work of the Reformation by demonstrating humility in nurturing a shared vision rather than grasping for the shiny ring of making one's own mark. He admirably demonstrated the beauty and power of covenantal succession.

While Beza quite obviously brought great gifts to the monumental task of succeeding an iconic founder, in many ways, it was Calvin himself who ensured that his young friend would ultimately be up to the challenge.

Early in his tenure in Geneva, Calvin began to entrust unique responsibilities to Beza. Calvin somehow saw in Beza what few others did—and so the great

authority laid firm foundations for Beza's eventual success."

Calvin was never grasping for control, for credit, for prominence or for preeminence. His multi-generational perspective and his commitment to covenantal succession enabled him to invest unhesitatingly in Beza. By 1561, Calvin had even arranged to share preaching duties with Beza on alternate weeks.

Another biographer has noted, "Without being a great dogmatician like his master, nor a creative genius in the ecclesiastical realm, Beza certainly had qualities which enabled him to be the leader of the second generation Reformers . . . But, it was Calvin's great confidence in him that paved the way for all his later successes."

As a founder of a number of institutions, churches, schools and organizations, there are many lessons I need to learn from the example of Calvin and Beza; lessons I suspect that they may have learned from the examples of Moses and Joshua, Samuel and David, Elijah and

George Grant is the pastor of Parish Presbyterian Church (PCA), chancellor of New College Franklin, and a lecturer in humanities at Franklin Classical School.

Covenantal Succession . . .

Elisha and Paul and Timothy.

If we are to survive—and even thrive—during seasons of transition and succession, we must first and foremost be very intentional in preparing for those seasons long before they are forced upon us by the dumb certainties of experience. As any insurance agent would remind us, we can't delay preparing for eventualities until the crisis is upon us. It is sometimes hard to remember when our schools are still in the day-to-day-survival stage that we need to be planning for the future—a future when our founders, our stalwart board members and our lead teachers are no longer on the scene. But, remember, we must. Calvin was very deliberate in his commitment to and investment in Beza. He looked forward to the day when Beza would stand in his stead—and he acted accordingly with great purposefulness.

Second, in order to prepare genuinely for smooth covenantal succession, founders have to lead the way themselves. They have to identify, train, invest in and send forth a host of young disciples. They have to “give away the shop” continually. Their job is to “work themselves out of a job,” as J. Hudson Taylor used to say about foreign missionaries. John Maxwell has memorably stated, “Collaboration is multiplication.” Calvin did not grasp at the reins. Instead, he put them firmly in the hands of Beza—and then patiently taught his disciple just how to manage them.

Third, this means turning over responsibility for essential tasks early and often, even when the possibility of failure looms large. The whole of history contradicts the modern cult of monomaniacal micro-managing.

Throughout the past, wise leaders have demonstrated the immense long-term value of team building, even at the risk of short-term inefficiencies. They have shown us the true significance of humble reliance upon others. They have willingly shared credit and glory and prosperity with others, knowing full well that they have hardly sacrificed anything as a consequence. Likewise, they have known that cooperation, accountability and collaboration offered them substantially greater benefits. No man or woman is an island. There are no successful loners—not in business, not in education, not in politics and not in life. Wild cards trump the best intentions. Rogue agents jeopardize the securest operations. Even the archetypal Lone Ranger had Tonto, to say nothing of Silver! There is a vast difference between the leader who must position himself ahead of the pack and the servant-leader, who will intentionally place himself in the middle, or even at the back. It is the difference between following a man or a mission. It is impossible to tell the story of Calvin and the reforming movement he brought to Geneva without simultaneously telling the story of his open-handed, giving relationship with Beza.

Fourth, this necessarily involves real and substantial risk. But then, leaders always risk. Leaders do not play it safe. Leaders lead. They invest where others would never think of investing. They do not wait until the path is already clear ahead. Leaders get things done. They do not simply preserve the status quo. They actually work rather than positioning themselves for the sake of appearance. As a result, leaders simply cannot please everyone

all of the time. Doing the right thing is dangerous. It is bound to provoke a ferocious reaction. Anyone who acts on principle will surely attract criticism. Anyone who pursues a determined course of action is bound to meet equally resolute opposition. People can only argue with someone who has taken a position. Critics can only rail against actual programs. Opponents must have something to oppose. Thus, if you wish to remain in everyone's good graces, do nothing whatsoever, decide nothing whatsoever and stand for nothing whatsoever. Abandoning the thing worth doing is always a safer and more popular course of action. It is also wrong. As Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed, “Better faithful than famous. Honor before prominence.” Calvin took a great risk with Beza. But, it was a risk that he knew he must take.

Finally, in order to make the institutional transition from founders to disciples, it is vital that the processes, expectations and assumptions be altogether transparent. It is vital for leaders to help their entire communities toward buy-in. There must be consensus going forward or there will be no going forward. The worst possible scenario for any transition is to have to face a succession crisis (indeed, some of the world's most bitter civil wars have resulted from just such scenarios). Calvin worked hard to give Beza visible opportunities to win over the people of Geneva: he helped to institutionalize orderly processes; he built a strong and united support leadership team around Beza; he constantly kept Beza and the Genevan church focused on the Gospel rather than the myriad of peripheral issues that might otherwise vie for their attentions; he constantly prayed with and for

Covenantal Succession . . .

Beza; he helped to refine, develop and maximize Beza's already substantial gifts. His greatest desire was that Beza's legacy might one day even outstrip his own.

In our still youthful movement of classical and Christian schools, we have been blessed with a goodly number of dynamic founders. And we are just now coming to the time when we will have to survive the passing of these leaders from the scene. How we invest, how we prepare and how we build consensus now will surely do much to determine what our long-term impact in this poor, fallen world will be.

Common Questions About School Boards

by Patch Blakey, Ron Lee, Don Post and Douglas Wilson

1. How much daily input should a board have on the routine operation of the school?

In general, the board may have input on the routine operation of the school, but not daily input. The input should be during a duly called meeting of the board with the headmaster or the person in charge of the daily running of the school. The board should have no authority except when it sits to conduct business, or in that rare time when they appoint a commission of the board to accomplish some particular task. Individual board members should have no independent authority unless it has been specifically delegated to them by a vote of the board for a particular task. (D. Post)

2. What pitfalls should a start-up school avoid in the selection of its first board?

It is tempting to select individuals who are influential in the local community. Individuals may possess skills that are necessary for your success, but if they are not philosophically aligned with the classical and Christian vision of your school, you must pass them by. It would be better to contract for their services. It is more important that the board consist of individuals who have a common mission and passion for the school than to try to appease appearances. (R. Lee)

3. What considerations should the school board give to selecting replacement board members for those who have resigned? (P. Blakey)

The school board should have a process established that enables it to evaluate potential board

members on a number of issues before they are even nominated as a candidate. At a minimum, the board should verify that each of the potential candidates are members of a Christ-centered, Bible-believing church in the community; they are in agreement with the school's statement of faith; their practice of life is consistent with their profession of faith; they are knowledgeable of and have demonstrated commitment to the classical Christian methodology used at the school; they are in agreement with the school's written philosophical positions; and that they have expertise which is of value to the school.

4. What does an administrator do if the school board is not complying with the bylaws and policies it has established for the operation of the school?

There are two ways to go. If the violations are egregious, and the issues involved are important, then the administrator should formally request the board correct the deficiency. If they refuse to do so, then the administrator should appeal to the entity that the board is accountable to. If there are no orderly procedures in place for making such an appeal, he should submit his resignation.

If the violations are not egregious, then the administrator should propose to the board that they change the bylaws and policies in order to conform to the actual practices of the board and school. (D. Wilson)

5. What is the role of the board in helping to raise funds for the school?

In the early stage of the school,