

Leadership as a Spiritual Practice

In the world of publishing, Harry Potter is not the only cash cow. The genre of leadership books is as well. If you search Chapters on-line for titles listed with a keyword for "leadership", you will find more than 1,300 books. It is a mega-million dollar industry. To paraphrase WP Kinsella, "write it, and they will come". It is a topic of growing concern in our culture. In the face of growing complexity and uncertainty, of rapid change... business, government, non-profits, and – yes – churches yearn for authentic and effective leadership as the cure for their woes.

But the barrage of books and experts over the past 20 years on this subject has muddied the topic more than clarified it. It is getting harder, rather than easier, to answer the question "What is the discipline of leadership about?" Well, there are some common threads in the leadership literature. Here's a few.

- You have to be a student of the life of your congregation. The most valuable tool for the leader is the question, "What is really going on here!"
- You have to have a clear appreciation of the reason for your organization's existence. For us that means knowing the answer to the question, "what is the core purpose of the life of the church?"
- You have to have a sense of direction... destination: whether it's a goal or vision for your congregation's future.
- Leaders empower people. They help people in their congregation find, own and then strive together in their common purpose or towards a common goal. Yet leaders also recognize the strength of diversity, helping individuals contribute from the strength of their uniqueness.
- Leaders are servants. They work for the purposes. Leaders take their lead from the vision. Leaders serve the congregation so it might become what it aspires to be.

In every way, then, leaders are in the business of change.

When we think of the apostle Paul, we don't often look at him through the lens of being a leader. And yet he wrote of and demonstrated these qualities, and through his leadership he had a remarkable affect on the early church. And... we can even say that Paul's influence as a leader, to a degree, is one of the reasons we are a part of the Church today as gentile Christians. You don't have to look any father than Paul's letter to the Ephesians for illustrations of how Paul demonstrated these aspects of leadership that I've listed out.

Paul had a very straightforward answer to the question, "What is really going on here?" The Gentiles did not know Christ. This, in turn, made his goal clear: "Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3.8). What he sought to do was profound: he wanted people to discover and enter into an intimate relationship with God. In an awesome prayer in this letter Paul offered

this hope to his readers, "I pray... that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (3.16-19). Paul appreciated that this was a core purpose of the church. We read in verse 10 of chapter 3, "through the Church the wisdom of God in its rich variety can now be made known... This is in accordance with the eternal purpose that God has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Congregations, through their witness to Christ, are to prompt and foster faith. This, in turn, made Paul's action plan as a leader clear: create new congregations to be new points of light, new living signs to Christ, to be the body that continues to live out the very life of Christ. This was so central in his thinking that he saw Christ's death, resurrection and glorification as enabling this to happen through the Church. In Ephesians he explained, "God put this power to work in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places... and God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made Him the head over all things for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (1.20,22). Congregations are Christ's agents for continuing His work of making disciples. This is our core purpose.

So Paul knew "what's going on here". He also had a vision for the future and he knew what had to be done to make the vision a reality. As a leader he worked for that vision. We read this afternoon, "Of this gospel I have become a servant" (3.7).

Leaders empower people. Well, in Paul's case, he pointed to the empowering work of God in us. He told his readers that God gave spiritual gifts to the people of the church, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4.12,13). He wrote that each one of us, equipped by God, can find our unique place in God's service, and that this in turn helps fulfill the goal of witnessing to Christ.

So, OK: we can see in Paul those attributes of what a leader does. Thus we could say this gives us some kind of "spiritual sanction" to take up and use these leadership skills from business books. But, if we do this, are we not turning over the priority to the leadership guru's? Are we simply going to them first as the experts, following their recommendations, and then reading back into our faith for these practices? Are we really thinking, "the leadership books say an organization like a church needs vision. The Bible talks a lot about vision. So let's do what the leadership books say!" If you think about it, this is really what I've done in this study of Paul as a leader, isn't it?

We could be selling leadership short as a spiritual practice if we do only this.

Let's look at leadership from a faith perspective. I don't think it is an overstatement to say that leadership can be understood as having a religious structure. Just think about those qualities of leadership we've explored here:

We've said leadership starts with an honest, clear assessment of "what's really going on right now?". Bernard Bass, in his book "The Handbook of Leadership" (a 1,200 page textbook – hardly a 'handbook') puts it this way: our views of current reality come down to our perspective on human nature. As an historian of leadership issues, he boiled it all down to religious terms. He wrote, "Either human nature was cursed by original sin or human nature was blessed with the inherent ability to find salvation". Either way, Bass suggests the starting point for leadership is our assumption that the human creature is never quite what we can aspire to be (at best) or (more negatively) that the human creature is simply not what we ought to be. We have, he states, an inherent need to have our beliefs challenged and changed, and that this is a big part of the work of the leader. In the world of religion, we call that naming of what needs to change "confession".

Leadership calls people to glimpse a vision of what can be: for the greater good, for a higher cause. In the world of religion, we talk of meaning and purpose of life. Leadership holds up values to be lived out in fulfilling the vision, that the dream may become reality through a way that is full of integrity. To put it another way, the means to the end (our actions) reflects the goals of the end. In religion, we call this holiness. Leadership should be inherently ethical because leadership is about helping people relate well to each other as they work together on their common purpose. The old word in religion for this is morality. Finally, if leaders call forth new visions, leading to renewed beliefs and new commitments, to new ways of acting, to a vision's fulfillment, does that not sound like "conversion"?

Vision, confession, purpose and meaning, involvement, values worked out through ethical relationships, holiness, conversion.... perhaps leadership is a religious practice.

Now... you may be thinking I've pegged leadership far too high to call it this – a religious practice -- and you may be right. But I wonder if we have not instead set our sights far too low in what we believe leadership is really about. If leadership, really, is only about balanced government budgets, increased corporate profits, maintaining the status quo in our church, then – yes -- our sites have been set too low.

But, if the practice of leadership has a religious framework, then for a people of faith it can become a spiritual discipline:

- *A discipline of discernment:* of wondering how we can serve God as His people who gather as this congregation.
- *A discipline of spiritual formation:* of honestly discussing our needs for change in light of our calling to be more fully the body of Christ. This practice will take corporate confession and conversion.
- *A discipline of building up the body:* in discovering and using our giftedness, in strengthening our community life, in our growing witness, so that people may grow in discipleship.

Paul saw the church as a means of God to reach into the world and to change it. He wrote to the Ephesians, “For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (2.10). Wow, to do this will take leadership: leadership which looks to God, draws from God, leans on God.

So, yes, in the face of tremendous change, I do read Maxwell and Max DePree, Heifetz and Warren Bennis, Drucker and Covey. There is wisdom to be mined here. But as we sift through these books, reading with the eyes of faith, we can see that these are but tools that can be put into the service of our spiritual work of discernment, spiritual formation, building the body. Making leadership a spiritual practice first will prompt us not to be change technicians, but spiritual leaders.

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