CHURCH LEADERSHIP THAT KILLS COMMUNITY

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Introduction

After having relegated to oblivion for centuries its true identity as community, the church is finally rediscovering it with a vengeance at the dawn of this new millennium. In numerous churches of all stripes and denominations appears a surge of interest in recovering the constitutive elements of community life. Congregations are restructuring themselves into conglomerates of small groups. Corporate worship is revitalised. Hitherto passive believers are discovering the thrill of participating together in the ministries of the local church. Laypeople demand to be involved in the decision-making process relative to matters that concern their church life. A plethora of conferences and informal training opportunities provides innumerable resources and tools for church leaders and members alike to develop their skills as administrators, advisors, counsellors, teachers, artists, musicians, dramatists, youth workers, missionaries, and even as publicists. Except for those bodies that opt to remain dormant and, consequently, doom themselves to decline and demise, the church is generally in a state of healthy effervescence.

However, as encouraging as such signs of renewed vitality may appear, the church must surmount one major obstacle in order to become again the new community that was created after Pentecost under the fresh impact of the Holy Spirit. Church leaders must return to the basic teachings of the New Testament to redefine their own ministries of leadership. Far too often, the availing models of church leadership are uncritically imported into the church as constructs borrowed from the corporate business world or from secular systems of administration.
As a result, multitudes of congregations are saddled with structures of leadership that violate the New Testament prescriptions for community life and stifle or distort its biblical expression. Transference into the church of worldly patterns of governance was absolutely prohibited by Christ. To the disciples who conceived of leadership as attaining positions of ascendancy, he described two prevailing models of secular structuring: rulers lording it over their constituencies and officeholders exercising authority over them. Jesus did not pronounce a value judgement on either. He recognised the emperor's right to rule, and the New Testament enjoins believers to submit to civil authority. But, Jesus emphatically proscribed the transfer of such worldly structures of leadership into the community of believers (Mark 10:35-45). His thunderous prohibition, "It shall not be so among you!" should continue to ring loudly into the ears of contemporary church leaders.

A teaching of Jesus provides a case study for his view of the exercise of leadership within the local church (Matt. 18:15-20). A relational crisis happens that requires intervention for resolution. The matter is ultimately brought to the congregation for a decision that becomes binding on the opponents. Leaders are undoubtedly present, but they are not mentioned as being part of the resolution process. However, their role may be assumed. They are the ones who have brought the congregation to a level of decisional competency that enables it to exercise self-rule. This observation is amply verified in the rest of the New Testament: the basic job description of church leaders is to develop the self-leadership potential of the congregations they serve.

Examples from the New Testament

The Jerusalem church offers a case in point. Prior to Pentecost, the apostles thought that they would be unable to perform their leadership ministry without filling the 'vacancy' created by the demise of the betrayer. Since they had received no instructions from the Lord to do so, they were left with their own wisdom, and, in a flurry of confusion, they resorted to gambling in order to select a twelfth individual. Prior to his ascension, their Lord had gathered the 'eleven disciples' to command them to 'make disciples of all the nations.' He had thus pointed to the insignificance of the numbers 'eleven' or 'twelve' since the company of the 'disciples' would expand exponentially. Yet, the eleven viewed themselves as privileged officeholders who would not be able to function outside of a set structure of twelve appointed leaders. As a result, the centralised leadership they provided is reflected in the fact that they and only they managed the financial affairs of the church, preached and taught, accomplished signs and wonders, and served at tables. There seems to have been no delegation of responsibilities during the beginning stages of the life of the church in Jerusalem.

Soon, it became evident first to the congregation and then to the apostles themselves that it was necessary to expand the responsibilities of leadership beyond the Twelve. The congregation selected seven other leaders, ostensibly to serve at tables. However, the evidence indicates that Stephen and Philip performed exactly the same ministries as the apostles as they did signs and wonders, taught, and evangelised. Then, without providing any explanation, the book of Acts reveals that elders had also been appointed in the Jerusalem church, and that they were now the ones who handled its financial affairs (11:30). This gradual decentralisation of the leadership structure was further confirmed during the Jerusalem Council. The issue under debate was resolved through consensual agreement by the apostles, the elders, and the congregation (15:22-29). Finally, when Paul returned to

Jerusalem for the last time prior to his arrest, he reported to the congregation and the elders (21:17-19). The apostles had passed off the scene without explanation as the leadership had been handed over to the whole group.

This is the authentic function of leaders: to develop and release the leadership potentials inherent within local congregations. Prior to Pentecost, when they prepared to assume their leadership function, the apostles had viewed themselves as the future princes of the church – hence their desire to fill the void left by the disappearance of Judas as they closed the circle of power. But, they gradually learned to extend their leadership responsibilities to others, presumably while developing appropriate competencies, until they made themselves dispensable enough to slip away quietly to different fields of ministry. The same understanding of the purpose of leadership seems to prevail in the majority of the church situations reflected in the epistles of the New Testament. The epistles are generally action documents, letters written to address specific issues within local bodies: tensions between Gentile and Jewish converts in Rome, moral and doctrinal deficiencies in Corinth, heretical teachings in Galatia and Colossae, personal conflict between two leaders in Philippi, misleading adventist expectations in Thessalonica.

It could be assumed that the key persons habilitated to resolve such problems would have been recognised leaders such as elders/overseers and/or deacons who were presumably in place in every congregation. But, in fact, no appeal is ever made to them in the corresponding epistles to step in, to take command, and to resolve the problems. Instead, congregations are directly urged to get their act together and to confront the difficulties as a group. Officeholders are not even mentioned in those epistles, except cursorily in Philippians. And, in this case, they are completely bypassed. Someone other than each of them is called upon to help mediate the conflict. Such a pattern seems to indicate a clear preference for local congregations to assume responsibility in exercising their own leadership before they have it imposed upon them by an elite group of leaders above them.

The Epistle to the Ephesians merits special consideration in this regard since it actually provides a job description for church leaders (4:11-12). Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers do not represent functions of executive leadership in the body. Their task is only supportive. The executors of the work of ministry and the persons responsible for building up the body of Christ are the 'saints,' that is to say, the congregation. The leaders are there to equip, support, train, and encourage the congregation to perform ministry. Again, the mission of leaders is to develop congregational leadership. It is not top-down control but bottom-up empowerment.

A notable exception to this New Testament developmental model is found in the Pastoral Epistles where it becomes, in fact, reversed. According to 1 Timothy, chapters 2 and 3, and Titus, chapter 1, the ministries of teaching, of managing the affairs of the church, and of leadership were the purview of a rigorously restricted group of men who, in addition to spiritual and character criteria, were selected on the basis of their family status as indispensable proof of their ability to lead the church (1 Tim. 3:4-5,12; Titus 1:6). This model appears to exclude women and most men (unmarried, married and childless, married with only one child, married with unbelieving children, married with believing but unsubmissive children, married with believing, obedient, but disrespectful children) from church leadership functions. It was prescribed as a measure of exception for churches that were in situations of terminal crisis. Its underlying crisis-management principles remain valid for churches that find themselves in similarly extreme predicaments.(i) However, the very existence in the New Testament of this restrictive remedial or crisis-management model highlights the desirability of the prevalent model that calls for the involvement of grassroots leadership resources invested by God among healthy and stable congregations of believers, women and men alike.

Inferences for Today's Churches

This rapid sketch of some of the New Testament teachings about the definition of the role of leadership in community suggests the following conclusions:

1. There is a stark contrast between the developmental definition of leadership presented above and the frenzy of a movement that deserves to be called 'leaderolatry' as it afflicts many contemporary churches of evangelical orientation. Christian promoters of leadership conferences and authors of books on leadership should remember Christ's "It shall not be so among you!" and refrain from going after secular models, authors, and speakers for definitions of Christian leadership. Actually, for all the self-serving consideration that surrounds it currently, leadership as a spiritual gift receives comparatively scant attention in the New Testament ('to lead' in Rom. 12:8 may be alternatively translated 'to provide for others' TNIV).

2. A distinctive mark of Christian leadership is that it is not authority-driven. It relies on instruction, exhortation, and persuasion to fulfil its mandate. According to the New Testament, recourse to authority remains a last resort measure to be invoked for the resolution of disciplinary issues and crisis situations. However, in biblical definition, recourse to authority does not constitute the normal mode of operation for relationships in a community of oneness, be it congregational or conjugal.

3. According to the New Testament, church leadership is always plural. There is no model in the New Testament

for the one-pastor church. Local congregations are always led by teams selected from the congregation and accountable to it. Pastors are part of the leadership team and answerable to it. When recourse to authority becomes necessary, it is exercised by the leadership team. No individual leader may assume authority independently from the leadership team. The Apostle Paul was not a local pastor. Timothy and Titus were not pastors; they were temporary trouble-shooters dispatched to self-destructive congregations for the purpose of replacing corrupt leadership.

4. The New Testament indicates that congregational leadership structures were flexible so that they could be adapted to the growth needs of local churches in consideration of size, changing ministries, new opportunities, and available leadership potential. Constitutional texts that permanently solidify church structures doom those churches to atrophy.

5. Ultimately, the effectiveness of a church leadership team is not dependent on their constitutional texts but on their heart disposition. A highly hierarchical church polity may well be served by servant-minded leaders who make themselves inconspicuous in order to offer ministry opportunities to the greater number. On the other hand, congregational type churches are often dominated by conniving control freaks or manipulative tyrants who occupy centre stage and calculate their every move to elicit adulation.

6. Overbearing leadership often disguises itself under the scriptural cloak of 'servant leadership'. In New Testament definition, authentic servant leadership shares that leadership function by developing potential replacement for itself.

7. A pretext often adduced for strong, dominant individual leadership is the need for one person, presumably privileged with exceptional guidance from God, to engage in 'vision-casting' for the group. The New Testament community model calls for such insights to be submitted to the scrutiny of the congregation. Rather than imposing one individual's visionary program on the body, genuine leadership requires this person to facilitate the vision to be formed at the congregational level in order to generate participation and ownership and to protect the church from rogue vagaries.

8. Unfortunately, congregational life and the business side of church operations are not uncommonly confused with each other. The church office is a parachurch organisation based on remunerated contractual agreements that justify hierarchical structures borrowed from the corporate world. However, the transfer of such structures and of corresponding designations of rank such as 'senior pastor' to the congregational side of the life of the church has no scriptural warrant. At the congregational level, the 'senior pastor' should essentially be a lead person whose task is to develop, nurture, and empower others for ministry.

9. What often goes under the designation of 'strong leadership' is management skills. The difference between biblically defined leadership and management must be sharply drawn. Christian leadership is a team function that comprises management as one of its responsibilities. To reduce church leadership to clever management is to define the part as the whole. It does not matter whether the management is actually conducted by the leadership board or by professional staff administrators responsible to them. But, it is biblically wrong to designate management skills as 'strong leadership'. The latter is a secular concept susceptible to hierarchical abuse when wrongfully imported into the church.

It behoves church leaders who are pushing the current wave of leaderolatry to recognise that they may be striking at the very foundations of the biblical definition of community and that, in Gods eyes, it is a grievous offense to destroy God's temple.

NOTES

i. See Gilbert Bilezikian, Community 101 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 91-128. 4.

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PRISCILLA PAPERS * Vol. 21, No. 4 * Autumn 2007