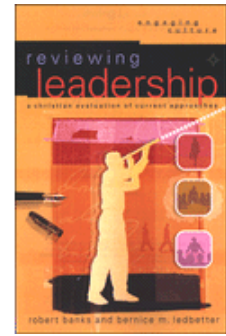


reviewing leadership: a christian evaluation of current approaches

Robert Banks and Bernice M Ledbetter (Baker Academic, 2004)

Amid the huge number of books on leadership published in recent years, how does one evaluate all the different approaches from a Christian perspective? That is what this book attempts to do.

The book begins by exploring reasons for the interest in leadership today. The authors suggest a variety of reasons, including the rapid pace of change, and they also set out some parameters for understanding leadership, including the question of 'leader' or 'leadership'. Here, as throughout the book, what I found most stimulating was the way in which the authors take a step back and ask questions which are not always being asked elsewhere.



Banks and Ledbetter then look at biblical, historical and contemporary perspectives, covering Paul, historical models such as the Benedictine tradition, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Pentecostal; and trait, contingency and transformational leadership. While one might quibble with some of the emphases, this chapter provides a very helpful summary, and a pointer to some key themes.

The following chapter moves the discussion towards the spiritual, and looks at 'emerging spiritual and religious dimensions of leadership.' Here there's an incisive case study on Stephen Covey, whose *Seven Habits...* and other books are widely read, yet without readers always recognising how they are influenced by his Mormonism. This is followed by another chapter, covering more popular faith-based approaches. There's a useful exploration of Laura Beth Jones, whose writings seem to have become popular among some women leaders, but whose approach is shown to be inadequate from a biblical perspective. In this chapter we also find discussion of Leighton Ford's *Jesus, the Transforming Leader* and Walter Wright's *Relational Leadership*. The authors' US/Australian context means there is no mention of Tidball, Fernando, Croft or Lawrence, but there is enough exploration of different approaches to help readers evaluate any writers critically.

Chapter 5 explores three themes which the authors see as underpinning a truly Christian approach to leadership: faithfulness, integrity and service. Exploration of the themes is interwoven with discussion of authors such as Robert Greenleaf, who brought into popular leadership thinking the concept of 'servant leadership'. I was pleased that the authors have highlighted how for some people in positions of inequality, 'servant leadership' has negative connotations.

The final chapter explores, though a series of case studies, a number of key questions about leadership, for example: 'Are leaders always ahead of those around them?' 'Does a leader need a certain kind of personality?' 'Are leaders primarily exercising power or empowering others?' I was unsure about some of the leaders highlighted here (Kirkegaard, for example), but I liked the focus on these questions. Women leaders in the Church may warm to the fact that this chapter counters some less than helpful prevailing models, and shows that there is more than one way to lead. While the authors do not cite Jim Collins' *Good to Great* '5 levels' model, the leaders they commend seem to be mainly 'level 5 leaders' rather than the more 'popular' and 'charismatic' 'level 4 leaders'.

As a woman I found this book refreshing – referring occasionally to particular issues for women, but otherwise being totally inclusive, including in its case studies (Janet Hagberg, for example, whose work on power is excellent, but often overlooked, perhaps because of her own deliberate low profile). It's quite a densely written book, alluding to a large number of ideas and authors – but that is obviously the focus of such a book. Occasionally I found myself disagreeing with the authors, and a more UK-focused book would be even better, but I found it informative and thought-provoking.

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2010