

THE MYSTERY OF ELDERS AS SERVANT- LEADERS

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At last, the elders' meeting adjourned in the wee hours of the morning with every participant physically weary and mentally depleted.

The meeting had not gone well for a lot of reasons. From the chairman's viewpoint, the meeting was impossible to control. Although the group wanted to finish on time, it seemed to the chairman that they enjoyed wandering off the subject and wasting time.

From their viewpoint, the participants in the meeting were frustrated because it had taken so long to adjourn. Actually the meeting did not adjourn, but really just died. When the hour grew late, the men finally said, " It's late, and we've been here long enough." So they informally dismissed themselves. Some then realized they had contributed to the failure of the meeting, but still they could not help also blaming the chairman for not doing a better job of controlling the meeting.

Part of their frustration came from the decisions they had been struggling with that night. As they handled problems on their agenda, they also rehearsed the difficulty of dealing with some of the people in their congregation. It seemed that no matter what they decided, someone would be unhappy. They had been down this road before, and they didn't enjoy their second and third trips. Most of their agenda seemed to be putting out fires, and as soon as one complaint fire was doused, another one sprang to life. Their meetings seemed like a boring walk on an endless treadmill.

This story is not unique, and not even rare. It happens time after time to God's men, the Elders. We intuitively know that the answer to this problem is leadership, but how do we exercise that kind of leadership in the baffling work of the eldership?

Consulting modern business leadership principles may or may not help us in a church setting. What works in business does not always work in spiritual settings.

Instead, let's go to the words of Jesus and see if we can find the key to the leadership puzzle. Listen to what the Lord said about leadership style. In the twentieth chapter of Matthew, Jesus told the story about the mother of Zebedee's children asking that her two sons sit on the Jesus right and left hand when he came into his kingdom. This bold grab for a position of authority made the other apostles indignant.

Matthew 20: 20 – 28

Listen to Jesus' answer as he changes the paradigm of their thinking and puts a new frame on the picture. His words were, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever want to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Just reading that text shows us that all we have to do is to lead in the style that Jesus taught. So why do we have so much trouble understanding that? The truth is we know the leadership principle in theory, but we don't always know how to apply it. Knowing the words does not necessarily qualify us to interpret those words into action. We don't seem to know how to apply the words of Jesus to our leadership.

Let's explore the implications of Christ's description of a special brand of leadership. He suggests two different styles of leadership.

Authoritarian Leadership

Our Lord does not recommend the authoritarian brand of leadership for the church. He explains that this type of leadership is characteristic of the Gentiles. Such people "lord it over" you and "exercise authority" over you. Today we call this positional authority or command authority. You do this because I say so. Such people are called "bosses."

The use of authority sometimes gets good short term results, but bad long term results. One can lead with power and fear in the short run, but in the long run, such methods are destructive of what Jesus wanted for the church.

This method has also been called "top down" authority; that is, the boss decides what will be done, how it will be done, and when it will be done. Then he sends the message down the chain of command. This type of leadership appeals to people who love the sense of power and enhances their sense of importance. We may not know all the reasons why this kind of leadership is not best for the spiritual kingdom, but the fact that Jesus prohibited it ought to remove it as an option for us.

A man of low station in life once asked to be appointed to a very high ranking job in the government. The political leader explained to him that such a job required a very important person to fill it. The man's reply was, "But if you would put me in that job, I would be an important person!"

Regardless of how you feel about that kind of leadership or how many times you feel you have used it successfully, Jesus boldly said that is not the way it is going to be done in his Kingdom, so that's not an option for us today.

Servant - Leadership

The phrase "servant leadership" for some is an oxymoron; that is, the two words used are contradictory to one another. When we say the word "servant", we think of someone with lower status and lesser authority. When we say the word "leader", we think of someone of higher status and greater authority. How can these two words plow in the same yoke? Yet Jesus said they should be joined together in the leadership of his church.

We seem to understand the theory of these words, but when we try to apply them, we get confused. Most leaders in the church muddle back and forth between the two styles much like the shop foreman who was sent to a leadership school to learn how to be sensitive to his employees. The man tended to be rough and outspoken, and management thought a little leadership training in sensitivity and human relations would help him. He came back to the shop floor after a week of training, and the first thing he did was to bawl out an employee who tended to be lazy. He said, "Smith, if you don't get up and get busy right now I'm going to fire you right out the door.....By the way, Smith, how are the wife and kids?" Needless to say, this foreman missed the point as leaders often do. Servant-leadership is not a technique or a method, but a genuine way of life. Since Jesus was not into platitudes, we know he intended for us to take this leadership concept seriously.

Jesus' Example

John 13

How is that possible? Let's see how Jesus applied his words to his own life. The events found in John 13 are an excellent example of this.

The disciples had gathered with Jesus in an upper room, not in a formal class but for a meal; however, Jesus seized the moment to instruct his apostles in the fine art of servant leadership. The disciples had passed by the basin of water and the towel at the door when they entered the room. Not one of them volunteered to wash feet for the group. So when everyone had passed up their chance to act like servants, Jesus took the role of a humble servant and washed the feet of each one. Then he told them that he, their master, should not have been the one to wash their feet, but he did

He reminded them that he had set them an example of how they should wash each other's feet.

Now the question is, "Did Jesus act as a servant or as a leader?" Surely we can see that he took the servant role which was far beneath his status in life. At the same time, however, he seized the high ground and took the leader role of showing them by his example and words what they should do. As a servant-leader, Jesus served while he led, and led while he served.

The Apostles' Example

Acts 6: 1 – 7

Let's look at another example of servant-leadership. We all remember how the Jerusalem church had a crisis early in its life. The project they had was to feed the widows. The problem they uncovered was that some of those widows thought they were being neglected in the distribution of food.

We know the apostles solved the problem through highly effective leadership, but the question which intrigues us is, "How did they do it?" Let's analyze the leadership steps they took:

First, as good leaders they listened to the criticism. It is easy to label messengers as troublemakers and disregard what they say. That is a human tendency, but it is one leaders must avoid. Like good servants, leaders should listen first.

Secondly, they attacked the problem and not the people. The sting of complaints often distracts us from searching for the solution to a problem. It is much easier to kill the messenger than it is to solve the problem.

A third step is implied between verses 1 and 2. It is a wise move to call God's people together, but not before the leadership has spent some time analyzing and planning. Obviously, the apostles had some kind of a planning meeting before the larger meeting because they already had a plan when the congregation was assembled. Planning wisely is something a larger group often cannot do for itself, so leadership wisely takes up that slack. The apostles prioritized their work as prayer and the ministry of the word. This meant the apostles would not leave their important work in order to do another work that someone else could do. Setting priorities is always a good leadership principle.

The fourth step of leadership was to call the whole group together and communicate with them. This larger meeting was an opportunity to announce the problem to the whole group. At the proper time, good

communication to the group is evidence of good leadership. Unless we do that, many never find out what is going on, and the rumor mill is fed false information which leads to confusion.

Next, the apostles proposed their plan for solving the problem, and verse 5 says their proposal “pleased the whole group.” Many leaders in the church today read that sentence with amazement. We know it was true, but we ask ourselves why it was true. Before you discount how well received the apostolic plan was, remember how the good leadership steps leading up to this moment made this reaction possible.

The next step was involvement. Wise leaders will always delegate tasks to others for many reasons. One reason is the priority of other work. Another is the fact that leaders cannot do everything themselves. A third reason is that people feel better if they are involved in the solution. Also, with more minds working we often get a better solution. It is a rule of leadership to lead people to be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Now notice the next crucial step. Listen to the text. “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them...” Let’s analyze the implications of those two sentences:

YOU CHOOSE: The first implication is found in the words, “Brothers (you) choose...” That involved the group, and it was a delegated job.

MEN: The second implication is noted in the words, “Men”. By this stipulation the leaders (in this case, the apostles) nailed down the gender of those they wanted as helpers.

SEVEN: A third implication which arose out of their planning was that they had decided seven would be the correct number needed. That could have been an all day discussion for the larger group, but the leaders swept that off the table and used their judgement to save the group’s time by deciding seven would be right number for the task.

QUALITIES: Next, the apostles specified the qualifications they wanted in the seven men chosen. Unqualified men would have made the problem worse, so the leaders had the foresight to name the qualities they felt were necessary in these men. Without this guideline, the group could have chosen men unsuited to do the task.

WE WILL APPOINT THEM: The leaders did not totally get out of the process. They reminded the group to bring the nominees back so they could appoint them and turn the task over to the seven men. This kept the

leaders doing the appointing and hence in a supervisory position over the group's work.

Now before we leave this example, let's ask what kind of leaders were these apostles? We'll ask the same thing we did about Jesus' leadership. Did they serve the group by doing some of the planning necessary for good leadership? Of course they did. They were very active behind the scenes all the way from the introduction to the solution of the problem. Now let us ask ourselves: Were they servants or leaders? One cannot separate the two. They served the group, but how would that large group ever have solved the problem without their subtle leadership?

They, like Jesus, were servant-leaders.

Modern Day Application?

Our last question concerns modern day application. Perhaps you feel overmatched trying to imitate the leadership of the Son of God and the inspired apostles. Are we excused simply because we're neither divine nor inspired by the Holy Spirit? No matter how true it is that we cannot equal their qualifications, surely we can profit from the principles of leadership they used.

We can't discuss every situation which elders face but let's see if we can make some kind of application of these principles of leadership.

For example, let's look at the long, frustrating elders' meetings. What kind of leader should the chairman be? How does he serve and lead the group at the same time? It's really not difficult in principle.

SERVANT: First, let's look at how the elder-chairman "serves" the group. To begin with, he will do the hard work of preparing for the meeting in advance. He needs to prepare the agenda, analyze the issues, and suggest to the group some possible solutions. Only a servant would do that kind of hard work. He has a harder job than the others. He is working and serving the group before they even come together. If he doesn't serve like this, everyone will suffer in the meeting.

Before you reject this servant model application, stop and realize how much this sounds like the role Jesus played in washing his disciples' feet. And don't forget the background service that the apostles rendered to the Jerusalem church.

LEADER: Secondly, how should the elder-chairman "lead" the group? A leader must be pro-active during the meeting. It is unthinkable that the chairman will let the meeting drift off course. He must learn how to diplomatically, but firmly, ask some speakers where their comments are

going. A leader is honor bound to ask a rambling speaker how his comments fit the subject being discussed. He must “stay at his post” as the chairman at all times. He must not become embroiled in giving his opinions, because this will leave no one staying alert to guide the meeting. If he thinks agreement has been reached on a topic, he is obligated to play his role and intervene to announce that agreement and suggest the group move on to the next item on the agenda. These are things that some men don’t like to do, but they are the role of a leader. How could one better serve a group than to keep it on track, off side roads, and getting out on time? You will probably shrink from doing this because it makes you feel uncomfortable. If you do this well, however, your group will rise up and call you blessed for your leadership.

And how do elders lead and serve in the larger context of the whole church? It’s no different than the examples we have already examined. Listening, planning, organizing, and ministering to the sheep is the role of a shepherd-leader. Although we often don’t recognize it as a leadership function, shepherds did more than bind up the wounds of the flock. They were sensitive to the needs of the sheep, but they were also busy seeking out new pastures and in general planning and doing things for the sheep that the sheep could not do for themselves.

This is why scripture exalts the role of elders, God’s servant-leaders.