

The Church Leadership Development Series:

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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Towards a Theology of Leadership in the Local Church¹

The purpose of this paper is to move us *towards* a theology of leadership in the local church and to consider implications for leadership development within the local church. The study of leadership as a discipline is from a historical perspective, recent. Leadership has been a matter of interest and concern throughout the ages but “scientific research on leadership did not begin until the twentieth century.”² In considering a theology of leadership our necessary first step is to understand what God has revealed in Scripture about leadership and leadership development and not to be dependent on what the stated theories of leadership upheld in our culture are communicating to us.³ While this paper should prove to be helpful in moving towards a theology of leadership and leadership development, it is limited in its scope. This paper will present a series of theological observations found in various NT texts and then suggest a series of implications for leadership development within the local church. The purpose of this paper is as a primer for discussion. A more robust theology of leadership and leadership development with a broader biblical, historical and systematic theology needs to be developed. Christian leadership is of critical importance and deserves this kind of extensive study.

The challenge in considering a theology of leadership in the local church is recognizing how immersed we are in directives for leadership and development of leaders based on commonly understood theories of leadership that are developed from observations within various types of organizations. It is difficult to establish a definition of biblical leadership without being influenced by many of the prevalent theories of leadership. Yukl says, “Most leadership research can be classified into one of the following four approaches: (1) trait approach, (2) behavior approach, (3) power-influence approach, (4) situational approach.”⁴

Most of these theories of leadership attempt to determine to define leadership based on a “desired outcome or a measurable growth.”⁵ This has led many to think of local church leadership through the organizational lens of effectiveness. Faithfulness not effectiveness is the starting point of leadership in the Scriptures. When it comes to biblical leadership the focus is not on the “what?” of leadership but the “why?” and “who?” of leadership.⁶ Most commonly held theories of leadership deal with the “what?” (traits, behaviours, skills, situations) rather than the “why?” (intended purpose) and “who?” (source and direction of leadership) and this cultural emphasis continues to have an influence upon approaches to leadership development in the local church. This is not to say that the “what?” is of little importance but that it should not be the priority or the starting point in church leadership. A theology of leadership begins with answering the “why?” and “who?” of leadership while not ignoring the “what?” It is to some guiding theological observations and implications that we now turn.

¹ Submitted by Earl Marshall, Hope Bible Church in Oakville, ON. July 2021.

² Yukl, Gary. *Leadership in Organizations*, Third Edition. Prentice Hall: NY. 1994, 1.

³ This paper affirms that all truth is God's truth and that there are principles of leadership that can be learned by observing and studying various kinds of organizations. However, when developing a theology of leadership, one should be looking to the norm of biblical revelation. The critical error that many church leaders make is not starting with the Scriptures and neglecting to evaluate leadership principles and priorities in light of the Scriptures.

⁴ Yukl, Gary. *Leadership in Organizations*, Third Edition, Prentice Hall: NJ. 1994, 11.

⁵ Huizing, Russell L., “Bringing Christ to the Table of Leadership: Moving Towards a Theology of Leadership.” in *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, Vo. 5: No. 2: Fall 2011, 60.

⁶ Huizing, *ibid*, 60.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT FOLLOWING

The “who?” of leadership moves us in two directions. First, the NT teaches those who are leading in the church that they are not the leader of the church. Local church leadership is all about “following.” Leaders are sheep first who must always follow the Shepherd. Jesus is the founder, owner, builder and sustainer of the church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, “I will build my church.” Colossians 1:18 says, “And he is the head of the body, the church.” Most certainly the biblical idea of Jesus as head denotes him as leader of the church, one who provides for and protects the church. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” Jesus is the head of the church and the one that all church leaders are following.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT FOLLOWERS

Second, Jesus as the leader of the church not only reminds leaders in the church that church leadership is a matter of “following” it also gives a missional focus to church leadership. Leading the church is fundamentally about “followers.” The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up of the body of Christ.” Jesus has given groups of word-based ministry leaders to the church so that the saints, the church, could do the work of ministry. In Acts 20:28 the elders at Ephesus are reminded by the Apostle Paul to, “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 5:2 reminds the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Jesus is the leader of the church and therefore, church leadership in the NT is all about the followers of Jesus, the building up of the body Christ.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP HAS A MANDATE

The “why?” speaks to the mission and goal of church leadership. Jesus as the leader of the church reminds us that the mandate of church leadership, therefore, comes from Jesus. The NT directs us to consider two main foci in this mandate. The first is maturation. The Apostle Paul proclaims in Ephesians 4:12-16,

“for the building up the body of Christ, until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Jesus, then, is not only the leader of the church but also the goal of the church. The goal of the church should be connection to Christ that leads to maturation in Christ. Leaders in the church must be focused on this important part of their mandate from Jesus.

The second focus is multiplication. In Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you to the end of the age." This kind of missional multiplication is a sign of maturation.

The answers to the "why?" and "who?" of leadership in the NT affirm that Jesus is the leader of the church and that those in leadership under Jesus are first and foremost called to follow Jesus while they serve the church in a way that leads to the church following and being connected to Jesus. The goal of church leadership is to see the building up of God's people into Christ. The people of God are the point of leadership.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP IS A ROLE

In the church all are called to be disciples and some disciples are set apart to be leaders. Discipleship and leadership are related but they are different. We can see in Scripture that the role of leadership is implied. God uses individuals to lead others. We can also see in the NT that leadership roles in the local church are explicit. In 1 Timothy 3 elders and deacons are appointed leadership roles in the church. In Ephesians 4:11-12 the Apostle Paul says, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." These word-based groups of individuals are gifts to the church. Among the spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12:8 is the "one who leads." This is the word *προιστημι* and it denotes one who is ruling over, taking a stand.⁷ Those who are gifted with leadership are to pursue it with zeal, a word that denotes eagerness and or diligence. So, in the NT there are specific roles of leadership in the church.⁸ These roles have a delegated leadership. Jesus the leader of the church gives leadership in the church to some.

The picture painted in the NT is of some disciples being set apart for leadership roles in the local church. The process of recognizing and setting apart leaders in the local church is a relationship between the Holy Spirit and the community of faith. Luke records the following about the church at Antioch in Acts 13:1-3,

"Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit . . ."

⁷ Moo, Douglas, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Eerdmans: MI. 1996, 768-769 says, "'Probably, then, we should translate "one who presides." But presides over what? Paul does not say, and this leads a few scholars to think that Paul may intend to denote a person who is in a position of leadership, whether that be in the home or the church. Others try to do justice to the context by arguing that Paul is referring to those persons who presided over the charitable work of the church. But Paul twice elsewhere uses the verb (once absolutely) to denote the "leaders" of the local church (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17). It is probably this ministry that Paul has in mind here. Paul exhorts the leaders in the community to pursue their calling with "eagerness" or "diligence."

⁸ While the roles of elder and deacon are "offices" within the church I don't think that this precludes other kinds of leadership roles within the church. The point is that the NT teaches that there are roles of leadership in the local church.

There is an expectation that God will work internally within the life of the leader, as Paul notes in 1 Timothy 3:1, bringing about desire and aspiration for leadership, and externally within the life of the church community, a recognition that the Holy Spirit is setting apart leaders aside for this ministry. The NT also portrays an intentionality in the raising up of leaders within the church. As was the case with Jesus and his disciples so is true of Paul and his disciples and therefore, Timothy and his disciples. 2 Timothy 2:2 states, "and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."

The NT shows us that leadership is a role within the local church. The church is called upon to recognize the authority and responsibility of the leaders among them. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

CHURCH LEADERS ARE SERVANTS

When it comes to leading, "there is a daily choice between two very different value systems."⁹ Jesus instructed his disciples in Mark 10:35-45,

"And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great one's exercise authority over them. But 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 slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Servant leadership is the biblical norm.¹⁰ The biblical leadership metaphors of steward (Titus 1:7) and shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-3) for elders are likeminded examples of the servant and slave. There is a "distinction between a style of leadership that is authoritative and one that is

⁹ Tice, Rico. *Faithful Leaders: And The Things That Matter Most*. The Good Book Company:UK, 2021:83.

¹⁰ Robert Greenleaf popularized the concept of servant leadership as a theory of leadership and defined the servant leader as someone who serves first and then makes the conscious choice to aspire to lead (not the other way around). He noted that the difference between the two extreme choices of leader-first and servant-first is that the servant-first makes sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. He suggested that the primary question that the servant leader is asking is, "Do those served grow as persons?" It should be noted that while there is much to learn from Greenleaf's version of servant leadership most applications of his principles of leadership are used to pursue an increased bottom line. In other words, many who have embraced servant leadership do so not because they are truly servant-first but in an attempt to make the organization more efficient or profitable. See Greenleaf, Robert. *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into The Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press: NY. 1977.

focused on serving others.”¹¹ Jesus modeled this kind of leadership. It was his very nature. He showed us that the attitude and approach of the servant is humility, having the mind of Christ. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:2-8 and how they impact the ability to lead as a servant,

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

CHURCH LEADERSHIP IS RELATIONAL

Leadership in the NT is portrayed as being done with others. Jesus sent his disciples out in teams. The Apostle Paul served in his missionary journeys in team. The elders of the early church served in plurality. It is not surprising, then, to see in the NT an emphasis on leadership development that is relational. Of particular importance is the role of modeling and imitation in leadership development. “The chain of imitation flows from the Lord Jesus himself, whom Paul is copying, through to Timothy (who models himself on Paul, and reminds others of Paul’s ways), and to believers, who become “imitators of us and of the Lord.”¹² In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17 the Apostle Paul says, “I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.” This process of imitation and modeling is more than the giving of information. Leadership is a life on life interaction.

THE FOUNDATION OF LEADERSHIP IS CONVICTION AND CHARACTER

The NT overwhelmingly emphasizes the importance of the doctrine (gospel and teaching) and the leader’s life over other aspects of church leadership. In church leadership we must get the word right and our character right. In 1 Timothy 4:16 the Apostle Paul says to Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” First, doctrine is essential. The Apostle Paul encourages Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” While local church elders have a greater responsibility in the oversight of the doctrine of the church all church leaders should be growing in their understanding and commitments to biblical convictions. Likewise, attention to character, your way of life, is vital to church leadership. The Apostle Paul addresses Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” You can see both of these foundational elements within the characteristics to be found in elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. The leader in the church must be able to lead themselves in both of these areas. Paul’s words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:11-16 summarizes this well,

¹¹ Morgan, Tony. *Developing A Theology of Leadership*. 2011:7.

¹² Marshall, Colin and Payne, Tony. *The Trellis and The Vine: The Ministry Mind-shift That Changes Everything*, Matthias Media: AU. 2009:, 73.

“But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”

This, then, serves as a strong foundation for leadership within the church. This causes us to redefine what successful leadership in the church looks like. Successful leadership in the church is fundamentally faithfulness in doctrine and life. A perseverance to the end in these things is what matters. As leaders imitate and model these important elements a foundation for leadership is established in the church. The leader should invest in training themselves in godliness and being diligent to present themselves to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth (1 Timothy 4:7; 2 Timothy 2:15). The leader must learn how to lead themselves in these areas and pass on to the next generation of leaders these fundamentals as vital to church leadership.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS MATTER

The NT clearly emphasizes the importance of convictions and character in church leadership. When it comes to the issue of competency and the effective use of leadership skills the NT is not as clear. Actually, the NT is almost silent. The NT does not give an exhaustive list of skills for church leadership and when it does mention a required ability it does not always give careful details of the description of the skill. For example, elders are required to be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9) and refute (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Knowing the context of the early church would be helpful in the description of the skill but it is instructive to us how little detail the biblical text gives. In contrast is the ongoing and seemingly ever-changing list of traits, skills and behaviour-based competencies of effective leadership put forth in popular theories of leadership. Things like creating and communicating vision, confronting and changing the status quo, turning vision in action through execution of a plan, willingness to take risks, enlisting and motivating a team, fostering collaboration, and embracing the resource challenge.¹³

There is an inherent danger to think that church leadership is primarily about a leader's ability to deliver certain skills. “It's very easy to get carried away with competencies – to think that if only we get skills and techniques right then everything will fall into place, and growth will be assured. It's easy to focus on skills as an end in themselves, and to put too much trust in them.”¹⁴ There are enough examples in Scripture and the history of the church to remind us that competency in a set of leadership skills or behaviours is not the answer. Scripture emphasizes dependence on God, relying on God and seeking God in leadership not a leader's personal abilities.

¹³ See Stogdill, R. M. *Handbook of Leadership: A survey of the literature*, Free Press: NY. 1974; Bennis, Warren and Nanus, Burt. *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, Harper & Row, NY. 1985; Kouzes, James M. and Posner, Barry Z. *The Leadership Challenge: How To Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass, CA. 1991; Hybels, Bill. *Courageous Leadership*, Zondervan: MI. 2002.

¹⁴ Marshall, Colin and Payne, Tony. *The Trellis and The Vine: The Ministry Mind-shift That Changes Everything*, Matthias Media: AU, 2009: 78.

So, does competency matter? There are principles found in the NT that imply competency. First, the Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." The pursuit of every redeemed church leader is to bring glory to God through their leadership and we should assume that this would mean an attempt to lead others skillfully for God to the best of one's ability. Second, the NT concept of stewardship suggests the importance of faithfulness, responsibility and accountability in church leadership.¹⁵ One could surmise that this means the abilities and skills that one has been given by God should be developed and used competently for God's glory. Third, the use of spiritual gifts within the body of Christ implies the pursuit of the use of these gifts in a manner that produces a healthy care and maturation within the church. This requires care and competency on behalf of the leader.

We must, however, consider that the NT does not emphasize the kind of skill-based leadership found in popular theories of leadership. For example, there is no reference to cultivating vision or developing and executing a strategic plan for church leadership in the NT. By implication the NT emphasizes the promotion of competencies of church leadership that are based in the "who?" and "why?" Because Jesus is the leader of the church the church leader must be competent in disciplines and habits that keep them connected to Jesus and give them a dependency on and humility before Jesus. They must be competent in their handling of the word of God and understanding of the doctrine and gospel. They must work diligently at the guarding and development of their own character. They must possess skills that will help the church grow in its connection to Jesus and maturity in Christ. Serving the church in leadership will necessitate the learning of certain skills that will lead to the building up of the body. Being competent matters but the competency of the NT is more one of faithfulness than effectiveness.

This is a good reminder. The NT is a theological text not primarily an owner's manual or playbook of step by step implementation for church leadership. The NT promotes faithful leadership not a dependence on skills. This, however, does not negate the competent use of leadership traits, skills, or behaviours by leaders in the church. The NT emphasizes the determined focus of church leaders on activities, disciplines and plans that promote dependence on Christ, humility, conviction and character. Church leaders should also pursue contextually based application of practical theology that will help them serve the church in a way that leads to maturation and multiplication. Growing in competency of skills and behaviours of leadership is a matter of wisdom. However, these matters are mostly outside of the realm of a NT theology of church leadership. The emphasis in the NT is on faithfulness to conviction and character. Dependence on Christ and faithfulness to the gospel are primary while effectiveness through specific organizational leadership skills is a distant secondary.

¹⁵ For example, 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; 1 Peter 4:10.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE CHURCH

As we consider the development of a framework of leadership development within the GCC the above should cause us to consider implications for the development of leaders in our churches. The following are some potential implications. Developing leaders must include:

- Focusing on disciplines and habits that help leaders follow Jesus and stay connected to Jesus.
- Reminding leaders that church leadership is a delegated responsibility and authority from Christ.
- Creating clarity on the mission and process of maturation and multiplication within the local church.
- Establishing a development process from potential leader to elder within the local church.
- Setting apart leaders through a process of internal and external calling.
- Promoting servant leadership through humility.
- Recruiting leaders based upon and emphasizing ongoing development and faithfulness in character and conviction.
- Ensuring a process of development that not only includes a transfer of information but includes life on life interaction (modeling and imitation) between leaders and potential leaders.
- Identifying and growing in competence in organizational leadership skills that are contextually important for maturation and multiplication in the church.

Church leadership continues to be of vital importance and the development of church leaders is a critical aspect to our ability to see the local church mature and multiply. May we do so focused on the “who?” and “why?” of church leadership even as we consider the necessary skills of the “what?” of church leadership.