

Leadership: Sight and insight, influence, every member

By Bob Young

Leadership is not what most people think it is. Secular concepts of leadership stand in stark contrast to biblical concepts of leadership. Three aspects of biblical leadership highlight the contrast.

Leadership is sight and insight. To guide is a common synonym of the verb to lead. To guide means to show the way. One root of this word relates to knowing, showing, pointing out, and seeing. This suggests that leading is about seeing and knowing the way to reach the goal. Of course, one shows the way by example, but first one must know the way. In our contemporary world (and in a majority of the churches), we often try to develop leaders or leadership by focusing on a set of qualities or traits of leaders. We promote leadership and we try to cultivate certain qualities in future leaders. Too often we do this without establishing the foundation. Effective leadership demands that leaders understand the nature of reality. Biblically, this means that leaders know God, know themselves, know love and mercy and justice, and can live their own lives accordingly. Biblically, leaders are those who know the way and are able to influence others to follow a certain path. They are spiritually wise and capable guides. They have both sight and insight. The New Testament describes church leaders as those who have a certain kind of relationship in their marriages, their homes, the church, and their neighborhoods and communities. While a list of qualities or requirements may be helpful, a better first question is, what can this person see? Another question that reflects the same principle is this: what is the testimony of his or her life, relationships, lifestyle, priorities, reputation, and influence?

Leadership is influence. In most of the seminars I present in Latin American churches, the entire local congregation is invited. Since the goal is congregational and spiritual development, it is imperative that as many as possible be present. I often begin seminars by asking all of those who are leaders to raise their hands. Generally, only a small number of those present raise their hands. After explaining that every person who has influence in the life of another person is a leader, I ask the question again. The second time, almost everyone raises their hands. The first point I want to make is that all are leaders. A leader is simply a person with influence. There are good leaders because people have a good influence; there are bad leaders because there are people who are bad influences. Everyone is a leader; every Christian is a leader. We are leaders through our examples—whether good or bad. Our children are leaders when they invite their friends to church events. Our leadership crisis in the church begins in our pre-school and primary classes because we describe leaders as an exalted and separated class of Christians. We must rethink the nature of leadership, and we must begin by establishing the biblical foundations.

In the Old Testament, Israel had good leaders and Israel had bad leaders. Whether your translation of the Bible uses the word leader or not, there were people who functioned as guides and influences. Because there were people with influence, there were leaders. I repeat: a leader is simply a person with influence. Leadership was exercised in the home and in the nation. Sometimes the influence of a king in his home was different than his influence in the

nation. There were good kings who had bad sons. There were bad kings who had good sons. This reminds us that leadership exists in the home, in the church, in our neighborhoods, at work, in the community, and everywhere we go.

Leadership is for every member. In the church described in the New Testament, all Christians were called to be leaders according to the gifts, ministries, and activities they had been given. Every Christian was called and empowered to be involved in the work of the church and to be an influence for Christ, to assist in the edification of the body and to grow into spiritual maturity. Different Christians were given different gifts, different ministries, different roles, and different responsibilities. Never did these become a matter of position or office.

Misunderstandings of the nature of the leadership described in the New Testament have led the church to depend on special classes of members (“leaders” such as elders, deacons, preachers, and evangelists) to do the work. The churches have developed offices and positions, power and control. The average member sitting in the pew does not see himself as a leader. The average member does not think of herself as capable of doing much that is important in the work of the church. The average member does not think constantly about who and where and when and how to be an influence for Christ.

Before the local church can begin to grow again—with spiritual maturity and biblical organization, with members committed to being positive influences for Christ everywhere they go, we must conceptualize afresh the nature of the New Testament church. The New Testament church is not an enterprise or a business. It is the body of Christ, a living organism. Biblical organization does not parallel the organizational models of secular endeavors.