

'A Gospel of Leadership'

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Questions:

- 1. What could be a 'ministry success disease'?**
- 2. What is the biblical response to this?**
- 3. Quote: "Who are we really? We are people who bring a message." Comment**
- 4. So what do WE bring to ministry?**

Leadership: Avoiding the pitfalls

Leading and serving go hand in hand in the Christian faith. But Christian leaders don't always practise what they preach! Over the past few months, we have been publishing a collection of reviews and articles on the nature of leadership—some of which is collected on our website in the Briefing Archives. In this issue, we take one more look at the perils and pitfalls of leadership, in three punchy pieces calling leaders to have a long, hard look at why they are doing what they do. It is intended as an encouragement to a more godly approach to leading, not an attack on those who are trying to do just that! May it strengthen and focus your own servant leadership.

A gospel of leadership

AUTHOR | MICHAEL FISCHER

LeadershipRise was the title on the glossy brochure that I pulled out of the letterbox recently. Aside from my curiosity as to why every second seminar these days has to have the word 'rise' in it somewhere, my real question was: How come we've got this avalanche of leadership-related books and seminars? One more leaflet in the letterbox and I think I will be well and truly buried.

This focus on leadership as the cure for all the church's ills has been building for some years now. Scores of books, such as those by John C. Maxwell, for example, have been a big hit with Christians in general and pastors in particular. And of course we see it

in the mass of seminars and conferences on the subject.

Now, what on earth could we have against something that sounds so central and vital to the life of the church? But there is something here which I believe should concern us. For the claim inherent and often explicit in this movement is that if we get our practice of Christian leadership 'down pat'—and preferably modelled on the pattern of the modern business CEO—this will be all that's needed to get God's church bursting at the seams.

Not that having solid Christian leadership is unimportant. Far from it. Paul in Ephesians 4:11-12 makes it clear that pastors



More on leadership

and teachers are God's gift to his church, so that God's people are prepared for works of service, so that in turn the body of Christ may be built up, attaining the full measure of Christian maturity.

But a couple of things bother me about the current preoccupation with leadership. First, our obsession might just be one more case of churches mistakenly confusing a 'means' with the 'end'. Second, our understanding of what Christian leadership must be has to be based on something much more than the modern business management model put forward by the current spate of seminars and books.

I believe we are mistaken if we see matters of leadership as having final importance. Let's ask the big question: what is it that grows the church? When Paul talks about pastors and teachers there in Ephesians 4, we have to ask: teachers of *what*? We know the answer: teachers of God's word, the great gospel about Jesus.

According to the Bible—and this may surprise practitioners and adherents of the 'leadership gospel' alike—the most critical thing for the church *isn't* having a competent church leadership. Leadership does indeed have an important and integral role to play in the process of church growth, but it doesn't grow the church. It's not what is in focus.

The thing that grows God's church is the word of God. We must be clear on this. Peter was clear on it when he told his readers:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23-25)

What is it that gave them birth? The eternal word of God, heard in the apostles' preaching of the risen Jesus. Yes, Christian leaders faithfully preached Jesus, and Peter's readers came to Christ, and the Church grew. But Peter's focus isn't on the role of leadership; it's on the growth that

came about through God's Word.

Paul shows the same focus in his letter to the Colossians. He is ecstatic that the Colossian Christians have been growing in their faith and love—qualities which spring from the hope held out in the gospel, says Paul. He continues,

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. (Col 1:6)

Again, it is the gospel which gives the growth. In fact, Paul is even more pointed: it is *the gospel itself* that is bearing fruit and growing as it is proclaimed throughout the world. In the message about the risen Jesus, then, we have God's vital force for life and growth—or, as Paul says to the Romans, the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16).

This sort of thinking puts the knife to the throats of a number of our sacred cows, not the least of which is our myopic preoccupation with numerical church growth—a kind of growth that Paul doesn't even have on view in Colossians 1. But for the moment we need to recognise that when it comes to the matter of church growth, leadership *per se* is not the central or critical matter. Rather, it is whether the word of God, the great gospel about Jesus, is being faithfully proclaimed and taught.

Although there are many, many passages which bear this out, the final testimony we'll consider here is Luke's repeated refrain throughout the book of Acts, his account of the establishment and growth of the early church:

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

These little 'progress reports' are peppered throughout the book of Acts. What stands out is that even when Luke does refer to numerical growth, as he does here, he says it happens because the gospel

is spreading. The leadership has a vital role (as the opening verses of Acts 6 in fact make clear), but it is only an effective role insofar as the leaders are freed up to faithfully proclaim the gospel. Luke's concern is that nothing must hinder the proclamation of the gospel. Church growth is all about the triumph of the great gospel of Jesus, ahead of anything else.

In drawing these matters to a conclusion, let's return to Ephesians 4:11,12.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...

What we need to recognise and keep clear in our heads, is that Christian leadership is given by God to serve the ministry of his gospel word. Christian leadership is a means to an end: the spread of the gospel.

For our centre is the word of God: that is, God's word (the gospel message) about God's word (Jesus Christ) in God's word (the Bible). That's what puts the fire in our belly and the message in our mouths. The great gospel of Jesus is what drives the increase of God's kingdom, and the growth of the church.

So then, enough of emphasizing yet another fashionable thing at the expense of the gospel. The ministers of our country—pastors, youth group leaders, Sunday School teachers, the lot—need to remember what they are, and what they are not. For they are not ministers of leadership. But rather, they are men and women entrusted first and foremost with a message, not with a role. Leadership is not the end in itself, but a means God has given us to get his gospel on the go, so that his church will grow.

But I fear we'll be waiting in vain to see a seminar called 'GospelRise'. It's always so easy to be distracted. **B**

Bible references in this article are to the New International Version.

Worldly woes for Christian leaders

AUTHOR | MATTHEW R. MALCOLM

There are certain ways of 'making it' as a leader in Christian circles. There are certain, almost expected, ways for church leaders to attain a desirable level of respect and honour.

Let me guide you through the process, step-by-step:

1. Establish a teaching ministry where there is *distance* between yourself and the people that you're teaching. The distance gives your hearers the impression that you have a complete grasp of your subject, and that you don't need their help in practising what you preach.

2. Allow yourself to be made an example for others in terms of your *successes*—how people have come to the Lord through your ministry, or whatever success it is.

3. Gladly accept *honoured treatment* from other Christians—when they are introducing you as a speaker, for example: "So-and-so spent fourteen years doing such-and-such, during which time his congregation grew significantly in numbers and maturity. He's well-known as a speaker, and has vast experience in the area about which he speaks to us this evening."

4. Make the most of *honourable titles*,