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Servant Leaders or Leading Servants?

(Part Two)

So what does leadership look like in the New Testament? One of the foundational texts on the subject comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 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. (Eph 4.11-13)

The New Testament letters speak of 'leadership' in the church in three senses:

1. People given to the church (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11)

Christ has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to His Church. All are 'ministries of the word.' All are responsible to equip others for ministry (Eph 4:12).

2. Functions needed for the health of the church, expressed in three words

- *Hēgeomai* – leading the way by example and so standing over the church (Heb 13: 7, 17).
- *Proistēmi* – taking responsibility for the church and for providing for its needs by working hard and keeping it faithful to God's truth, protecting it from error and caring for its members (Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12).
- *Kubernēsis* – Setting a direction for the church and helping to organise its affairs (1 Cor 12:28).

All three ideas come together in the most important biblical image of leadership, the shepherd. Those who lead in the church are expected to be shepherds who lead the way, provide food and protect the flock

(Acts 20:28-31; 1 Peter 5:1-4). The key leadership functions are taking responsibility, setting direction and protecting the sheep.

3. Positions in the churches

As churches became organised, it was necessary to recognise certain people in positions within the church. Three positions are mentioned: elder, overseer, deacon. Character and example are the key qualifications for all three. Elders and overseers also need to exhibit the ability to teach. Based on the example they already set, the church should seek to identify those God has given to fulfil the function that is needed. They should then be recognised by their appointment to specific positions.

Two important themes run through these three perspectives.

- a. Faithfulness to the Word of God – leaders must keep the church true to Scripture;
- b. Example to the people of God – leaders must keep themselves true to Scripture.

Unfortunately, the way we read our English translations of Scripture may introduce a distortion into our understanding of leadership if we don't question our assumptions from culture and experience about leadership.

- **Romans 12:8** – there is no verb for 'govern' (NIV); it simply says that leading should be done with zeal or diligence. Even the word 'leads' (ESV) may mislead if we forget that the predominant meaning of *proistēmi* is to take responsibility and provide for the needs of the church rather than to control it or make decisions for it.
- **1 Timothy 5:17** – again the word translated 'direct the affairs' (NIV) or 'rule' (ESV) here is *proistēmi*.

Knowing that helps us see that the elders are being commended for caring and providing well for the needs of the church. The English words 'direct' and 'rule' may convey quite a different sense to some readers.

- **Hebrews 13:17** – there is no word for 'authority' in the original. We are actually told to 'submit to them' (our leaders). To recognise this does not remove the challenge to submission, but the call is to submit and obey in relationship to the people who lead us rather than to an office they occupy or a quality they possess. This distinction may seem purely semantic, it can help us keep our focus on relationship and mutual responsibilities as well as on the character leaders must exhibit.

Leading by example

The idea of leading by example is strongly emphasised in Scripture. Rather than tell – which focuses on orders and authority – the servant shows. Richards and Hoeldtke write, 'Example, not command, is the primary mode through which the servant leads.'¹ St. Paul picks up this theme in his letters. 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1) Also, 'set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity' (1 Tim 4:12).

So, do church leaders have authority to lead the Church? In one sense, the answer is a definite no. All authority was given to the risen Christ (Matt 28:18) and remains His. He is the head of the Church (Col 1:18), a term that is never used for any leader. Furthermore, authority in the Church rests in the Word of God. God exercises His authority among His people through Scripture.

In another sense, however, leaders have authority whenever they are keeping the Church faithful to Christ. In Titus 2:15, Paul tells Titus to command people to obey 'what is in accord with sound doctrine.' What does this include?

- a. Gospel truth (2:11-14; 3:3-7) – holding firmly to the grace of God in Christ Jesus.
- b. Gospel morality (2:2-10; 3:1-2) – living out the good works to which God calls us.

- c. Gospel unity (3:9-11) – living in harmony together as the family of God.

Indeed, leaders are expected to discipline an errant brother or sister based specifically on departures from these three standards. Issues that must be addressed include teaching contrary to gospel truth (1 Tim 1:18-20), unrepented sin (1 Cor 5:1-13) and behaviour that threatens unity (1 Cor 11, 14; Phil 4:2-3). How should this look in practice?

Unless it is an issue of gospel truth, morality, or unity, leaders should allow freedom. They have no right to insist that believers commit to activities or patterns that Scripture does not insist on, unless failure to do so risks division. Special care must be taken to avoid coercing believers into acting against their consciences or preventing them from following the Lord's direction. At the same time, leaders must not shirk from tackling issues of false teaching, persistence in sin and divisiveness and members should submit to them in this task.

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Henri Nouwen reflects on the nature of spiritual leadership, when he writes, 'Here we touch the most important quality of Christian leadership in the future. It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made mani-

fest. I am speaking of a leadership in which power is constantly abandoned in favour of love.'² As I close, some questions worth considering:

1. When asserting authority, how much is it biblical leadership and how much is it personal self-assertion?
2. When communicating vision, how much is it God-inspired wisdom and how much is it selfish manipulation?
3. When organising workers, how much is it equipping the saints and how much is it personal selfish ambition?

1. Richards, Lawrence O., and Hoeldtke, Clyde. 1980. *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan)

2. Nouwen, Henri J.M. 1989. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: DLT), p.63