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Leadership: Essential for a Church to Grow Numerically and Spiritually

Steven L. Estes

Abstract

This article relates the spiritual gift of leadership (Rom. 12:8) to numerical church growth. Scripture presents spiritually gifted leaders as those who received authority from God and had knowledge of his will for his people. Biblical leaders delegated effectively and encouraged those who were given tasks to accomplish. The overall scope of biblical teaching on leadership indicates that pastors/elders should have the gift of leadership. Allowing those who qualify and have the gift of leadership to emerge is crucial for the health of a church.

My family and I were immediately impressed as we drove into the church parking lot. The whole area seemed like a beehive of activity. There were uniformed helpers directing traffic. People were walking quickly toward the sanctuary. Those still in their cars, including us, were looking in all directions for a place to park. When we entered the church building our first impression was that we were part of something alive, a church that is moving forward. The worship was exciting and far from boring. Then the pastor came forward and began his sermon. Soon it was evident that this preacher had charisma accompanied by tremendous stage presence. But what was even more impressive was that he was gifted for leadership. God had given him authority to shepherd the flock and he cowered before no one. This is a church in the

United States.

Another church I visited was quite different. There was no parking lot and the building was on a dirt road. While the sanctuary was fairly large, it could only be described as rustic. The believers were very friendly and there was a sense of optimism among them. The worship was also quite lively and nothing about it seemed routine. When the pastor stood to speak, he did not appear to be an especially imposing figure. But as his voice rang through the meeting hall, there was again the sense that this preacher was a Spirit-gifted leader. He clearly expected total dedication to Christ from the church members. Anything less was not worthy of our Lord. The sermon cast a vision of hundreds in the area coming to Christ through the church's ministry. Finally, he brought the message to a crescendo by proclaiming, "This city is ours!" This is a church in Northern Argentina.

These two churches illustrate what I believe to be the main impetus to numerical church growth. Most everyone involved in missions has likely heard at least one "key" to church growth and I confess that the following pages offer another. What emboldens me to continue is that, first of all, I believe this key has biblical support, as the many Scripture references will hopefully demonstrate. Secondly, my observations, while limited, have repeatedly confirmed what it is that makes a church grow in numbers.

The Authority of Those with the Spiritual Gift of Leadership

In Romans 12:6, the Apostle Paul begins a list of spiritual gifts. Verse 8 indicates that there is a gift of leadership and those who have it are to "govern diligently." Paul writes to the Thessalonians saying that they are to "respect those who are over you in the Lord and admonish you" (1 Th. 5:12), adding that they should be held in the highest regard (1 Th. 5:13). According to 1 Timothy 5:17, the elders are to "direct the affairs of the church." When addressing elders (Acts 20:17) Paul says they are overseers who are to shepherd the flock of God over which the Holy Spirit has placed them. The elders are to keep watch over "all the flock" (Acts 20:28). In 2 Corinthians Paul explains that God gives authority to leaders to correct and edify (2 Cor. 10:1-2, 6, 8; 13:10) 1 Timothy 3:1-5 teaches that elders are to take care of the flock of God. Similarly, the Apostle Peter writes that elders are to shepherd the flock of God over which the Lord has made them overseers. While elders are not to lord it over the church members, the latter have been entrusted to their care (1 Pet. 5:1-3). The writer to the Hebrews teaches that leaders must be obeyed, and their authority recognized. It is their responsibility to watch over the believers (13:17).

Clearly, some people have the function and gifting for church leadership. These officials would be the elders. It would seem that "elder" is another term for pastor and that such an official must have the gift of leadership. A pastor

or shepherd, by definition, leads the sheep. The word “pastor” and references to a pastoral function imply authority for leadership.

We can conclude, therefore, that those with the spiritual gift of leadership have received authority from God to guide and watch over the church. C. Peter Wagner (1994) says that one prerequisite for a church to grow is that the pastor must have the gift of leadership. But the Scriptures above would lead one to question if anyone should be a pastor who doesn't have the gift of leadership. Pastoring and leading are inseparable. As Alexander Strauch points out, pastors must govern, give direction, and provide leadership for the church (Strauch, 2001).

There is much more in the Bible about leadership, including much in the Old Testament. The objection could be raised, however, that no spiritual gift of leadership was mentioned before the Pauline epistles. While there is a sense in which I concede the point, it is also true that what was written before was for our instruction (Rom. 15:4). Old Testament leaders provide biblical examples that can therefore be used as illustrations of how the gift of leadership plays out.

The authority of Moses is especially instructive. Exodus 14:31 says that the people put their trust in the Lord and in Moses after the miracle of crossing the Red Sea. According to Exodus 19:9, the Lord spoke to Moses so the people would always put their trust in Moses. In Numbers 16 we read about the rebellion against Moses led by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:1-2). Moses explains that the people would know that the Lord had sent him to do all he did if the earth swallowed the rebels, and that is what happened (16:28-33). The authority of Moses was transferred to his successor Joshua through the laying on of hands (Num. 27:18-20, 23). Joshua also was filled with a spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. As a result, the Israelites listened to all that Joshua said (Dt. 34:9).

The Lord confirmed the authority of Joshua and other Old Testament leaders as well. He exulted him in the sight of Israel so the people would know that God was with Joshua (Josh. 3:7; 4:14). When Samuel prayed, the Lord caused thunder and rain, which resulted in the people being in awe of Samuel and the Lord (1 Sam. 12:18). The Lord exulted King Solomon and clothed his reign with magnificence (1 Ch. 29:25).

All this is not to say that spiritual leaders are immune from opposition, as is illustrated by the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:1-2). In fact, the congregation criticized Moses and assembled against him in the same chapter (Num. 16:41-42). There are other examples of conflict in the life of Moses. The people complained that he had brought them out of Egypt to have them killed and they wanted to replace him with another leader (Ex. 14:10-12; Num. 14:2-4). More than once the entire community complained against Moses because of a lack of water (Ex. 15:24; 17:1-3). They also took him to task because of the food they ate during their journey (Nu. 11:4-6; 21:4-5). As Aaron

Wildavsky (1984) points out, Moses faced opposition during his entire career as a leader. However, God sent a plague, which resulted in the death of 14,700 people, and caused Aaron's rod to sprout in order to affirm Moses' leadership (Nu. 16: 46-49; 17:1-10). In other words, conflict does not necessarily destroy a leader's ministry and, over the long haul, may not impede numerical growth in a church led by spiritually gifted leaders.

Spiritual authority from God is a characteristic of biblical leaders. While the gift of leadership did not appear until the New Testament, in the Old Testament, leaders were endowed with authority for leadership, although opposition to their authority was not unknown. This biblical pattern has strong implications for pastors. Only those gifted for leadership are going to have an effective pastoral ministry.

Leaders Have Clear Direction from the Lord

In Scripture, leaders often had clear direction from the Lord as to his will for his people. For example, God revealed to Moses that he was going to free the Hebrew slaves from the Egyptians and lead them to the Promised Land (Ex. 6:2, 6-8). The Lord specifically told Joshua that he would lead the Israelites into the Promised Land and they would take control of it (Jos. 1:1-4, 6). It was also Joshua whom God clearly led to confront and defeat the armies of Ai and the Amorite kings (Jos. 8:1-2; 10:6-8). In 1 Chronicles 14:8-16, King David twice asked for God's direction when he led his men into battle with the Philistines, and God answered with specific instructions.

Sometimes God gave direction to a leader indirectly. The Lord communicated through Shemaiah to King Rehoboam that he should not attack his fellow Israelites (2 Ch. 11:1-4). King Jehoshaphat consulted the Lord when a great multitude gathered against him. In response, the Spirit of the Lord gave guidance through Jahaziel, and Judah was delivered (2 Ch. 20:2-3, 14-22). When the Assyrians threatened Jerusalem, King Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, pleading for help. God answered through the prophet Isaiah indicating that the Assyrians would not be able to attack the city (Isa. 37:1, 15, 20-21, 32-35). Zerubbabel discovered that his job was to lead the people in rebuilding the temple because of God's revelation through the prophets Haggai (Hag. 1:1-4, 8, 12-14; 2:1, 4, 9) and Zechariah (Zec. 4:6, 9).

It makes sense that those to whom the Lord gives authority for leadership will know His will for those whom they are to lead. When pastors have a clear sense of God's leading, churches tend to be healthier as they move toward a divinely inspired goal. Such a goal unites the church and motivates the members to action. At the same time, knowing what God is *not* leading a church to do prevents a lot of wasted time and energy on ministries that are not fruitful. Churches without a leader who is convinced of God's will for the congregation tend to flounder and not accomplish much.

Leaders Delegate

Someone has said followers like to do things, while leaders like to get others to do things. It is indeed interesting how many times in the Bible a leader delegated tasks to others. Moses appointed judges to settle disputes so that he would not have to resolve all of them himself (Ex. 18:13-26). The Levites were instructed by Moses to place the Book of the Law next to the Ark of the Covenant as a witness against Israel (Dt. 31:24-26). We find that twice Joshua sent men to check out enemy territory before the soldiers attacked (Jos. 2:1, 7:2). He also had three representatives of each tribe survey, describe, and divide into sections much of Israel after the conquest (Jos.18:1-6, 8). Jehoida the priest placed the Levitical priests and gatekeepers to serve in the temple (2 Ch. 23:14, 18-19). Nehemiah put men in charge of distributing supplies to the priests and Levites (Ne. 13:13). Hanani and Hananiah were told by Nehemiah to select people to be guards in Jerusalem after the wall was completed (Ne. 7:1-3). Nehemiah also assigned gatekeepers to patrol the night before the Sabbath (Ne. 13:19, 22). Our Lord delegated the task of world evangelization to his followers (Mt. 4:19; 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

There are several examples of when Old Testament kings were involved in delegating tasks to others. Pharaoh turned over to Joseph the leadership and administration of all of Egypt (Gen. 41:39-41). David and Samuel assigned gatekeepers for the tabernacle (1 Ch. 9:22-23). King David delegated offering sacrifices, guarding the gates, and giving thanks to the Lord (1 Ch. 16:37-41). Officials were named by David to be in charge of secular and sacred matters among the Transjordanian tribes (1 Ch. 26:32). King Solomon and the priest Jehoiada made similar assignments for various responsibilities (2 Ch. 8:12, 14; 23:18-19). Solomon appointed men to build the temple and the King's palace. Leaders were also appointed as supervisors to make sure the construction work went forward (2 Ch. 2:1-2, 17-18). Jehoshaphat sent officials to teach the people God's law (2 Ch. 17:5, 7-9). He also appointed judges and priests to settle disputes. Over them, Amariah the chief priest was to be responsible for spiritual matters, and Zebadiah was to be in charge of royal issues (2 Ch. 19:5-11). King Joash commanded that the Levites be in charge of collecting the annual offering prescribed by Moses. Joash asked the chief priest Jehoiada why the Levites did not collect the offering, implying that Jehoiada was put in charge of administering the collection (2 Ch. 24:1, 5-6). Both of them hired carpenters and masons to work on the restoration of the temple (2 Ch. 24:11-12). The Levites were assigned the task of purifying the temple through King Hezekiah (2 Ch. 29:1, 4-5). Hezekiah also sent couriers with letters inviting the people of Judah and Israel to the Passover celebration (2 Ch. 30:1, 6). Hezekiah organized the Levites and priests for their duties of offering burnt sacrifices and singing praises. He also appointed Levites and priests to distribute the monetary contributions received to their fellow Levites and priests (2 Ch. 31:2, 13-20). Storerooms were prepared at the order of Hezekiah

for the offerings received for the priests and Levites (2 Ch. 31:4, 9-11). King Josiah delegated repairing the temple to other people (2 Ch. 34:8). He also delegated to the priests and Levites the celebration of the Passover (2 Ch. 35:1-6, 16). In still another case King Artaxerxes delegated to Ezra the Priest the job of investigating the spiritual condition of Judah. Then the king commanded Ezra to delegate the task of administering justice in Trans-Euphrates to magistrates, whom he was to appoint (Ezra 7:12, 14, 25).

Clearly, there are many times when a biblical leader delegated an important task. At first glance, getting others to do things may sound like laziness on the part of leaders. But the reality is that much more gets done when leaders delegate effectively. One pastor assigned jobs to those that faithfully attended his men's Bible study. Other factors contributed, but afterward, the church began to grow impressively. Biblical leaders have a clear sense of God's will for the group and passionately seek to raise up those who will work towards attaining a divinely revealed goal.

Leaders Encourage

Since leaders delegate, it follows that they will seek to inspire those to whom they have given an important task. Both the American pastor and the Argentine pastor mentioned earlier do this very effectively. Another attribute of leaders is that they encourage others. While that is not always the case (e.g., Dt. 9:6-8, 16, 22-24; 31:24-29), there are numerous examples in Scripture of leaders offering encouragement. When the Egyptians trapped the Israelites at the edge of the Red Sea, Moses told them not to be afraid because God was going to deliver them from harm and fight the battle for them against their enemy (Ex. 14:13-14). Moses was to encourage Joshua because he would conquer the land. He also explained that the Lord was going to fight for Joshua during the conquest (Dt. 1:1, 37-38; 3:21-22). Joshua told the people to consecrate themselves because the following day God was going to do wonders among them, which occurred when they crossed the Jordan River (Jos. 3:5, 14-16). After circling Jericho seven times, Joshua told the Israelites to shout because God had given them the city and they would conquer it (Jos. 6:2, 16-17). Ehud rallied the Israelites against Moab, proclaiming that God had delivered the Moabites into their hands (Jdg. 3:26-28).

Nehemiah gave a pep talk to the men who were with him so they would start rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (Ne. 1:1, 2:12, 17-18). Nehemiah told the leaders and the people not to fear the enemy because God is great in power. He added that God was going to fight for them and they should defend their families and homes (Ne. 4:13-14, 20). In Nehemiah 9:5, the Levites exhorted the people to praise God for his greatness. Through a prophecy, Azariah encouraged King Asa to follow the Lord (2 Ch. 15:1-2, 7-8, 16).

Jesus encouraged the disciples by saying that He had all authority in heaven and earth and that He would always be with them. Our Savior further

explained that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, giving power for the task of bearing witness (Mt. 28:18-20; Ac. 1:8). In Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas encouraged followers of Jesus to remain steadfast in their faith.

Just as Old Testament Kings delegated, they also repeatedly encouraged. David pointed out to Solomon all the provisions he had made for the building of the temple. Abundant supplies and workers were available. On that basis, David encouraged him to get on with the job (1 Ch. 22:7, 14, 15-16). David added that God was with Solomon, and he could count on God's presence until the temple was completed (1 Ch. 28:10, 20). Jehoshaphat appointed people to settle disputes in Israel and encouraged them to be courageous as they carried out their duties (2 Ch. 19:8-9, 11). "Hezekiah spoke encouragingly to all the Levites" (2 Ch. 30:22). King Hezekiah told the people not to fear the Assyrians because God was greater than the enemy and would fight the battle for Judah (2 Ch. 32:6-8). We read that "the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said" (2 Ch. 32:8). Josiah encouraged the priests and Levites in their service for the temple, the Lord, and all Israel (2 Ch. 35:1-3).

There is a good reason for the many cases in Scripture where leaders encouraged others. They are included because it is important to do so! The many examples one finds also imply that followers tend to get discouraged. Pastors who are adept at lifting the spirits of others have a great advantage as they seek to take a church forward.

Conclusion

Romans 12:8 instructs those with the spiritual gift of leadership to govern diligently. Those who are so gifted have received authority from God to guide and watch over the church, even though such gifting does not exempt leaders from opposition. Looking at examples of biblical leaders leads us also to conclude that those with the spiritual gift of leadership have a clear sense of God's will for the group, an ability to delegate effectively, and a tendency to encourage others. My observation is that, in Argentina and the United States, a church grows when the pastor has the spiritual gift of leadership, that is to say, when the pastor is clearly a leader. Certainly, there are other pastoral attributes, such as effective preaching and teaching (1 Ti. 3:2; 5:17), that contribute to the numerical growth of the church. But it is not hard to imagine that a church would grow if the pastor had authority from the Lord, knowledge of God's leading, the capacity to mobilize others, and the ability to inspire followers toward the goals God has for the church. The two pastors I mentioned at the outset are prime examples of gifted leaders of growing churches.

There are other crucial requirements in the Bible for spiritual leaders (1 Ti. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9). Paul directed Titus to appoint elders in every town, listing the requirements that are necessary for becoming an elder (Tit. 1:5). Paul and Barnabas named elders in the churches of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:21, 23) even though these were new churches (Strauch, 2001). But, as we

saw earlier, those who are elders/pastors must have the spiritual gift of leadership in order to carry out their ministry effectively.

How does the existence of people who meet the qualifications for elder/pastor apply to numerical church growth? If a church is not growing should the pastor resign so that someone with the gift of leadership can emerge? Of course, that cannot be a hard and fast rule for every situation. Some churches would sink into severe problems or even dissolve if the pastor were suddenly to resign. In other situations, a church might not grow even with spiritually gifted leadership (e.g., a congregation of exclusively elderly people in a region of mainly young families). But, as a general rule, would the resignation of the pastor in a non-growing church be advisable? I submit that the key to numerical church growth is allowing those with the gift of leadership, and who meet the other Scriptural requirements, to pastor churches.

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