

Leadership – Jesus Style

Leadership is natural.

Leadership is natural. Amongst any group of children in a playground a leader will emerge. Every society in the world organises itself to have leaders. They do so because they recognise that there is some worthwhile goal that can only be achieved through common and organised effort.

Because God has created us with this inbuilt desire to organise our communities and to value leadership, some people have a natural desire to lead and other people have a natural desire to be led. Some enjoy the stimulation and challenge of leadership; others value the security of following someone else's lead.

Leaders therefore tend to be strong willed, determined, ambitious and sometimes ruthless whereas followers tend to be compliant, willing, easily persuaded and mild.

Leadership has been corrupted by the fall

Although God has designed leadership for our good, the fall has corrupted it so that much harm has also been done. Some key aspects of leadership that are commonly encountered in the world have no place in the Kingdom of God:

“Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” (Mk 10:42-44 NIV)

Jesus said that amongst the Gentiles leaders lord it over the people and exercise authority but that it shall not be so among you. Sadly many churches have ignored this command. It is common for churches to have very controlling leaders. This is exactly how Jesus said it should not be.

Kingdom leadership is counter cultural

Kingdom leadership is fundamentally counter cultural. It is very difficult for many leaders to accept that it is even possible to lead effectively in a way that is contrary to their culture. We must not say “in our culture you have to use authority to get anything done” since Jesus expressly says that Kingdom leadership is counter cultural.

Gifting, responsibility and authority

All authority has been given to Jesus and he has given us authority as his disciples and representatives. Primarily that authority is given to each of us to establish God's Kingdom on earth. In his name we have authority over sickness and all the works of the devil. Jn 20:21

But we are all unique and called to be members of the body of Christ each contributing according to our gifting and ability:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Rom 12:3-5 NIV)

Some of those contributions involve carrying responsibility within the church. For instance, some are given the responsibility to lead God's people:

“if his gift is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.” (Rom 12:8 NIV)

Some responsibilities come with special authority, but responsibility and authority should not be confused. A responsibility is something you **should** do whereas authority is for something you **may** do. Many people may have authority to do something that only one person has responsibility for. For instance everyone may have authority to help put out the chairs, but just one person, the janitor, has the responsibility to make sure they are in place. The janitor may be given special authority to enable him to fulfil his responsibility, such as the authority to ask some members of the welcoming team to leave their duty and to help with the chairs. In the Kingdom we are all called to love and serve one another in joyful submission to Jesus our head.

Esteem your leaders

1 Thess 5:12-13. Paul urges the church to highly esteem those who are over them in the Lord. Honour and respect is part of the Kingdom, but this must not stray into superiority. In some cultures it may be appropriate for a leader to wear special clothes or have a special place to sit, but where these things are used to reinforce ungodly leadership styles such as lording it over, or to make the leader appear superior, then it is wrong. Remember that Jesus specifically warned against those who sat in special seats:

“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the market-places.” (Lu 11:43 NIV)

Authority structures

Churches seem to love authority structures where authority is delegated down from the head to various layers below. Such structures are a means of control. Leaders love to be in control. Most leaders assume that it is their duty to be in control and that such control is necessary to fulfil the duty they have been appointed to. But this is not the model that Jesus gives us, nor the model of the New Testament church. People often talk about serving the leadership, but that is the reverse of what Jesus taught. He said:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:45 NIV)

Lording it over people

Lording it over is when someone says, “Because I am a special or a superior person you should obey me.” e.g. Because I am “anointed by God” or “Because I am God’s apostle or prophet” or even “Because I am educated” or “I am an expert in this field” or “I am a white man”.

Jesus said that Lording it over is not appropriate in the Kingdom. The exercise of leadership must not be based on a claim to superiority. We should never say or imply, “Because I planted this church you should obey me.”

Authority over people

Although we may have authority amongst God's people because of our particular area of service, we are not to use that authority as a means of control. As with lording it over, we should not say or imply things such as, “Because of my position you should obey me.” “Because I am the pastor...” “Because I am the youth leader...” “Because I am your apostle...” “Because I am your mother...” “Because I am a policeman...”

Although the basis of the claim is different, both lording it over and exercising authority is claiming a right to tell you what to do in order to exercise control. They both expect and demand simple, unquestioning obedience. This wrongful exercise of control depends on the people being led feeling they have a duty to obey.

Sadly it is very common to see these mechanisms of control being taught and promoted in churches. Leaders are commonly elevated by the use of titles, special clothes, special treatment, special places to sit etc. in order to make them appear special. People naturally treat such elevated people as lords and so allow them and even expect them to lord it over them.

People who are appointed to leadership positions are often given special titles to honour them for the sacrifice and service they offer to the church. But Jesus expressly warned about seeking honour from men:

"they love to be honoured by men but not by God. They have their reward on earth." (Matt 6:2)

Seeking the glory of men has the effect of stopping us hearing from God:

How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)

A title may be useful to identify a person's role, but should not be used to elevate them above those they lead.

So, both elevation of leaders as special people and the creation of positions of authority are common in churches as a means of control, but both rely on people having a sense of duty to obey.

Duty

We all have a duty to obey God and give willing obedience to godly leadership. Hebrews 11:17 says "obey those who lead you and be submissive."

This obedience should be joyfully and willingly given, not demanded, and not obtained through false teaching, such as "if you serve and obey me without question God will bless you."

Churches where the leaders like to be in control make much of the command to obey the leaders. This is how leadership in the world works. Jesus said it should not be like this.

Kingdom leadership

In the Kingdom we are not to use control as a means of leadership. We are not to require obedience from people or to rely on their sense of duty. The Kingdom is supposed to be characterised by Joy: "The joy of the Lord shall be your strength." Demanding or shaming people to obedience breeds resentment and unhappiness.

Kingdom leadership depends not upon authority and duty but on vision, inspiration, empowerment and love.

Leading by example

Peter reiterates what Jesus said about leadership in the Kingdom:

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." (1Pe 5:2-4 NIV)

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (1Co 11:1 NIV)

We see here that the character of a leader is crucial, not just the ability to perform a task. Again this is counter-cultural. In the world leaders are usually appointed either through favouritism or because of the person's skills. But in the Kingdom, *example* is the most important quality. If the person does not live what they tell others to do, they are not suitable for leadership.

Leading by example is a very important principle which is often promoted in churches and is a reflection of how Jesus led. It is when a leader goes ahead of the people to show them what to do and demonstrate the kind of behaviour he/she wishes to see from those he leads.

Leading by example is far more effective than leading by instruction and people often resent being told what to do by a leader who has not or will not do the task themselves. Also by doing the task themselves a leader will learn about the difficulties experienced and will have compassion for those he has asked to perform the task and try to provide the means for them. Doctors learn how to perform surgery by watching one being performed.

However leading by example is often exhausting and frustrating. A leader should never sit idly by watching others work. The people we are trying to lead are rarely as faithful as we wish, they are rarely as thorough as we wish, and may not be as skilled as we wish. How a leader deals with this situation is a test of godly leadership. There is no point getting worked up about this, it is just a fact of life. But we may be able to improve things by sharing our vision for the task more effectively or by providing more training or resources.

Leadership in the home

It is much easier to behave well and serve one another in church than it is at home. That is why Paul makes a godly home a qualification of leadership in the church:

“Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)” (1Ti 3:2-5 NIV)

Godly servant leadership must be applied in our own homes if we are to be authentic leaders in the church.

Servant leadership

Servant leadership is the least well understood aspect of Kingdom leadership. It is very easy to talk about servant leadership and to teach that we should be servant leaders without properly understanding who is to be served.

All leadership is for the purpose of serving some agreed goal. Sales managers for Coca-Cola serve the directors and shareholders and in return receive their pay, but that does not make them servant leaders.

Leaders are called to serve Jesus and the vision of the church. But that is not what servant leadership is about. Jesus said “I came not to be served but to serve...” Servant leaders are those who serve the people they are leading. This is commonly understood when it comes to the pastor, but what about those with smaller spheres of leadership such as a choir leader? Who exactly are they called to serve? They have two areas of service which are simply the duty of any leader; they serve their immediate “superior” (their pastor) and they serve their ultimate superior (Jesus). But those areas of service are not what servant leadership is about. To be a servant leader they must also serve the people they are leading.

That is the example Jesus gave us to follow - to serve those we lead. In the Kingdom leadership is a service that we offer to the body of Christ. Each one of us is called to serve Christ and to be an ambassador of the Kingdom. We pray “Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”; that is our common goal and is the purpose of the church. We can serve that goal in hundreds of different ways, some of which are best accomplished in teams with a leader. The leader serves the members by helping them to achieve a goal they value. This leadership service may include inspiring someone with confidence to aim for something they would never have believed possible. It may include rousing them when they feel tired to put in effort that they would otherwise not have the discipline to do for themselves. Leadership service includes clearly explaining the reason for the task being performed and envisioning the team members so that they willingly give sufficient priority to the team activities.

Servant leadership does not include coercing members to do what they don't want to do. We must not resort to threats, or shame, or the appeal to our authority or to a person's duty to obey. These are all attempts to control a person and that is not a part of Kingdom leadership.

If a person is not willing to participate in the way the leader wishes then the leader must go back to Jesus with the problem. Either the leader's goal is wrong, or they have failed to share the vision for the goal clearly enough, or else the person is inappropriate for the team.

Leadership teams

Cooperation between leaders is often difficult to achieve. The problem is that they are all leaders and not used to being led. Cooperation requires leaders to allow others to set their direction. Genuine cooperation between leaders only occurs when they recognise that a goal they value can only be achieved through cooperation. The task of leading a leadership team is therefore fundamentally one of identifying a common goal and envisioning the team so that they willingly subjugate their own priorities for the sake of this greater goal.

However, where the team is brought together with the specific purpose of encouraging leaders to share their experience and to influence one another in order to shape the direction of the church and its mission, teams can work very well and become very open to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Authority structures

Since Jesus says that authority should not be used to exercise control in the Kingdom, we should be wary of hierarchical authority structures in the church. Jesus is the head and we are all members of his body, and before Christ none is more important than another. We are all answerable to Jesus as our authority. All Jesus' sheep hear his voice. Each of us have gifts we bring to the body. Some are gifts of service and others are gifts of leadership. Just because a person serves through leading does not make them more important to Jesus and it does not give them a right to control people.

In terms of authority it is better to think of a flat structure rather than a hierarchy. A flat structure helps to remind us that leadership is not about control but is offered as a service alongside all the other kinds of service performed. We should not be demanding obedience from those we lead. Peter says that obedience should be offered freely without compulsion. 1 Peter 5:2-5.

Communication structures

Although authority structures are better thought of as flat, communication structures may need to be hierarchical in a larger church for purely practical purposes. But friendships should be nurtured across such structures. It is very unhealthy for a pastor to only have other leaders as friends. They soon forget what it is like to be a member of the congregation, and can make unreasonable demands.

Delegation

Delegation is often used as a means of multiplying servants in the church. This may be good for sustaining the church program, but it may not be good for the wider calling on the church. The crying need of the Kingdom is not servants but servant-leaders. We need to be sending disciples into all the world to make disciples. The church should not be focused on its own programs but on training and releasing leaders. For this to happen, delegation should be seen as a way of multiplying leaders, not just servants.

Whether we see delegation as a means of multiplying servants or leaders will determine how we appoint leaders. If we want servants we will appoint compliant leaders, "Yes" men who will not give us trouble, or we may look primarily for natural leaders who can motivate and command obedience. But if we want to produce leaders for the Kingdom we will look for those with a passion for Christ and the ability to hear Him. We will look for people who are developing their own unique calling. We will not want to control them but to develop them. They may or may not be natural leaders; either way Kingdom leadership principles and values must be nurtured. Kingdom leadership is more about character than skills.

This is often a real challenge to the existing leadership. Where leadership is used as a means of control you will not develop leaders, but only servants. You might call them leaders, but the reality is you want servants.

Releasing leaders

A leader with true Kingdom vision will want to train and release leaders, not just train people to serve his own vision. Jesus is the King and we must release leaders to serve Him. To develop leaders you need to give authority and freedom:

"When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick." (Lu 9:1-2 NIV)

A leader who has no authority to take initiative and make decisions will never be more than a servant. As a leader grows in their faith and ability they need to be given more freedom to serve Jesus directly, without constant supervision and the requirement to report back.

A beautiful example of this is given by Mary at the wedding in Cana. Mary has a situation that needs sorting out. She leaves the responsibility to Jesus and the servants:

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee ... When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." ... His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Leaders need to learn to do more than faithfully perform a duty. They need to learn how to hear from God, receive or develop a vision, search the scriptures to learn what God says about their vision, inspire others to embrace the vision, and persevere through many setbacks and discouragements to see the vision become a reality.

Releasing churches

The church belongs to Jesus and he is the head. The umbilical cord between a mother church and a church plant should therefore be cut as soon as possible to encourage dependence upon Jesus and rapid growth. However because church leaders are often tempted by the lure of "kingdom building" they rarely release leaders fully. They want to retain control, even over church plants. Leaders want to impose their version of church over other churches. The excuse usually given for the mother church to retain authority over a church plant is in order to ensure it keeps to the vision and values. But what right does one church have to act as the head of another? Jesus is the head. As soon as a church can stand on its own it should be released to Jesus. Of course relationships of friendship and mutual support should remain and the mother church may continue to serve the church plant with training and other resources, but the retention of control should be seriously questioned.

The labourer is worthy of his wages

Jesus and the apostles taught that labourer is worthy of his wages:

"Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. "When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.'" (Lu 10:7-9 NIV)

But note that Jesus is very particular about eating whatever you are given. In other words, accept the hospitality or rewards offered rather than demanding to be treated like royalty. The rewards or wages of ministry are gifts to be gratefully received, not demanded.

Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? ... If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? ...In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." 1 Cor 9:5-6, 11-12, 14

Paul presents a forceful argument for his right to receive wages for his ministry in the Gospel (although as verse 18 shows, he did not make use of this right) and he urges churches to honour that right:

"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."" (1Ti 5:17-18 NIV)

It may well be that some members of a church may wish to offer those wages in practical service as well as or instead of money. But remember that giving, whether service or money should be done willingly and joyfully and without any compulsion:

"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2Co 9:7 NIV)

There is no New Testament support for requiring members to serve the pastor in his home duties or for the pastor having menial tasks performed for him by members. The wages given to a Gospel worker are to enable him to serve without restraint, not to elevate him above the congregation.

The five -fold ministries

In addition to apostles Jesus has given prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, to equip the church in ministry. They are not given to do all the ministry but to equip others to do the ministry. So for example, all are encouraged by Paul to zealously pursue the gift of prophecy and all are encouraged to hear God for themselves, but prophets are given to encourage and inspire others in growing in these areas. They also have a role in helping to discern what God is saying to the church through the body. A prophet must not use his role as a means of control. He must not seek to control the congregation, or the leadership.

Each of the ministry gifts are given to serve the church in their obedience to Jesus. Each ministry should operate in love and mutual submission to all the other ministries.

Since these are given by Jesus to the church, it is not up to the pastor or apostle to simply appoint people to these offices. Rather it is a matter of recognising those whom Jesus has appointed.

Apostolic authority

In some churches much is made of apostolic authority. I wish to make a few brief points.

Apostles are for mission, not control

When Jesus chose the twelve, we are told he called them "apostles" which means "sent ones". This tells us that apostleship is not primarily about authority over churches but mission. Remember that the great commission is to go into all the world to spread the good news of the Kingdom, not just to run churches. Christ gives apostles to the church to serve them in mission not to control them:

"Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." (Ro 1:5 NIV)

Apostles have authority in the churches they plant

Because the calling on an apostle is to "go into all the world..." and plant churches, it is natural that during the early years of a church the apostle will have authority in the churches they helped plant:

"... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." (Eph 2:20 NIV)

Apostles plant churches and become "foundational" through relationship. The church is not founded by studying a systematic theology, but by the example, teaching and instruction of the apostle:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Ac 2:42 NIV)

It is natural and proper for a church to give close attention to the biblical teaching of the apostle. That is how the Kingdom works - through people and relationships. Jesus works the truth into us and out through us. And so Paul urges the churches to follow the pattern he has passed on to them.

"What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." (2Ti 1:13 NIV)

The relationship is forged in love and fatherly concern and care. The relationship naturally includes an aspect of authority, but the exercise of that authority must be subject to scripture, including testing what the apostle is saying:

"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Ac 17:11 NIV)

Apostles bring teaching directly to the church

Where the apostolic relationship is genuinely relational and foundational then it is to be expected that the apostle will relate directly with the church members and not only through the leadership. They may therefore bring correction directly to a church without deferring to the leadership. We see this in the various epistles where teaching is addressed directly to church members. However this apostolic relationship must not usurp the autonomy of the local church or undermine the leadership. Paul repeatedly urges the people to honour and respect their leaders.

Apostles may advise leaders

Visiting ministries are able to take a more objective view of things than is possible for those in local leadership, and as such may offer advice about vision, focus, church programs or practices. The apostle will want to see that leaders are being developed and released to new ministries rather than the local church program simply growing ever bigger.

Churches can very easily become inward looking or maintenance minded whereas the Apostle's calling to "go..." will help to keep the wider calling to mission before the leaders.

It is all too easy for leaders to expect members to come to multiple meetings each week and to make attendance a mark of commitment or discipleship. The effect may be to burden people with heavy expectations that are difficult for them to meet and may detract from discipleship and mission as people spend less time amongst unbelievers because they spend so much time at church meetings. Jesus warned about overloading people with requirements that are not from Jesus:

They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. (Matt 23:4)

Apostles may bring correction to leaders

Where leadership proves to be false or hypocritical, we see both Jesus and Paul publicly reprimanding leadership:

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues ... Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?" (Lk 13:10,14-15)

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. (Gal 2:11)

The apostle may have a duty to intervene if things go badly wrong with the church leader.

Apostolic Delegates

An apostle may send someone in his place as a delegate for a particular purpose as Paul did, sending Timothy, but it is hard to see how the apostolic role can be delegated, since it is Jesus who gives these gifts.