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# Biblical Leadership

WYNDHAM SHAW

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*When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD (Judges 5.2 NIV).*

Biblical leadership includes God's use of leaders from Genesis to Revelation. The song of Deborah and Barak, from the above scripture, is a celebration of the dynamics of biblical leadership for which I believe every spiritual leader longs. When leaders lead and people willingly offer themselves to follow it is cause to praise the Lord. I have discovered that while this leadership equation may sound simple it is truly a product of the power and grace of God. Only God can consistently produce the conviction of men and women who accept the mantle of biblical leadership responsibility. Only God can produce the willing heart to follow his human leaders among the people in a unified and victorious display of humility and faith. It is for the celebration of many more such experiences that I seek to be a learning leader and part of a church building biblical leadership in my own life. My hope is that this article encourages others to find such celebrations of biblical leadership to the praise of God.

The purpose of this article is to provide insight into the leadership model of the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) past and present. I will explore how the ICOC leadership model has evolved from our roots in the Restoration Movement and Churches of Christ campus ministry efforts to our present state. This has been both an exciting and painful journey, which neither commends or discredits it. I believe the past and present experiences have tested and transformed us into what God will judge as worthy or unworthy, as he will judge all attempts to practice his will. I take heart that overcoming (Rev 21.7) is essential to entry into heaven, not how we started or where we wandered in our spiritual journey as individuals or groups of churches.

In this discussion of leadership I will also use personal experience as appropriate material. I write as one who was converted in the early days of Church of Christ campus ministry in Gainesville Florida.

I was trained by mentoring and "hands on" experience by the leadership of elders and staff of the Crossroads Church of Christ. I was baptized and trained primarily by Sam Laing in my early years and pursued a master's degree in ministry at Abilene Christian University, which I gained in 1977. At Crossroads I was inspired by powerful expository preaching from the pulpit and called to deliberate Bible application in my personal life by leaders and peers alike. My father-in-law, Richard Whitehead, was such a man of faith, whose love for and obedience to God's word inspired thousands to imitate his big heart, joyful spirit and affectionate love. He inspired me to want to become an elder because of his marriage and family and also his sacrifice and vision for winning hundreds of college students to Christ.

I have been shaped, encouraged and taught by many incredible men and women of God since moving to serve in the Boston Church of Christ for the last twenty-two years. God has blessed me with many examples of spiritual leadership, each of whom contributed to my perspective and lifestyle as a leader today,

and to whom I am eternally grateful. Every leader's life should be filled with faith that God can bless clear convictions, and actions of lifestyle that can be imitated by those who follow.

#### CONCEPTUAL ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

In my own life and leadership experience, as well as in my dialogue with other church leaders, conceptual clarity about biblical roles, the balance between authority and inspiration, and grace and truth are of first importance. Lack of conceptual biblical clarity results in confusion, ineffectiveness and frustration at best, and at worst pain and loss of faith. Biblical leadership, both from scripture and experience, is more accurately "pursued" than "fully arrived at" in terms of complete healthiness of concept and function by any given group at any given time.

We have experienced many learning curves as ICOC leaders and individual Christians, some of which I will share in some detail later. Suffice it to say, most learning in the leadership area has to do with biblical integrity, personal humility and finding the balance between "either/or" or "both/and" choices of application and practice. However exciting or painful the journey, overcoming and persevering are the keys to being a learning leader for whom the best is always yet to come. I believe we will be our best at leadership the longer we seek to comprehend and practice a more purely Christlike and biblical model. Leadership practices in the ICOC created both opportunity and challenge. Beginning as a campus ministry movement in traditional churches that were often more stagnant than growing, there were very few enthusiastic older leaders who could shape leadership without stifling the zeal and evangelistic success of our early years. I do not say this to point blame, but to simply observe its contribution to later problems. I also would commend some older Christian leaders like Jerry Jones, Richard Rogers, Reuel Lemmons, Tom Olbricht and others who for periods of time sought to both learn and give to this gathering circle of campus converts and evangelistic zealots. As our experience has developed through both success and failure, our mix of older and younger is much more balanced. I believe we can better be like David, "men after God's own heart," having been through both victory and defeat. We are becoming better at distinguishing between God's blessings and self-righteous success.

Early leadership concepts from Crossroads' campus ministry origins were derived from the example of Jesus in the Gospels and greatly influenced by the way these were set forth in the book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.<sup>1</sup> From this model came results that included the following:

- Leadership was earned by example in the basics of personal prayer, Bible study, evangelism and growth through "one another" interaction as "prayer partners." These led to success in converting others and building a successful small group ministry.
- Evangelistic success and the practice of "one another" relationships helped others grow and were viewed as necessary for leadership recognition and influence. This was aided by training classes and "one-on-one" training by campus ministry and church leaders.
- Leadership principles based on Jesus' life and teachings were seen to be best "caught" as well as taught through a mentoring or hands-on approach. This approach passed on many elements of effective evangelism and small group development, most often resulting in a loving, involved and committed evangelistic fellowship. (Jesus' example of focusing on a few, walking with them and training them to be like their teacher works, as practiced by us, in passing on both good traits and those not as good).
- Effectiveness was quickly demonstrated as leaders from Crossroads soon saw similar results of hundreds of baptisms and rapid church growth with primarily (but not only) students across the nation. These young leaders had experienced widely varying degrees of character transformation

1. Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1993).



with similarly differing maturity levels, with potential for temptation to selfish ambition. Leaders in Churches of Christ were often unprepared and sometimes unwilling to grapple with serious church growth issues that arose from the mixture of the “old and new.”

- Some, like me, pursued graduate degrees which exposed us to deeper biblical knowledge and better biblical interpretation, but offered little practical wisdom about how to handle clashes of uncommitted church culture with large numbers of new converts being brought in. Eventually, either by dismissal or decisions to leave, most campus ministry leaders moved toward starting new churches or serving in ones that emerged as willing to start with a unified leadership who shared the common leadership and membership convictions.
- Early campus ministry leadership training was based more on friendship, respect for spiritual example, Bible application and faith in action, rather than an authority-based approach. (This changed over time as the early Boston leadership model was developed under Kip McKean.)

The tensions between existing church leaderships and campus-ministry-trained leaders in the Churches of Christ eventually led to a large exodus of campus ministers (aging into their thirties) from traditional churches of Christ. We began to form churches consisting of former campus converts or work with churches like Boston, which was so small at the beginning it was quickly converted to a unified leadership philosophy. Other churches in Florida or other locations where many campus converts had migrated succeeded in varying degrees to unite around the common practices just described.

It was at this time (around 1983) that Chuck Lucas was removed from leadership in Florida and Kip McKean was emerging as a new spokesman and pacesetter for campus ministry based leadership. Kip was dynamic, powerful as a preacher and a student of historical movements. The son of a navy admiral, he was familiar with the military culture and worldview. These components, along with continued success at building the Boston church into a fast growing world missions church, resulted in Boston becoming an attractive center of missions training through “discipling,” as it was termed. Hundreds of campus and mainline ministers were encouraged to move to Boston or other “discipling ministries,” where the vision soon moved from planting campus ministries around the United States to planting churches of “true disciples” around the world.

#### CURRENT ICOC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

In 2001 Gordon Ferguson and I became alarmed about our leadership model and accompanying harmful results and began writing a book we entitled *Golden Rule Leadership*.<sup>2</sup> It was based on the premise that we should lead as we would want to be led and want our children to be led. In a more positive and intentionally gentler way we were the precursors to a call for change that was more critically asked for by an open letter in 2003. Both called for change. We saw that a different leadership model was needed to correct the existing one. However, we saw convictions and practices such as discipleship, world missions, “one another” involvement, “discipling” and a world brotherhood of the ICOC that needed to be maintained.

My perspective is that primarily two learning curves have shaped current practice among us since then.

*The First Learning Curve*—The pre-“Golden Rule Leadership” and open letter era, which could be summarized as follows:

- One-man leadership was overvalued and created too much pressure and temptation. Authority was inappropriately used to force unity or compliance, rather than persuasion, respect and reason to forge it. This was done at the individual, congregational and brotherhood levels.

2. Gordon Ferguson and Wyndham Shaw, *Golden Rule Leadership* (Billerica, MA: Discipleship Publications International, 2001).

- “One another” relationships with proper biblical application were replaced with “over and under” relationships of accountability. This was a misapplication of Hebrews 13.17.
- Congregational leadership was not accountable to local non-staff participants, but only accountable to outside leaders with outside agendas not connected to or in tune with the local good or health.
- Personality and results were elevated over principle and personal integrity of character, conscience and conduct.
- Motivation became too imbalanced between external versus internal (biblical) motivations of the heart.
- Mutual respect between leaders and leaderships, members and leaders, and other Restoration leaderships was not appropriately cultivated.
- Exclusive postures beyond biblical boundaries were drawn in defining our fellowship. These were wrong and hurtful to others and our reputation

I am not the judge of all the motives or elements that led to shifts in leadership practice in our movement. Certainly I have searched my soul over ways I practiced or allowed unbiblical leadership practices to develop from 1990 to 2002. I do not believe all leaders were caught by the same traps to the same degree, but clearly change was needed and brought by God in dramatic ways from 2001 to the present. The good news is that the ICOC concept of restoration firmly held that both doctrine and lifestyle should continually be examined and that ongoing restoration must always start with ourselves! Receptivity to change was a conviction in our church culture that served to allow both the departures and then the call for needed Biblical restoration.

*The Second Learning Curve*—The post 2003 period as overreaction and reevaluation led to opposite extremes of doctrine and practice among our family of churches:

- While seeking to repent of being too exclusive, we sometimes failed to distinguish specifically what biblical obedience for salvation still consisted of in terms of faith, repentance, discipleship and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
- The overreaction to misuse of authority by some led to failure to practice biblical authority for dealing with sin, church discipline or maintaining congregational expectations.
- Freedom in Christ was used to justify the lack of spiritual discipline in basics of prayer and Bible study, “one another” partnerships, confession of sin, belonging to a small group and personal evangelism.
- Congregational leadership was hesitant to define expectations of holiness such as devotion to the body, dating and marrying Christians only, and seeking first the kingdom in priorities of time and money. All of these expectations are still very biblical and essential to growing churches set apart by their holiness.
- Commitment to world missions and service to the poor and needy was cut or discontinued, with some third-world churches being left without needed monetary and shepherding support. This is now being addressed through our cooperation plan but suffered significantly after 2003.
- Insistence on autonomy in reaction to a forced cooperation structure led to isolation and resistance to interdependent congregational influence and relationships

In the chaos and redefining of ourselves that followed both learning curves, a second effort was made to separate the “baby and the bath waters” of a biblical leadership model and membership expectations by writing a cooperation agreement for ICOC churches. This was based on “agreed corrections and continued



convictions” as to leadership and membership expectations we believed should and should not change. Leaders in our churches were struggling primarily between three choices:

1. A new movement called for by Kip McKean to reassert his leadership and leadership model. This appealed especially to disciples experiencing confusion, lack of growth and indecisiveness about how to build in their individual congregations and who were inclined toward the military model.
2. A departure from former ICOC churches to isolated practice of autonomy and independent small groups, joining Christian church fellowships, returning to traditional Churches of Christ or rejecting Restoration doctrine and uniting with denominational churches that do not hold to Restoration salvation doctrine.
3. A penitent and renewed model based on deliberate effort to repent of unbiblical practices and beliefs but reassert the biblical ones distinctive to our heritage and history. The ICOC Proposal for United Cooperation was a collaborative effort and statement to this cause.<sup>3</sup> It was both corrective of some past practices and defining of future practices that were encouraged to unite cooperating churches worldwide and preserve a forged rather than forced unity.

Over 500 churches have affirmed this agreement to cooperate, and leadership conferences and regional families of churches are growing in cooperation and moving forward in encouraging ways. “Disciples Today”<sup>4</sup> has become our official supported communication network where current events and progress can be viewed. A delegate approach to collective decision making, along with vision and direction from groups of experienced evangelists, teachers and elders working together has been adopted as our current approach to corporate leadership as a fellowship. We do not claim to be the only Christians. We do believe the biblical leadership and membership expectations that we agreed on to define us are crucial ingredients for cooperation toward effective church expansion, and a distinctive choice among Restoration options.

Finally, I believe a leadership must forge congregational unity based on a shared vision of a healthy, growing church that is radiant in its display of Christlike character and impact. Each church leadership should decide with courage what core convictions they believe God values in doctrine and lifestyle. Restoration is not complete until biblical teaching is not only intellectually believed but personally obeyed. The essence of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is that the blessings of God are reserved not for those who hear his words but for those who put them into practice. The road that leads to heaven is accessed by a narrow gate that is followed by a narrow highway of holiness, and only a few (relative to 6 billion souls) will find it and walk all the way to heaven!

While numerous passages can be used to define the responsibility of biblical leadership in the church, I will refer to the one I find most specific and helpful to a conceptual approach to church leadership. It is Ephesians 4.11–16. This passage makes clear God’s intent to use the gifted leadership roles of evangelists, elders and teachers to build with the foundational teaching of the apostles and prophets a growing and self-sustaining church. The body of Christ is not to be a “Super Bowl” type experience of multiple spectators watching a few participants do the work. Rather, God’s will is every one doing their part of the work of Christ’s ministry, as they are equipped or prepared by biblical leaders! When each part is equipped and responds with a life in keeping with the gospel, the body is built up in numbers of souls and maturity of spirituality!

Every church is meant to grow in both of these ways when biblical leadership and membership are working according to God’s will. The growing conviction and practice we are learning and aiming for is

3. [www.icocco-op.org/content/blogcategory/7/23/](http://www.icocco-op.org/content/blogcategory/7/23/) (accessed May 31, 2010).

4. [www.disciplestoday.org](http://www.disciplestoday.org) (accessed May 20, 2010).

to develop a team leadership of elders, evangelists and teachers who respect and appreciate each other's different gifts, and who promote an interdependence on each other in practice. The challenge is first to raise up qualified leaders for each of these roles: evangelists to lead the evangelistic thrust and prophetic preaching of God's word, elders to oversee and shepherd with experience and wisdom, and teachers to lay a foundation in God's word. Once qualified and suitable candidates are available, forging the means and best mix of these gifts in terms of "air time," venues and visionary planning is essential!

It takes courage to build a united leadership, and even more to forge a unified membership acting according to biblical purpose and priorities! The result can be a fellowship devoted to the Bible and to one another, and adding daily to our number. The result can be a church that is known for its love for one another and winning as many as possible to Jesus, turning our world "upside down!"

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