

Christian Leadership: A Summary

By Bob Young

Note: I am indebted to Frank Viola for helping me think through some of these summarizing principles. Some of the points are his, both in concept and in wording.

Following are some summary points to assist in establishing a biblical definition of Christian leadership. The Bible does not specifically use the words “leader” or “leadership,” but the concept of leaders and leadership is a biblical concept. The words “leader” and “leadership” are used at times in this summary, but in the biblical sense of those words. Read, think, study.

-1- Jesus Christ has all authority; only Jesus Christ is the head of the church. In the church, authority flows from Jesus Christ. Whatever leadership exists in the church depends on Jesus. Because every member of the body is guided by the head, every member of the church of Christ knows, is guided by, and is authorized to reveal Christ’s mind and will. Christ speaks and works through every member of his body; every member of the body has access to the mind of Christ. The will and mind of Christ is not the exclusive property of a few special members.

When Jesus’ apostles understood the kingdom in terms of authority and levels of importance, Jesus clearly said that it would not be so among his followers, that his kingdom would be different. The apostles were expecting an earthly kingdom and were thinking of the kingdom in earthly terms, but Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom. Jesus’ model of being the head and having authority was not like the model used in the world. Earthly understandings of authority, power, and control, even when used for good, are contrary to the nature of the spiritual kingdom, the church.

On the contrary, Jesus said that leadership in the spiritual kingdom comes through service and sacrifice. This description of the nature of the kingdom, and leadership and authority in the kingdom, changes everything. When we focus on following and imitating Jesus, serving Him and serving others, we naturally lead by our example, both in word and in action.

-2- That Jesus has all authority in the church does not imply an “office.” Jesus is the head of the church, but since the church is his body and is a living organism, the concept of office is not a functional description of his role. As head of the church, Jesus shares his fullness with his body as he gives gifts and empowers for ministry and service. The word pictures used in the New Testament to describe the relationship between Jesus and his body do not support the concept of leading the church from an “office” or “position.” The relationship is personal, shepherd/sheep, groom/bride, head/body, husband/wife, brothers.

-3- None of the words for “office” in the Greek language are used to describe a function or role in the church. Never in the New Testament is leadership in the church a matter of position or office. The use of “office” in translating 1 Tim. 3:1 is more based on church practice than the Greek words. The text uses a form of episkopos (bishop, superintendent) and literally says that if a man desires “superintendence” (to serve as or be a superintendent) he desires a good work. One can describe leadership as a work or service, ministry or task based on these words, but to think of an “office” is to read into the text based on already existing understandings or practices of church leadership.

-4- The New Testament never uses the term “leader” to describe those who care for, oversee, or counsel the church. In *some* translations, the word “leader” appears in a few texts (Heb. 13:17 and Rom 12:8). These are not good translations of the Greek. The words are better translated as guard, give care, or guide. They are verbs not nouns. The New Testament clearly

identifies a group of men in each local congregation that are responsible for guiding, overseeing, and caring for the church. These are variously described as elders, bishops and pastors, all of which are descriptions of the same group. But, these are not the “leaders” in a local church. They simply minister in specific tasks that are different from the tasks of other members of the church.

-5- The words used to describe overseers (also called elders and shepherds or pastors in the New Testament) are an important part of the biblical organization of the church, but these ministries or functions are not offices or positions that have inherent authority or control over other believers. In some sense of the word, the overseers/elders/shepherds lead, but so do others—prophets, evangelists, teachers, exhorters, those who have gifts of mercy, helps, and every other function in the body of Christ. Christ has all authority, and every Christian has authority to speak according to the word of God. All Christians lead according to their specific gifts and ministries. For more on this concept, study the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4.

If the Bible does not speak about a matter, there is no spiritual authority to be exercised. The use of the word authority in non-biblical matters or decisions leads to faulty conclusions because of secular understandings. The Bible uses multiple words to describe the roles, responsibilities, and work of those who care for and provide spiritual counsel and wisdom for the church.

-6- Jesus Christ redefined leadership. He taught against the positional and titular view of religious leadership that was common in Judaism (Matt. 23:8-13; Luke 20:46-47). He denied the hierarchical view of leadership that was common among the Gentiles (Matt. 20:25-28; Mark 10:43-45; Luke 22:24-26). He said that it would be different among his followers. He taught service and sacrifice as the way to influence others.

-7- We should not be surprised that the New Testament does not emphasize leadership in the contemporary use of the concept. Rather, the New Testament emphasizes following Jesus and living as a servant of Christ and a servant to others. According to the New Testament, all are gifted, all are servants (ministers), all are priests, and all have ministry as members of the body. All are called to be examples of Jesus.

-8- Hebrews 13:17 does not teach obedience to leaders. “Obey them that are over you.” The Greek word for obey in this passage is not *hupakuo*, the usual word for obedience in the New Testament. It is *peitho* (middle/passive) meaning to yield to persuasion or to be persuaded. The author says, “Allow yourselves to be persuaded by those who are more mature in Christ than you are.” Further, the words “over” and “rule” in some translations of this text do not reflect the Greek. Elders are not rulers or lords; they are not over the flock, they are *among* it (1 Pet. 5:1; Acts 20:28).

-9- Therefore, the modern and post-modern concepts of leadership that focus on control and obedience are not helpful or applicable in the church. If Christians spend time focusing on following Jesus Christ and sharing whatever He has given them with others, i.e. functioning as a member of the body and serving others, rather than focusing on how to be a leader in the secular sense of the word, the Kingdom of God will advance much more rapidly.

-10- Many Christians and churches follow a worldly model of leadership rather than the New Testament description of leadership. The New Testament reveals the nature of the church. The New Testament tells us how the church should be understood and how it should function. The church is divinely ordained not humanly constructed; it is a spiritual organism not a

secular organization. Understanding the nature of the church changes our understanding of leadership in the church.

Is it possible that the biblical model of Christian leadership could be better taught by focusing on how to follow Jesus Christ rather than focusing on how to be a leader?