

Seven Qualities of Authentic Church Leadership *A Study in 2 Corinthians*

We live in a day when leadership is considered to be a skill, an art, or even a natural talent. It is something that can be learned and taught to others. Many church leaders gain their positions because they have abilities for teaching or administration or persuasion. Churches are seen as successful when people are pleased with their leaders and when the churches grow and prosper.

I would contend, however, that authentic church leadership is far more than these. Authentic leadership is a miracle, the infusion of something supernatural into ordinary human beings. Paul says in Ephesians 4 that church leaders are God's grace gift, His chosen means for equipping saints to gradually bring the church to the full stature of Christ.

If this is so, then it follows that authentic leadership itself would be characterized—or at least increasingly characterized—by the qualities of Christ. I've chosen here to examine, not Christ Himself, but the apostle Paul, who I believe modeled as a human leader what Christ-like church leadership should be. In his second letter to the Corinthians, I have found evidence for seven key indicators that Paul faithfully reflected the nature of his Lord in his relationship with the church.

Humility

There can be some confusion over what it means to be humble. Our first inclination may be to see it as the result of being shamed—either by others or by our own self-accusation. But godly humility is something quite different from humiliation. True humility comes from an accurate understanding of our place and purpose in God's plan.

Paul first understood that whatever strengths he had were not of his own making. “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God” (3:5). He also realized that the hardships in his life were designed not only for his own benefit, but also for their usefulness in the lives of those to whom he was ministering. “Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation” (1:6).

This kind of humility actually brings a person to a place of strength. By contrast, pride (the absence of true humility) is an indication of deep insecurity. Paul calls this out quite clearly. “We dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (10:12).

Paul reveals his secure humility in a number of ways. Above all, he understood this truth: “For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord approves” (10:18). But even in the tangible realities of his life, he had come to see what was truly most valuable. “I will not boast except in my infirmities...lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be” (12:5-6).

Why was this man to whom had been revealed the mysteries of heaven not inclined to boast? It was because he was deeply concerned that he not be “exalted above measure” (12:7). As he famously had learned, “I take pleasure in my infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

Authentic Christian leadership exists to the extent that a person reaches the place where he can honestly say, “I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (12:15). This is the heart of Christ, reaching out through a cleansed and seasoned vessel to nurture and nourish His people.

Courage

A second key characteristic of godly leadership is courage. Again, this is something other than human bravado or even human nobility. Most leaders respond bravely when they have a sense of themselves as being needed, either by people or by some cause or purpose that deserves defending. While these motivations are not wrong in themselves, God calls His leaders to a unique sort of courage—courage that depends not on their strength or wisdom or ability, but solely on His.

Paul understood that the intense challenges he met regularly were the means whereby he had learned to draw upon God’s strength rather than his own. “For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead” (1:8-9).

There is reason to believe, based on these verses, that Paul may actually have been stoned to death in Lystra (Acts 14:19). And God did indeed raise him up—from being dead or nearly so. But more significantly, Paul soon returned to that very city to encourage the believers who lived there. That, my friend, is courage of the supernatural sort.

Wisdom

The wisdom needed by God’s leaders comes only from a profound and persistent interaction with Him. Knowledge can accrue through our studies, but wisdom is situational and is lived out in the realities of life. We are wise based on what He gives us in the moment for the need of the moment. A wise person knows he had no resource apart from the Spirit, but he also knows that in the Spirit he is thoroughly equipped for every circumstance and challenge.

Paul says it this way. “For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you” (1:12).

Yet this is not to say that wisdom doesn’t have real content. For example, Paul speaks of his understanding of forgiveness—not only what it entails, but also that unforgiveness is a specific tool of the enemy. “Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices” (2:10-11).

Another face of wisdom is revealed in the honest recognition that we ourselves are responsible for our holiness. Because God has revealed what is holy, and because He has offered the needed empowerment, the component that remains is our own determination to bring this grace into our actual lives. “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us *cleanse ourselves* from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (7:1).

Finally, wisdom is simply a full commitment to the priority and indispensability of God's truth above all competing arguments or enticements. Paul puts it quite simply. "We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (13:8).

Compassion

Compassion carries the heart of Christ to those who need Him. It's not so much that we should seek the elimination of pain as an end in itself, but rather that we seek to bring the sufferer into contact with the true Comforter and Provider.

Paul's rich understanding of this process dominates much of this letter. In the opening chapter he describes the Father as the "God of all comfort...who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (1:3-4).

There is of course a part of compassion that brings censure or discipline. We find this in Paul's first letter as he confronts the church's tolerance of sin in their midst (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-5). But even here, he is not merely focused on removing sin, but rather he desires to impress upon the people what full compassion looks like. "Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you" (7:12).

In the final count, Paul says, "The love of Christ compels us" (5:14). This compulsion is so strong that it visibly permeates every component of Paul's leadership. He has personally experienced the startling and life-transforming power of Christ's love in such a way that it has become the defining quality of every interaction he has with the church. "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you" (2:4).

Endurance

Christian leadership is tough. If it isn't, there's a problem somewhere. Our enemy is very alert to effective ministry and has no hesitation to press against it, often using a sinister arsenal of temptations and hardships. Paul is the first to testify to this reality, and he does so often throughout his letter.

As we mentioned earlier, his time "in Asia" was particularly challenging. "For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life" (1:8). Later he provides a formidable tally of his sufferings—but accompanied always by the reality of God's sustaining grace. "We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (4:8-9).

The stunning thing about Paul's capacity to endure—beyond its mere existence—is his profound understanding of its value. For him, the trials were so precious that they brought him to a place where he could honestly claim, "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation" (7:4). What did Paul know that all Christians leaders should also come to realize?

Probably the greatest truth that sustained him was his confidence that suffering is of value to God, so much so that it will gain the sufferer rich rewards. Paul puts it this way: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working *for us* a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (4:17).

But another value he found in his hardships was his awareness that they provided the context in which God’s approval of his ministry was confirmed. “But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses” (6:4). Again, this is exactly why he could tell the Corinthians, “Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation” (1:6).

Christian ministry has no place for the promotion of personal comfort, pleasure, safety or honor. To be sure, God graciously grants these things to His people as He sees fit. But the model of Paul, of the other apostles, and most especially of Christ before them, is a joyful self-denying and self-dying that rises out of the understanding that it is in the crucibles of suffering and affliction where God’s greatest glory is revealed.

Honesty

Honesty is an openness before God that welcomes His correcting. It refuses to manipulate or coerce, trusting that God will accomplish his purposes without us adding our schemes to His ways. If we speak and live out His truth, people will be drawn to the God He actually is—or they will reject the actual God. Misrepresentation of God in the church is one of the greatest deterrents to Kingdom growth.

Paul understood these realities, and made it a point to mention them in his letter. “For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity” (1:12). Later he adds, “For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ” (2:17).

This is key—that leaders realize their every word or deed stands “in the sight of God.” They aren’t allowed to hand in carefully-crafted reports to their superior officer which might mitigate any slips of the tongue or trips of the feet. Only a person who stands with a heart bared before God is qualified to represent Him in this world as a leader of His people.

Again, Paul is our model in this regard. “But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience *in the sight of God*” (4:2).

Submission

Authentic authority exists only in the context of authentic submission. People safely follow Christian leaders only when those leaders are truly in submission to the One who is over them. Christ called a proper understanding of authority and submission “faith” (see Matthew 8:8-10), and it is the centerpiece of the church’s functioning.

In Romans 1 Paul describes himself as a “bondservant of Christ.” He’s not the only New Testament writer who takes this label—Peter, James and Jude also open their letters with the same claim. A bondservant voluntarily places himself under the authority of someone, and these men considered it a point of recommendation that they were effectively enslaved to Christ.

It was this very submission that qualified Paul to speak with authority to the churches. His highest desire was not that the church be accepting of him, but rather that he would remain in the favor of God. “Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him” (5:9).

Paul recognized that his ministry needed to accurately emulate the heart of God. At one point he uses three separate terms to describe his calling. First he says, “We are *ambassadors* for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (5:20). Next he says, “We then, as *workers* together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain (6:1).

Finally, he describes his identity simply as a “*minister* of God,” validating this title “by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, and by sincere love, by the word of truth [and] by the power of God” (6:6-7). Paul in essence had become transparent, allowing the character of Jesus to be visible in and through him.

And while Paul often speaks boldly in his letters as one who has the authority of Christ, in this letter it seems he is deliberately qualifying the nature of that authority. He makes a key point early in the letter: “Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand” (1:24). Then twice he describes the authority God has given him as being “for edification and not for destruction” (10:3, 13:10).

This then is the test of authentic submission and authority, that they result in the edification of believers and the glory of God. Christian leadership, at all levels, reaches outside itself, seeking to provide a smooth and healthy conduit between those who follow and the Christ who is to be followed.

Paul concludes his letter with some expressions of love for the church in Corinth that well summarize the essence of godly leadership. Hear his heart—and Christ’s—in these words:

“And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved....Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified. For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete” (12:14-15; 13:7-9).

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