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Christ-likeness in leadership

In his last sermon in 2007: John Stott said, 'I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of my pilgrimage on earth and it is – God wants His people to become like Christ. Christ-likeness is the will of God for the people of God'. His point was much wider than Christian leadership but if Christ-likeness is God's will for all Christians, how much more important is it for those with influence. Many Christians would instinctively agree. A CPAS survey conducted over the last few months has posed the question, 'what is most important in building your church'? Out of nine attributes to choose from, including preaching the gospel and releasing God's vision, the clear survey leader is 'modelling Christ-likeness'.

Churchill esteemed courage as the 'the first of human qualities because it's the quality which guarantees all others.' And the same could be said of Christ-likeness in the context of Christian leadership. Other attributes are of course important, but Christ-likeness trumps all because it underpins and shapes the way other qualities are applied.

Leadership through modelling Christ-likeness

The so-called 'silent' language of leadership – our practical behaviours and actions – is arguably more influential than our words in facilitating real transformation and change in those we serve. People instinctively tend to absorb the values and emulate the behaviour of leaders they respect. A management consultant recently told me that within an hour of arriving in a new company, simply through observing the behaviours of the staff, he could usually discern

the values and priorities of the chief executive.

But our behaviours ultimately flow from who we are, our character or, to paraphrase D L Moody, 'what we are in the dark.' Over the long term and with those who see us regularly, we cannot fake this. Jesus spent three years with his disciples. They saw him day in, day out when he was tired, full of joy, facing opposition, facing temptation and in numerous encounters with ordinary people.

Think back to those leaders who have had the most profound influence on your own walk with Christ. For most of us, the Christ-like quality of their lives, modelled over a sustained period has played a key role. Even for those whose preaching and teaching ministries we respect, we instinctively 'look at' their lives to corroborate and authenticate their words. We notice, for example, their reaction in the unguarded moments, perhaps the way they treat the person who can do nothing for them.

Francis Whitehead, John Stott's secretary said this: 'Because I worked alongside him as his secretary for 55 years, perhaps I more than anybody can testify to the fact that, in his case, familiarity, far from breeding contempt, bred the very opposite — a deep respect, and one which inspired belief in God.'

Which is why Paul sets the bar high for those who desire to be a leader in the Church (1 Timothy 3:1-13). Christian leadership is often exercised in messy and complex situations; the best way ahead or the wisest response to a specific situation is not obvious. Christ-likeness doesn't guarantee discernment and wisdom but



we are much more likely to be in a place where we are attuned to the guidance of the Spirit.

And finally, it is unlikely we will be able to lead others into discipleship, if we are not experiencing transformation by the Holy Spirit, to be more like Christ ourselves. The pressures of leadership can bring out the best but also accentuate the fault lines. Every leader wrestles with tensions in their character and most Christians do not expect their leaders to be 'perfect', but when, for example, our dominant driver is personal ambition rather than an attitude of service, or fear of any criticism engenders permanent inertia then, at worst, division and cynicism in the body can ensue. Sadly, I have met too many Christians who would cite as their primary reason for becoming disillusioned and even falling away, the *significant* gap between words and reality in the lives of leaders.

So what do we mean by Christ-likeness?

It's not being Jesus! As leaders we are not called to 'save the world' and ultimately it is God the Holy Spirit who transforms lives, not us; we serve a redemptive God and live under grace! Neither is Christ-likeness about simply investing in 'being' rather than 'doing'. The two are intertwined within the formation of our character and identity although for those of us who, by temperament, are activists, we may need to ensure we don't neglect the transformation that comes from simply being prayerful and still before God.

It is being like Jesus in our attitudes and mindset. Philippians 2 is a good place to start and some of the attributes which flow from this and other areas of scripture include humility and a servant heart (Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 10:45); love that costs (Ephesians 5:2); integrity (Luke 16:10); perseverance in the face of opposition (Matthew 10:16-23); faith (Mark 14:36); relational in character (Acts 2:42-47); willingness to forgive

(Matthew 6:14-15); missional (John 20:21) and courage (Luke 22:42).

So how do we nurture Christ-likeness?

It's much more than the occasional tweak in behaviour – it's about allowing the Spirit to work deeply in us. In my own (very much ongoing!) experience, the process of transformation has often felt costly and seems to take time. Deep seated attitudes are often not readily apparent let alone uprooted; fears can be tenacious in their grip. Comfortingly, Paul himself was able to say 'imitate me', (1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1) only after many long and painful struggles. We shouldn't underestimate the role of spiritual warfare in this (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and Ephesians 6:10-18) with our minds as a battleground.

Consequently Scripture encourages us to be purposeful and intentional in cultivating a Christ-like mindset so I offer seven thoughts:

- Remain in the vine (John 15). Without healthy and sustained spiritual disciplines, deep-seated transformation is unlikely to happen.
- Invest in wise and safe friends and mentors who can speak truth.
- Don't try and 'fix' everything at once.
- Guard your minds (Philippians 4:8).
- Counter unhelpful thoughts and attitudes by practicing opposite behaviours, e.g. praying for those we dislike; seeking out the 'least' to talk to (Luke 6:27-31).
- Embrace the difficult times; more transformation and fruit usually results from the valley experiences than the mountain tops.
- And always remember... we live under grace!

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What do you think?

- 'Scripture encourages us to be purposeful and intentional....' What is our part in becoming more like Christ and what is God's?
- 'We shouldn't underestimate the role of spiritual warfare in this with our minds as a battleground'. Do you agree and what weapons do we have in response?
- Choose one attribute you would wish your leadership to be more like that of Jesus'. What three things could you do to nurture this transformation?

