

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Think of a work situation or community organization (not the church, in this instance) where you know of someone who has exercised leadership. What was good about the way that leadership was exercised? What was disappointing or deficient?

Name the qualities you would look for in a good leader.

Human Leadership

God has given human persons great powers of leadership ('dominion') in the creation:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, [Syr: Heb. and over all the earth] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind [Heb *adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them [Heb. him]; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (Genesis 1:26–28).

This gives human beings a very high dignity, and vast responsibility:

you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet (Psalm 8:5–6)

This is with a view to God's ultimate purpose, that we will rule with Him over the whole creation. Paul the apostle spoke of God's promise to Abraham and his descendents (which include all who live by faith in Christ; see Galatians 3:7) 'that he would inherit the world' (Gk. *kosmos*; Romans 4:13). The heavenly creatures and elders sing to the 'Lamb' of those who have been ransomed by his blood:

you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on earth (Revelation 5:10)

This jurisdiction will extend even over angels:

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters? (1 Corinthians 6:2–3).

Jesus said that our responsibilities in the kingdom age to come compared with now will be as vast as ruling over whole cities compared with looking after a few pounds (see Luke 19:16–19).

In God's Image, and Never Apart from God

Paul in Athens said some important things about our relationship with God:

he himself gives to all people life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring' (Acts 17:25–28).

This takes us back to the way we were created:

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7)

Our continuance and advancement in life and leadership is always to be in this faith-relationship of total dependence and trust in God.

To be in the image of God is to be related with God as sons to Father (see Genesis 5:3). Jesus shows us what this means for the exercise of authority, as recognised by an officer of the Roman army:

'I *also* am a man *under* authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith' (Matthew 8:9-10).

The centurion recognised that Jesus' authority came from his being under the authority of the Father, as the true Son, in faithful, obedient, loving dependence and trust. The same must be true of any authority we have from God.

Servant Authority

To be in the image of God also means that we exercise our authority/leadership in the way God does. David the king received a revelation from God regarding this:

Now these are the last words of David:
The oracle of David, son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man whom God exalted,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the favourite of the Strong One of Israel:

The spirit of the Lord speaks through me,
his word is upon my tongue.
The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to me:
One who rules over people justly,
ruling in the fear of God,
is like the light of morning,
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

Is not my house like this with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.
Will he not cause to prosper
all my help and my desire?
But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away;
for they cannot be picked up with the hand;
to touch them one uses an iron bar
or the shaft of a spear.
And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot (2 Sam 23:1-7).

God rules His creation, us included, by serving and blessing and securing it, and by removing from it all causes of evil. Our leadership is to be of the same character: serving for the good of those we lead.

Sinful, Distorted Leadership

Sin is our decision, as a human race, to go on our own, apart from and over against God. This has horribly perverted the way we exercise leadership: to serve ourselves at the expense of those we lead. One instance:

Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals (Ezekiel 34:2–5).

The disciples of Jesus were behaving no less in this way:

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’ (Mark 9:33).

Thus Jesus identified himself and his Father with a child—the one on the bottom of the social order. He did this not to enunciate a pious paradox. He was simply reasserting true servant leadership as revealed to David.

It has been said that if you have the slightest trace of ambition, you will ruin your ministry.

God’s Loving Service-Ruling Redeems

Jesus contrasted his own leadership with that exercised among the sinful nations, and spoke of himself as God’s antidote to all of that:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42–45).

A ‘ransom’ is a high price paid to set someone free—from prison, slavery, or the sentence of death. That tells us where we are, and how God has given His all to get us out of it to where we are meant to be with Him. This is God’s true leadership of His creation, and we are to be with Him in that.

Note that Jesus calls himself ‘the Son of Man’ when speaking of his suffering and death. ‘Son of Man’ is an idiomatic way of saying ‘the true human being’. In Daniel 7, it is to this one, together with ‘the saints of the Most High’, that God gives ‘everlasting dominion’.

Leadership in the Saving Gospel

God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves or others. So to be with God in His saving action does not mean we become little ‘redeemers’ ourselves. That would be a reversion to trying to put ourselves in the place of God, and to ‘lord it’ over other people’s faith (see 2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Peter 5:3). God has given us the gospel—the good announcement of His salvation, and we lead by serving others in that. ***True Christian leadership is to serve others by bringing the saving gospel to bear in people’s lives, by word and deed.***

A couple of examples:

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1-7).

The apostles knew that the trouble had arisen through a diminishment of the gospel among the believers. The answer was not for them to get in there and try and sort it out themselves, but to give themselves even more to prayerful ministry of the word of the gospel. At the same time, there needed to be those appointed to work on this, who were no less in the gospel — filled with faith, the Spirit of God and mature wisdom. All of this must be demonstrably the action of God, and not something generated from ourselves on our own:

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Questions for consideration:

How have I exercised leadership in my ministry?

To what extent has it been with and from God?

To what extent has it been from and for myself?

How has the exercise of leadership in my ministry brought God's saving gospel to bear in the lives of others?

How has the exercise of leadership in my ministry avoided or obscured the saving gospel?

Has there been the slightest trace of ambition in my ministry?

To what extent have I sought to 'lord it' over others' faith?

How will I exercise leadership in my ministry differently now, in the light of what God has shown me today?

Note:

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