



The Tap Root

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Three Top Priorities for Christian Leaders

By Nick Howard, Psy.D.

The word “leadership,” in my world, is a *huge* word. It has wide-ranging connotations, from dictator to enabler, from life-giving to life-stealing, and from grand-standing to grand-serving.

I suggest that how we *understand* leadership, including our gut level beliefs and feelings about leadership, substantially shapes how we *do* leadership. And, if you believe like I do, that how we lead has significant ramifications, (which we are ultimately accountable to the Lord for), then being clear about how Christian leadership is to be viewed and lived becomes highly important.

Because most of us tend to start leading before we’ve really thought much about how we want to lead, and because it is so easy to fall into a reactive mode when we get overwhelmed with leadership demands, it is very important on occasion to slow down and reflect on how we really do view Christian leadership, and perhaps even more importantly, to consider how our approach to leadership matches up with some of the core biblical tenets relating to leadership.

Pause for Reflection

Compelling Quotes

“Empathy is the key to retaining talent”
Daniel Goleman

“Love, and do what you will.” St. Augustine

“There can be no building up unless thought precedes action.”
Gerald Vann.

“God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 1:8

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last....This is my command: Love each other.”
Jesus, John 15:16,17.

So in that vein, let me indulge for a moment here. I would like to ask you to reflect on what is most important for you to *do really well*, to lead in a biblical manner. (Part of my support for doing this comes from the movie *Invictus*, where in a private meeting in his presidential office, Nelson Mandela asks the captain of the national rugby team what his philosophy of leadership is. How about that! If Nelson Mandela thinks this is important, so do I!) So, please take all of three minutes or so to write out what your beliefs are about what the **top three priorities of a Christian leader should be in order to lead biblically**. Quickly open up a new document, or pull out a piece of paper, and write down “The top three priorities for me to lead biblically.” I encourage you to think in biblical terms as you do this, and it will be interesting to see how much our lists overlap as this unfolds!

Top Biblical Priority in Christian Leadership

While it may seem too simple on the surface, I believe it has to be said that the first priority of a Christian leader, regardless of their particular vocation, is to **love well**. Yes, I said to love well. You may find yourself thinking, what does love have to do with Christian leadership? I would say, as you would probably too, that the answer is **everything**. So often it seems though that things like numbers (e.g., attendance, the bottom line, tithe), or not hurting someone’s feelings, or superficiality, or honoring human tradition can sneak in and trump the call to love well.

How did I get to love well, from a biblical perspective? I’m sure you have ideas handy as well, so let me make this brief. But please don’t gloss over this part because it so important. First, we know biblically that foundationally, or in his essence, that God is love (I John 5:16). **Everything** he does he does fundamentally out of love. The host of biblical phrases that come to mind are: For God so loved the world..., a new command I give you, to love one another..., the greatest of these is love..., dear friends let us love one another..., and love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. And the list could go on and on and on. Love has to be crucial when it comes to Christian leadership because love is who God is and his most essential attribute.

Loving well is no small task from my vantage point. It must include growing *throughout our lives* in how we embody and communicate both grace and truth, as Jesus did, well, perfectly. (No small task, right!) It thus means being both gracious, patient, and generous, but it also means being willing to “speak the truth in love” to say no when it is needed, to confront when that needs to happen. Loving well also includes entering others suffering, entering their worlds, empathizing with them, as Jesus did. I believe loving well is about balancing the best interests for the company or church, or organization, and having the best interests in mind of the individuals we are serving.

For our purposes, perhaps the greatest ongoing challenges and most important questions for Christian leaders to ask are: “Is the depth and strength of my love for those I serve growing? Am I able to express love to those I am leading in ways that enable them to see more of Jesus in me? How much better at loving am I than I was a year ago, or five or ten years ago?”

So, how do you do at making loving well the foundation for how you spend your time, for how you make decisions, for how you treat others? Ask the Spirit to guide you on these questions, as you reflect on them.

Second Top Priority

I probably have a bias here, but I would say the second most important leadership priority is to **build well**. By “building well” I mean seeing things grow well, seeing people grow, teams grow, organizations grow and become healthier and bear more fruit. I believe Jesus loves building, because, well, the first thing that comes to mind as I write this is that he was a carpenter! He built things for a living! He had to enjoy the fulfillment of seeing things built well, built to last, built to be pleasing to those who would use his furniture, or whatever it was he built. And, on a deeper level, he is the cornerstone, the rock on which everything we build is built. I believe it brings great joy to the heart of God to see His Kingdom grow, to become more beautiful, more grand, filled with greater life.

Further, the apostle Paul loved building; seeing people grow, the church grow, and the Kingdom expand. He talked about it a lot in his letters. “I have laid a foundation as an expert builder (I Cor. 3:10). He asks his readers to “try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (I Cor 14:12).

I hope your heart is energized as you think about building well. This is about doing great work at creating a compelling vision, assessing current reality well, creating structure and priorities, and ultimately helping people grow while your team or church or organization moves closer to the vision.

How would you say you are doing when it comes to building well? How are you doing on putting together the various components that lead to seeing your organization, your teams, and your people bear fruit? Is there more life in your organization, team, and key leaders now than a year ago, and than five years ago?

Third Top Priority

I love this one too. From my vantage point the third priority is to: **disciple well** (a la, Matt. 28:20) In a sense this is really the first two priorities fleshed out in a more concrete, focused, and tangible way. Now discipleship is another huge word, that I believe people have glossed over for decades. Discipleship from my vantage point is not just about memorizing Bible verses, or just about accountability questions, both of which of course are good things. Discipleship is about living a life someone would want to emulate (e.g., I Cor. 4:16, Phil 3:17); it’s also about entering someone’s world, listening well, asking good questions, connecting with their hearts, about affirming them well, challenging and confronting them well. It is about helping them become more mature as a person and as a leader *through how you are with them*. ***If you are discipling well, you are loving well, if you are discipling well, you are***

building well. *If you're doing all these things, well, you can't help but be pleasing God with at least a major part of your life.*

Wrapping Up

Love well, build well, disciple well. Those are the top three priorities I landed on. How does that compare with your list? (In love, I'm sure your list was better than mine! 😊) How much is your leadership revolving around these crucial biblical priorities? What do you need to do differently to move in that direction, to lead in a more biblical manner? Because discipling well is so crucial to leading well, (and also because I happen to be writing a book on Coaching, Leadership and Discipleship over the next number of months!), I'll be going into greater detail about the heart of discipleship and how it dovetails with coaching skills that are crucial to leading well from a Christian vantage point. Until next month, blessings on your leadership journey!