

LEAD ON

GROWING HEALTHY LEADERSHIP CULTURES

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Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Before you read any further, I'd like you to pause for a moment to consider how you and your church might finish this sentence:

We could say the leadership culture in our church is spiritually healthy because...

At the heart of the issue of spiritually healthy leadership culture are three issues:

- Have we got our foundational DNA right, from which everything else flows?
- Have we understood the leadership task correctly?
- Are we exercising our leadership rightly?

FOUNDATIONAL DNA

Both 'culture' and 'spiritual healthiness' can seem rather nebulous concepts. But while they can be hard to define, they are both critical for leaders to give attention to. When we fail to do so, it is not as if we

default to spiritually healthy culture and leadership. Rather, we tend to default, pragmatically, to what seems to deliver results, and then use those results as a surrogate or proxy for healthiness. 'We must be healthy because... our numbers are good / we have small groups / people like the activities / our preaching is biblical.' Insert your surrogate metric of choice. The trouble is that none of those are good measures of spiritual healthiness. Indeed, recent scandals have shown how leaders can use them to give a false appearance of healthiness when the reality is anything but.

None of those things are bad, but they aren't reliable indicators that we are spiritually healthy, so what is? At the most foundational level, when we strip away everything else, it is the love of God. The Apostle Paul is clear this is our DNA when he says in 1 Corinthians 13:13 'these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love'. Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:37-39). We love because God first loved us, and that then flows out in love to our neighbour. Elsewhere Jesus told his disciples that his command to them was to love one another, by which all people will know we are his disciples (John 13:35).



Everything else in church life either flows from this foundation, or is a good-looking substitute for it. To change the metaphor, the love of God must be upstream in church life, cascading into everything else we do. Is that the aroma people are sensing, the aroma of life? Is their experience of church one of being comforted and delighted by the love of God? Do they want to join themselves to us as leaders because they know they are going to experience the love of God, or because we run their favourite activities?

THE LEADERSHIP TASK

The various leadership ministries listed in the New Testament are spiritual gifts for the common good. The point of leadership gifts, according to Ephesians 4, is for the body to be built up in maturity, love and effectiveness. Our shepherding, in all its various forms, is stewarding the grace-gift of leadership to equip all the believers for their ministries, so that they grow, so that God is glorified, so that they won't be blown around by false teaching, and so that love abounds.

The Apostle Paul tells the church in Philippi that he wants to come and work with them for their progress in the faith, and their joy in the faith, so they glory abundantly in Jesus, with his character of humility among them (Philippians 1:25-2:5). That's it! That's spiritually healthy church and spiritually healthy leadership.

In practice what that most commonly looks like is seen in 1 Thessalonians 2. The apostles were like caring, sharing mothers, and encouraging strengthening fathers, giving not only the teaching of the gospel but

also sharing life so their discipleship walk could be imitated. It's a great chapter and I encourage you to read it when you've finished reading this article.

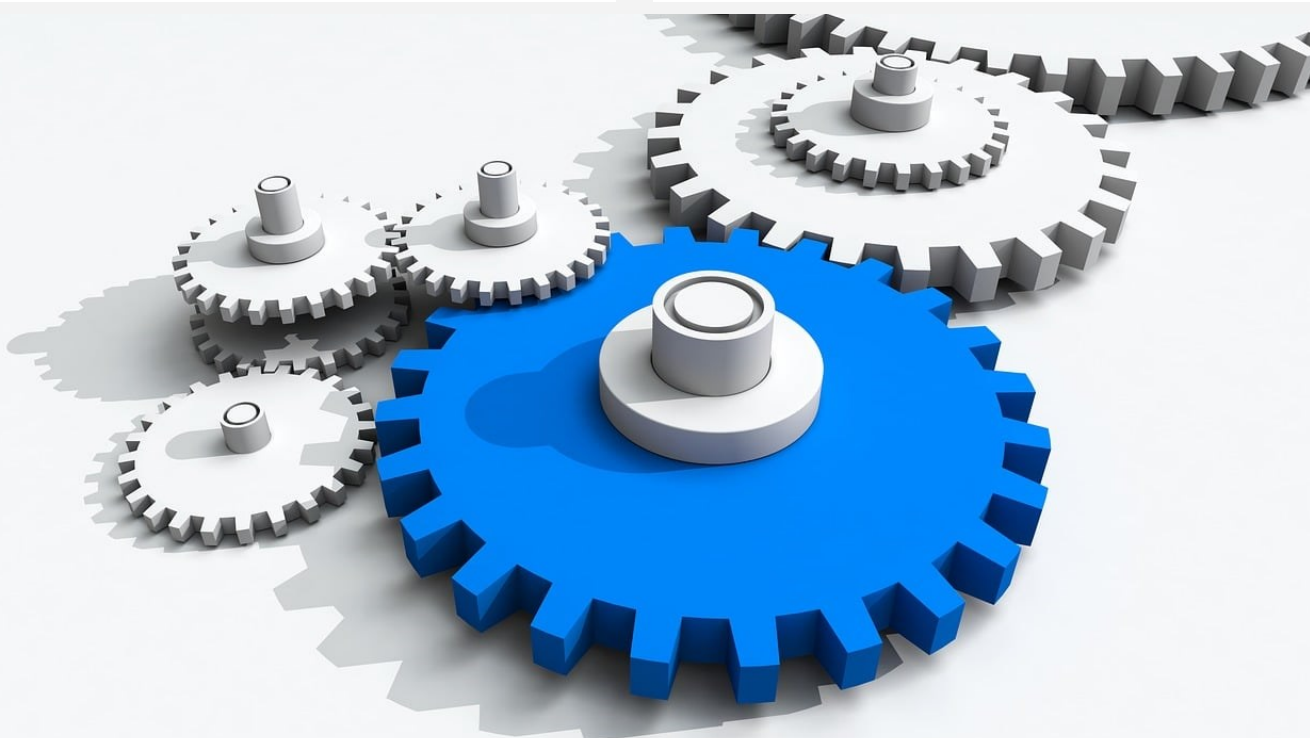
We are servant leaders, entirely focussed on the spiritual good of the flock. Predominantly so that Christ is formed in them and that they become imitators of him. People who put themselves under our leadership should do so knowing they will be raised up and encouraged, convinced that it will help them follow and be delighted in Jesus, and to live a holy life.

LEADING RIGHT

Jesus tells the disciples in Mark 10 that our leadership is utterly unlike that of the world. Christian leaders are servants not masters. We are shepherds, not generals. Parents, not head teachers. Imitable examples of faith, not organisational executives.

If we want people to trust that our leadership is from God, and not merely aping the world then, like Paul, we have to exercise it transparently and in the light. Leadership cultures go wrong in the darkness. As per 2 Corinthians 4:2, we don't act with deceit but commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God by setting forth the truth plainly. Then everyone can have confidence that our leadership is being exercised in an appropriate and godly way. They can trust that they are being shepherded well so they are enabled to follow and imitate Jesus, and that they aren't being used or manipulated.

Transparency really gets to the heart of healthy leadership culture. Things being done in the light is the



way to grow a high trust culture, legitimately. The Bible says that overseers must be above reproach. We aren't like politicians stitching things up in dark corners.

Transparency is my first principal for healthy leadership cultures. Here are another three:

ACCOUNTABILITY

We are told that people should be tested before they serve as leaders (1 Timothy 3:10). Scrutiny of leaders' personal walk of faith and of our use of power and authority are crucial. We are more at risk of going bad than anyone else in the church because we have the most power and can easily use our position to cover up misjudgements, errors and sins.

Generally, congregations don't know what the limits on eldership authority are, and we are bad at self-limiting. For the sake of healthiness it is impossible to be too clear about where the boundaries are, and how to question leadership practice where necessary. Put it on your website, it cannot fail to engender trust.

PLURALITY

Leadership in the New Testament is resolutely plural and collegial. Shepherds acting together, not lone rangers. That doesn't 100% guarantee that leadership remains godly; there is always the risk of an inner ring of mutually reinforcing, controlling people. However, plural leadership is normally less at risk than the lone ranger. It can also be helpful to think how to triangulate with others outside your leadership circles, in a similar way to school governors having external critical friends. Once again, it engenders trust.

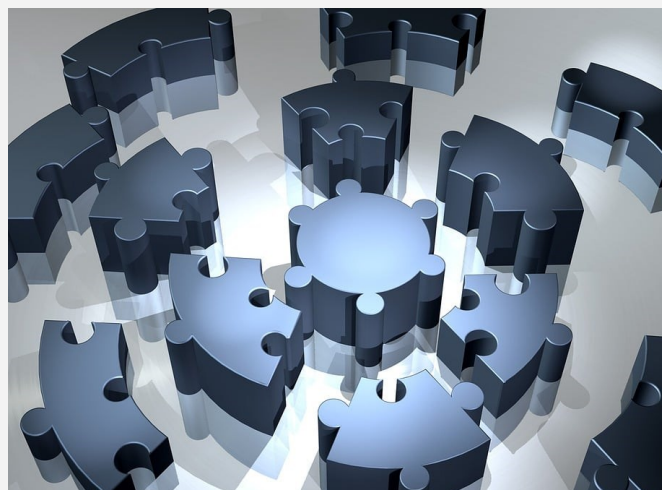
SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IS LIMITED TO USING SPIRITUAL MEANS

Because authority does not reside finally in us but derives from God through his word, we don't have any right to impose anything beyond that on other people's consciences. We can appeal on the basis of wisdom, knowledge and experience, and the shared goals of the church, but godly leaders do not command and insist on things on the basis of our own personal authority.

When leaders demand obedience without reference to scripture they are certainly outside the boundaries of legitimate authority. It can be done with overt bullying (in the worst instances even using scripture to do it), insistence on submission to their position and office, subtle manipulation, personal winsomeness, the appeal of faux-vulnerability, or implicit threats of sanction or removal. However it is done, it is a sure sign of unhealthy and illegitimate leadership culture.

There is another article to be written about how leadership cultures cease being healthy. In short, it tends to happen in small increments, 1000 accommodations and small decisions to put up with low level dysfunction. It always happens unexamined, in the dark. The first warning signs are not big red flags, but something smelling off. For more on this see my book [Powerful Leaders? When Church Leadership Goes Wrong and How to Prevent It \(IVP\)](#).

I recently spent a day with a church leadership team who had just decided that the first item on every agenda was how to approach all their business as spiritually healthily and prayerfully as possible. That speaks volumes about their desire to be proactive in building spiritually healthy culture as leaders, and in the church. We want to attract people by the aroma of Christ, modelled and seen in our climate of vibrant grace-filled, prayer-fuelled spiritual healthiness and leadership humility. Then we can expect to see people appreciating being led to know God's love in their lives, to delight in his grace to them and to enjoy being worshipping disciples and witnesses.



REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- Would people in your church identify the love of God as your core, foundational DNA? If not, what would they say, and why?
- What steps towards good practice could you take in respect of transparency, accountability, and clarity about how spiritual authority is exercised?
- Has the article highlighted any areas in which your church, or you as a leader, might be at risk, for you to consider? How could you discuss these in the most constructive way?