

## Balaam's Ass

Remember the story of Balaam's ass (Numbers 22: 22-35)?

Balaam was a non-Israelite prophet who was offered a contract by the Moabite king Balak to come and curse the Israelite army, which at that time threatened to defeat the Moabites. After some initial resistance, Balaam went. Along the way, however, his previously-trusty donkey balked! No matter how much Balaam beat the animal, threatened it with death or commanded it to comply, the donkey wouldn't go along. According to the story it was because the animal saw the Lord's angel blocking the road, and it realized there was something more important than Balaam's orders.

What a great story! I hope it comes up soon in my Sunday School curriculum. Every kid should learn it.

So should every professional. I've just been reading Professor William F. May's new book on professional ethics, *Beleaguered Rulers*. May uses the story of Balaam's ass as an ancient illustration of what we now call "whistle-blowing." He argues that professionals in medicine, law, ministry, engineering, etc. have an ethical responsibility not to simply "go along."

The contribution they have to make goes beyond pure how-to-do-it knowledge that puts legs to someone else's objectives. "Junior colleagues must accept an obligation...to teach their superiors....[The professional] needs to raise

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substantive questions about goals....Presumably, the professional generates power through placing knowledge at the service of human need. It would be odd to restrict the scope of this professional service in the corporation as to provide the staff advisor with less moral power than Balaam's ass, which posed an awkward question or two about the direction in which his master rode."

Being Balaam's ass can be a difficult thing to do. It can be difficult even for very senior staff in an organization. Sherron Watkins was a senior Enron Vice-President, but the situation had to be catastrophic before her objections could be heard.

The explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986 was the crisis that exposed a fault in the engineering profession. The designers had specialist knowledge about the tolerances of the O-rings that had been installed in the shuttle, and they had reason to know that they were not good enough. But when the V-P of engineering was ordered to "take off his engineering hat and put on his management hat," he saluted and signed the clearance orders. As a consequence he failed himself as an engineer, his employer Morton Thiokol (which suffered financially), and the astronauts who trusted his engineering expertise to protect them.

To make it all a personal failing would be too simple. The engineers of Morton Thiokol, like the employees of many businesses, governments and NGOs, lived in a culture that rewarded optimism. As Professor May says, "The authorities

send myriad signals through their rhetoric and incentives that they do not want to hear bad news.”

Some professions do a good job of setting and enforcing standards to which members of the profession are accountable. Which can have the benefit of strengthening the individual’s spine.

My wife is a nurse. Some of the most agonizing moments in her career have been those moments when she has thought it necessary to question a physician. But Laurie knows that if a physician orders a medication that on the basis of her nursing expertise she believes would be harmful, she has to object. The occasions for this are rare, and usually a professional conversation clears matters up. But Laurie knows that if she were simply to go along, no questions asked, her nursing license would be at stake. The power of the physician and of the employing hospital is counter-balanced by her own conscience *and* the power of the professional association.

And that’s part of the point. Balaam’s ass benefits from having the Lord’s angel in front of him. Underlings who differ with their bosses need others who understand that they might just be right.

Back in 1894, Commissioner George Scott Railton appeared at a large Congress barefoot and dressed in sackcloth. The reason? He took strong exception to the decision to start up a Salvation Army life insurance company. “I was glad to hear our General in the holiness meeting this morning lay down the principles of

self-sacrifice which he deemed necessary for successful salvation warfare,” Railton said. “Judge then of my surprise when I found lying at my feet a dirty piece of paper...inviting our officers to pay twenty shillings of the Lord’s money and offering to give them thirty-three farthings yearly in return...” History reports that Railton then put the insurance company ad on the platform floor and trampled on it.

William Booth was understandably embarrassed and angry. Railton was unrepentant. And whether it was needed or not, he was sent on “sick leave.”

I find it hard to defend either the way Railton did what he did or the way Booth reacted, but the fact that Railton had the courage of his convictions I find inspiring. Anyone who thinks the Army is one big sausage machine needs to read this story. My question is whether he was driven to this very public and humiliating form of protest because there were insufficient avenues within the organizational structures of the Army itself for people to express dissentient views and have them heard.

I wonder where we are today as Salvationists and a Salvation Army. We know that might does not make right. We know that no human—follower or leader—is infallible. We know that Balaam sometimes needs his ass. How do we ensure the vitality of these things that we know?

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