

Review of *Leadership and Emotional Sabatoge*

By Joe Rigney

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW DAMICO

Leadership and Emotional Sabotage: Resisting the Anxiety That Will Wreck Your Family, Destroy Your Church, and Ruin the World, by Joe Rigney. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press. 2024. 120pp., \$17.95.

Joe Rigney's *Leadership and Emotional Sabotage* came out in 2024, but I'm confident I am one of many who wish it had been published earlier—say, the fall of 2019 or early 2020. This is because some of the book's insights and warnings double as descriptions of what has actually happened in parts of the evangelical world at the home, church, and denominational levels over the last few years. *Had Leadership and Emotional Sabotage* been available, much folly and trouble could have been avoided.

Alas, some lessons are best learned the hard way, and some books are more beneficial after having learned said lessons. And like all good cultural analysis, this book's diagnosis of our cultural moment can spare us from being caught unawares moving forward.

Leadership and Emotional Sabotage is Rigney's attempt to take the insights of Edwin H. Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* and provide them biblical grounding and vocabulary while removing the faulty theology (Friedman was a Jewish rabbi) and clinical babble (he was also a therapist). Rigney does this well as he diagnoses what ails much of our culture, proposes "a biblical cure," and then ably applies these principles by showing what faithful leadership looks like in the home, church, and world (5).

There is so much to appreciate about the book, but two items are especially worth highlighting.

THE RIGHTNESS OF AUTHORITY

Rigney spends the first chapter putting his finger on the source of our problems. With assists from Friedman, Lewis, and Shakespeare, Rigney names our crisis as one of "degree." Degree is "the principle of cultural order or rule or hierarchy" (12). Degree is everywhere, "because God made the world in a particular way...There are many separations and differences and distinctions that God makes, but they're all a part of one majestic whole" (13). Where degree flourishes, people joyfully function how they ought, in the roles to which they're assigned, and all things abide in providential order.

Our world, however, is fallen. And our culture is bent on throwing off all forms of degree. In the absence of degree, morality is arbitrary, honor is eschewed, might becomes right, and envy leads to devouring of all kinds. The root of it all is the rejection of authority. Rigney's summary of these issues is invaluable.

His remedy for this crisis of degree is faithful, sober-minded leadership, which Rigney spends a chapter exploring and defining.

What is so important in Rigney's prescription is the simple affirmation of the importance — and even goodness—of leadership and authority. This may seem basic, but if "degree" is to survive, then the people who hold leadership roles in "ordered relationships...with asymmetry and hierarchy" must actually embrace them. Again, this may seem obvious but given the state of things we have reason to doubt that it is obvious to all.

In the evangelical world, so much time and ink has been spent explaining what leadership is not that many husbands, pastors, and leaders have held leadership roles while surrendering any actual authority. This is not to say that the way forward is some form of hard-nosed and tight-fisted authoritarianism—this would be to fall prey to reactivity and the equal opposite error. But Christian men in God-ordained leadership roles do not serve those around them by practicing certain kinds of “servant leadership,” much of which abdicates any real leadership and instead morphs into a responsibility to provide people what they want. If we would recognize that our service is to lead, then we would find ourselves in healthier marriages, churches, and institutions.

Rigney’s chapter on sober-minded leadership and the following chapter, “Sabotage Is Coming,” are immensely insightful, and ought to be heartening to anyone in leadership: God has put you in a leadership role, your job is to get over yourself and execute it, and then to be ready for challenges and threats to your leadership. The fabric and order of creation depends on people functioning in proper degree, starting with those called to lead.

LABELS THAT LAST

Occasionally, terms and taxonomies arise that prove useful for the way they label what many have observed but not named. One recent example is Aaron Renn’s Positive-Neutral-Negative World categories, which, regardless of whether everyone agrees on its subtleties, has been widely adopted because it describes realities we can all identify. An older example is Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the very title of which continues to serve as a cultural diagnosis. Rigney’s most lasting contribution in his book may be some of the categories and vocabulary he employs.

Whether the categories and terms are original to him or not, Rigney has propelled them into more common use, and the way they’ve been received testifies to their utility. For example, the category of “emotional sabotage” is the kind of nomenclature that expresses and clarifies something real, and so has been adopted because it so aptly describes something we’ve all seen. When emotions and vague threats of “concern” and “hurt” are weaponized against

men aiming to lead, we now have a category to name what's being done.

Another useful piece of vocabulary is his use of the verb “steer,” which is simply a way to describe one of the aims of sabotage: “Sabotage is any attempt to steer or derail you, to take you and your people off-mission” (40). The reason “steer” stands out is that it accentuates the bad intentions of the one doing the sabotaging.

One example of the value of these terms came last June when Michael Carlino applied them to the Southern Baptist Convention in his article for *Christ Over All*, “The SBC Isn’t Drifting, It’s Being Steered: A Sober-Minded Response to Emotional Sabotage.” The simple distinction between the inactive “drift”—which has been used for years to describe dynamics in the SBC—and the active “steer” is significant because anyone who’s observed the goings-on in the SBC the last few years recognizes the accuracy of the latter verb.

Categories like these are a service to readers, and I anticipate they will stay in our vocabulary as long as the problems are with us.

A NIT TO PICK

To make it abundantly clear, *Leadership and Emotional Sabotage* is an excellent book, and I recommend it highly to all in positions of leadership. The book’s concision is a feature that most will appreciate, but one that makes the reviewer’s job more difficult—it would be easier to find cause for objection in a longer work. And yet, as so much of this book is strong, direct, and to the point, I’ll offer just one nitpick.

While I appreciate the distinction Rigney makes in the final chapter between “refugees from the world” and “apostles of the world”—and agree in principle that we should address each group differently—it comes across as a not-so-veiled apologetic for the serrated edge of Moscow lore. Nothing Rigney writes in this section is objectionable, but given the book’s provenance, it is hard not to detect the material is doing double duty. If those who wield the serrated edge today did so in the way Rigney says we should, there would be fewer objections to it. But as it is, the section reads like a call to use steak knives in

the kitchen while giving cover to those who prefer a machete.

CONCLUSION

Pastors, husbands, and leaders would benefit from *Leadership and Emotional Sabotage*. Even better if you can read it with a few other men and glean its insights together, charting a way forward for how to deal with the threat of emotional sabotage. Strong men make for good times, and we are not dealing with a surplus of such men right now. This book both helps us see why that's the case, and how to go about addressing it.

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