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## Toward a Biblical Theology of Leadership: Followers who Shepherd and Serve others to Follow

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Christian leadership as a subset of leadership is unique. It is unique because of the modifier of “Christian.”<sup>1</sup> The meaning of this modifier, however, is often unclear in the minds of those who use it. Most authors who write on this topic have thought long and hard about what this means, but the average Christian still wrestles with the question of “what makes leadership Christian?”

The first deviation between leadership and Christian leadership is obviously the faith of the leader. Only Christian leaders can practice Christian leadership. Surely, non-Christian leaders can borrow methodology from theological reflection that they perceive to improve on the product of leading, but it does not make them a Christian leader. Beyond this distinction though, many have trouble identifying what makes Christian leadership *Christian*. What is the next fork in the road that separates Christian leadership from all other forms of leadership? Knowing where Christian leadership deviates helps us to conceptualize the uniqueness of this subset and then trace our trajectory and analyze our action. For just as non-Christians cannot practice Christian leadership, many Christians fail to *actually* practice

Christian leadership. Instead, their version of leading as a Christian is simply imputed models of business leadership applied to a religious context.

As we move toward a biblical theology of leadership, it is important to consider the next fork separating these two leadership approaches. Some may suppose it is methodological, pragmatic, or personal practices which result in variances of leadership philosophy. However, above these more practical considerations is a subtle yet vitally important branch which

further separates Christian leadership from leadership proper, and it is this:

*Christian leaders are first followers.* Recognizing this reality is the right location for starting out with a

definition of *Christian* leadership, as contrasted by secular leadership common in culture. By nature, leaders lead, yet as Christian leaders, we do not lead into a direction we have visioneered. Instead, we are beholden to a master and His trajectory. Thus, in attempting to whittle down the differences between Christian leadership and secular leadership, I propose that Christian leaders are first called to follow and secondly to lead others to follow their following.

Secular leadership and Christian leadership may accomplish their goals similarly through common grace and common leadership, but in essence the difference is that the secular leader gets to set their own direction for the tasks at hand, while the Christian leader is obligated as a bondservant to the

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will of his Lord. For this task, Christian leaders, receive directives from the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, and in turn become the first-follower in a chain-reaction that leads to the followership of others. In this role as Christian leader then, the duty is to lead others to follow well. This is how and why Paul often said, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Certainly Paul was a Christian leader, and he was this because he understood that his leading was not after his own vision of ministry, but rather his leading was to lead others to follow well that they too might walk the path first walked by Christ.

If leadership as followership is the Christian distinction, then the question must be asked, “How does one accomplish this task of leading by following?” In order to answer this question, I will submit two biblical motifs used to image the task of the Christian leader. This goal will certainly fail to be comprehensive, and there are likely many additional pictures one could find in the pages of scripture to clarify the task of the Christian leader. However, this is why my goal here is to aim “toward” a biblical theology of leadership. The hope of this article is to add to a conversation that has been happening for years and I hope will continue to happen for years to come. It is an attempt to clarify an important part of the leadership task and biblical vision for leading. Thus, in order to move toward this conception of Christian leadership, the two motifs that will draw our attention are the shepherd and the servant. However, these pictures will be related to the cross and the incarnation as Christ first leads leaders that we may in turn lead others to follow him as well.

## **The Incarnation and Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership is often, rightfully, grounded in Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45. In both of these accounts James and John ask a request of Jesus. They wanted to “sit, one at [Christ’s] right hand and one at his left, in [his] glory” (Mark 10:37, c.f., Matt 20:21). Christ’s reply is as timely today as it was then, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the

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Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (42b-45; c.f., Matt 20:25-28).

Servanthood has long been rightly associated with Christian leadership, but even before the gospel’s explicit teaching on the topic, there is perhaps a more foundational biblical grounding of servanthood. And it is found in the incarnation (Phil 2). Paul, in his letter to the Philippians encourages these readers to “complete my joy by *being of the same mind*, having the same love, being in full accord and of *one mind*” (v. 2, *emphasis added*). Going on, he says, “Have *this* mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (v. 5, *emphasis added*). The explanation of “this” is then conveyed in the verses that follow. Here Paul tells of the incarnation how Christ emptied himself “taking the form of a servant”

(v. 7). The teaching here is clear, we are to have the same mind, one mind which led Christ to taking the form of a servant. Christ's example in the incarnation translated his heavenly existence to earth, taking the form of a servant.

Shortly after this passage Paul proceeds to tell us about Timothy and Epaphroditus and their work for the Lord. Timothy, Paul says, is like no one else. He is "genuinely concerned for your [the Philippians'] welfare" (v. 20). Many seek their own interests, but Paul implies that this is not so of Timothy whose interests are rooted in what interests Christ. Similarly, Epaphroditus is a brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier who nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life in service (v. 25, 30). It is noteworthy that this excursus on Timothy and Epaphroditus takes place after Paul's teaching on humility culminating on Christ's willingness to humble himself in the incarnation. What happens in this passage is a progression. Christ is held up as the example *par excellence*, but then Timothy and Epaphroditus are used to demonstrate how Christ's example is played out in the lives of leaders. These young emissaries had the same mind of Christ, and it was evident in their service.

The incarnation serves as the primary picture of servant leadership as Christ took the "form of a servant . . . and humbled himself becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (v. 7-8). But it also reveals to us how Christian leaders are to serve. Our service is not abstract serving, but it is service modeled after the self-less service of Christ. Generally, servant leadership as a

concept has become in vogue across the leadership spectrum. Christians and non-Christians have learned that there is a secret to be had in servant leadership. Yet, Christian leaders serve because they are first following Christ in his servanthood.

**We serve,  
because He first  
served us**

Secular leaders trying to impute this understanding into their leadership models will ultimately fail to reach the level of selflessness required in the incarnation because they do not have a picture to follow that compels them to such service. This does not mean however, that Christian leaders will succeed in such leadership. While we have a perfect example, our vision is often blurred by sin and selfishness.

Yet, Christ offers to Christians the death of self and will replace our life with his. In this, we can see his call more clearly and how the incarnation founds the most compelling vision for such service. We serve, because He first served us (c.f., 1 Jn 4:19), and it is this mind of Christ that Paul tells us to have among ourselves (Phil 2:5). This then becomes one of the ways we follow first as leaders. We follow in service which compels to serve even at great cost. Christ was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). This is Christian leadership.

### **Shepherd Leadership and The Cross**

Shepherds were common in the times of the Bible. From the Old Testament to the New, shepherds were a cultural necessity, but they also were useful for imaging God's care for his people. In Isaiah we are

told that “[God] will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (40:11). The Psalmist reminds that “he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid, but the sea overwhelmed their enemies” (78:52–53). To Ezekiel, God says, “I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken” (34:22–24). God acts as Shepherd and even promises that “if Israel would return, God would give them ‘shepherds,’ i.e., rulers, who were like him.”<sup>2</sup> In Jeremiah 3:15, this is a reference to the prophesied “shepherds after my own heart.” It is a messianic promise for a ruler “who will lead with ‘knowledge and understanding,’ that is, he will rule wisely and well.”<sup>3</sup> This prophecy is fulfilled in Christ and in John 10 it is even clarified as Christ tells us that he is the Good Shepherd. As the Good Shepherd the sheep hear his voice and recognize it, they are known to the shepherd, the shepherd goes before them and the sheep follow (v. 3-4).

Using Psalm 23, Walter Kaiser traces the theme of the shepherd as a biblical motif for leadership.<sup>4</sup> As the passage begins, we are told that the Lord is our shepherd. This reality harkens back to our thesis here. Christian leaders are first followers, and if we are following well, we are becoming what

God has modeled for us. If God is our shepherd then we too must put on this picture of shepherding in our leading. Shepherds anticipated the needs of the sheep (c.f., “I shall not want” [v. 1b], “He makes me lie down in Green Pastures” [v. 2a], and “He leads me beside the still/quiet waters” [v. 2b]). In verse 3, we are told that the Shepherd “guides me into the right paths for his name’s sake.” On this Kaiser says, “Sheep in the Middle East are not driven from behind the flock as they might be herded in the other parts of the world, but are led by the shepherd walking in front of them, to form a path for the flock to follow. That is why all of the sheep are guided so well; they follow single-file in the path set by the feet of the shepherd.”<sup>5</sup> Verse 3 makes verse 4 possible. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” When the shepherd is in front of the sheep leading them with reassurance as to where to step and how to go, valleys become less fearsome. The shepherd, as leader, protects and provides for their sheep. Shepherds protect their sheep from the natural dangers of life and from those that might want to devour. Shepherds also provide for their sheep. They provide what is needed, they provide rest, they provide water and sustenance, and they provide direction. For without the guidance of the shepherd we would be like the crowds in the cities and villages along the route of Christ’s traveling and teaching who were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36).

It is with this picture of the shepherd in mind that we move from the shepherd as leadership motif to a theology of the cross. This movement will

hopefully complete the proposal for Christian leadership that I am advocating here. For Martin Luther, a theology of the cross paradoxically reversed the emphasis of theology he saw in the Catholic church – a theology of glory. A theology of the cross, contrasts with glory and recognizes that God’s good plans were accomplished in the suffering found on the cross. Therefore, we see that God’s plan for redemption was paradoxical. A theology of the cross recognizes that the weak are strong, the poor are rich, and the persecuted are blessed, and the leader is servant and shepherd.

Kaiser’s work reminds us how the shepherd-leader walked with the sheep leading them to life and through the valley of the shadow of death. Christ demonstrated this leadership as the Good Shepherd and in his walk to Calvary, he leads us through his death into the resurrection and our life. As the Good Shepherd, much like the shepherd of Psalm 23, “he leads me in paths of righteousness” (v. 3b). Christ walked in front leading to the cross, going where we could not go unless we were willing to follow his lead. Jesus has shown us that the shepherd leader is willing to walk before the sheep that they may have sure footings and a secure, albeit not easy, path. In John 10, we are told that the good shepherd, “lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11). Shepherd leadership reflects this crucicentric theology demonstrating the lengths to which Christ, as leader went, for the sake of us. And it is because of His example that Christian leaders follow in this cruciform leadership. We lead not in glory, but we lead by carrying our own cross and helping others to

carry theirs. As Christian leaders, we follow the path laid out by Christ who has gone where we could not go without first his example. But because he has walked to Calvary, we too can lead others to the cross.

### **Christ, both Shepherd and Servant**

Christian leaders are to lead like Christ. And, I have hopefully pointed out successfully, they are to lead in the directions that Christ has modeled. This is more than a style of leadership. Occasionally as I teach on this topic, I get students attracted to something from one of these motifs coming to the conclusion that they are (emphatically) a servant leader or a shepherd leader. This conclusion misses the point. Christ was both shepherd (John 10) and servant (Phil 2). If Christ was both, and Christian leaders receive our direction for leading from him, then we too must incarnate as servants (Phil 2) and shepherd people along the road to Calvary (John 10). Christian leaders are *both* shepherds *and* servants. We lead in light of the incarnation and the cross just as Christ has modeled for us.

### **Under-shepherds and bondservants**

These two pictures – the shepherd and the servant – provide to us images of what our leadership should look like. However, in closing I want to make sure I nuance these roles clearly. Christian leaders are not just shepherds, we are under-shepherds leading a flock of sheep for a season, but always at the behest of the Good Shepherd. As Christian leaders we are also servants, but not just servants – bondservants with a master to whom we are beholden as stewards. Our

master has tasked us with a charge, and it is that for which we are responsible. Thus, the directional

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component for Christian leadership is always set by the One above. True Christian leadership never sets a new course, it is always directionally oriented because it is following

the charge of our Good Shepherd and our Master. Christian leaders receive their commissioning and use their authority unto the accomplishment of His will. Each under-shepherd and bondservant are given a different task along with capacities and opportunities to accomplish these tasks.

Christian leadership in practice looks as unique and different as there are individuals in the church. Some are professional leaders – paid to lead. Of these, some are paid to lead the church or para-church organizations. Others are paid to lead within secular companies or in governmental agencies. The expectations of the constituencies of each of these locations is extremely different, and how the Christian leader navigates these expectations will vary. But the Good Shepherd expects that we will shepherd those in our care first by following His voice ourselves, and then leading others to hear His voice and respond to His call. Our Master expects the same, we are to serve others, but to serve them in a way that is consistent with our charge as steward over His affairs. Navigating how this is done takes dexterity and a sensitive ear to hear the words of the

Lord through the voice of the Spirit. This task, however, is not only for the paid or professional leader. This same expectation is passed along to all Christians, because all Christians have a modicum of influence and thus the opportunity to lead others. This leadership may be in its infancy or it may be that at this point in life we are only leading infants. Regardless of our professionalism as leaders – Christians are called to follow well and lead others to follow similarly. Let us like Paul often say, “Follow me, as I follow Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

May our pursuit in leading be focused not upon leaving a legacy, not of bricks/mortar or vocation/visioning, but of obedience and faithfulness. For it is the faithful pursuit of God’s calling as shepherds and servants that will be the ruler by which our leadership is measured. And, if we faithfully pursue obedient followership, we too will hear Christ’s resound, “well done good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21).

*(Endnotes begin on next page.)*

**ENDNOTES**

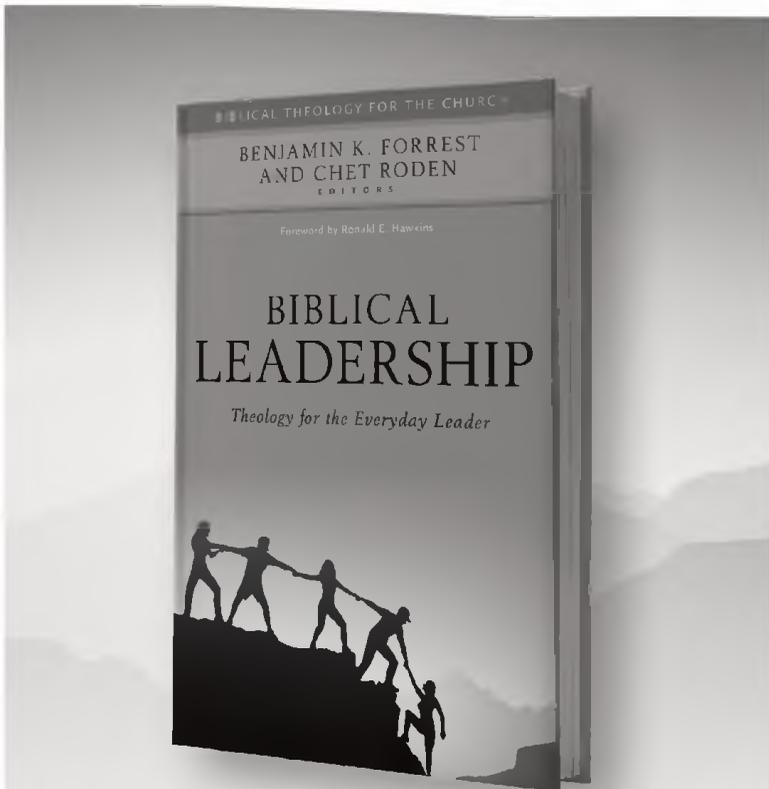
1 AUTHOR'S NOTE: Excerpt taken from *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader* edited by Benjamin K. Forrest and Chet Roden. Published by Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, MI, 2017. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2 F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 75.

3 Ibid.

4 Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The 'Shepherd' as a Biblical Metaphor: Leadership in Psalm 23," in *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader*, edited by Benjamin K. Forrest and Chet Roden (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2017), 155-162.

5 Ibid., 158.



*“Biblical Leadership . . . constitutes a unique contribution to the literature dealing with Christian leadership, especially because of the broad biblical approach adopted, the caliber of the scholars enlisted for the project, and the essays each has contributed. Most parts of the Bible are explored, noting their particular historical contexts, and highlighting the various aspects of leadership they reflect and/or mandate.”*

—COLIN G. KRUSE, Melbourne School of Theology

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