

CEO No More: The Future of Church Leadership

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Abstract

In the 21st Century church, ecclesial/church leaders are called upon to fulfill a variety of duties. Although the word “pastor” is synonymously associated with church leadership, research reveals that church leadership goes beyond the scope of any particular metaphor. However, the normalization of mega and multisite churches coupled with the practices of the church growth movement seems to encourage a “Chief Executive Officer” mentality when it comes to church leadership. A return to the biblical concepts of church leadership, an exploration of biblical metaphor, and a focus on Christ-centered leadership may provide church leaders with the vocational clarity needed to effectively serve the local church.

Keywords: church, leadership, servant, biblical, pastor

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Ecclesial leaders in the 21st century wear a variety of vocational “hats.” On any given day a pastor may function as a counselor, preacher, janitor, mediator, accountant, or community activist. To say that ecclesial leaders are metaphorically challenged regarding their primary function may be a gross understatement of the problem (C. Bekker, personal communication, November 5, 2014). Yet, it seems that much of the popular focus surrounding ecclesial leadership is geared toward making church leaders better managers, businesspersons, and executives. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) versus pastor debate greatly impacts ecclesial leadership structures. Indeed, church leadership may have shifted away from a stewardship model and towards an executive model. Periodicals such as the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* and the *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* have raised the level of scholarship in the area church leadership while conferences such as Andy Stanley’s *Catalyst* and Perry Noble’s *Unleash* have emphasized church leadership on a pragmatic level (Crowther, 2012). This is not to say that church leaders are not benefiting from all that organizational leadership theory and the best business practices have to offer. However, one could argue that overcompensation in the area of executive management may have long-term negative consequence for vocational ministry and the field of ecclesial leadership (Frank, 2006).

Some attribute the CEO focus of modern church leadership to the high-profile moral failures of church leaders over the last 30 years (Crowther, 2012). Simply put, it appears that the emphasis on practical leadership is a reaction to a previous gap in the pastoral skillset. Others argue that the focus on how to “run” and “grow” a church flow from a systematic shift away from a biblical understanding of ecclesial leadership and toward secular concepts of leadership (Frank, 2006). In many ways, the deep sense of calling, the demand for selfless service, and the

unique spiritual elements of church leadership have been reduced to a series of “10 Ways to Grow Your Church” lists. If the blogosphere is the primary resource for church leadership theory and practices, then it may be time for a recalibration regarding the nature of ecclesial leadership. The rise of the megachurch and a resurgence in community-based and organic church models may offer insight into the future trajectory church leadership.

Church Leadership in Theory

There are several connections between organizational leadership theory and the biblical foundations of modern church leadership. For example, Greenleaf’s (2002) servant leadership theory argues that a “great” leader is first and foremost a servant of others. This principle mirrors several of Christ’s teachings found in the New Testament:

“And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all...for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Mark 9:35;10:45, English Standard Version).

According to Yukl (2003), transformational leaders appeal to values such as liberty, justice, and peace. One could argue that the life and teachings of Christ stand as a prime example of the idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation associated with transformational leadership theory. Even charismatic leadership theory borrows from the Pauline understanding of the Greek word *charis* (Muthiah, 2010).

Along with servant leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership, spiritual leadership also builds on biblical principles. Fry (2009), argues that spiritual leadership flows out of an inner life that positively influences the development of faith and hope in others. Spiritual leadership is relational, transformative, ethical, and authentic (Sanders, 2007). In many

ways, spiritual leadership involves more than natural ability, strong personality, and education (Sanders, 2007). For the church leader, spiritual leadership demands a “power” that cannot be manufactured or developed via traditional means (Sanders, 2007). If the major organizational leadership theories borrow from the ontological, spiritual, and ethical principles of leadership found in the Sacred Text, why does the burgeoning field of church leadership borrow so heavily from extra-biblical sources? Executive leaders in business, government, and commerce use ecclesial ideologies in their efforts to foster ethical communities and healthy organizational culture while church leaders desperately look outside of the ecclesial framework for leadership development (Frank, 2006). Something appears to be broken.

Church Leadership in Practice

Part of the problem may involve the culture of work that exists within the United States (Hoover, 2010). In this culture, “being busy” is often equated with productivity (Hoover, 2010). Thus, church leaders carry a burden of work that leaves little margin for spiritual disciplines and the development of the “unseen self”, which are essential for ministerial longevity. The focus on tasks such as administration, event planning, building maintenance, and policies may cause church leaders to assume that achievement is the only metric for ministerial success (Hoover, 2010). It is important to note that the aforementioned tasks are not bad in and of themselves. Modern technology, the size of church buildings, and congregational expectations require that church leaders have some understanding of organizational management and development (Frank, 2006). However, many equate the high turnover amongst church leaders to the busyness associated with trying to be “all things to all people” on a functional level (Willimon, 2002; Forward, 2000).

The advent of the “megachurch” and the American culture of success also contribute to the shift in church leadership focus. The current church growth movement, inspired by the teachings of C. Peter Wagner, argues that the local church - especially the megachurch, should run like a fine-tuned machine (Watson and Scalen, 2008). A mega church is typically defined as a congregation with a regular attendance of 2,000 or more per week (Walton, 2011). This model emphasizes the well-intended practices of accurate record keeping, metrics, customer service, and culturally relevant teaching (Watson and Scalen, 2008). The megachurch often contains the features one would find in a mall or Fortune 500 company (coffee shops, book stores, gyms, age specific programming, etc.). Some argue that this model also equates success with “more” (Franks, 2006). The megachurch is central to any discussion on the future of church leadership because the leaders of these churches are often promoted as the “ideal” when it comes to leadership, vision-casting, and pastoral ministry. These CEO-like leaders often write the bestselling books, blogs, and conference talks that inspire (and possibly discourage) “normal” church leaders. While there is little denying the apparent spiritual fruit of these large churches, the pressures to “grow” based on the standards of the US leadership industry may cause some to view ecclesial leadership through the lens of best business practices as opposed to a biblical understanding of church leadership. Pastors such as Piper (2013) and Peterson (2011) argue that church leaders are not “professionals” in the classical sense of the term. On the contrary, church leaders are driven by a God-given agenda that transcends the most recognizable vocational identities (Piper, 2013; Peterson, 2011).

The Future of Church Leadership

Perhaps, the way forward is to take a look backwards. A brief exploration of the biblical passages connected to church leadership reveals several principles that make no mention of

numerical or organizational growth (1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Timothy 2:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5):

- Preach the word
- Teach others
- Endure hardship and suffering
- Exercise oversight
- Do not be demanding
- Serve others
- Set an example

Thus, the biblical concepts of church leadership seem to focus more on self leadership and the service of others as opposed to the leader-first mindset that many associate with corporate America (Greenleaf, 2002).

Opponents of the CEO mindset view the megachurch as the “McDonaldization” of Christianity (Watson and Scalen, 2008). Basically, the church seems less about the community and more about the corporation while church leadership seems less about the God-ordained call and more about the CEO (Frank, 2006). Some argue that the church should function in small groups or houses as the early church did (Watson and Scalen, 2008). Should the church should move a way from “brick and mortar” all together and return to an identity based on “being” the church as opposed to “doing” the church? While it is beyond the scope of this article to dissect the nuances of church structure, the answer to the aforementioned question may be found in the biblical concepts of church leadership.

For example, one of the most used metaphors for church leadership found in the New Testament is the term “overseer” (Goodrich, 2013). The overseer did not function as an

autocratic or autonomous “boss.” On the contrary, the overseer was a manager or “steward” who was empowered by a lord or ruler and entrusted with the care of a household (Goodrich, 2013). The steward was a servant with authority. However that authority did not originate with the steward (Goodrich, 2013). The stewards placed the needs of the household above their own personal interest. A CEO is concerned with important matters such as: meetings, budget, policies, and vision casting (Yau Man Siew, 2013). An ecclesial leader should focus on essential matters such as: prayer, teaching, leading worship, and community spiritual development (Yau Man Siew, 2013). A return to the “steward” metaphor may offer church leaders a renewed sense of balance when it comes to the day-to-day operation of a local church. However, church leadership is not limited to one biblical metaphor or model.

Hirsch and Catchim (2012) argue that a return to an Ephesians 4:11-13 model of church leadership may return the church to a healthy understanding of leadership function. Ephesians 4:11-13 states:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”

As an apostle, the church leader is a “sent-one” tasked with establishing new works. The prophetic church leader is one who persuasively challenges the status quo via preaching and teaching (Hirsch and Catchim, 2012). As an evangelist, the church leader focuses on inviting new members into the community through preaching (Hirsch and Catchim, 2012). The pastor or shepherd is one who is able to administer the benevolent use of authority while simultaneously considering the well being of the “sheep” (Laniak, 2006). The teacher’s role is to develop the

existing community by expounding upon biblical truth and reinforcing the congregation's core values (Hirsch and Catchim, 2012).

It seems that part of the lack of vocational focus amongst church leaders is due to the fact that many church leaders try to encapsulate all 5 of the Ephesians 4 gifts. Instead of viewing these leadership gifts as descriptors of pastoral ministry, it may help to view them as a call to shared/decentralized leadership. Church leadership models have historically overemphasized the roles of pastor and teacher to the detriment of church growth and sustained movement (Hirsch and Catchim, 2012). Furthermore, this overemphasis on pastoral ministry may serve as a primary factor behind ecclesial leadership turnover and eventual burnout. The obvious differences between biblical-centered church leadership and culturally centered church leadership are that the latter tends to emphasize competence and charismatic talent over biblical principles such as selflessness, humility, and love (Kretzschmar, 2002). One could also argue that modern pastors are forced to operate outside of the biblical paradigm because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the pastor/shepherd gift found within the broader scope of the other Ephesians 4:11 gifts (Hirsch and Catchim, 2012). To exile the apostles, prophets, and evangelist from church life is to sabotage the very mechanism that Jesus put in place to sustain the church (Hirsch and Catchim, 2012).

Discussion

One way to advance the study of church leadership is to conduct exegetical research into the various biblical passages related to church leadership. For example, the Acts narrative equates church growth and multiplication with the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit and unity within the existing church (Acts 2:42-47; 5:12-16; 9:31). Instead of looking outside of the Bible for effective management formulas and equations for exponential church growth, perhaps

it is time to revisit the biblical foundations of church growth and leadership. This type of scholarship would promote academic thought that takes church growth away from secular business models and moves it back towards biblical paradigms. Since Christ is the head of the church, a renewed scholarly and practical emphasis on Christ-centered leadership may take the burden off of church leaders who feel ultimately responsible for the so-called success of their churches. Finally, it is important to be on guard against extremes in either direction. Instead of discrediting contemporary organizational leadership theories and business practices, church leaders may benefit from allowing the Scriptures to serve as the guide for how those theories and practices are practically implemented. While church leaders may function as executives, counselors, or accountants, it is important that they remember the purpose and nature of the high-call to ecclesial leadership.

If the Bible stands as the foundation for Christian life and practice, then it is paramount that scholars and practitioners reject the popular trend of assimilating Scripture into Western cultural ideologies of leadership (Frank, 2006). Jesus was not a CEO who ambitiously and skillfully managed an organization; He was and is the servant-savior who modeled a style of leadership that transcends the best of organizational leadership. He is the leader that all church leaders should take their cues from. His is the ultimate standard. In Christ one finds power given away, community developed over individualism, and selfless service elevated to the place of greatness (Mark 9:35; 10:45). The future of church leadership seems safe if it remains fundamentally Christ-centered.

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