

A Christian Philosophy of Leadership

A biblical philosophy of ministry grounded in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ must be centered on relationships, modeled after Christ's teaching and example, empowered by the Spirit's charisms, and directed by God's kingdom vision.

The purpose of this paper is to present a biblical philosophy of leadership that is grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This philosophy will be:

- Centered on relationships
- Modeled after Christ's teaching and example
- Empowered by the Spirit's grace-gifts
- Directed by God's kingdom vision

The four points above provide the basis for a distinctively Christian philosophy of leadership -- a philosophy that can only be fully implemented in Christian ministries by Christian leaders. Though some of the following principles may influence leadership in a secular setting, only a Christian organization will purposefully embrace all four components.^[1] A Christian philosophy of ministry will be grounded in all four points, resulting in a distinctly Christian philosophy of leadership. Though secular models can provide great insight into leadership, to the extent that they neglect the four points above, they are deficient and stand in need of critical correction in order to be assimilated into an overall Christian philosophy of leadership.

The structure of this paper is as follows: After developing a theological basis for each of the four points above, I will offer related principles in regard to the practice of Christian leadership.

The Priority of Relationships in Christian Leadership

Relationships are at the heart of a biblical philosophy of leadership because relationships are at the heart of God.^[2]

The personal nature of God. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity states "God is one in essence and three in person." God's essence is not an impersonal divine "something" utterly removed from the three persons -- an abstract substance that is the foundation for the three persons. Rather, God's essence consists of the dynamic interpenetration and mutual self-giving of the three persons -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, God's essence is the three persons! Thus, ultimate reality is personal and relational.

The personal nature of humanity made in God's image. All people are made in God's image and are therefore persons made for relationships -- finding identity, meaning, and purpose only in the context of the community of other personal beings. Contrary to much Western theology, the image of God is not primarily physical, emotional, or rational.

Rather, following the lead of the East, the image of God is our capacity to be relational because we are created as persons. We are made for relationships and -- like the triune God -- we find our identity only in relationship to others. We do not discover our identity as an isolated individual, but as a person caught in a web of relationships.

Due to sin, human persons are *alienated* from God and others, being in *bondage* to their own selfish desires and wills. God's saving grace removes this alienation and bondage through *reconciliation* through the Son, *liberating* people to love God and others with the love of the Holy Spirit. Since restored and loving relationships are at the heart of God's saving initiative, they should also be at the heart of Christian leadership. Understanding this frees Christians from individualistic, self-serving religion. Because God is triune, the world cannot clearly see God in an isolated individual, but only in persons in community, because God is ultimately community. Therefore, reconciled and liberated relationships must be the priority in leadership, for relationships are at the heart of God's nature and God's saving purpose.

In light of God's personal nature and humanity's participation in God's personal nature as image-bearers, two practical principles are offered:

Christian leaders must not seek results at the expense of relationships. Reconciled and liberated relationships are both at the *heart* of Christian leadership and also the *result* of Christian leadership. Though it is important to measure results in order to properly steward God's gift of grace, it is vital that the standard of measurement never neglect the priority of relationships. **Indeed, one vital measurement must be the observable unity, harmony, and community -- a sense of shared life and love -- that arises from a people reconciled to God through Christ and liberated by the Spirit to love.** Obviously, this does not lend itself to scientifically precise measurements, but its existence is palpable, perhaps even intuitively sensed. If nothing else, the lack of this is quite evident![\[3\]](#)

No institution, program, or activity is more important than people. Indeed, all these must serve people or they fail to fulfill their function, which is to promote and sustain loving relationships. **Only when we "depersonalize" people are we able to treat them cruelly, and make them secondary to other "impersonal" goals.** Good leaders will affirm personhood and produce results at the same time, using their authority to build up rather than tear down people.

Love is at the heart of the experience of the tri-personal God, and thus should be at the heart of Christian leadership. The primary experience of the three persons of the Godhead is loving communion. It is for this reason that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). The point is not that God loves, but that God is -- in his very being -- love. Good leaders will model their relationships after the self-giving love of the Trinity.

Our leadership responsibility is to implement and incarnate the Trinitarian ways of being in each and every leadership situation... How we relate to each other as persons, how we treat each other, how we love and commune with other persons, can and should be modeled upon how the persons of the Holy Trinity relate to each other.[\[4\]](#)

The Incarnation as the Model of Christian Leadership

Christian leadership is unique because its model is the unique servant-leadership of Christ Jesus -- a style of leadership as unconventional today as it was in Jesus' day.

The paradox of servant leadership. Jesus' teaching on leadership is both counter-cultural and counter-intuitive, forcing us, like his disciples, to fundamentally reassess all our assumptions about leadership (Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 22:24-27). Unlike secular leaders, the Christian leader holds no exalted place of status above those he or she leads. Instead, his or her greatness is demonstrated in humble service to others, for power is meant to be at the service of love. The paradox of servant-leadership ("the greatest is the least," "the first is last," etc.) equalizes all people, removing gradations of status and redefining power as the "power-to" love rather than "power-over" others.[5]

The pattern of servant-leadership. Jesus not only taught, but also modeled this style of leadership (Philippians 2:5-11; John 13:1-20). In his incarnation, the Son refused to exercise privileges due him because of his exalted status as God. Instead, he willingly took the lowest place in order to benefit others. His leadership was not revealed in a raw display of superiority and power but in servant-leadership characterized by self-denial, humility, weakness, and suffering. The Christian leader must "have this attitude" in order to follow Christ's model. Though the world often views humility, weakness, and love as signs of weakness rather than strength, the Christian leader embraces these things as necessary components of Christlike ministry.

In light of Christ's teaching and model, two practical principles are offered:

Christian leadership is incarnational, following Christ's teaching and model, imitating Christ's self-giving and humble attitude. Leaders must "flesh out" divine truths, embodying what they teach. Leaders teach by word and deed. This calls for Christlikeness in character and soundness in doctrine. Indeed, these two things -- doctrine and life -- are inseparable (1 Timothy 4:13-16). For this reason, Christian leaders must "prove to be examples to the flock" by leading with godly rather than self-serving motives (1 Peter 5:1-5).[6]

Incarnational leadership is not merely intellectual leadership. Making Christ known in word and deed calls for high levels of involvement and commitment between the leader and his or her followers.[7] Incarnational ministry understands that teaching involves more than the mere transmission of facts. The Christian leader must also be "a spiritual guide to his pupils, a living model and exemplar, providing them not only with information but with an all-embracing personal relationship." [8]

This commitment extends to the level of personal sacrifice. Leaders following Christ's example are willing to accept suffering in their service to others, for Christ himself sunk to the lowest depths and paid the highest price in order to benefit others. It is imperative

that Christian leaders transcend self-interests and self-serving motives and make it their ambition to please God rather than self (2 Corinthians 5:9). They must find greatness in the act of self-giving service, and not in the recognition of others, personal titles or rewards.

As Christian leaders pattern their leadership after the model of Christ, they will manifest Christ through their faithful, loving, personal presence. Christian leadership offers the opportunity for faithful, loving men and women to be channels of communion, love, and grace to others. In this way, leadership offers more than a model for others to follow, but it is also ministers the presence of Christ to others. In this way, the faith is “incarnated” or “fleshed out” in the context of the Christian community, and thus Christ’s presence is mediated through the leadership of faithful Christians.

Stewardship of the Spirit’s Charisms as Empowerment for Christian Leadership

All those reconciled to the Father through the incarnation of the Son have received the Spirit whose primary work is to transform people into a loving community growing together through shared service, one to another. Because all are called to serve, all are called to lead in the paradox of servant-leadership.

*All Christians have received a **charism (grace-gift)** through the Spirit in order to serve others in the body for the sake of the world.* All those in the Christian community are benefactors of God’s grace through participation in God’s Spirit. This is evident in the fact that **every believer has received a charism through the Spirit in order to serve others.** 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Romans 12 describe the great variety of charisms that are a result of God’s gracious working in the community of faith. **All charisms are needed for the proper growth of the body.** Because of this, no one charism rises above the others in importance since the **purpose of each charism is to serve the whole body.** Indeed, Paul goes out of his way to demonstrate that it is the less noticeable gifts that are more necessary to the life of the body (1 Corinthians 12:22-25). Divisions and strife arise when any one person seeks to be “first among all” in light of his or her respective charism (see 3 John 9).

All believers -- not merely leaders -- are called to steward this grace for the good of others. Serving others “by the strength God supplies” brings glory to God through Christ (1 Peter 4:10-11). A corporate commitment to properly steward the gift of the Spirit’s charisms through faithful service to the body is necessary in order for the entire community to experience the transformation God calls us to in Christ. A group of people gifted by charisms and intent on serving one another will be both a transformed and a transforming community of grace -- a body alive with love![\[9\]](#) In short, God’s new creation begins with each person consciously and willfully participating in the life of the church through his or her diverse charisms, creating a grace-filled community of love.

In light of the Spirit's empowering charisms, two practical principles concerning leadership are offered:

Christian leadership is a response to God's grace given to all members of Christ's body. In order for the Gospel to permeate the whole of society, it must first permeate the church in **transformed relationships revealed in loving service to one another.** Therefore, Christian leaders must seek to promote **every-member ministry -- ministry that involves every member seeking to serve others through his or her personal charisms.** In so doing, the entire body will be transformed, as each member faithfully leads by serving in accordance to the grace given them.

Christian ministry involves faithfully stewarding the Spirit's charisms in the life of the church for the sake of the world. Stewardship is the appropriate response to God's gifts. **Stewards are servants using the gifts of another for the good of others.** Ultimately, stewardship is a community project, calling every member in the church to faithfully steward his or her individual charisms for the good of the whole.

If the Christian life could be reduced to one principle, to one way of living, what would it be? To be a good steward. Why is this so? Because stewardship is a way of life... It requires responsibility and love. It is characterized by maturity and caring. It is informed by vision and fulfills a mission -- that of our Lord. None of us are our own stewards (as if that were even possible). Rather, we are stewards of Jesus Christ, whom we have the privilege of serving in his vineyard, which is the Kingdom.[\[10\]](#)

It is a challenging proposition to consider one's relationship with the church from the perspective of good stewardship, but it must be done in order to faithfully steward God's gifts. The church has been given resources by the Spirit that must be tapped if true transformation is to occur. Christian leadership that fails to promote this will ultimately fall short of God's intentions for his church.

The Vision and Mission that Drives Christian Leadership

Christian leadership is unique because its mission derives from the kingdom vision of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*The church is a product of mission -- a sign of God's saving purpose. **God's eternal purpose is to reconcile humanity to himself through Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:11).*** The church is the first-fruits of this universal redemptive mission, existing solely because of God's divine initiative demonstrated in his saving work through Christ. As God's new creation, the church is a sign of God's grace and love to a lost world, consisting of people reconciled to God and one another and liberated to love God and others.

The church is a people of mission -- sharing in God's saving purpose through witness. The church exists for a greater purpose than the good of the church. The church is not only a sign of God's saving purpose in the world, but also shares in God's saving purpose through her witness of God's grace in word and deed (Matt. 28:18-20). For this reason, the church is not called to depart from the world, but rather, to be a witness in the world of God's saving grace offered to all people (John 17:14-26).

Because of this great responsibility, every member shares a leadership role, for all are called to lead others to Christ through the corporate witness of the faith community sustained by the personal faithfulness of each member. Making the Gospel attractive to outsiders is a prominent part of the church's witness (Matthew 5:13-16; Titus 2:7-10; 1 Peter 2:11-12). This can only be done when the church recognizes her larger purpose and seeks to testify by word and deed to the reality of God's grace, acceptance, and love.

In light of the church's participation in God's kingdom mission, two practical principles are offered:

Christian ministry is driven by the kingdom vision of Christ. Like all organizations, a vision drives the mission. In the case of the church, the vision that drives the mission is God's ultimate intention and goal revealed in his saving purpose, namely, a completely transformed cosmos filled with people reconciled to God and one another to the glory of God. Or, put more compactly, the vision is a kingdom vision. The church recognizes that God's purposes will be fulfilled. It is impossible to thwart God's kingdom purpose because God's kingdom presently exists through Christ and in the Spirit, guaranteeing a future glorious consummation. Therefore, only things done in accordance with God's redemptive purpose have any real lasting value. For this reason, the church "seeks first his kingdom" (Matthew 6:33).

The priority of the kingdom in shaping Christian vision and mission cannot be lost or else the church will be tempted to substitute a human vision for God's kingdom vision. **Christian leaders fully realize that human sin, selfishness, and lovelessness will always hinder the corporate "seeing" of the divine vision of the kingdom.** As Williams and McKibben write, it is easy to "follow human tendencies to substitute another 'vision' for the vision we choose to ignore or can no longer discern. Then we have replaced the vision of the Kingdom with 'our vision.'" [\[11\]](#) It is in light of this danger, that the following (and final) principle is offered.

Christian leadership must continually articulate the vision of God to those inside and outside the community of faith. Due to human sin, God's kingdom vision is easily forgotten by those within the community of faith, and easily disregarded by those outside. Because of this, Christian leaders must continually articulate God's kingdom vision in order to reorient those within and to reach those without. Christian leadership that does not continually articulate the missional stance of the church runs the danger of becoming withdrawn, inbred, and powerless. [\[12\]](#)

For those within the Christian community, the kingdom vision of Christ is needed to focus, guide, and direct efforts. Vision is vital for “[v]ision is the picture that drives all action. It conveys an image of where you want to go and how you want to get there... vision is the source for a person’s sense of purpose and goals... ‘For the secret of man's being is not only to live but to have something to live for.’”^[13] In short, “[v]ision focuses effort; it inspires action, and it validates decisions.”^[14] Once the vision is firmly entrenched in the community, the Christian leader must seek to articulate strategies, goals, and activities to implement and achieve the vision.

In order to maintain focus and direction, a Christian leader must clearly, concisely, and continually present the corporate vision to the church. A clear sense of identity and mission cannot be sustained without this constant reminder. “Planning and implementation (no matter how well done) cannot compensate for knowing *who* we are, *why* we're doing what we're doing, and for *whom* we are doing it.”^[15]

Conclusion

A biblical philosophy of ministry grounded in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ must be centered on relationships, modeled after Christ’s teaching and example, empowered by the Spirit’s charisms, and directed by God’s kingdom vision. Successful implementation of this philosophy should result in personal loving relationships growing in Christlikeness through the filling of the Spirit seeking to testify of God’s saving grace to others through a shared corporate witness embodied in the life of the community. A wise use of the community’s “charisms” will largely shape the specific mission that arises from the kingdom vision shared by all. Because of this, different churches following this same philosophy of leadership may take on very different shapes, sizes, and types.^[16]

^[1] For example, a Christian working in a government job may do her best to imitate Christ’s servant-leadership example (point 2), but since the government organization is not empowered by the Spirit’s charisms (point 3) or consciously directed by Christ’s kingdom vision (point 4), she may have to stand up for her rights in the case of the moral compromise of others. In short, all four components of a Christian philosophy of leadership can only exist within a Christian organization.

^[2] The first “R” of the 4R Model.

^[3] The 4th “R” of the 4R model. This does not exhaust the results. The last paragraph of this paper will take this one step further.

[4] Benjamin D. Williams and Michael T. McKibben, *Oriented Leadership: Why Every Christian Needs It* (Wayne, New Jersey: Orthodox Christian Publications Center, 1994), 87.

[5] “Lording over” leadership is transactional.

[6] The “DICE” qualities would certainly be a large component of what is “embodied.”

[7] The “+1” part of the “DICE+1”.

[8] Irene Hausher, *Spiritual Direction in the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 55.

[9] Transformational Leadership!

[10] Williams and McKibben, *Oriented Leadership*, 4.

[11] *Ibid.*, 46.

[12] The 2nd and 3rd “R” of the 4R Model. Sorry to compact this into such a tight space. All the Roles and Responsibilities would be included in speaking to those without and within the Christian organization.

[13] *Ibid.*, 35.

[14] *Ibid.*, 37.

[15] *Ibid.*, 41.

[16] The 4th “R” of the 4R Model again. This time the results involve more than reconciled and liberated relationships. In this section, I am attempting to suggest that the intended results will differ from church to church dependent upon the specific giftings of those within each respective church.

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grace to you... stop making sense....you're liable to get bounced off the net...props to your perspective on christian leadership...i'm wrapping up my first year of seminary at a liberal institution and i am deeply convicted daily of the absolute necessity of Christ-centered leadership.... and i was particularly impressed by the incarnational vibe you dropped....the subject will be my thesis someday..... in Christ, jesuskrazy

Posted by: [jesuskrazy](#) at May 2, 2003 11:22 PM