



Seeing Christ-Likeness in Leadership¹

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One of the oldest debates in modern leadership research is whether leaders are *made* or *born*. It is a great argument, but not useful. Yes, leaders are born *and* leaders are made—both, and in all cases. Genetic inheritance is surely important, but no one ever becomes a leader simply because of being born to certain parents. And as for the influence of leaders being *made*, some people’s “natural” characteristics are so offensive, empty, or useless that no matter how much teaching and “training,” no evidence of leadership is ever seen.

The Bible tells of many outstanding leaders. Even if you include only those who are remembered for their godly righteousness, the list is long and the variety is great. Note well: *variety is good!* God made no two of us exactly alike. You would never confuse Moses with Solomon! All sorts of people are leaders, some in terms of their inner qualities and strength of character, some in terms of their cleverness and skills. Many emerging leaders, as their lives are transformed by God’s Holy Spirit, bring their cleverness and skills under the discipline of godly qualities of character and thus their leadership matures into a mighty force in God’s hands. But such people do not all become alike. God seems to value difference and uniqueness and so should we.

Leadership characteristics and what sometimes is called “leadership style” must fit the culture and expectations of those who are being led. An important misunderstanding comes from this truth. A child’s nutritional needs sometimes conflict with that child’s tastes and eating habits. Good parents know the danger in letting a child fill up on sweets. Godly leadership is like that. There is a danger in simply feeding people what they want to hear and encouraging them onward into their chosen paths. A godly leader must learn how to handle the prophetic tasks. Knowing when and how to say, “Thus says our God” is part of the agenda for every Christian leader.

The culture in which a group, an organization, a church, even a committee is working will, by its very traditions and habits establish certain expectations about what a leader is and does. For various reasons and in various ways, these expectations will be fulfilled and frustrated by the leader. It is inevitable; no leader is a perfect fit with *everyone’s* expectations! But a competent leader will make careful efforts to adapt and conform to the general expectations of the culture on any matter that is not a matter of integrity or godliness.

Culture seems to become a battleground for many well-meaning Christian leaders. Do we “give in” to culture or fight it? Do we “stand up for the right” or give God the alibi that if we did that we would lose our status with our people? Each of us must interpret the culture in which we are leading. We

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must know the situations in which we work, and we must interpret the circumstances in light of cultural decisions people make. But as Christians with leadership responsibilities, we must seek the mind of Christ in matters of our decisions and priorities and our choices of leadership style. We must ask: “What will bring honor to the name of Jesus?” When we develop this habit and learn the urgency of making Jesus-honoring choices, we can more flexibly adjust ourselves to a wider variety of socio-cultural situations and leadership tasks.

Our Christian values should be plain to see 1) in the goals we develop with people as we lead, and 2) in the procedures we use in carrying out the leadership tasks. Goals and purposes are the most important indication of our commitment and values. We should not lead toward goals and purposes that are harmful and ungodly. Faithfulness requires continuous reflection and prayerful search of the Scriptures. It also requires us to bring others into the discussions and reflections in order to fulfill the discipling process as we lead. As an increasingly shared ministry, Christian leadership demonstrates its contrast with tyranny.

There are other differences. Becoming sensitive to the ways in which well-meaning people and even Christian institutions can become authoritarian and tyrannical is so very important. So rarely do Christian leaders *choose* to become tyrants.

I have encountered very few Christian leaders who will even admit that this has happened to them. No, for Christian leaders who go astray, it is not always their choice *to become* tyrants. Instead, it is their choice *to do* the things that will lead them into tyranny. Economic monopolists, media controllers, and political dictators are tyrants because it fulfills their basic goals and purposes. Sometimes Christians, observing the behaviors that have made such people “big” and “important” and “successful,” make the terrible choice to copy their procedures and style.

Taking an honest look at oneself can help to shape the leadership path. Across my fifty years of leadership in and for the church of Jesus Christ my awareness of the themes that have become my watchwords has grown. At this stage in life it is fun to write them out and to talk about what each has come to mean. Yes, I could as easily identify passages from the Bible from which I have drawn the dominant principles of my life, but somehow the list of watchwords seems better to reflect my vision as a leader. Following is such a list. These five words of encouragement are at the top of any guidance I might offer to younger Christian leaders as they mature into a fulfillment of their responsibility before God. The ideals expressed in these watchwords are goals and motives, not always completely reflected in my life; I am still *on the road* with Christ!

Can do! To oversimplify, there are those who say, “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” while others say, “Let’s try it.” Everyone has experienced the contrast. Some people tend toward negative responses and lots of talk about why we *can’t* or *won’t*; others are positively biased and will seek ways to go further into a matter before closing it down.

Especially in organized institutions it is often easier to put a stop to deviations from the ordinary and established ways of doing things. For example, leaders in schools and colleges often use “accreditation standards” as a way to put a stop to creative innovation. In churches the slogan is often, “But we have

never done it that way before.” Where this tendency hurts the most is in reference to individuals who, for legitimate reasons, have need for seeking exemption from this or that “rule.” If we build a culture that worships the quantity and variety of petty rules it has accumulated, it squeezes out the space to witness to the grace and the creativity of God.

After several years in a college that was glorying the uniformity that its many rules could create, I went into a graduate school where the “can do” spirit was allowed and even encouraged. What a difference! Ever since I have made *can do* one of my leadership watchwords. In terms of encouraging creativity and responsiveness to one another’s differences and particular needs, willingness to be creative and innovative pays big dividends.

Work yourself out of the job. Be an encourager. Early on, Barnabas of Cyprus became a valuable example for me. He was chosen to lead the church through his habits of encouragement. Doubtless he was exemplary in many ways, but what we see most clearly is his insistence on bringing others along.

Like Barnabas, I see myself as a *developmental optimist*. I don’t have to be at the center of things. My task is to encourage others. I am less interested in forcing my own timetable for change and for reaching goals; instead I am absolutely committed to letting things unfold God’s way, in God’s timing, and toward God’s purposes. In the scholarly matters of research and theory in human learning and culture, I am classified as a developmentalist. Since my beliefs hold that it was God who created the patterns that are still evident in all of nature, I am thankful to be identified as such.

The optimism part of Barnabas as my model comes from his capacity to trust people—even Saul of Tarsus—and to so thoroughly trust God that he didn’t insist on understanding everything that was happening. God is in charge; your job is to lead his people.

Watch out for the lost pieces. Be a *finder*. The parable that Jesus told of the shepherd committing himself to find the lost sheep suggests that the leader’s efforts might well be focused more on the lostness of the one rather than on the performance of the ninety-nine. A leader needs constantly to be putting things together. In every human enterprise—whether school, church, business, or informal group—there are lost pieces. The task of making things whole requires leadership that searches and finds.

There are two basically different kinds of leaders: *collectors* and *finders*. Both types of shepherds (leaders of the sheep) might indeed go out looking for the lost but for the *collector* it is a matter of getting the job done, *completing the collection*. Dare we add, getting the job done by a certain date? But for my kind of Christian leadership it is the motive of keeping on with the basic task: finding and bringing along that which is lost. Don’t tie the idea of success to numbers and time. Don’t treat this sort of finishing the job as if it were your own badge of success. Instead, watch out for the lost pieces.

Observe the principle of the “critical mass.” Be watchful for God’s signals. Competent leaders soon learn that not often does a human group simply get larger and stronger. The course of progress

is rarely a straight line on an upward diagonal. A leader needs mini-slogans that will help to explain reality: “Win a few, lose a few.” “You can’t win ‘em all.” “Make the best of it.” In my own career I became aware of the importance of “the critical mass.” Based upon a well-known statistical assumption, I adopted the “80%-80%” slogan: *If four-fifths of the people achieve four-fifths of the goals intended, you are on the right road.* This guideline helps you stay on track but lets you sleep at night! Leaders who flog themselves (worse yet, flog their participants, their faculty, their students, or their congregation) toward perfection are miserable people, not really worthy to lead God’s people given the realities of a fallen world. Notice: God trimmed Gideon’s army to a critical mass in His own good time.

We need each other! Be a team player. Dominant cultures in the technologically driven world today are burdened by the tendency toward competition and by individualism. For the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, the preference for cooperative values and a family-oriented community at the heart of society are basic to the scriptural images and ideals. Whatever leadership styles and forms may be appropriate, godly leaders are intended to bring us together into affiliations of mutual support and cooperative mutual reliance. The more social scientists discover about learning, about communication, about industry, and about intercultural relations, the more clear it becomes that the basis for effective human organization is trust.

To be Christlike calls for *fairness*, *honesty*, and *reliability*—the social evidences of the same *faith*, *hope*, and *love* which the apostle Paul identified for the Christians in Corinth. The watchword for the people of God should be, “We need each other!”