

ESSAY ON THE THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

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Jesus Christ provides us the ideal model for leadership. His central place in Scripture, and His unique relationship with the Church makes it imperative that His model of leadership be seriously considered in any discussion of a theology of leadership. Indeed, it would seem necessary, considering His position as Head of the Church, to understand His leadership as the basis for developing our theology of leadership particularly in the Church.

Jesus' ideas of leadership seemed to center around the concept of servanthood. When He presented Himself to the people at the synagogue in Nazareth, He quoted from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me – to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners..." Using this passage as a personal basis for ministry and leadership in Israel, He thus emphasized the servanthood role – a servant serving in the power of the Spirit of God!

The passage Jesus used as His Scriptural authority for leadership among His people is impregnated with the thoughts of the servant's role. He is to bring "good news to the afflicted"; He is to bind up the brokenhearted". He is to play a healing and helpful role, having been anointed of the Lord with the Spirit of God upon Him. This is no knight in shining armor going forth to wield his sword for personal glory and power. Instead, this is a servant going to serve others, and at the same time heavily dependent not upon himself but upon the Spirit of God.

The old adage, "more is caught than taught" could well be applied to Jesus Christ. He certainly modeled teaching, and was a master storyteller and illustrator, whose teaching tended to remain in the minds of the people. But He was strong on leading by example. Here was no armchair general. Jesus rubbed shoulders with the real world, and shared the hardships of the road

with His followers. When He spoke of prayer, He could well teach others to pray for He Himself spent the night in prayer. When Jesus taught the disciples to trust God for their needs, He Himself went out under the stars with no place to call His own! His theology of leadership taught that a person must first be, then act to affirm that being.

His leadership approach was one of immediate example, rather than abstract theory. While it is evident He had, and still has, the right to exercise a commanding authority, He opted instead to lead by the power of His example. The power of His persuasion largely lay in the fact of His person. There was no apparent contradiction between what He was and what He did. This kind of man many would give their lives to follow!

Jesus did not come to be served by others but instead Himself to be a servant to all. I am reminded of a much decorated American Army major who served in the Vietnam War. The reason he was considered such an outstanding leader by all who served with him was because he would not order his men to do anything he himself would not personally do. If it were a particularly difficult exercise or a dangerous mission, he would personally demonstrate or participate in the mission. Jesus was on the “front lines” in service to others. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and personally gave words of hope and comfort to the discouraged. He led His followers by His own example.

One of the wonderful episodes in the life of Christ took place the night before His crucifixion in the Upper Room. In one of the most dramatic gestures to teach His disciples a theology of leadership, Jesus took a towel and a basin and proceeded to wash each of His disciples’ feet. This was the work of a servant or the youngest of the group. Now Jesus was the leader of the group...the most important member. Yet He is the one to wash the feet. He did not leave it there. He made the point that those who wanted

to be chief among them must take the lowliest place of all and wash the feet of others...be a servant to them!

As Ted Ward has pointed out, this is just the opposite of the way the world thought of leadership. To almost everyone else, the sign of leadership was that you were served by others. Jesus dramatically illustrated His theology of leadership with the point that leadership in the Church presupposes a selfless servant attitude and manner of life.

Neither did Jesus advocate self-reliance as part of His concept of leadership. Instead Jesus emphasized the idea of total reliance upon God. He demonstrated and spoke of His own dependence upon the Spirit of God for all the He did. The great promise of Jesus to His disciples was the Holy Spirit. For it is the Holy Spirit Jesus commanded His followers to wait in Jerusalem until they were “endued with power from on High”. His leadership theology was pneumatic in nature.

The pneumatic principle is the operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of a person wholly dedicated to the will of God. This is not a person who is attempting to gain favor with God through his own efforts, but rather a person who has realized that the grace of God alone has made him acceptable for service to others. At the heart of the theology of leadership, then, is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. His work in the life of the believer is essential to our understanding of leadership. It is the Holy Spirit who provides the charisma to an individual thus endowing him with a leadership capacity and force.

Even the Greeks had some idea of this concept. They understood that a true leader was one who had been touched by the gods and given a supernatural ability to draw others and to lead them. Their concept, however, was incomplete, for they did not realize that the greatest manifestation of the supernatural was to show itself not in the pomp and splendor of royal selfishness, but in humility and selflessness of the lowly servant.

It is this very theme which is found in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah: “He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...there was no beauty that we should desire him”. It was not in the mere outward appearances that the greatest of all leadership would reveal itself. It was, rather, in the quiet, yet powerful, simple, yet profound, life of a carpenter’s son that leadership for the Church would forever find its model and search for its theology. In His very being He was leadership. Through a life lived in absolute dependence upon the Spirit of God we see the example of true leadership at its best.

To sum up a theology of leadership for the Church, it is essential to understand that a servanthood mentality is basic. Secondly, what we are and what we do must be complementary. In the third place, we must lead by example, with the force of moral integrity. And finally, in the Church, we must be sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and rely upon His power and personal endowment. In all that He did, Jesus was the servant of the Lord. The basic component of His leadership was a servant attitude. He was led by the Spirit of God to meet the real needs of those around Him, and to set an example of leadership through humility to be followed by His disciples.