



GOSPEL-CENTERED
LEADERSHIP

Becoming the servant God wants you to be

by Steve Timmis

Gospel-centered leadership
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INTRODUCTION

Having been a Christian since the tender age of 10 years old, I consider myself well acquainted with leadership in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some of it good, some of it bad, and some of it just plain ugly.

I have seen trained leaders lead badly and untrained ones lead with skill and sensitivity. I have also seen lay leaders make a compelling case for formal training simply by their incompetence. I have seen gifted leaders lead effortlessly and others in positions of leadership carry it like a heavy burden.

This variety of experience has convinced me that leadership is a given. It is one of those things that just is! In any group of any size, a leader will emerge. Someone who takes initiative, assumes responsibility for the activity and direction of that group. Someone who thinks they know best and that it won't be too long before everyone else agrees with them!

I have also read countless books on leadership and gleaned helpful insights from leaders, both male and female, in the worlds of commerce, industry, politics and sport.

All of this exposure to leadership over so many years will have inevitably influenced and even shaped my attitude to, opinion of, thoughts on and practice of the art of leadership. I have seen leaders I want to emulate and other leaders and leadership styles that I abhor.

But in the end, I have a deep and enduring conviction that it is the gospel that should shape my attitude to and practice of leadership. That what God has done in Christ should define who I am as a leader

and for what kind of leader I am. That there should be something distinctive about leadership among the people of God, that springs from the message that brings it into being.

In the person of Jesus Christ, we have a unique and compelling model of leadership and the supreme example of authentic and effective leadership. All leaders who claim to be Christian should want to lead like him and be a leader like him. To love like He loves, serve like He serves, be wise as He is wise, and lead so that others follow willingly, eagerly and safely.

But I also know my heart—that it is deceitful and wicked, full of pride and self-promotion. I know that my leadership can easily become “all about me”. So gospel-centred leadership must, in the first instance, lead from a position of repentance and faith. The gospel calls me to lead by example, and that is primarily in the recognition of my deep and enduring need for Jesus and the patient work of His indwelling Spirit.

The leadership style of someone who has been gripped by the gospel and captured by Christ will be profoundly different from that of someone who labours under delusions of their own adequacy.

The aim of this book is to help us think through what shape, colour and texture the gospel gives to leadership. It is for leaders—formal or informal, experienced or novice, actual or aspiring, skilled or simply doing the best they can. It is for leaders of churches, small groups, youth groups, large groups and tiny groups of one or two.

My willingness to become a leader in a church context was in no small part because of my experience of leadership. I want to put on record my deep appreciation of those leaders who shaped me as a young boy and adolescent—Rod Townsend, Ron Price and Pete Bellingham. I am thankful to the Lord for the way He used them to develop me, and for the men they all were.

But in the end, it is the Saviour by his Spirit through his Word who constantly calls me back to himself and gives me a desire and ability to lead among his people, conscious that he is the Shepherd and not only do “they” remain his sheep, but I am always one also.

Finding your way around



Consider this

A scenario—often based on a real-life situation—which raises some kind of dilemma or frustration in gospel ministry.



Biblical background

A relevant Bible passage together with some questions to help you think it through.



Read all about it

A discussion of the principle, both in terms of its theological underpinning and its contemporary application.



Questions for discussion

Questions that can be used for group discussion or personal reflection.



Ideas for action

Some ideas or an exercise to help people think through the application of the principle to their own situation.

We have tried to make this book work:

- ☑ whether it is read by an individual or used as the basis for group discussion.
- ☑ whether you want to work through it systematically or turn to particular topics as they arise in church life.



GOD RULES! OK?

Principle

The people of God belong to God.



Consider this

Paul took a deep breath and counted to ten. There was no other way to put it: sometimes people were just a pain in the neck.

He found it so frustrating when he could see what they were doing wrong. But they just kept on doing it no matter what he said to them. Sometimes dictatorship seemed an attractive option...

He had the experience, gifting and track record to equip him for this job; if they had anything about them they would see that.

Herding sheep was easy—this was more like herding cats.



Biblical background

Read Genesis 2 – 3

- ? What freedom does God give the man in 2 v 16?
- ? What boundaries does God set on this freedom and why (2 v 17)?
- ? What makes crossing this boundary attractive to Eve in 3v 4-6?
- ? What are the results of Adam and Eve's rebellion (3 v 10-19)?
- ? The serpent suggests that God is being deceitfully restrictive in the boundary that He set (3 v 4-5). Was He?



Read all about it

I first became aware of the defining influence of culture in the former Soviet Union, through the issue of leadership.

The Soviet Union of the late 1980s was a vast empire held together by the ruthless totalitarian regime that Stalin had created. It was interesting to observe Soviet church leadership in that context—particularly in those churches most viciously harassed by the state.

People in these churches had faced great suffering because of their loyalty to the Lord Jesus. They were led by men of courage and conviction. Yet the leadership of the pastor often reflected the autocratic style of leadership in the wider culture—church leaders could see no other way to lead.

This should get us thinking. Unlike the former Soviet Union, the western world is sold on the notion of democracy—at least as an ideal. It is taken for granted that democracy is the best (maybe even the only legitimate) form of government. This default towards democracy permeates every area of life, creating two issues:

1. In an established democratic culture, “my” opinion is as valid as any other opinion. I have a right for my voice to be heard and for my views to be expressed and given due weight.
2. In a representative democracy (such as the USA or the UK) individuals are elected to a governing body to act on behalf of the people. In this system, someone can be elected and then quickly replaced by someone else if they no longer enjoy the favour of the people. Elected leaders are often not respected, and their position is often viewed with cynicism.

Leadership is always going to be contentious in such a world.

There is a recognition of the necessity and value of leadership along with a dislike of “being told what to do” and a rejection of forms of respect and deference to those in power. Acknowledging our culture’s view of leadership is important because it alerts us to at least some of the issues that shape us. We are always in danger of resorting to a prevailing cultural model or mind-set.

It would be naïve to claim that we can (or should) rid ourselves of all cultural influences. However, because we instinctively reflect our culture, we should do all we can to ensure that our understanding of and response to leadership is shaped by the Bible rather than our culture.

Who rules?

But leadership isn’t a problem for us simply because of cultural attitudes. Genesis 3 shows that rebellion and grasping for autonomy—self rule—is a central part of human nature. Essentially, we all want to be “god” of our own worlds—we all want to lead ourselves.

The Bible begins with a clear assertion that this is God’s world. He made it. He rules it. He made the first man and woman, and He rules them. The events narrated in Genesis 2 *assume* God’s right to set boundaries on human freedom. Genesis 3 *demonstrates* that right, along with the rest of the Bible.

Throughout the whole tragic and glorious story from Genesis to Revelation, God’s right of rule is asserted. His rule extends over all

creation and the whole of history. It includes His people, but is not limited to them.

History, as the Bible understands it, is not the product of chance. History really is *His-story* because it is the result of His design and purposes; it's an expression of God's sovereign will. History is the context in which God rules, and judgment and grace are the defining qualities of His loving rule.

God is the Leader

None of the forms of human leadership which emerge in Bible history undermine this fundamental truth. We see God's rule exercised in the fine and precise details of His judgments passed on Adam and Eve, Cain, the human race in the flood, and the insurrection at Babel. We see His rule exercised in the grace extended to Eve in bearing children, the protection of Cain, the confusion of languages at Babel and His choice of Abram to be the means through which the rebellious nations will be blessed.

God's "macro rule" is seen in His calling of nations such as Assyria and Babylon to be the sword of His judgment against His people. It is also shown in His judgment on those nations for their failure to honour God and acknowledge Him as King. His "micro rule" is seen in the lives of characters such as Joseph, Moses and Ruth. At one and the same time, God interweaves his great purposes with the fine detail as His purposes for the world and individuals are fulfilled.

This is seen supremely in Christ. The phrase "*fullness of time*" (Gal 4 v 4) shows that Jesus' arrival in human history was a fixed moment in the purposes of God. When Jesus began His public ministry, He did so with the declaration that "the time is fulfilled" (Mark 1 v 14). In other words, the moment has arrived—the decreed time is here. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter articulated this God-driven view of history when he said boldly: "This Man, delivered over by the pre-determined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men." (Acts 2 v 23)

Finally, the book of Revelation shows—through the images of the

seals, trumpets and bowls—that history in all of its apparent chaos and conflict is nonetheless directed from the throne room of heaven. From there, the Lion of Judah, who is the slain Lamb, unfolds a pre-ordained plan as history moves inexorably towards the return of the King.

We must keep these broad truths about God's total rule in mind when we think about the concept and practicalities of leadership. I remember the story of a new minister who announced his arrival at the church's Annual General Meeting by saying:

"We need to remember that this church is not a democracy, a plutocracy, an aristocracy, a monarchy or a bureaucracy. It is a theocracy. And my name is Theo!"

Hopefully, no church leader would be quite so crass in describing or thinking of their role! But it is surprising how often such an attitude lurks beneath the surface, coming out in various ways and times. When leaders are well respected, the church can give up too much authority to them—they, in turn, can be all too ready to accept it. Dictatorship is still dictatorship, even when it's benign. On the other hand, when the flock is rebellious and stubborn, power can be grasped and authority asserted by the pastor out of nothing more noble than frustration.

And it's not just the pastor problem. Such an attitude can lurk in the heart of all kinds of leaders in the local church. A Bible-study group leader who dominates the conversation, and crushes dissent. An elder who schemes behind the scenes to assert their control. A church administrator who uses their privileges to dominate the way things are done. The root of many of these misuses of power lies in a simple failure to believe Lesson One in the Bible.

God rules!

What we are now as the church is meant to model and point to the future of Jesus' direct rule. Any biblical theology of leadership must

look at the period of time known as the “not yet” or “still to come”. We look forward to a time that will take us beyond the opening chapters of Revelation to the great vision at the end (chapters 21 – 22). Here, the Lamb rules His people not from the distance of heaven, but from among us, as we rule over His new creation and enjoy life as it was meant to be lived.

So, leadership is important, but it must be leadership that gives expression to the continuing leadership of King Jesus over His people. True leadership does that in two ways:

1. Faithfully expounding God’s word so that it is God’s voice that is heard;
2. Conforming to the servant-hearted, cross-shaped leadership of Jesus Himself.

God rules His world—God rules his people. He has never and will never abdicate. This simple truth, simply stated, should be a source of great joy to those who lead God’s people. It means that our role as leaders is specific and our responsibility limited. We are set free to do what we are called to do, confident that God will do what He will do. Praise God that the people of God are precisely that—the people of God!

God rules. Ok?

You bet it is!



Questions for reflection

- ? What kinds of churches have you been part of? How has the leadership been viewed in them?
- ? Who is your ideal leader? Think of a hero you admire in politics, history and church life. What was their style, and why do you find it attractive?
- ? What style of leadership do you think you currently exercise?
 - I am in charge—do what I say (dictator)
 - I am the slave and servant of the people who have elected or hired me to be their leader
 - I am not in control at all (anarchy!)
 - I am technically in control, but I have to jump through endless hoops in order to get anything done (bureaucracy)
- ? Which kind of leader would you prefer to be?
- ? What frustrates you most about your leadership role?
- ? What is your greatest fear in leadership?
- ? Can you see some ways that your views of leadership or authority are shaped by your culture? If you cannot, ask a friend who is not from your culture—they are sure to see some!
- ? What comes to mind when you hear the word “leadership”? Are your impressions mostly positive or mostly negative? Why is that?
- ? Think of some ways in which a leader will do the wrong things if they forget that God is the one who is truly in control. Which of these are you most tempted to fall for?