

Christian Leadership

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In speaking about Christian leadership at this ordination and induction of two new elders this morning, I am conscious that most of you are not elders and may never be. However I want to think about leadership in terms of one simply definition, that 'leadership is influence'. Leadership is about seeking to influence others in some way or direction. With this definition, most of us are in some kind of leadership position, in our families, workplaces, community groups or some ministry in the church. So think about how what I share might be applied in your area of influence.

There is an overwhelming mass of material that has been written in recent years, on the characteristics and styles of effective Christian leadership. So when speaking on this topic, there is always the risk of leaving out what someone thinks is a very important aspect.

One perspective that I found most helpful was from John Maxwell, a current American specialist in leadership matters. He describes how there are a number of Biblical models of leadership but highlights four that he believes to be esp. relevant into today's western society. Maxwell suggests that whatever leadership we offer, but esp. in church leadership we need to seek a balance of these four styles, and learn to apply them in the appropriate situations.

I am also conscious that to preach on the characteristics of Christian leadership, there is a good chance that I'll leave all leaders feeling inadequate and wanting to resign asap! What I share today is intended to encourage us to grow into a balance of these four models of Christian leadership.

SHEPHERD MODEL (which highlights relationships)

Psalm 23; John 10 v 2-5,11 (Jesus the Good Shepherd); I Peter 5 v 1-4.

This is the traditional caring, pastoral role of a minister (the 'flock of cows' role!) It is the relational image of an eastern shepherd loving, knowing, leading and protecting his sheep; and of the sheep trusting and following their shepherd. Shepherd leaders focus on connecting with people, getting involved in their lives, listening and empathising, developing good communication, seeking to help and guide. This is still vitally important because the church is still about people; people with their joys and sorrows, struggles and achievements, hurts and hopes.

Central to this image is love for your people, and that's not always easy. Some can be very unlovable at times, just like their leaders! Above all, leaders need to pray for a deeper love for their people. Love your people, seek the very best for them, serve them well, and they will welcome your leadership.

STEWARD MODEL (which highlights responsibility)

This image involves the idea of acting on behalf of and being accountable to the owner; having oversight of and managing the owners resources (1 Peter 5 v 2, 4). Key biblical passages are the Parables about a master/landlord going away and leaving the steward in charge (Luke 12 v 42f & Matthew 25 v 14f).

The key ideas are that a good steward is faithful to his calling, accountable to God and acts responsibly towards people.

A Good Steward is Faithful

Faithful to the mission of Jesus, to continue his preaching, teaching, healing and discipling work; faithful to Jesus' Great Commission.

But what is 'faithfulness'? We usually think of being faithful in terms of being reliable and holding firmly to our beliefs. Being 'defenders of the faith', faithful to the teaching of the Scriptures, maintaining an orthodox, evangelical faith.

Jesus defined faithfulness more in terms of behaviour. The biblical word is about a willingness to take risks (which requires much faith!); a willingness to take risks in order to be fruitful in terms of God's mission. In the Parable of the Talents, the two stewards who doubled their funds, who took risks with their money to be fruitful, were described by Jesus as 'good and faithful servants'. I wonder what the master would have said if they'd taken risks with his money and lost it!

The other steward, who was passive and fearful, who buried the money he was given in the ground, was in some senses being reliable and faithfully guarding what was entrusted to him. However the master called him a "wicked and lazy" servant because he had not taken any risk in order to be more fruitful.

In the well-known 'vine and branches' passage, Jesus links faithful discipleship with fruitfulness, using our gifts and resources for his kingdom purposes (John 15 v 8,16).

In order to be faithful in leadership, this involves being 'full-of-faith' in taking risks to be fruitful for the Kingdom. This can involve the risks of giving others who are less experienced an opportunity to try something new, and developing other potential leaders around us.

A Good Steward is Accountable

There is now a general recognition of this principle in society, esp through employment contracts, performance agreements and the development of codes of ethics.

Church leaders are accountable to some body for our beliefs and behaviour, maybe through a code of ethics or supervision, for on-going learning – all on a human level – and also daily and ultimately accountable to God and the Lord of the church.

A Good Steward is Responsible

For ensuring that the mission of Jesus is continued (Matthew 28 v 19,20) and the people of God are equipped in their ministries (Ephesians 4 v 12). Jesus reminds us that those to whom much is entrusted, much is expected. The greater the gifts, the greater the responsibility.

One key responsibility of a Good Steward is the good stewardship of his or her own time and energy. This continues to be a matter of difficult balance for most of us in church leadership, but we must continue to work at it. We need to care for ourselves so that we can care effectively for others. A drained or empty vessel cannot provide refreshment and support for others. We need to seek regular personal refreshment, physically, mentally and spiritually, through our relationship with the Lord. We also need to give adequate attention to our own household, so that they are not neglected and become resentful. Proper self-care also makes us less vulnerable to personal temptation and less likely to exercise poor judgement. In the USA every month, hundreds of people in full-time Christian

leadership drop out due to two main reasons: stress and sexual misconduct. I appreciate the words of the Apostle Paul as he said farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 v 28: "So keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care." Keep watch over yourselves!

These two biblical images or models of leadership are the more traditional ones. In the contemporary social context where the church is no longer at the heart or centre of society, but has been pushed out towards the edge, and where people exercise much greater personal choice about which church they will attend, Maxwell believes that two other models are essential to effective church leadership.

SEER MODEL (which highlights revelation & vision)

This is an old-fashioned word, but Maxwell clearly wanted a word for 'vision' that started with 'S'! The word 'seer' comes from 1 Samuel 9 v 9, and was an old-fashioned word then, where the narrator describes how the contemporary prophet was formerly known as a seer. A prophet or seer in the Old Testament was a visionary who helped the people of God to see God's future; he was a forth-teller more than a fore-teller.

We know well the old proverb, "Without a vision the people perish" (Proverbs 29 v 10).

A clear sense of vision can give purpose, focus, direction to a community or organisation, but it must be a worthwhile and challenging vision. People can lose vision very quickly; some think a new vision can be lost within 30 days if it's not reinforced. We too easily get our heads down and buried in our own little world and don't look up often enough for a sense of perspective.

Christian leaders need to keep the Kingdom vision before people. We all too easily reduce the church to being a holy Christian club which exists to meet our own needs. We need a constant reminder of the Kingdom vision, that we are called to be participants in the mission of God in this world, to continuing the work of Jesus; and each local church has to discover its part in God's mission.

Murray Robertson, of Spreydon Baptist Church, believes that 'vision' is the key characteristic of the gift of leadership. He discovered a secular study of 100 very effective business leaders in the US, which identified a number of common factors. They had been in the same job/company for 25 years on average. They were still in their first marriage, indicating an emotional energy, support and stability for their work. But the primary common factor was their sense of vision for their company or organisation, and their ability to communicate it.

If a real vision for mission is to occur in the church, it will occur first in the hearts of its leaders.

When a church captures a big vision of being a community that loves one another, where people open their lives to and are honest with one another, where worship is inspiring, where people reach out with compassion to their community, where non-Christian people are becoming friends and followers of Jesus, where Christians are making a difference in their workplaces and communities...then this kingdom-sized vision is energising. Leadership is about providing this kind of vision and inspiration, so that people say, "I'd rather be part of this church than anywhere else!"

Vision was the driving factor behind all the great leaders of the Bible:

- Abraham, leaving his home for an unknown place thousands of kilometres away, to discover God's land and to become a great nation.

- Moses, requesting freedom from the Pharaoh, journeying through the wilderness with a bunch of whinging moaners, to discover God's promised land.
- Joshua, invading a land of giants and military superiority.
- David extending his kingdom and Solomon building the Temple.
- Jeremiah giving hope of a return to Judah for those exiled in Babylon
- Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem
- Jesus, enduring everything for the sake of the cross
- Apostle Paul taking the gospel of Jesus beyond the walls of Judaism and out to the hated Gentiles.

And in our own century, we've had Martin Luther King with his 'Dream' of white children and black children playing together on the hills of Georgia; Mother Teresa helping over 50 000 of Calcutta's dying poor, by doing it one at a time; Nelson Mandela, suffering 20 years in an isolated prison and keeping alive a vision of a democratic, multi-racial South Africa.

The list goes on.

Leaders are called to keep God's big picture before our people, the vision of God's future, of why we are here, what we're saved for, of our church's part in God's mission.

SERVANT MODEL (highlighting the denial of our rights)

Key passages are 1 Peter 5 v 5; Mark 10 v 45 (Jesus came...to serve); Luke 22 v 24f (the disciples argue about greatness); John 13 (Jesus washing the disciples' feet); the whole example of Jesus.

The key to servanthood is about the voluntary denial of our rights as leaders.

The servant model highlights a number of significant characteristics of godly leaders: a humility of spirit, a teachability, an inner maturity and security, knowing who we are in God, where we are going, what we are giving our life to, under God.

In John 13 v 1 and 3, we read of this maturity and security within Jesus

- Jesus knew his position but he didn't have to flaunt it.
- Jesus knew his calling and was willing to be faithful to it.
- Jesus knew his costly future but was willing to submit to it.

Jesus could kneel down and wash his disciples' feet and serve them because he was secure in himself and his relationship with his heavenly father; whereas the disciples wouldn't wash each other's feet because they were insecure and needed to assert their superiority over each other.

So we need to develop this sense of personal security in God, not only to risk big things for God, but also to risk the small, humble things for God, the quiet ministering, the serving of people behind the scenes which only they and God will ever know about.

I see the stark contrast between Jesus with his towel and basin, and Governor Pontius Pilate with his.

Pilate was not secure and mature enough within himself to do what he knew was right, because he put himself and his personal needs first.

Jesus put the needs of his disciples and all the people of this world first.

Mature, secure people are into towels; the less mature are into titles.

The mature are people-conscious; while the less mature are position-conscious.

Mature people add value to others; the less mature always want to receive value from others.

Biblical scholar John Stott says, "power/influence is only safe in the hands of those who can humble themselves to serve".

It's the law of sacrifice: godly leaders have to **give up** in order to **go up** the leadership ladder.

The higher we go, the less rights we can claim and the more responsibility we are given. But our sacrifice needs to be motivated by love if it is to be genuine service and not grudging duty.

We see this servanthood in Jesus' life of self-giving.

We see it in Moses on Mt Sinai the second time, after God declared judgement on his people for worshipping the golden calf. Moses pleaded with God not to abandon his people but to forgive them, and asked that his own name be removed from the God's book if that could make it possible. Israel's great leader Moses risked his own eternal salvation for his people; what outrageous love! (Exodus 32 v 32)

We see it also in the Apostle Paul, agonising over his own Jewish people's unresponsiveness to the gospel of Jesus in Romans 9 v 2 & 3. He too was willing to give up his salvation to aid their response.

Jesuit teacher and writer on pastoral ministry, John Powell, when speaking of the cost of leadership, said how sometimes as a pastor he felt like the town water pump, always on tap, constantly having to respond to the needs of others, being drained to the point of resentment at times. But that is simply living out the servant-heart of Jesus.

This Servant model highlights the fact that underpinning all models of leadership is one central factor, that of **PERSONAL CHARACTER** – our distinctive inner-selves and personal qualities; our distinctive nature, style and temperament.; the people we are becoming under the leadership of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Leadership is both something we do and something we are.

Leadership is influence and we all want people of good Christ-like character leading us; people of integrity, who seek to allow Jesus to shape and direct and integrate every area of their lives, open to and dependent on the Holy Spirit; people who abide in Jesus, because without him we can achieve nothing of eternal significance.

Murray Robertson 1995

Leaders are excited by a passion for God's mission. Leaders lose sleep over the church's mission. If real mission is to occur in the church, it will occur first in the hearts of its leaders. True leadership takes risks and gives permission to others to try creative new ways of mission.

Bill Hybels 1997

The local church is the hope of the world, and its renewal rests in the hands of its leaders. The local church, to reach its redemptive potential, has to be well led. It has to be powerfully envisioned, strategically focused, internally aligned, have its members motivated, its problems addressed, its values pressed and its resources harnessed – and all that is the business of leaders, which is why Paul emphasised in Romans 12 verse 8, **"If you have the spiritual gift of leadership, for God's sake, lead!"**

The key question for developing healthy, mission-oriented churches is this, "Will leaders lead?"

I don't share these characteristics to make you feel inadequate but to inspire you to keep seeking to develop your leadership. Whatever our position of influence, we are to use our influence positively and wisely for God, seeking to keep a balance of these biblical models of leadership.