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Leadership in schools – is there a biblical paradigm?

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This article will give a brief overview of some of the challenges school leaders face; identify some key features of the Bible's teaching on leadership and suggest some ways these could be implemented by leaders in schools.

1 Some challenges faced by school leaders

In general, many people's expectations of schools are as idealistic and romantic as they are unrealistic and impractical. Schools are complex entities. There is the 'core business' side: the educating of students. This is not merely getting on with 'the what' of teaching and learning, it necessarily involves a complex interplay of 'the who', the personal elements of staff, students, parents and administrators. There is also 'the why', the philosophical basis of all that occurs in schools: incorporating the metaphysics, epistemology and ethics of education. In addition to these is 'the how': the interfacing of the school as an organization within society with the variegated legal, administrative and financial aspects that make the school 'go'. The effective managing of such a diverse institution is thus the lot of those who are leaders in schools, especially Heads of schools.

In this context it is difficult to overstate the impact that leadership has on the definition, articulation, and practice of the core beliefs and values that are the fundamental building blocks of the purpose, relationships, structure and culture of individual schools. Consequently, we who are Christians and called to lead schools must do so in a distinctively biblical manner.

But, what sort of leadership are we to exercise? There are many responses to such a question. Theories, definitions, principles, practices for leadership abound and many have attempted to adapt and apply contemporary leadership theories to schools, with varying degrees of success. So, in the midst of the conflicting and often contradictory ideas regarding leadership, we ask: Is there a biblical paradigm for leadership within schools?

2 The enigma of biblical leadership

It is undeniable that the notion of leadership is somewhat enigmatically portrayed in the Bible.

On the one hand, there is often an extensive exploration of the character, events, lives and relationships of leaders such as Moses, Gideon, Samuel, David, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Paul and many others. Yet, it is clear from an exegetical standpoint that leadership is not actually the subject of these narratives, and that as a result aspects of leadership in the lives of the leaders are; at

best, only discursively considered, they are thus to be interpreted in the overall light of the flow of redemptive history in general as well as their specific positioning within the biblical record.

On the other hand, ironically, the nature of leadership *per se* is never comprehensively discussed. While aspects of leadership are noted, comments and judgments on leaders are made, qualities and characteristics for leaders are outlined, there is nevertheless no sustained systematic or formulaic prescriptiveness for leaders or leadership.

That different leaders appear with differing personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and roles within redemptive history of Samson or Peter contra Joseph or Paul, immediately indicates that the profile of a biblical leader is necessarily individual and fluid. Therefore, any search for a single profile paradigm for 'biblical leaders' would be a futile exercise, whereas an examination of fundamental principles applicable to all Christian leaders would not.

3 *The core of biblical leadership*

Against this background, it should be observed that the biblical notion of leadership, particularly in its NT formulation, is deliberately antithetical to the world's idea of leadership. For the world leadership is power: power to control, direct and change; it is to have influence, status, position, and respect. This is graphically portrayed in Matt 23:1-12 where Christ both exposes and then denounces such a view.

In this pericope it is plain that leadership is most often seen in terms of position, one that is highly visible, wielding power and yielding influence; it is to be sitting in the recognizable place of authority; to have prominence, prestige, and control and is inextricably bound up with titles, names, ranks, and status. In summary it is seen as basically self-glorifying, self-seeking, and self-possessed.

Against this view Christ delineated his radical alternative, that of servant leadership.¹ He did so first by the use of a series of strong negatives '*and do not*' that indicate the antithetical nature of the alternative behaviour and attitude he espoused. Secondly, he outlined the major feature that was

to characterize biblical leadership: servanthood; as evidenced supremely and perfectly in himself and that was to be emulated by all those who were to follow him as leaders.

It is this radical view of the leadership as servanthood which predominates in our Lord's teaching on the subject of leadership, cf Matt 20:20-28; Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-30; as well as his own example and exhortation in John 13:1-16. This understanding is further developed in Acts 20:17-38; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Thess 2:1-14; and Heb 13:7, 17.

For Christ leadership had nothing to do with ranks, titles or positions, as stated three times in Matthew 23:8-10 – do not be called or call others, rabbi, father or teacher. We are not to do this because being a brotherhood of believers necessarily precludes the exaltation of one over another, as though by rank or position one is, or is seen to be, or considers him/herself to be, more important than another. The status one has is as a 'Christian'; any other differences are the result of God's gifting and providence, not his saving work.

This does not suggest that Christ was seeking either to diminish or to abolish the different roles and functions that his people were to pursue. To propose this would nullify the importance of the fact that God's people are gifted in order to serve others (cf Eph 4:11ff; 1 Cor 12-14, 1 Peter 4:10ff) and that one of those gifts specifically is that of leadership cf Rom 12:3-8.²

1 The idea of servant leadership espoused by Christ is qualitatively different to that of Robert Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf's notion is, at best, only vaguely defined and primarily views servant leadership as a mechanism of empowering one's followers. While there are useful elements in Greenleaf's concept, it is not essentially the same servant leadership as the one Christ taught.

2 Granted there is some debate regarding the precise meaning of ο' προΐστα,μενοϋ as to whether it refers to a ruler of the congregation; a function undertaken by more than one person; or an administrator in charge of a charitable work, nevertheless whichever is intended all require skills and processes that are inherent in the general connotation of leadership. Further, such a concept is not unique to this passage cf 1 Cor 12-14; 1 Peter 4:7-11; cf also the stewardship of the gifts that God has given in 1 Cor 4:1ff.

Further, the radical nature of this teaching must not escape us. Christ and his disciples lived in a world dominated by the Greco-Roman preoccupation with status, positions and titles, where even clothing was an important indicator of one's social ranking.³ To be a leader and disavow all titles was bad enough, but to be leader who was a servant...! This was to invert all the 'givens' of leadership of the contemporary society and usher in an understanding of leadership that was radically opposed to all the prevailing notions, then or now.

But, whose servant is the leader? In order to biblically respond to this inquiry we must focus on Christ who was **the** Servant of the LORD (cf Isaiah's 'servant songs'), he faithfully served to please the One who sent him and to finish the work that was given him to do cf John 8:29, 4:34 with 17:4. Similarly, those who would serve as leaders must also consciously acknowledge they are servants of the living God.⁴ Whatever role, rank, title or position they may have as leaders they are first and foremost God's servants, their allegiance is to him, and they are accountable to him for all that they do cf Matt 25:14-30.

4 *Some implications for school leaders*

So, what has this to do with Christian leaders in schools? We must begin by examining the way we view ourselves as servants who are leaders. Is the view we have of ourselves as king [or pawn] in the political power broking game called 'school life'? As master [or slave] of the Governors in our educational establishments? As lord [or servant] of all we survey? As engineer [or cog] in the inexorably spinning wheels of institutionalized education in our nation?

It is apparent that Christ's teaching is not antithetical to the harshest realities of leadership. For him, being God's servant meant making the difficult decisions, walking alone, feeling the agonizing grief of betrayal by close friends and, ultimately, abandonment by the One he served. This has profound implications for those of us who are in leadership in schools.

It is the acknowledgement that it is we, who as leaders, will make the final decisions and live, for better or worse, with the consequences of them. Whether that be in casting the bold vision of what

the school could be; forging new processes for student welfare; confronting the erring student and dealing with the subsequent fallout from the parents; or taking the risk in employing a staff member with great potential, but limited experience.

It means a preparedness to lead the way by example rather than decree [or memo]; getting your hands dirty in the details of school life for the glory of God as well as for benefit of staff and students; to be vulnerable by admitting it when you have made a mistake, and not seek to excuse yourself by blaming the incompetence of others; seeking forgiveness from those whom you have wronged or sinned against; doing things that no one would expect of you, such as putting out the chairs for assembly or taking the extra playground duty that no one else wants to; taking time to actively listen to the genuine concerns or grievances of others, empathizing with them, rather than dismissing them as weak or irresponsible.

Biblical leadership, simply put, is having the determination to do what God wants no matter what. It necessarily requires self-denial and self-sacrifice: as for the Master, so for the servant cf Matt 10:24-25. Bradley has rightly observed⁵:

"Leadership sometimes demands bold action, harsh decisions, courage, risk, ignoring the opinions of others, and the willingness to live with uncertainty and a troubled conscience. It sometimes involves deep regrets, difficult negotiations and disappointing compromises. Those realities must be faced and embraced."

3 Cf Winter, B W 'You are what you wore in Roman Law' *The Whitefield Briefing* (Vol 8 No. 4), August 2003. cf also Clarke, A. D. (1993). *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6*. Leiden, E. J. Brill.

4 The title 'servant' was often seen as a title of privilege, depending on the status of Master, and to be a servant of Yahweh was especially 'an honor, raising the status of the person involved. It did not mean degradation but exaltation in Yahweh's service. To be a servant of God had no negative connotations for the servant ...' Carpenter, E. (1997). **dbj** in W. A. VanGemeren (ed) *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis Vol 3*. Carlisle, Paternoster Press. p 307

5 Bradley, Y. (1999). "Servant Leadership: A Critique of Robert Greenleaf's Concept of Leadership." *Journal of Christian Education* 42(2) p. 52

All Christians in school leadership can readily identify with these words.

It is who we are that matters: we are servants of the living God. It is this view of ourselves that will ultimately determine our success and effectiveness, or lack of it, as leaders in schools. As servants we have the amazing privilege of serving him where he has chosen to place us for his glory. It is he who has made us who we are, gifted us as he has, and surrounded us with those of his choosing that we might fulfil his purposes in the lives of all within our school communities. What a wonderful privilege.

Further Reading:

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School leadership: A profile document at: <http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~vsvede/index.html>

What we know about successful school leadership at: <http://eric.uoregon.edu/pdf/whatweknow103.pdf>

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