

Redefining Christian Leadership

By Bob Young

One way to deal with the leadership dilemma is to quit using the words “lead, leader, leadership.” That was the suggestion of one brother in Latin America. Certainly that is one way to deal with the problem, but in my mind it is an insufficient solution. The church, called to be a contrast community in the world, must make clear that secular definitions and practices of leadership are very different from biblical descriptions. The problem is not the use of the word leadership. The problem is that our concept of leadership is more informed by the world than by the Bible. We must redefine Christian leadership in order to help the church be what God calls it to be, and in order to help the church begin to grow again.

Let me quote a brief excerpt from the previous article in this series:

“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.”

Ephesians 4 clearly describes the preparation and ministry of every Christian and the activity and importance of every member of the body. Every member is important. Every member is called to spiritual maturity. The results are that the church is self-edified and unified, and that each member grows into a “little Christ,” attaining a measure of the stature of Christ. Every Christian is called to be a leader in his own sphere of influence and ability.

It is difficult to read the New Testament and conclude that clergy and laity distinctions existed. All Christians are *laos* (the Greek word for people, thus the people of God), including elders and ministers. This word occurs three times in 1 Pet. 2:9-10, always referring to all of God’s people. It never refers to only a part of God’s people or to a portion of the Christian assembly. Equally, all Christians are *kleros* (the Greek word means a lot or inheritance). This word is applied to all Christians in 1 Pet. 5:3, where elders are instructed not to be “lords over God’s heritage.” Elders are given the care of the *kleros* (heritage), not dominion. *Kleros* is never used in the New Testament to refer to a special group of Christians. All Christians are God’s people (laity, if you will) and God’s heritage (clergy, if you will).

Historically, numerous problems have arisen because of the distinction between clergy and laity.

- The distinction between clergy and laity is the first step away from the biblical model found in the New Testament. Some Christian groups have discarded the use of the terms clergy and laity but have retained the reality in a faulty model of church organization, maintaining distinctive “offices” and “positions,” or insisting on authority and control, rather than focusing on ministry and service.

- The distinction between clergy and laity confuses the distinction between the two covenants, between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God established the priesthood and gave regulations for the separation of the priests from the general population of Israel, but God does not intend for the New Testament church to have certain “holy men” who are the only ones qualified and responsible for leadership and ministry.
- The distinction between clergy and laity undermines New Testament authority, because a select group of Christians becomes the interpreters and controllers of Scripture.
- The distinction between clergy and laity keeps the church from being what God intends—a functioning body. The distinction limits the work of the body. It demeans the role of the majority of the members of the body and excludes them from certain parts of the work.
- The distinction between clergy and laity disconnects daily life from the spiritual life; it separates the inner world from the outer world. Some members of the body are more spiritually mature; others are not expected to reach spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity and insight is only for a limited group. Ministry becomes the exclusive responsibility of a certain class of Christians.
- The distinction between clergy and laity confuses the nature of the differences between various ministries or responsibilities in the church. In the New Testament, the distinctions between ministries are functional not hierarchical.

How must we redefine biblical leadership?

First, we must clearly set forth the nature of biblical or Christian leadership: **focused directional influence that persuades others**. This phrase says four things. (1) Biblical leadership is focused. It points to Jesus. (2) Biblical leadership is directional. It helps others know how to move forward; it mentors and empowers. (3) Biblical leadership is influence. It has an impact on the decisions and actions of others. (4) Biblical leadership is persuasive. It changes minds, so that eventually followship is not based on control but on changed thinking.

Consider these principles.

- We must recognize that leadership exists in the church.
- Biblical leadership is not exclusive. We must emphasize that every Christian is called to be a leader in the biblical sense of the word. All Christians lead in various ways and in different areas.
- Every Christian receives gifts, ministries, and activities that call and empower to be involved in the work of the church, to be an influence for Christ, to assist in the edification of the body, and to grow into spiritual maturity.
- Different Christians are given different gifts, different ministries, different roles, and different responsibilities. The differences are functional not hierarchical.
- Biblical leadership is not based on position or office.
- Biblical leadership does not follow worldly definitions of success. Biblical leadership is not successful based on the number of followers. Biblical leadership is based on service, not being served.

- Ministry is not exclusive but is the calling and responsibility of every Christian.
- Biblical leadership honors every member of the church. We must avoid demeaning some church members as less capable and less important.
- Biblical leadership involves both teaching and example.