

HOW DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTAND LEADERSHIP?

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The Christian Scriptures have a good deal to say about leadership and about the way in which it should be exercised. Indeed, Steven Croft insists that, 'The Judaeo-Christian Tradition provides the longest continuous tradition of reflection on leadership in communities that the human culture has ever seen'¹. Although far more concerned about the functions of leadership rather than about the titles or positions held by leaders, we learn a huge amount about how leadership is understood by the NT writers from the words they used to describe those exercising leadership. Authentic Christian leadership seems to reflect three particular emphases.

1. EXERCISING OVERSIGHT

Three words in particular each draw attention to the function of careful oversight associated in the NT with godly leadership – episcopos, prohistamenos and hegoumenos.

Although the first of these words is used, at least from the second century onwards, to denote a particular office in the church, in classical literature and in the OT it is used to describe the act of paying attention to, inspecting or supervising an activity or person, and is

used both of governors and their associates² and of God's loving care of people³ and of the land⁴. The apostle Paul⁵ urges the Ephesian elders to shepherd the church over which God has made you overseers (episkopoi), exercising protective pastoral care in such a way that God's people might flourish and grow, even in a hostile environment. In this way they will reflect and participate in God's own oversight of the people for whom he has a particular concern.

Prohistamenos and hegoumenos are both words used to describe the functions of civic or military leaders. The former is particularly used of civil officials whose



¹ Croft, S., 2016, The Gift of Leadership, Norwich: Canterbury Press, p. vii

² e.g. 2 Chronicles 24:11; Nehemiah 11:9,14,22

³ e.g. Psalm 80:14; Zephaniah 2:7

⁴ Deuteronomy 11:12

⁵ Acts 20:28

responsibility was to provide for or care for those citizens under their charge. The *prohistamenos* is mentioned in Romans 12:8 as part of a longer list of spiritual gifts and callings and set in company with those who are called to teach, exhort and show mercy. This juxtaposition of roles seems to be deliberate rather than accidental, implying some overlap between them.

There is a more explicit connection between this word group and the role of *presbuteroi* (elders) in 1 Timothy 5:17 where the latter are instructed to rule (*proestotes*) well.

Above all, the use of this word group implies an understanding of leadership which involves responsible care and oversight with a particular concern for the spiritual edification and nurture of others. The *hegoumenos* has a similar pastoral concern, but exercises this through being a helpful guide or a good example to follow.

Christian leaders care for those entrusted to them by God, sharing his concern, and striving to be faithful role models and reliable guides.

2. REPRESENTING CHRIST

One of the striking things we note from reading the



New Testament is the clear understanding on the part of the earliest Christians that leadership was somehow both in imitation of Jesus, and also exercised at his behest and on his behalf. Thus, the apostle Paul sees himself as 'a bondservant of Christ, called as an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God', and is keen to encourage his proteges to be imitators of him as he is of Christ.

Peter, James and Jude each begin their own letters to the churches in similar terms, expressing their own indenture to Christ. Dunn suggests that this sharing directly in the leadership of Christ is a consequence, for the earliest Christians, of their consciousness of being 'in Christ'; we never experience such leadership independently of him. This sense of leadership as being somehow on behalf of Christ is reflected in some of the other New Testament words associated with leadership.

Perhaps the most widely used words to describe leadership in the NT are *diakonia* and its cognates. With the exception of the Thessalonians correspondence, they are to be found in every one of Paul's letters as well as in the Synoptics, Acts and Revelation. Although often associated with menial, practical, household service, more recent studies have suggested that many of the uses of *diakonia* in classical literature are to do with the conveying of a message or the delivering of an errand on behalf of another.

A significant study by J.N. Collins concludes that central to the notion of *diakonia* is the idea of being a go-between or representative of a master. It is in this sense that Paul is able to describe his own ministry as being that of a *diakonos*, a term that directs attention not to the menial nature of Paul's service but rather to the fact that his authority derives from his being an agent of Christ.

The frequency with which *diakonia* words are used throughout the New Testament indicates the conviction that Christian leadership consists in speaking and acting on behalf of Christ, of representing his interests fully and ensuring that his will be done, and of conducting such an embassy in a manner which authentically Jesus' own commitment to serve God and others.

⁶Romans 1:1

⁷1 Corinthians 11:1

⁸Dunn, J.D.G., 1975, *Jesus and the Spirit*, London, SCM: p. 92

⁹Collins, J.N., 1990, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

3. ANIMATING THE BODY

A third dominant motif for leadership in the New Testament is that of empowerment or animation. Leaders are not primarily those who do things instead of others but rather so that others might be equipped to play their own full part in the life and service and advance of God's kingdom. To this extent they are stewards of and catalysts for God's work.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this dynamic is to be found in Ephesians 4:7-16. God's grace is given to every member of the Church so that the whole Church (all the saints) might share in the work of serving God and his kingdom. God's intention is that the Church grows, presumably both in the quality and purity of its life and also in terms of its scale and influence, as each member of the body plays their full part.

God's way of equipping and animating the whole body through the mobilisation of every member is to provide the church with gifts of leadership, diverse in function but which together reflect the fulness of the ministry of Christ. As Howard Snyder observes, 'The chief priority of pastoral leadership ... is to bring the ministry of all God's people to functioning practical reality.'

WHAT THEY AVOID

One final observation might be made about the words which the NT writers seemed deliberately to eschew in referring to leaders, despite these words being in common currency.

Archon (leader/ruler) and hierous (priest) were widely used to describe civic and religious leaders and yet are strikingly avoided in the early NT church. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this is that each of these words had connotations of status and privilege, something entirely at odds with the self understanding of NT leaders of being servants of another, who himself laid aside status and privilege.

Christian leaders are not immune from the temptation of finding our significance in the titles we have or the positions we occupy. However, faithfulness to the NT paradigms of leadership means laying aside any privilege we might seek to gain from leadership position in favour of faithfully representing Christ, caring for those under our charge, and doing all in our power to enable them to flourish and thrive.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:7

¹² Ephesians 4:12

¹³ Ephesians 4:12,16

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:11

¹⁵ Snyder H., 1983, *Liberating the Church*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, p. 248



FOR REFLECTION

1. In what specific ways does a consideration of these three NT leadership emphases affect the way in which I understand my own leadership calling?
2. In which of the three particular areas of leadership outlined above do I most need to develop and grow? What steps could I take in order to enable such growth to take place?
3. To what extent do I succumb to the temptation to use my own leadership role as a means of securing status or privilege? What steps might I take to guard against this?