

Leadership: Influence and Service vs. Power and Authority

By Bob Young

Simply defined, a leader is a person with influence. Whether a leader is good or bad depends on whether the influence wielded is good or bad. One's leadership can be measured by the influence one exerts. Leadership can also be measured by its results—leaders have followers. Because almost every person in the church, including very young children, has influence, in one sense, every Christian is a leader. We can use our influence to encourage others toward spiritual things. This refers to leadership in an informal sense.

Christian leadership is the result of influence rather than power. How does one come to have influence? What are the sources of influence? A short list would note that one may have influence due to (1) a hierarchical structure, that is, as the result of one's position or by definition, (2) relationships, (3) competence or abilities, (4) knowledge, (5) credibility, (6) experience and example, (7) personal characteristics or charisma, and (8) spiritual maturity. Leadership that guides by influence is always more effective than leadership that depends on power structures.

Christian leadership is the result of service rather than authority. Jesus came to serve, not to be served (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). Jesus demonstrated his love by service (John 13). Jesus said that the one who would lead (be great) would be the servant of all (Luke 22:24-28). Leaders serve. One who does not serve cannot be a leader in reality but is only a leader by definition. Jesus has all authority, but his leadership does not depend on his authority but on his service and love. The Bible does not use the word "leadership", but the life and teachings of Jesus clearly show us the nature of one who leads. New Testament texts from Acts and the letters reinforce the biblical foundations which guide those who would lead God's people.

Effective biblical leadership is not based on or dependent on power. Power does not make one a leader in the biblical use of this concept. A leader who has to rely on power in order to lead will be a poor leader. Power leadership may work in the business world where people receive salaries and have personal interests as motivators. In the church, power is an inadequate base for leading volunteers.

Effective biblical leadership is not to be confused with authority. Leaders have authority, but it is the authority of example, relationships, knowledge, and abilities. Leadership is based in the heart, not the will. Jesus has all authority and he commands obedience based on love, not demands. Paul wrote to Philemon that he could demand Philemon's response, but he does not because love based on example, relationships, and understanding is sufficient.

Christian leadership leads from influence and service more than from power and authority. May those of us who strive to serve as leaders imitate Jesus' model of leadership!