

**SOS Checks and Career Management**  
**ACMS Worship Service, Point Loma University, May 31 2003**  
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**Selections from 1 Sam 15: 10 – 22 (NASB)**

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul came to Carmel, and set up a monument for himself." And Samuel came to Saul and said, "Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you king over Israel, and the Lord sent you on a mission and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord?" Then Saul said to Samuel, "I did obey the voice of the Lord, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal." And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams."

A friend of mine once remarked that a colleague of his at another institution had criticized him for not managing his career properly. He was told that he did not network enough with the right sort of people. Because of this faux pas opportunities passed him by, and he generally did not get the kind of recognition he deserved.

That night our conversation came back to me. It raised an issue my generation did not think much about, but seems to be a relevant topic. How, if at all, should Christian faculty members pursue career self-management? This question can take various forms depending on circumstances: While on a probationary contract, how do we with integrity and humility make known to the institution our perceived strengths? How should we interact with colleagues who are on a committee that will be evaluating us for tenure or promotion? Is there a strategy we should employ in 'making a name for ourselves' within our disciplinary academic guilds?

I find an interesting contrast of self-promotion in the careers of Saul and David. There are strong similarities, even though the personalities of the two are complex. Both were chosen while they were minding their own business—Saul in looking for some lost sheep, and David in tending sheep. Saul actually tried to avoid his calling by hiding among some luggage. There is an important difference between them, though, which I'm reminded of upon reading the circumstances surrounding David's selection to be king. When Samuel thought David's brother Eliab was surely the one who would replace

Saul, God said, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as a man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Saul was king of Israel for 32 years, the amount of time comprising a nice long academic career. But his ministry was not fruitful, and we sadly read that God also rejected him. In fact, for the most part 1 Samuel describes Saul’s career as going into a tailspin. In human terms, of course, he accomplished some impressive things, certainly as impressive as, say, winning teacher of the year, researcher of the year, securing a huge grant, or being recognized by professional colleagues with flattering words and awards for superior academic work. But God looks at the heart, and it appears that Saul tended to do things for himself, not for the kingdom. Note his defense quoted earlier, “I did obey the voice of the Lord . . . but the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen . . . to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal.” It is hard to fathom that at some level Saul did not know that such catering was contrary to what God wanted. Was Saul self-deceived, or merely very adept at rationalizing? What would he say, for instance, was the purpose of the monument he erected to himself?

More to the point, how do we recognize when we are really setting up monuments to ourselves and thus are in danger of beginning a ‘tail spinning’ career? Even better, how do we ensure that we have productive careers? Let me suggest two strategies worthy of consideration, one being a focus on negative motives while the other is more positive. I’ll call them the objective and subjective SOS check, where SOS designates *Service Of Self*. The objective check—*Service Of Self*—asks whether self is the wrongful *object* of service: the self is served; the subjective check—*Service Of Self*—asks whether self is the useful *subject* of service: the self serves.

The objective SOS (the self is served) is the negative check. It attempts to see if our actions are, at the end of the day, sophisticated means of self-glorification. Determining whether we are trapped in this mode involves some introspection, for it requires that we ask questions such as these: Are we jealous of the professional accomplishments of other colleagues, as Saul was with David? Do we have an increasing need for and addiction to the praise of others, as Saul seemed to have? When we examine our inner reasons for doing something, are they for building Saul-like monuments of self-promotion? Is our humility false—put on display in an attempt to have others judge us as humble? And do we cater to our students for the purpose of self-advantage?

While the objective SOS is a negative check, seeking to avoid a plummeting career, the subjective SOS is a more positive check, and concerns what we might do ensure a useful career. It requires that we examine questions like these: When asked to be in a prominent role, do we put our light

under a bushel—hide in the luggage as Saul did, so to speak—or do we carefully weigh our decision in the context of ministry opportunity? Are we building colleagues up by rejoicing with them in celebration of their accomplishments? Do we have an increasing desire to give praise to others? Will a specific project we get involved in build monuments for the kingdom, and are we *habitually* looking for ways to use the gifts we have for kingdom building? Do we require of our students what is best for them in the long-term, even if it means a short term self-*dis*advantage? In other words, are we instruments of service?

Proverbs 27:2 gives a nice illustration of the subjective and objective SOS checks in one verse: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips.” To understand how this passage synthesizes the SOS checks, it’s important to appreciate one of the features about the Hebrew (and Greek) languages that we lack in English. It is the notion of a *third person* imperative. Such a construct involves an indirect command to the third person—him, her, it, or them—as opposed to commands targeted to the second person, you, such as, “Pay attention to this meditation!” Third person imperatives are found in both Greek and Hebrew, but as we do not have such a facility in English, most of our biblical translations try to get a sense of these commands with the word *let*. When expressed negatively, this probably works. (E.g., A third person imperative is used in 2 Thess. 3:10. “If anyone will not work, neither *let* that person eat.” This is a command directed to the person refusing to work.) When expressed positively, however, the technique can be misleading, as one may think the translated words connote a request, exhortation, or perhaps an expression of a desire as to how things should be. (E.g., consider Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:37, “But *let* your word be, ‘Yes, yes, No, no.’ ” This statement is not an exhortation. It is much stronger than that. It is a command directed to our word.)

Now, the Proverbs passage has two imperatives, one of which is like Matthew’s, but with a different emphasis. It illustrates the objective SOS check. The concern is not with *how* to say things, as in Matthew, but with *what* to say. Our mouths and lips are commanded *not* to render self-praise. That part is obvious, and we academicians would do well to remember it in our interactions with students, following the example illustrated by the tribute paid to Leonard Euler by the Marquis of Condorcet: “He preferred instructing his pupils to the little satisfaction of amazing them.”

What a model for all of us. Certainly, if anyone were able to dazzle his students, it was Leonard Euler. Yet he avoided showmanship, resisted the temptation to display knowledge for the sake of impressing, downplayed his publishing accomplishments, and, we are told, preferred instructing his pupils to the little satisfaction of amazing them. We can modify this phrase slightly so it applies not only in our interactions with students, but with the entire academic community to which we belong. It seems to me that the mark of a Christian in academia should be one who, “Prefers *edifying* others to the little satisfaction of *impressing* them.”

The second imperative in the Proverbs passage deals with the subjective SOS check. It commands, “*Let* another praise you,” and often gets overlooked because it is a third person imperative introduced with the word *let*. But the command is nevertheless there with all its force. It is certainly not to be taken to mean, “Let (in the sense of *allow*) another person to praise you.” Nor is it intended to be an exhortation, nor an indication as to how things should be. I think a better translation is, “Another *is to* praise you,” or, perhaps, “Another *must* praise you.” The entire passage, then, commands us not only to be humble, although this is certainly an emphasis, but also to be praise givers. Now, someone may wonder: If the phrase, “Another is to praise you” is a *third person* imperative directed to “the other”, how is it to be construed as a command to us? Simply because when we look at ourselves from our community’s perspective, we become “the other” to whom that command is to be applied. In other words, rather than merely calling us (as ourselves) to humility, this passage also calls us (as others) to become praise givers—habitual praise givers. “Another (meaning us) is to praise you, and not your own mouth.” This does not imply we should give forced and false praise. But I think it at least means we are to work just as hard at finding that thing we can give praise for as we do, say, when we scrutinize a scholarly work, or when we critically evaluate any activity in our community.

So, that wraps up an unpacking of what SOS checks practically mean, but do we have any role model of someone who put these two SOS checks together? Let me read a few sentences from the journal of Charles Wesley:

**From the journal of Charles Wesley (Tuesday, May 23, 1738):**

I waked under the protection of Christ, and gave myself up, soul and body, to Him. At nine I began [composing a] hymn on my conversion, but was persuaded to break off, for fear of pride. Mr. Bray coming, encouraged me to proceed in spite of Satan. I prayed Christ to stand by me, and finished the hymn.

There’s more coming, but I can’t resist by commenting here that I find this part quite inspiring. Charles Wesley has asked the right question, whether his project is born out of pride. His friend, Mr. Bray, assures him it is not. In the context of prayer, Wesley decides to continue and he finishes the hymn. Now listen to the rest of his journal entry.

Upon my afterwards showing [the hymn] to Mr. Bray, the devil threw in a fiery dart, suggesting that it was wrong, and I had displeased God. My heart sunk within me; when, casting my eye upon a Prayer-book, I met with an answer for [the devil]. “Why boastest thou thyself, thou tyrant, that thou canst do mischief?” Upon this, I clearly discerned it was a device of the enemy to keep back glory from God. And it is most usual with [the devil] to preach humility: when speaking will endanger his kingdom, or do honour to Christ. Least of all would he have us tell what things God has done for our souls, so tenderly does he guard us from pride. But God has showed me He can defend me from [pride] while speaking for Him. In His name therefore, and through His strength, I will perform my vows unto the Lord, of not hiding His righteousness within my heart, if it should ever please Him to plant it there.

In summary, I think SOS checks can be a valuable means for insuring productive careers, and referring to them can be a useful guide for dealing with practical questions as they arise. Questions relating to our grading policies while striving for tenure, to our interactions with those on the faculty with whom we strongly disagree, to how we should inform the Provost about a publication we just had accepted, and to our posturing for visibility within the community.

Well, that concludes our meditation, but just in case you're wondering about the hymn that Charles Wesley wrote, it was *Free Grace*—at least that was the title he gave it. Today it's better known as *And Can it Be?*—one of my favorites. I'm sure glad Wesley used both SOS checks in its composition. He certainly had a productive career, and I'm confident that following his example will result in productive careers for all of us. *Service Of Self?* No! The self is not to be served. *Service Of Self?* Yes! The self is to serve! Let's close in prayer.

Father, may the works that we do be pleasing hymns in your sight, showing your glory and building your kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.