

THE GREAT COMMISSION: A THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

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“A theology of leadership begins with mission” writes Strawbridge (2009)¹ who in this one statement identifies both a purpose and a principle that conceptualizes leadership. Leadership implies that there is a purpose, called mission, which is a goal or vision that is the magnet for attracting followers. Secondly, leadership is based on the principle that leaders can only exist where there are followers. Vision, suggested here in the context of mission, which can be designated as *primary purpose*, is the glue that binds leaders and followers together. The relationship between leaders and followers determine the quality of leadership.

The pericope of Matthew 28: 16-20 and Mark 16: 15-18 can be framed as the “theology of leadership” as the eleven were sent by Jesus Christ with a mission of making disciples that are then to follow Jesus Christ. An analysis of these texts reveals that which has become known as *The Great Commission* is nothing less than the joint mission, *a co-mission as it were*, of leaders and followers empowered by God to engage in a global outreach to every nation. In order to achieve the task, the eleven were to articulate the mission, define the process, and create the motivation that could cross boundaries and cultures in establishing the worldwide organization to be known as *the church*.

The eleven however must first receive their share of the vision and be empowered for leadership. In the Great Commission, the theology of leadership reveals three frames of leadership that suggest elements essential for a cross-cultural context. These are rudimentary elements common to all cultures. First, people in all walks of life must have a sense of purpose

¹ Strawbridge, Jennifer R. "The Word of the Cross: Mission, Power, and the Theology of Leadership." *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (2009): 61-79.

for what they are doing. Secondly, the principle that leadership is based on relationship cannot be ignored. That principle was summarized by Sanders who defined leadership by saying, “Leadership is influence”² and this should always guide activities of leadership. Thirdly, leadership depends on issues of power, a commodity that must be shared or allocated between leaders and followers toward achievement of the mission. The cultural context defines the parameters for each of these elements but leadership for all cultures is conditioned on leader-follower perception of these three elements, *the purpose of leadership, the principle of relationship, and the power dynamics between leader and follower.*

Robbins (2006) states “the spectrum of ideology for socio-rhetorical criticism occurs in for special locations: (a) in text, (b) in authoritative traditions of interpretation, (c) in intellectual discourse, and (d) in individuals and groups.”³ The Great Commission is for the Christian Church the ideological equivalent of the “Shema”⁴ to the Jewish faith. It is the core principle or defining statement for the existence of the church, just as the Shema defined Judaism with the purpose of worshipping One God. Jesus could have saved as many disciples as possible in his brief earthly ministry and then took them all in his ascension. For what reason did he leave them behind? It was to fulfill a mission that would not be complete until “the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come.”⁵

² Maxwell, John. *The Maxwell Leadership Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson (2007). Section: God Has Called You To Lead.

³ Robbins, Vernon K. *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetorice, Society, and Ideology*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 1996. Religious. 2005, p. 193.

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁵ Matthew 24:14, NLT.

Does the Great Commission suggest cross-cultural leadership? After all, if the mission is to evangelize the world, could eleven disciples experience hope that such a thing was possible, given the current uncertainty following the crucifixion of Jesus Christ? The Matthew pericope and Mark pericope differ to some degree, but both suggest one purpose by Jesus Christ – to settle once and for all times the reason for His coming.

The historical setting

Robbins uses Elliott’s definition of ideology as “a system of beliefs, assumptions, and values, not necessarily true or false, which reflects the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history”.⁶ The historical setting is a group of disciples in the midst of uncertainty. Uncertainty existed because of the death of Jesus Christ, but having appeared following his resurrection, the disciples were still experiencing doubts. Mark notes, “Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen”.⁷

Several issues of concern must have entered the minds of the disciples as Jesus gave them his final commandment. Jesus is changing their mission, plans on leaving again, making new promises, and telling them they will have new powers for which they have no experience. All of this at a time when they have been on an emotional roller-coaster of fear and doubt brought about by the crucifixion of Jesus.

First of all, Jesus reiterates his commands to evangelize, but now with added emphasis that was surely a discomfort for these Jewish disciples. In the Lord’s first statements concerning

⁶ Robbins, *ibid.* p. 193

⁷ Mark 16:14, KJV.

carrying the gospel, the mission was to the Jews. Jesus told his disciples, “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; But go ye rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁸ The original mission was acceptable to the disciples who understood Israel to be God’s chosen people and who normally would only have limited social contact with Gentiles and almost none with Samaritans.

DeSilva (2004) notes the historical tension that the Jews had with outsiders would have been reason to increase the doubt of the disciples concerning the Great Commission. DeSilva writes, “Matthew maintains Mark’s strange balance of viewing the community of disciples in a hostile relationship with the world while at the same time being commissioned by Jesus to preach, convert, and make disciples of the inhabitants.”⁹ Given the many warning by Jesus concerning how they were to be hated by the world¹⁰ it is reasonable to assume that the mission statement would give pause to the disciples. Only by clearly stating that the extent of His power included all of heaven and earth, could Jesus begin to engage the faith of his disciples.

Purpose of leadership -- defining the mission

The Bible declares, “Where there is no vision, the people perish”.¹¹ A suitable paraphrase to the passage of scripture in Proverbs could read, “Where there is no vision, the people perish for lack of leadership”. Jesus frames his mission in the ideological context that his disciples could understand. The political and traditional thinking for the Jews is that the gentile

⁸ Matthew 10:5-6, KJV.

⁹ DeSilva, David A. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, & Ministry Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2004.p. 278.

¹⁰ Matthew 10:24-28, 34-39, 24:9-11.

¹¹ Proverbs 29:18, KJV.

world was for the most part a world without God. Terms such as heathen, the uncircumcised, and “dogs” were common pejoratives that meant “lost and unsaved” to the Jewish mind.

The Great Commission is based on a political ideology, or in the context of ideological texture, the dominant tradition of the church is expressed by Mark, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned”.¹² While it has been suggested that the Mark 16 pericope was a later scribal addition,¹³ the importance of meaning is that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can save a lost and dying world. Both Matthew and Mark emphasize the global mission and in no uncertain terms express the importance of the role that the disciples must now play – as teachers sent out with authority and power to bring a lost world back into relationship with God.

Principle of relationship

A leader’s vision must always resonate with those who would carry out the mission. It is a general statement of ideology and there could be no doubt in the mind of the disciples that Jesus intended that the church be a worldwide church. However, leaders exist in the context of the mission, vision, or goal, often times becoming the icon of the follower’s perception of the mission. Jesus develops first of all the nature of the relationship that he has to the mission. A leader’s expression of ideology through the mission statement is often couched in terms where the leader and the mission are seen as one. In the case of Jesus Christ, He called himself, “The son of man”¹⁴ an expression that identified himself with mankind as a whole, not with the Jewish nation. Jesus develops his concept of authority as it relates to the goal of worldwide evangelism.

¹² Mark 16:16

¹³ DeSilva, *ibid.* p. 224

¹⁴ Matthew 8:20, 9:6, 16:13 and others, KJV.

Jesus then takes one of the most critical steps in leadership – creating the relationship that must exist between himself, the mission, and his followers.

Leadership is about relationship and Jesus powerfully displays one of the major characteristics of leadership, emotional intelligence. LaMothe (2010) writes, “Generally, EI refers to an array of mental capacities where a person is able to recognize, monitor, and regulate his/her own feelings, as well as the feelings of others”.¹⁵ Emotional intelligence is regarded as one of the most important leadership traits, and in a moment where the disciples are experiencing uncertainty and doubt, Jesus states, “And lo, I with you always, even unto the end of the world.”¹⁶ In the context of a mission that would take the disciples into other parts of the world and into a hostile world, Jesus creates a bond between himself, the mission, and his disciples. He uses this statement to dissolve the feelings of abandonment that the disciples experienced when Jesus was crucified.

The importance of relationship between the leader, the mission, and the follower cannot be over-emphasized. Followers will not value a mission that is not valued in the life of the leader.

Leadership requires empowerment

Strawbridge (2009) notes “In basic terms, mission means ‘sending’, with God as the one who sends.”¹⁷ If leadership requires power to lead, the text amply describes the source of power for both the apostles and the disciples to follow. Jesus states, “All power is given unto me in

¹⁵ LaMothe, Ryan. "Types of Faith and Emotional Intelligence." *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 3 (2010): 331-44.p. 333

¹⁶ Matthew 28:20

¹⁷ Strawbridge, *ibid*, p.64.

heaven and in earth”¹⁸, but the text does not rest with verse 18 but continues, “Go ye therefore. . .”¹⁹ The adverb or connector extends the authority and power of Jesus Christ to the disciples and is the empowering agency for the mission.

For most cultures issues of power depend upon the characteristics of *power distance* that implies controls, cultural values concerning power, and boundaries. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) explain “Power distance refers to the extent to which the members of a culture are willing to accept an unequal distribution of power, wealth, and prestige.”²⁰ Where there are high power distance cultures there are unequal distributions of power, meaning that power rest in the hands of a few, while in low power distance countries, power is more widely distributed and in varying measure between leaders and followers. In reality, all people hold a semblance of power which creates the tensions that arise in all relationships.

It is in the realm of power that leadership is faced with the greatest challenges. Too much power can be corrupting, and in the words of Lord Acton, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.²¹ On the other hand, power is a commodity that can be transferred, shared, assigned, distributed, or relinquished and is a necessary tool for getting things done. May-Chiun and Ramayah (2011) write, “Further, power can be derived from sources inherent in the organization, interpersonal relationships, and the characteristics of the individuals. In the

¹⁸ Matthew 28:18

¹⁹ Ibid, v.19

²⁰ Hatch, Mary Jo, and Ann L. Cunliffe. *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. 1997.p. 181.

²¹ John Aston. Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton. (1887). Retrieved from <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/absolute-power-corrupts-absolutely.html>

broadest terms, power has to do with getting things done, or getting others to do them.”²² For the church, it means having the authority over sin, sickness, and Satan for as long as the church is in the world.

Both Matthew and Mark express empowerment as being necessary to the fulfillment of the global mission of evangelism. It is in this realm that both passages must have created a motivation that lifted the disciples out of the doubt and uncertainty that existed for the moment. First Jesus defines his own power as “all power”. In the Mark pericope, Jesus gives specific examples, some of which such as laying hands on the sick and casting out devils, were already familiar to the disciples. The Matthew and Mark pericope find support in Acts 1 which adds detail to the commission narrative. “But ye shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, in Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”²³

Summary

Leadership is all about relationship, how it develops, and how it is maintained. There have always been good leaders and bad leaders, but who shall decide who is a perfect leader? The Great Commission is unique in being one of if not the first record of a global mission statement for leaders. As an organization the church represents the oldest extant institution and as such offers meaningful examples for study in topics of leadership, relationship, community, organizational theory, and other fields of interest. In relationship with Jesus Christ, leaders in all

²² May-Chiun, Lo, and T. Ramayah. "The Multi-Dimensional Nature of Power Bases in a Non-Western Context." *Journal of Management Research (09725814)* 11, no. 2 (2011): 99-111, p.99

²³ Acts 1:8, KJV.

cultures are joined together in a community relationship that still works in fulfillment of *The Great Commission*.