

A Basic Understanding of Leadership

For a basic understanding of how God views leadership, let's start, quite literally, at the very beginning.

Read Genesis 1:26-28. This is the original mandate given by God to mankind – and by default, to you also. The New International Version puts it this way:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule...’” The Amplified Bible expands on this: *“God said, Let Us [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] make mankind in Our image, after Our likeness, and let them have complete authority over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the [tame] beasts, and over all of the earth...”*

As you can see, you were included in this broad mandate of leadership. This means that every one of us is, on some level, a leader of some kind. Think about it for a moment. How have you expressed leadership? Have you ever had a pet – a dog, a cat or even a hamster? Then you have been a leader, at least according to Genesis 1:26-28. Did you ever suggest a game at school, and have other kids follow your suggestion? Then you have been, at least briefly, a leader. Have you ever been at a prayer meeting and led forth in prayer? Then during the time you were praying, you were a leader, albeit in submission to the general leadership of the prayer meeting. Are you a parent, or do you aspire to be a parent? Then leadership skills are a must. This may surprise you. Perhaps you thought that leadership had to do with roles and titles. Maybe you thought that leadership was only for the select few. Well, although there are many different levels and expressions of leadership, we are all called, in one form or fashion, to be leaders! If you are to “lead” a person to Christ, then you must be a leader. If you are to obey the commission Jesus has given you to “go into all the world and make disciples of every nation,” then you must be a leader. If you are to exercise the gift God has given you, then you must lead, to one degree or another, within the sphere of that gifting. God has built leadership into the very fabric of your being. This capacity to “rule” was instilled into human nature at the dawn of humanity. It is called the Creation Mandate. Yet leadership, as God intended it, has become distorted. It has become equated with dominance, control, power plays, selfish ambition and exploitation. And so before we look at what Biblical leadership really is, let's take a quick snapshot of what Biblical leadership is not.

What Leadership is Not

An understanding of the flip-side of leadership – what leadership is not – is essential to laying a solid and clear foundation for leadership training in your life. Let's take a look, then, at four things that are not what God had in mind in Genesis 1:26-28:

Leadership is not a title

One of the most common misconceptions of leadership is that it is somehow connected to a

title or position. For this reason, many Christians who aspire to leadership are seeking out a title or position, thinking that as soon as they acquire this, they are a leader. This is not so. John C Maxwell expresses it well: “People have so many misconceptions about leadership. When they hear that someone has an impressive title or an assigned leadership position, they assume that he is a leader. Sometimes that’s true. But titles don’t have much value when it comes to leading. True leadership cannot be awarded, appointed, or assigned. It comes only from influence, and that can’t be mandated. It must be earned. The only thing a title can buy is a little time – either to increase your level of influence with others or erase it.”¹

When we begin to examine the leadership style of Jesus, we quickly discover that his leadership wasn’t based on a title. In fact, he never personally claimed the title of Messiah at all! Yet people knew who he was, because the anointing of the Messiah was upon him (John 1:41). In the same way, if you need to remind people that you are a leader, it is likely that you are not. People will know you are a leader if the anointing of a leader is upon you, and that anointing can only come from Christ (this is filtered through the unique gifts you have been given, and is exercised through the skills that you have learned). And in the same way that the leadership of Jesus wasn’t title-based, so he commanded that the leadership of his disciples wouldn’t be title-based. This is why, in Matthew 23:8-10, Jesus said:

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ.”

The people of the world chase after titles and jockey for positions, but we are not to be like that, says Jesus. A title is a label only. A title is not the leadership gift, nor is it the leadership role itself. In fact, a title has no real value unless leadership is actually being exercised in a Godly and Biblical way. As George Barna expresses it: “...it should be clear that having a title or position of pastor does not make you a leader any more than swimming in the ocean makes you a fish.”² Once we understand this simple premise, then we can understand Stanley Huftey when he declared: “It’s not the position that makes the leader; it’s the leader that makes the position.”³

Leadership is not management

A common fallacy, held by people both inside the Church and out in the world, is that leadership is equated with the day-to-day management of people and processes. John Maxwell makes this point: “A widespread misunderstanding is that leading and managing are one and the same. Up until a few years ago, books that claimed to be on leadership were often really about management. The main difference between the two is that leadership is about influencing people to follow, while management focuses on maintaining systems and processes.”⁴

In the church, the majority of the focus of church leadership is upon management – the management of people (through counselling and teaching), the management of resources (through financial administration), the management of programs (such as rallies, dramas and mission trips), and the management of meetings (such as the Sunday morning service or the Wednesday night Bible study). However, these activities, while important, are not leadership. They are administration, yes. They are government, yes. But they are not actually leadership – the act of leading the people of God. As Ross Perot observed, “People cannot be managed.

Inventories can be managed, but people must be led.”⁵ Church management (also called church government) is about maintaining church activities and making sure the church runs smoothly. Leadership, in contrast, is about taking a church toward the goal of Ephesians 4:13:

“...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Unless a church is moving toward that goal, there may be management in the church, but there is no true leadership. Management is about managing the status quo. Leadership is about managing change. But much more than being a “manager of change,” a leader is an “inducer of change.” Using his leadership skills and influence, he endeavors to help the church change, step by step, toward the goal of Ephesians 4:13. This is why John Maxwell makes this insightful comment: “The best way to test whether a person can lead rather than just manage is to ask him to create positive change. Managers can maintain direction, but they can’t change it. To move people in a new direction, you need influence.”⁶ John Haggai explains this point further: “...the leader induces and directs the change that most benefits the group. Change will occur whether there is effective leadership or not. But without positive leadership, the change will tend to be that of deterioration and de-struction rather than improvement.”⁷ This is so fundamental to the concept of leadership that it bears repeating. Leadership is not management of the church; leadership is, rather, the management of beneficial change within the church. The church needs “managers” – the Bible calls them “elders” (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 5:17) and “deacons” (1 Timothy 3:8-12). But the church also needs “leaders” – those who will actually lead the people of God in the direction God has set for them. It was this distinction between leadership and management that caused the apostles to appoint seven “managers” to look after the distribution of food to the Greek-speaking widows, so that the apostles would be released back into their primary role of leading the Church (see Acts 6:1-7).

Leadership is not control

This is one of the most serious and damaging misconceptions of leadership in the Church today. To be a leader, as some view it, is to be in control of other people’s lives. This is patently not a Biblical premise, for in Luke 22:25-26 Jesus provided his disciples with this specific guideline for leadership:

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”

Jesus coined the phrase “lord it over” to describe a leadership style that he firmly rejected. Peter echoes Jesus’ words in 1 Peter 5:2-3:

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Any leadership style that is based on control and manipulation falls into the category of “lording it over...the flock.” Leadership is not lordship. Let’s repeat that: Leadership is not lordship! It is not the exercise of power over people’s lives in order to further the cause and

benefit of the leader. This is lordship, not leadership. As John Haggai puts it: “God is calling leaders. Not power holders. Not Madison Avenue hype artists. Not mutual congratulation experts. Not influence peddlers. Not crowd-manipulating, exhibitionistic demagogues. God is calling leaders!”⁸

Leadership is not heirarchical

Over the centuries, the church has redefined leadership in line with contemporary concepts in the world. In the early centuries, church management came to resemble the imperial structure of Rome. In more recent years, church management is often indistinguishable from the corporate boardroom. But there has been one particular concept absorbed from the world which has proven difficult for many leaders to shake off: that leadership means the leader must sit at the top of a pyramid of authority, directing and delegating to all the minions below. New Testament concepts of leadership do not require a pyramid of power. In fact, they are surprisingly “flat” structures, with functions distributed horizontally to many teams, each of which require various leadership gifts and skills. Indeed, for the Church to operate as God has intended, there is needed a massive shift in the way we view leadership and its role in church life. A renewed view of leadership will in turn impact church structures, church priorities and church participation. Even in the secular world, leadership is being redefined in organic terms. Philip Selznick insists that “the art of the creative leader is to...fashion an organism that embodies new and enduring values.”⁹ Jesus, our creative leader, has already fashioned an organism that “embodies new and enduring values.” That organism is called “the Body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:22-23). The first priority of church leadership is to rediscover the “new and enduring values” that Jesus established right at the beginning, and reimplement those values in new and creative ways.

Next issue we will look at what Leadership is.

¹ John C Maxwell, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p.14. ² George Barna, The Habits of Highly Effective Churches (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999), p.31. ³ Stanley Huftey, cited by John C Maxwell, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p.16. ⁴ John C Maxwell, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p.14. ⁵ H. Ross Perot, quoted in <http://www.dailycelebrations.com/leaderquotes.htm>. ⁶ John C Maxwell, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p.14. ⁷ John Haggai, Lead On! (Reading, UK: Word Incorporated, 1987), p.6. ⁸ John Haggai, Lead On! (Reading, UK: Word Incorporated, 1987), p.1. ⁹ Philip Selznick, cited by Phil Pringle, You the Leader (Dee Why, Australia: PaX Trading Ministries, 1998), p.41.