

A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF LEADERSHIP: THE SERVANT MODEL

(Matthew 20:20-28, Luke 22:34-37, & Ephesians 4:7-17)

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Although there are numerous passages in Holy Scripture which may be utilized with much profit in teaching leadership principles complete with examples of the same, we have chosen the above passages advisedly – being persuaded that they provide for our purposes, the most comprehensive and far-reaching ones set forth in God's Word. Foundations for successful ministry, according to the words of the Lord himself, originate and proceed from what he said and taught in them! Another passage, 1 Corinthians 12:1-31, likewise could have been chosen. However, here, Paul's words are more concerned with the operation of the gifts themselves and their proper function, while the passages we have selected deal more directly with the person possessing the gift. That is more crucial for our purposes, since the spiritual qualities of the person almost completely determines, on the man-ward side, the quality of the gifts as they operate in the community of the believers. Our concern, therefore, is with the person, and how he or she conceives of and practices Christian ministry. Another way to put it is: What is the individual's understanding and underlying motivation in exercising Christian leadership? What are the moral-spiritual values upon which he or she erects and pursues ministry objectives?

In answering these important questions, our first point to be made is cardinal - there is a basic difference, a qualitative one, between the Christian approach to an understanding of leadership and all other non-Christian ones! Let us pause and let the force of this statement sink in. We live today in what is called by leading thinkers and social analysts "a pluralist society." Because this is so (and I for one believe their analysis is correct), they say, we must beware of any and all attempts to elevate any one set of values above others. Reality is far too profound for any one approach to comprehend the existence of final and ultimate truth. Following the lead of Immanuel Kant and other makers of the modern mind, contemporary man thus gives up the hope of attaining or arriving at ultimate truth and contradictorily dogmatizes in his firm conviction that truth as it is, in essence, cannot be fully known. The best that man can do is to settle for a glimpse of it. Under these circumstances, it is "reductionistic" and "simplistic" to exalt one approach over another. Both philosophy and much contemporary theology lead the way with such authoritative pronouncements, and functionalism and behaviorism in psychology, as well as other empirically based social sciences obediently follow their lead. Under such an authoritarianism so all-inclusive as to virtually numb the thought processes of the inquiring mind, it is small wonder that many, Christians especially hold their faith in neutral, while they simultaneously pursue and imbibe the values, principles, and philosophies underlying the educational systems of this and other enlightened countries of the Western world!

What shall, what should a Christian do? To go into a serious examination of the process by which knowledge is gained, or to examine the principles by which we can know what can be known, while valid (the technical word is "epistemology") is not immediately relevant to our purposes. Instead, we shall advance the Biblical position that, for the Christian, God's Word is the final ultimate authority. The Christian presupposition is - "In the beginning GOD!..." The Christian accepts this as revelation! Because God has "said" ...truth, or at least the measure that can be known by man, aided by God, can be known. Truth can be known and grasped in propositional form, and divine revelation comes that way. Ultimate and final truth, however, is most comprehensively known through a Person; and according to the Scriptures, that Person is Jesus, called the Christ. In him, declares the enlightened Apostle, "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." And He, Himself declared to His inquiring hearers, "I am...the truth!" Upon this foundation, then, the honest Christian erects his faith, and following that, his trustful wholistic commitment - not arrogantly, as though he accomplished the task of arriving at truth all by himself, but with whole-souled humility. For God has "hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes " Therefore, the Christian will consciously, and conscientiously, ground his faith and resultant action on the values revealed and taught by the One who Is the "Author and finisher of our faith!" As He left with the Church throughout all ages the glad tidings, "All authority is given to me, in heaven and in earth," even so do we proudly and confidently confess that the chief source of Christian life and ministry proceeds solely from His authority, with which He charged us and authorized us to "go."

The Scriptural groundwork having been laid, in the previous discussion, we now proceed to address the topic with which we began - What is Christian leadership? Another aspect of the question is, "What distinguishes it from other approaches?" "How can it be recognized?" "Aren't all Christians automatically demonstrating 'Christian' leadership?" As Sporting Life said in Porgy and Bess, "It ain't necessarily so!" Let us see why "it ain't necessarily so." Take our first passage, Matthew 20:20-28. Here it is clear that there is a qualitative difference between the Christian understanding and approach to leadership and all other approaches. The authority for this statement is Jesus Himself. The disciples are in utter disarray at the knowledge that Jesus is going away, even though He, according to John's Gospel, was not going to leave them comfortless. He promised "another Comforter, even the Spirit of truth...which the world cannot receive!" But the ones closest to the heartbeat of the Master, seemed to understand him the least! They were concerned about the problem of leadership, but their understanding of leadership was based on principles alien to the spirit and teachings of the Lord. They "quarreled among themselves." About what? "Who should be the greatest!" Their grasp of the One whom they most vociferously swore undying love is sorely deficient. Ever patient, though possibly exasperated ("Have I been so long time with you, Philip, and yet you still don't know me."), Jesus asks them the question that from the Christian perspective, separates the Christian men from the Christian boys, "What is the posture, the identifying feature, of a true Christian leader," as contrasted with the non-Christian, the world? The answer the disciples gave was the "right" one. They were on the right track - but they didn't know it at all! "The Gentiles exercise authority!" To them, the function of leadership is to make egoistic use of power - power to coerce men to service for the leader's benefit. "He that exercises [this] authority is called a benefactor." But Jesus said, "It shall not be so among you." "I am among you as one who serves ...Whosoever among you who will be great shall be your servant!" What a mind-blower! Jesus inverted the world's value system as revealed behind the way in which they diagrammed the purpose and defined their pyramid of power. And alas, the disciples' understanding was strangely similar! Imagine their utter unbelief, their utter dismay, as the Lord categorically stated that the function and use of the Christian leader's imparted power is for service to others! Not for himself! The Christian leader is not to reign - he is to serve! The values of God's kingdom must be the values of the Christian. Especially of the leader!

The same truth is revealed in the Lukan passage, so we will not expound on it now. Instead, we will turn to the final passage - Ephesians 4:7-16 Here, in my opinion, is one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the purpose, division of labor and proper use of leadership. Here, in clear focus, is what leadership is all about "For the perfecting (fulfillment, in the sense of successfully arriving at a predetermined goal of completeness) of the saints, for the work of the ministry." In a nutshell, the values of the Kingdom. Here is really what the philosopher Kant unknowingly and unconsciously intended when he spoke of the categorical imperative. Kant talked about the good man. Jesus revealed the righteous man! Kant talked sternly about duty. Christ revealed the motivation of God -communicated obligation! "I am a debtor!" It is, therefore, incumbent upon the Christian leader that he follow his leader, his model - in the continuous act and process of what theologians term "the kenosis," the self-emptying! Our Lord was rich, yet for our sakes, He became poor. He made Himself of no reputation, while we seek, all too often, by a thousand disguised ways, to make ourselves one. Christ, emptied Himself, that He might fill others. We empty others in order to fill ourselves. Christ built the house of his father. Too easily, too monotonously easy, we build merely our churches! Christ sought out and aided and helped the weak; many Christian leaders abruptly and intemperately shunt them aside, when they do notice them, in favor of attaining a success that betrays a faulty understanding of what true strength is. Christ taught, and demonstrated, utter forgiveness, while we often stubbornly refuse to forget. And so, the contrast goes on and endlessly on

At the abysmal bottom of many active values evident in the service of much Christian leadership of our day is a defective and faulty worldview. Our worldview too easily shades imperceptively into the world's view. Despite Jesus' clear warning to the contrary, many fall into the deceptive snare of adjudging bestness by bigness, and fail to properly recognize that there is such a thing as "despising the day of small things" They, too, have a place in God's kingdom. As great as Paul was, and as great as God subsequently made him, he was never too big to take time for little follows. This great leader, like his Master before him, was often despised and rejected of men. Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come. At the resurrection and the endless and blissful life

which follows, we are to receive the true recompense of reward! Sadly, and almost unnoticeably, however, the record of far too many contemporary Christian leaders in effect demonstrates that they have not sufficiently grasped this basic fact. The almost mindless, though naive self-assured attitude, betrayed by the actions on the part of some who go busily about amassing gigantic material resources by which they build massive media kingdoms more geared to the here and now, most effectively obscures their connection to the world to come! Strangely, however, while their major (though undeclared) emphasis is more earth-bound than heavenly, in their very earth-boundness such men and ministries seem oblivious to the everyday bread and butter issues and needs of hundreds of thousands of unemployed, under employed, and even poverty-stricken people, whose problems they solve (when they can admit that such people have a problem) by a brief hurried witness to the words of Jesus by quoting his words, "the poor you have with you always!"

Acknowledgment of the primacy of the servant model mutes an exaggerated emphasis on amassing of material resources as a sure and unqualified evidence of the presence of God's seal of approval. Justification for this caution to Christian leadership on the part of this writer is based on the fact that woven throughout the Scriptures of both testaments, believers are asked to consider the fact that the effectiveness of Christian example is not measured by a popularity standard. Right evaluation of the possession of material resources considers that such things in themselves can be as rightly used as wrongly. In the final analysis, what the presence or absence of them must signify cannot always be categorically determined. Otherwise, the experience of the prophets of the Old Testament, and supremely of the Lord Himself in the New, leaves us with more unanswered questions than we can comfortably deal with. Added to this caution is an additional and significantly greater one: the picture of the church at the close of the New Testament times was one of "not many mighty, not many noble, not many wise" are to be found among "you." The church of that day, and for many days after, was composed of the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed. Slaves, rather than freemen, and women made up a disproportionate share of those who called themselves, and were called by others, "Christians." The gradual adoption of Greek and Roman pagan values syncretized and soon subverted the Christian view of material possessions. The pyramid of power was turned upside down: the "poor in heart" dropped to the bottom, and the wealthiest, most educated, and most powerful rose to the top. Within three centuries, the Christian church shifted from its place as a refuge and protector of the weak and more and more became the place where ambition, sanctified and otherwise, was rewarded with position and prestige. The Church became "the power" instead of Rome and thus set the stage for a too easy identification of a given system of "evident blessing," with the true blessings of God!

This situation has persisted - so much so that the dominant image of the Church, at least in lands where Western culture presides, is that of white, middle-to-upper class, conservative in social values. Only at rare times in this country has that image been effectively challenged. That was the time of chattel slavery, when the church-dominated power structures were challenged and forced to see that the Church and the world belong to the Lord and He gives it abundantly to all his creatures. All men, willing or not, are God's servants. When this is recognized, accepted, and set forth as a goal, relationships between men will change, and a place for everyone will be found within the community of the redeemed. A kingdom of righteousness built upon unconditional commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ must be the supreme value of those who would surely inhabit that kingdom. And whatever be the social, economic, political, or religious condition of the people who call themselves by the name of the Lord, the scriptural model of service to others for Christ's sake must be at the very heart of their motivation for life and subsequent service. This is required of all, and especially of leaders!