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Characteristics of Christian Leadership

Defining Christian Leadership

In this first section on Christian leadership we begin by asking the question, “What is a leader?”. It is assumed that in embarking on this course of study you have a desire to grow in your effectiveness as a leader but in order to press on toward a goal you need to have a clear idea of what you are aiming at.

A great leader once defined leadership as:

“The art of consolidating the attention of the people against a single adversary and taking care that nothing will split up that attention.”

It’s a good definition, but unfortunately it was uttered by Adolph Hitler in his book “Mein Kampf”. So leadership is not just about **how** we lead people but **where**.

If you have to tell people you’re a leader, you are probably not.

In this session we will look broadly at the sort of leadership that is required to lead young people toward maturity in Christ

1. A Biblical Description of Leadership

The Bible offers further descriptions of Christian Leadership:

So Jesus called them together and said, "You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

- Jesus, Mark 10:42-45

Dear brothers and sisters, when I first came to you I didn't use lofty words and brilliant ideas to tell you God's message. And my message and my preaching were very plain. I did not use wise and persuasive speeches, but the Holy Spirit was powerful among you.

- Paul, 1 Corinthians 2:1-4

Care for the flock of God entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your good example.

- Peter, 1 Peter 5:2-3

These descriptions of leadership take our previous definitions to a new level. There is a "spiritual" dimension added in which God is the source of authority and Jesus is the example of how it must be exercised.

The spiritual leader must be "spiritual" first and a "leader" second.

From these verses we learn:

- a. The Christian leader must operate as a servant, looking for ways to serve and make sacrifices for others.
- b. The Christian leader must rely on the Holy Spirit as the source of their power and effectiveness in ministry
- c. The Christian leader must care for those whom they lead, watching over them with love.
- d. The Christian leader must set a good example for those whom they lead to follow.

Natural Leadership vs Spiritual Leadership

1. Similarities and Differences

Natural leadership and spiritual (Christian) leadership have similarities but they also have significant differences.

a. Similarities

i. Origin

Both natural leadership ability and spiritual leadership gifting originate in God. He creates us and that process of creation includes personality and natural abilities and traits.

ii. Development

Both natural leadership ability and spiritual leadership gifting need development. They may exist in latent form but in order for them to reach full expression and effectiveness, they need to be trained.

b. Differences

i. Source

While both natural leadership ability and spiritual leadership gifting originate in God, natural leadership does not depend on God. The natural leader will lead whether or not they acknowledge God. They are self confident, depending on their own ability. The Christian leader however, will be God confident, recognising the need for constant dependence upon Him.

“The best spiritual leaders are strong natural servants, who assume leadership simply because they see it as a way in which they can serve.”

- Robert Greenleaf

ii. Ambition

Inherent in natural leadership is the desire to lead. The natural leader will see the opportunity to lead and will naturally take the initiative necessary to get things done. They will enjoy the responsibility of leading others and will tend to guard their position of leadership against threat. The Christian leader is, however, content to not lead. They are available to God yet willing to be dispensable and to step aside if another should be appointed to succeed them.

The real leader has no need to lead—he is content to point the way.

- Henry Miller.

2. The Example of Paul

i. Paul as a Natural Leader

⁴Yet I could have confidence in myself if anyone could. If others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! ⁵For I was circumcised when I was eight days old, having been born into a pure-blooded Jewish family that is a branch of the tribe of Benjamin. So I am a real Jew if there ever was one! What's more, I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶And zealous? Yes, in fact, I harshly persecuted the church. And I obeyed the Jewish law so carefully that I was never accused of any fault.

- Philippians 3:4-6

ii. Paul as a Spiritual Leader

¹²Are we trying to pat ourselves on the back again? No, we are giving you a reason to be proud of us, so you can answer those who brag about having a spectacular ministry rather than having a sincere heart before God. ¹³If it seems that we are crazy, it is to bring glory to God. And if we are in our right minds, it is for your benefit. ¹⁴Whatever we do, it is because Christ's love controls us.

- 2 Corinthians 5:12-14

Note the contrasts above. Paul went from being:

- Self confident
- Self sufficient
- Self righteous

to being

- Sincere
- God glorifying
- Motivated by love

Those in Christian leadership may have many natural leadership gifts and abilities or very few. Either way God has called them to utilise both natural and spiritual leadership gifts in ways that acknowledge and depend on Him.

"The leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go on ahead, whereas the others follow, not realising all along that they are being directed from behind. There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way."

- Nelson Mandela

"Of a good leader, when his task is finished, his goal achieved, they will say, "We did this ourselves."

- Lao-Tse, Chinese Philosopher, 600 BC.

Servant Leadership

Christian Leadership is essentially servant leadership, and so to fully understand what it means to lead God's people, we need to examine this topic more carefully.

1. Servant Leadership is Other-Centred

The servant leader is not preoccupied with what they gain from leadership. They are not interested in status or comfort. They willingly undergo hardship and suffering humbling themselves in order to meet the needs of others. They are not too important or dignified to undertake even the lowest of tasks and they do so with no thought of personal gain.

³ Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. ⁴ So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, ⁵ and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he had around him.

⁶ When he came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, why are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "You don't understand now why I am doing it; someday you will."

⁸ "No," Peter protested, "you will never wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "But if I don't wash you, you won't belong to me."

⁹ Simon Peter exclaimed "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!"

¹⁰ Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you are clean, but that isn't true of everyone here." ¹¹ For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing?" ¹³ You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because it is true. ¹⁴ And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. ¹⁵ I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ How true it is that a servant is not greater than the master. Nor are messengers more important than the one who sends them. ¹⁷ You know these things—now do them! That is the path of blessing.

- John 13:3-16

2. Servant Leadership is God Honouring

The servant leader follows the example of Jesus and gladly relinquishes status and power for the benefit of others. They do not hang on to leadership because they know it is not a privilege to be contested, but an honour to be conferred.

³ Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. ⁴ Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. ⁵ Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. ⁶ Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. ⁷ He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. ⁸ And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. ⁹ Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- Philippians 3:3-11

The challenge for us as Christian leaders is to ensure we model a form of leadership that epitomises the servant attitude of Jesus in which we rely on God to infuse the gifts He has given us with His Spirit, and lead with a desire to live sacrificially for others and to bring honour to Him.

People ask the difference between a leader and a boss. The leader works in the open, and the boss in covert. The leader leads, and the boss drives.

- Theodore Roosevelt

"Leadership is one of the things you cannot delegate. You either exercise it, or you abdicate it."

- Robert Goizueta

"Leadership is the ability to obtain followers."

- James C. Georges

Proceed to page 1 in the workbook and complete the questions

