

Foundations of Christian Leadership

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At a recent workshop that I was leading an attendee told me that a management consultant had once remarked that all organisations are dysfunctional but that once recognised it becomes a starting point for improvement. It set me thinking about leadership and my own experience that most leadership both in and out of the Church is dysfunctional and that of course gives rise to dysfunctional organisations or Churches.

Yet in a Church context leaders are often unwilling to recognise dysfunction and the need for change. Why is that? I believe that there is often a fundamental error in how we conceive leadership that creates a distinction between Christians who are leaders in organisations and those that lead in the Church. This is a mistake because from a Christian worldview perspective the why and how of leadership for all Christians who are leaders in any context are governed by the same biblical principles and ethical foundations.

The reality of dysfunctional leadership

If we are bible believing Christians we should not be surprised at the reality of dysfunction in leadership or within an organisation because leaders and their followers are humans! We need to remind ourselves that as Christians we also are fallen creatures, redeemed yes, but also work in progress. When the apostle Paul writes to the Christians at Ephesus, he clearly reminds them of the need for sanctification;

“put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Ephesians 4:22

Less has been written on the topic of dysfunctional leadership and organisations than on the topic of what makes a good or successful leader. Over the last 50 years or so, a great deal of research has been carried out on what makes a good leader and much has been written, including oft quoted works from Christian authors such as Drucker, Blanchard and Kouzes and Maxwell. A perusal of academic research rapidly shows that there is in fact no agreement on what makes a leader successful and there are many competing theories.

In measuring success it will of course depend on what the criterion are. After the death of Apple founder and CEO, Steve Jobs, there arose an entrepreneurship cult that espoused the darker side of Job's temperament that sometimes surfaced in dealing with employees and the “reality distortion field”¹ justifying Job's approach as the way to get things done and to innovate. The problem with this view is that it confuses the achievements with the means rather than teasing apart good aspects such as creativity arising from *imageo dei* and the dysfunction due to pride and arrogance.

In our always connected, social media driven digital age, celebrity leadership has emerged as another dysfunction particularly in Politics and to a degree in business, where leadership success is defined by the number of followers that we have, a tendency that is not altogether absent from the Church.

¹ Described in Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson, Simon & Schuster, 2011, it was a term coined from Star Trek and used to describe Steve Jobs' ability to convince himself and others to believe almost anything could be accomplished in regard to the design and development of new products. An example might be Jobs' expecting something to be developed in a few days that would normally take much longer. This sometimes put enormous pressure on employees.

Dysfunctional leadership is not absent from the well meaning charity sector either. In August 2015, Kid's Company, a much celebrated UK children charity run by the charismatic Camila Batmanghelidjh who has raised funds from Government and pop stars over 20 years became insolvent. In a perceptive comment on Kid's Company's demise the Economist stated the reason for failure being that "the CEO was better at raising money than management". Others have spoken of a culture of "dysfunctional management" and Trustees have been criticised for poor governance.

Habits of the heart

In reality we lead out of who we are or to use a term that de Tocqueville used in his analysis of democracy in America in the 19th century, "the the habits of the heart".² Leadership is thus expressed as an outworking of who we are and the consistency with which we operate. No theory of leadership can therefore be complete without the counterbalance of the reality of fallen man that will inevitably give rise to both individual and corporate dysfunction.

If we lead out of the "habits of our hearts" then a crucial question to address is how those habits are formed and what would constitute good habits from a Christian worldview perspective. The answers to those questions lie firmly in the bible rather than any manual on leadership. Before we can embark on a discovery of how we develop good habits of the heart, we need to be clear about why we lead regardless of where we lead, in business, mission or the Church.

Why do we lead?

A failure to understand this fundamental question leads to wrong models of leadership for a Christian and arouses a degree of suspicion between those engaged in business or leading a secular organisation and those engaged in "full time Christian work". Of course "full time Christian work" is itself a misnomer because a biblical theology of work shows us that our prime calling is to serve God and that our vocational calling is secondary to this.³ We are all in full time Christian service, it's just that some are paid by the Church and others by business or their organisation!

One reason for this suspicion about leadership is that our evolving culture shapes the way we think about leadership. Fed by the political and business leadership scandals that make the headlines and the banking sector's greed that heralded a global economic disaster in 2008, our modern Western capitalist society is often viewed by the public and the Church as one in which the profit motive takes precedence over human relationships, fairness and justice. Leadership is seen as the cut and thrust of making money motivated by self interest and greed and this does not sit well with the bible's view of leadership. Even in the 19th century, de Tocqueville observed;

"As one digs deeper into the national character of the Americans, one sees that they have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: how much money will it bring in?"

In former communist countries it is still difficult to engage in business without offering bribes and understandably many older generation Pastors view with suspicion those in their congregation engaged in business because it is seen as rife with corruption, a hangover from communist dictatorships. Notwithstanding significant punitive action taken against corrupt politicians and business people in Romania including a former vice president, a senior Romanian judge has commented that corruption will continue but the price is now higher, reflecting the risk from being caught! We can only hope that a new generation of leaders will eventually displace this inbuilt tendency towards corruption.

² Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

³ For a fuller development of this theology see for example: The Call, Os Guinness, Thomas Nelson, 1998 and The Other Six Days, R Paul Stephens, Eerdmans, 2000.

The call

No matter what our sphere of leadership, whether in the world or in the Church, the bible's answer to why we lead gives us a common purpose. Simply stated if our primary calling is to Christ and to serve God then our vocational or secondary calling is no more than a vehicle through which we serve God, whether leading or following. This has a simple but profound implication for our leadership because it's underlying model is that of service, first to God and then to others. As we read the gospels we see Jesus himself demonstrating this in practice and in his teaching.

“A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” Luke 22:25-27

Interestingly the word company used to describe a legal business entity originates in the Latin word *companiono* "companion, one who eats bread with you". From these origins even today the definition of a company is a collection of individuals or members who share a common purpose and unite to focus their various skills and resources and organise collectively to achieve defined common goals.

Much of the dysfunction that arises in companies today can often be attributed to a style of leadership and ownership that has lost sight of this definition of a company often leaving shareholders, management and employees in tension with competing goals.

Serving others

Whilst the goals of a Church, Christian organisation or a business may be very different, should not our attitude as leaders of that "company" be the same, that of service, first to God and then to those we lead. This is a crucial underpinning of the development of our character from which "habits of the heart" emerge.

If we are first serving God in our leadership, what does that look like, if we are to serve others how can we lead? Once more the bible steps in to answer such questions giving us a clear set of virtues and ethics.

Character as a foundation

When the apostle Paul writes to Timothy and Titus with clear instructions as to the qualifications for those who should be appointed to leadership in the Church as elders and deacons, why would we look for anything less for Christians who are to lead in a para Church organisation, business or politics? Nearly all the qualifications that Paul lists when writing to Timothy and Titus, shown in the table below, are character attributes rather than specific ability. The exception in the case of eldership it is being "apt to teach". There is also considerable overlap between the qualifications for elders and deacons (deacons and elders qualifications shown in italics in the table).

CHARACTER TRAITS (1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1)		
DISPOSITION	LEADERSHIP	RELATIONSHIPS
Self Controlled, Self disciplined, <i>Temperate</i>		Not Overbearing, Not Violent, Gentle, Not quarlesome, Not quick tempered
<i>Respectable</i>		Good reputation with outsiders
Loves what is good	<i>Manages family well</i>	Faithful, <i>husband of one wife</i>
Holy, <i>hold of deep truths</i>	Apt to teach (ability)	Hospitable
Upright, Blameless, Above reproach, <i>Sincere</i>		
Not conceited (not a young convert)		
Not a lover of money	<i>Not pursuing dishonest gain</i>	

I have grouped the character traits into disposition, leadership and relationships. It is interesting in looking at the table in this way how our disposition, for example self control, impacts relationships. In leading people as one who serves others the relational aspects of character from the Timothy and Titus lists are clearly important, whatever the context we lead in.

Positional or ascribed authority?

One of the dysfunctions that occurs in leadership arises when the model of leadership is seen as one of positional authority, that is, one derived from the job title or role, such as CEO or pastor, rather than being ascribed or willingly given from respect of the one who leads. At first glance this may seem a rather nuanced and subtle difference yet it is one that causes major problems in some cultures and even in Churches and Christian organisations in a Western culture that culturally leans more towards an ascribed model of leadership. When a positional model of leadership is seen in any organisation, it is usually due to an insecurity in the leader that leads to a desire to control. Due to the explicit teaching in the bible about Church leadership, this style of positional leadership is sometimes justified by recourse to Hebrews 13:4 where in many translations the English does not do justice to the sense of the Greek original.

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you”. KJV

At first glance this reads clearly like a positional authority relationship between leaders and their followers. However, the three Greek words of concern in the original that give a better understanding of the sense of the meaning are peitho - to be persuaded, hegeomai - those who lead or guide and hupeiko - to yield or give in to. There is a reciprocity of relationship between the leader and follower so that the verse might best be rendered;

“Be persuaded (peitho) by those guiding (hegeomai) you, and be yielding (hupeiko)...”

Jesus inverts the model

When coupled with Jesus’s teaching on leadership in the gospels of Matthew and Mark it is clear that the leader does not assert his position but rather persuades and leads by example, seeking to serve rather than dominate. When the mother of the sons of Zebedee asked Jesus to give her sons a special place on his left and right side in his kingdom, the rest of the disciples were indignant.

“But Jesus called them to him and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Matthew 20:20-28 see also Mk 10:41-45

When we fail to serve our staff and insist that it's done our way, they can be hurt and their progress, as well as that of the organisation, can be stalled. I have met with several Christians over the last few years engaged in mission work who have had to leave their organisation because of such leadership dysfunction and the abuse of power. Are we not in danger of quenching the Spirit when we fail to allow God to speak through others in our organisation, especially when our organisation is made up of believers?

True Theocracy

In the Church, non authoritarian servant leadership does not mean defaulting to democratic or congregational rule but a true theocracy that acknowledges the priesthood of all believers. Such an approach does not subvert the role of leadership but rather strikes a balance between authority and a light hand that engenders respect and a yielding when persuaded. The Church has become institutionalised since the early Church days and much of the current programme of the Church now has little to do with watching over souls that shepherd leaders are called to do and for which elders must be “apt to teach”. In matters that are not about primary truth, such as how to plant a new Church, wise and servant like leaders will listen to what people have to say, allow open debate and even disagreement and then through corporate prayer discern God's will for the way forward.

I have seen this work well when I was in eldership and the Church was discussing some potential Church planting initiatives. From a situation where there was disagreement we held off voting and moved to pray for three months that God would guide us. When we gathered again the Church was at one and we could proceed with the Church plants.

Leaders don't threaten to resign if they can't have their way but will learn to discern the wisdom, gifts and experience of others within and outside the leadership team. Even in organisations made up of non believers, a good leader will seek the input of others and involve them in ways that doesn't end up in “management by consensus”.

Balancing authority and servanthood

Servant leaders learn to delegate tasks to others and give them the authority to act, they avoid micro management, interfering and taking back the task. When we are sensitive to the needs and capabilities of our staff we can direct and advise where there is uncertainty or be completely hands off when there is competence and experience. A servant like behaviour builds trust and respect that results in a motivated and willing team that wants to follow. This is I believe the practical outworking of the injunction we saw earlier in Hebrew 13:4, albeit aimed at the body of Christ.

Unfortunately there is an all too familiar pattern of divisions and splits in Churches caused by an authoritarian style of leadership and lack of servant like behaviour towards members. Other organisations or businesses are also not happy places where the human spirit is crushed in this way and I have found myself on a number of occasions counselling people who have suffered under such leadership.

Cultural influences

Leadership is heavily influenced by the cultural norms in which we live and lead whether in or out of the Church, creating many tensions for the Christian leader who is unaware or unthinkingly defaults to what those around him or her do.

Building on the foundations of character, a solid ethical framework for leadership provides the lens through which we can critically examine cultural norms, skills, processes and new developments in

management science. It also gives us the tools to inform the many decisions and actions that are required in leadership, whether people management or financial control.

Biblical ethics related to leadership apply wherever we lead, in the Church, organisation or business. However ethics in leadership need to be distinguished from the skills, processes and organisational structures used in leadership that can help us to be better leaders. Typical reactions amongst leaders of Christian organisations are often of two extremes, either to uncritically embrace the skills and processes of management science and economics or to regard them as an anathema, more often a reaction in church leadership, because of their negative connotations, derived as we saw, from the public image of business. Whilst some processes and skills in themselves appear at first glance to be morally neutral, they can in fact be heavily cultural conditioned in their use becoming morally destructive without a biblical ethical framework in which they are operated.

The system of Capitalism or free markets for example, has had a profound impact on leadership and it is now a cornerstone of business around the globe. Many ideas in Management Science have been shaped by Capitalism. It is a system that many Christians regard as a phenomena arising out of the influence of Christianity especially the Reformation and even part of the natural order. Yet the freedom of markets that capitalism stimulates and that propels economies, can itself stimulate the vices of greed, lust, pride and envy from which we are urged to flee.⁴ These vices are not of course restricted to any one economic system and one might argue at one level that the only real difference between communism and capitalism as two extremes is who is in charge or who exercises power and that brings us right back to leadership and the potential for leadership dysfunction. Christians therefore need to be mindful of the ways in which such macro systems and other developments in Management Science influence and shape leadership and organisations.

As leaders we must be aware of the sins, flaws and blind spots or what C. S. Lewis referred to as “fatal flaws”⁵ that can stifle our leadership and create dysfunction in our organisation or the Church and strive “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”.

⁴ One simple example of this is the continuous process of innovation required for companies to compete and succeed in the modern highly competitive market place and to increase shareholder value. Whilst innovation may at first sight appear to be a good thing bringing many advances to the human race in areas such as medicine and technology, consumer focussed companies are under pressure to bring out new products and innovations each year leading them to drive markets through lifestyle marketing, whether or not someone really needs a new phone or gadget. This yearly cycle feeds the vices in man - I must have one, keep pace, look cool, have the latest and so on. It can become morally corrupting for consumers and pose moral challenges for sensitive business leaders.

⁵ In the essay “The Trouble with ‘X’..” from *God in the Dock*, C S Lewis, Eerdmans, 1970