

Leadership for 2020

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Who are the men and women that, in participation with God, are going to change the future? What sort of leaders do we need to develop as we head towards 2020 and beyond? These are two critical questions around which much of the future of the planet will swing. This may sound like an exaggeration but only if you have not read *The New Faces of Christianity* by Phillip Jenkins. Here he explains the rise of leadership in the global south to those who live in the narrow world of the northern European imagination. The future world will be highly influenced through religious ideas, so spiritual leaders are critical to all that is ahead. Christian leaders will be particularly important in that future if we are heading towards a world of 3 billion people owning the name of Christ. What sort of leadership is needed for these future conditions?

Just looking at organised church does not always help. There are many models of ecclesiology in which Christian leaders are called to operate. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Methodists and the Presbyterians all draw on the same verses of the Bible for how the church should be organised, led and steered to action if they believe it should be steered into action at all. Therefore our task is not an easy one and needs to be worked through with boldness, imagination, cultural sensitivity and wisdom.

Before we can answer what sort of leaders we need to develop, it is worth looking down a few blind alleys down which Christians are walking in their search for good leaders. The first blind alley is the *Conservative-Evangelical*. This is where we believe that all leaders need to know is the Bible and they will be great leaders. The idea is that the more they know of the Bible the better leaders they will be. This is a good idea but miserably inadequate. It is inadequate because knowledge of the Bible does not mean knowledge of God, even if you can do a really good exposition of biblical text. You can be a biblical genius and remain a blundering disaster as a leader. The

second blind alley is the *Charismatic-Prophetic*. Leadership here is to believe that leading is concerned with the feelings associated with the moving of the Spirit. The idea is that 'Spirit-led' leaders will know the mind of God and that through their feelings, or an impression regarding what God is saying, they will be able to lead. This is great as far as it goes. Listening to the Holy Spirit is essential, but the dangers of self-indulgence, tendencies towards totalitarianism and abuse of power have all been present when this one method of leadership knocks out all the others. The third blind alley is the *Contemporary-Cultural* model. In this the emphasis is on cultural relevance and communication. Here leaders are to be seen primarily as communicators. With communication as the primary emphasis technique becomes the centre of the action and God is lost. Along with this another set of problems arise. If you merely focus on culture and relevance you become thin in your approach. You have no substance because the point becomes the communication of the message rather than the message itself. Image triumphs over substance and all that is left is a shell of leadership - empty and hollow.

To be able to understand and teach the scripture, hear the voice of the Spirit and be contemporary in our communication is critical for leaders and we need all three working together. To pursue one of these alone unnecessarily narrows the vision and will lead to deformed leadership. Over the long haul a deformed church and organisation will result.

What then do we want when it comes to leaders? I suggest that we need leaders who have a relationship with God, do their tasks with skill and commitment and have healthy relationships with themselves and others. So, the crucial areas are Spirituality, Task and Community. If we are able to live adequately in response to these three areas then we will not be so blind if we wander up the ally of our choosing. So, our first area is Spirituality.

Spirituality: Relating to God

Leadership is about relating to God. Without this understanding a Christian leader is the SS Titanic steaming towards an iceberg in the dead of night. You can relate to God in joy, anger, frustration, humour, praise and silence but you need to relate to Him. Yet to do well in this area the first thing you find is that you cannot rush even though God does some things very quickly. There is no fast track to relating to God. There is no efficient way to a life of relating to God. Many have learned all the right Bible verses and principles but have developed little in their understanding of God or cultivated an awareness of their own inner life. Secondly, you have to learn that God is in control. This is difficult for leaders as leader types like to control, build and envision. The first thing to learn in Christian leadership is inadequacy, not adequacy. It is this which marks us out from our contemporary secular brothers and sisters. They usually begin with human inner potential and we begin with human inadequacy. We move to being adequate leaders by first visiting our inadequacy and seeing what God will do with it as we grow in being loved by Him. Thirdly, you can put yourself in the way of God through the basic disciplines of the Christian life. You cannot control God, but you can be ready for His initiatives by walking in the way that others have walked before. John Calvin told us that the two crucial issues for us were knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.¹ Although the two are closely related, we have often lived with the fantasy that we can know God without knowing ourselves. This is dream world and particularly dangerous for the followers of leaders who have no knowledge of themselves. Leadership is not just about knowing God but about knowing who we are. They are two sides of the same coin.

Task: Doing what you do well.

Organisational leadership is about change. It is about the transformation of something into something else. Leaders are intended to make a difference through influence or impact as they engage in their tasks to produce change. This may be long term or short term but it is change which is the focus, regardless the form in which it comes or how long it takes.

¹ John Calvin, 1989, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, (translated by Henry Beveridge), Eerdmans, p. 37

This is the easier part of leadership as so many of the skills needed to do the tasks can be learned. It is startling what people can learn if they really want to. This is one of the great wonders of our age. Through the deluge of information coming out of institutions, the internet and media so many training courses are available teaching us how to do what we are intended to do and how we can contribute to helpful change. You can learn how to treat the Bible properly so you can teach it and not abuse it; how to develop a strategic plan; how to motivate people and empower them; how to make good decisions and how to become leaders that transform. We can also learn how to integrate new technology into our leadership structures and programs so that work can be handled well and we are effective in all we do. It is critical that we develop cultures of life-long learning so that we are able to grow and flex with each new situation.

I am also convinced that we can learn to develop that most central characteristic of leadership – vision. All leaders are not necessarily visionaries but all leaders need some sort of vision. I spent some time in India recently and it was a delight to see one leader realise that his vision was the facilitation of other visions. Vision can be learned through listening to God, the world in which we live and our own hearts and the bringing of the three together.

Yet, here is the danger. Aiming to complete your tasks as you see them can lead you into a world of self-love, dominance and control. The task can take on a life of its own and possess a demonic-like, all-consuming power so that it has to be completed at all costs. This tumbles leaders into power-fantasies and ideas which are totalitarian at the root. In the end leaders become addictive and totalitarian on a narcissistic journey into themselves. Invariably they are unaware of the process or the result. How can we avoid this particular danger often demonstrated in Christian leadership? How can we avoid the addiction to the task dominating everyone in the name of God and causing considerable damage? I think the answer is engaging the community, not in merely doing the task.

Community: Living with your friends

This is where the great shift has to take place if we are going to have the right sort of leaders developed over the next decade and connect with the generations of leaders to come. This is especially so for leaders brought up within a Western worldview.

I was eating lunch with a few Christian leaders and one of them asked me, “What would you pick as the one main characteristic of people who are leaders”? After grumbling about the limitations and unfairness of the question I answered, “The ability to make friends, the ability to sustain loving relationships”. The answer did not impress my lunch partners and while I was speaking the answer it did not impress me. For leaders are to stride the globe, create dynamic organisations and cultures, are they not? Making friends and sustained loving relationship sounds weak in the presence of contemporary ideas of thrusting leadership. Yet, I am convinced that making adequate friendships goes right to the heart of leadership. And the reason why it is true is because of the nature of God. God is community; He is three in one and one in three. His power and authority in producing creation and redemption all come from a God who is not the isolated ‘one’, distant from any relationships. He is the Father, Son and Spirit who are in eternal and mutual love towards each other. His power comes out of this eternal community of love with Himself. So, if leaders are to reflect the image of God in all they are and do they have to reflect this in their relationships. A leader who cannot develop and sustain friendship of loving communion with others will ultimately be a destructive leader.

So, how can we develop leaders who are spiritually mature, do what they do well and can sustain loving relationship with others? The question is impossible to answer in one article but we can note the key areas which will be the basis for growing leaders. What is the strategic vision of leadership development onto which we can add our specific and local tactics?

Leadership Spiritual Formation

We have to see leadership formation through the lens of spiritual formation. It is just not good enough to take secular models of leadership, baptize them with Christian enthusiasm and vocabulary and then let them loose on an unsuspecting church. The result will be disaster. Eugene Peterson has noted the problem when Christian leaders just take the values and goals of secular leadership and lead. The values of consumerism turn the church and her accompanying organisations into ‘a company of shopkeepers’² and abandon their call and ‘while asleep they dream of the kind of success which will get the attention of journalists’.

What does it mean to be spiritually formed in the sense of the idea I am using here? It means that the leader is in the process of becoming fully human, that they are growing in all that God has intended them to be in the various dimensions of life. Money, sex, prayer, emotion, culture, discipline, politics, vision and many more areas fit into this idea of spiritual formation. It is to do with all of what we are before God. Our mistake in the past has been to merely focus on a spirituality concerned with lofty feelings of goodness and pious sensibilities. This has led to a rejection of the material reality of our leadership lives and has caused us endless confusion and continual problems. Leadership has to be approached from Spiritual formation, the formation of all that we are before ourselves and the world in relationship to the love of God expressed through the Word. We can then go on and take leadership models from others but frame them in the context of what they do to our own spiritual formation and the shaping of those we lead.

Listening Leaders

We need to see the development of leaders who can listen. Leadership is often seen from the perspective of the power of the leader who can communicate well to the ones they are called to lead. This is important. Leaders need to be able to communicate well so that people know how to dialogue with the leaders they choose to follow. Yet the key to being a good communicator is that you are an even better listener. Leadership is about the process of listening to the many messages

² Eugene Peterson, 1987, *Working the Angles*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, p. 2

which surround. So the developing of leaders will be teaching a series of questions which will be continual and life long. These questions will vary from person to person and may not be asked in a formal way, but they will need to be answered in any environment a leader encounters. Questions such as 'What is God saying to me through my friends or those I perceive as enemies?' and 'What is going on beneath the surface of this person or organisation?' and 'Why am I really doing what I am doing?' will be the sorts of questions which will open up a leader to enable a life of listening. Listening to God through revealed scripture, listening to your own heart, listening to the friends you have and the culture you are in, and listening to the Spirit's voice through all of this is right at the core of developing leaders. Great leaders are great listeners; they know that they live their lives in response to the articulation of God through the Word and Spirit.

Leadership Vulnerability

We need to engage an open life of vulnerability and avoid a preoccupation with image. Leadership is surrounded by myth. It is usually the myth of the super-hero who defies all the odds and conquers all circumstances. They not only conquer but receive every accolade from an adoring public. The myth is embedded in our contemporary world, through Hollywood in the West and Bollywood in the East, in the desire to create consumers of this myth and make pots of money. I am one sucker who has spent much of his money on watching the myth of the super-hero and a sucker I remain. I will pay good money to watch Bruce Willis, Clint Eastwood and Tom Cruise. Yet it is not real. Super-heroes do not model leadership reality and the mythmakers know it better than we do.

Leadership comes from humans who interact appropriately with their world. They look at the world in which they are called to live and seek to live for God in the middle of it. Leaders who lead well engage with the reality around them, they enter into a dirty world and are made dirty in the process. Developing leaders who know how to be vulnerable in the realities of their own lives is crucial for the church in the future. Yet, our 'image' gets in the way. We are becoming more and more obsessed

with image. In this obsession reality is often ignored. Reality is more and more being understood as how we appear rather than how we are. In this world of image repentance is not needed. All that is needed in the world where image dominates is a new surface to replace the fading old one and suddenly we are free. This can come through a new dress, the purchase of some cosmetic surgery or new car. Yet, image is important and one of the keys to developing leaders is the creation of the right image. What is the source of this image? God is the source because we have been made in the image of God. Our image should not be a series of masks or faces which can be worn for particular audiences. Leaders are made in the image of God. To continue to be remade into that image means vulnerability and an openness to let the image be made by God and not by ourselves.

Leadership Generosity

We need to develop leaders who are generous. Leadership is about generosity. It is about the ability to give and keep on giving. This will work its way through into an extravagant belief in people. If a leader does not believe in the people they are called to lead then much is lost. We become mere functionaries of organizational life and everyone else follows, becoming functionaries in their turn. This characteristic of generosity is underplayed and yet is foundational to a Christian understanding of what leadership is all about. Developing leaders will necessitate teaching potential leaders how they are to give themselves to others, along with their time and resources. Sectarian, mean and merely tribal leaders will always lead us into one mess or another even though they may appear very good at what they do.

What can we say in conclusion? We are called to develop leaders who know God, can do their tasks well and be in continual interaction with the community. I also suggested that the sort of leader we develop has to be well formed spiritually, becoming fully human as God intended, be adept at listening to God, themselves and the world, able to live with their own weakness and process them well without running for the cover of some illusory image. Finally, I suggested that leaders have to be generous if they are going to lead well.

I truly believe that this is not some impossible vision but within our grasp if we encounter God through the Word and listen to the Spirit. All of this is primary. When we have learned these things we can be trusted to go on to our training courses, mentoring programs, leadership retreats, reading schedules, hard targets and all the other décor of leadership development that trains us to change the world.

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