Biblical Resources for Preaching

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Preaching on Church Leadership

In the churches of Christ, preaching on church leadership can become an increasingly onerous task because the occasions for preaching on the topic seem to occur more frequently than one is able to find new resources. Occasions for ordaining new leaders have customarily called for the preacher to return once more to the passages in the Pastoral Epistles on the qualifications of elders and deacons. To preach on lists of qualifications is a challenge even to the most creative preacher, and the urgency of finding resources is especially acute.

The dread of preaching one more sermon on the lists of qualifications may send the preacher looking for other resources for preaching on church leadership. We are not lacking for literature on the subject of leadership. Books on management are abundant from secular publishers. Many religious books have borrowed the concepts of management from the secular publishers and then sanctified them before presenting them as Christian books on leadership. Many sermons on church leadership are adaptations of secular models of leadership.

I suggest that preaching on church leadership involves far more than the existing models which I have mentioned above. Preaching on leadership involves far more than preaching on the qualifications of elders from the Pastoral Epistles. It also involves far more than speaking on the mechanics of leadership, inasmuch as the New Testament offers rich resources which are often overlooked. Preaching on church leadership involves discovering the rich texture of passages where leadership is discussed in the New Testament. In the New Testament, both Jesus and Paul engage in discussions in which "worldly" views of leadership are contrasted to the distinctively Christian view that is shaped by the concept of **diakonia**. Like our contemporaries, the people of the first century had their own "secular" ideas of leadership. This discussion occurs in several places in the New Testament.

The task of the preacher is to demonstrate that our understanding of leadership stands in opposition to secular models of power. A series of sermons on individual texts would help shape congregational identity on the topic. Texts from the Gospels could include Matt. 23:1-12; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 15:3-7; and John 13:1-17 and 21:15-19. Acts, of course, is a rich source of texts, including 1:24-26; 6:1-6; 15:1-29; and 20:17-35. From the Epistles one could preach on Phil. 4:2-3; I Thess. 5:12-14; James 3:1-5, 13-18 and 5:13-16; and Heb. 13:17. Even Old Testament materials could be used, including Exod. 18:13-27; Deut. 34:9; I Sam. 2:12-17; and Ezek. 34:1-31.

While one is likely to look in vain for resources in the homiletic literature for preaching on leadership, some of the literature on the New Testament offers rich insight for preaching on the topic. Gerhard Lohfink's book, **Jesus and Community**, is an engaging book on the subject of community in the New Testament. Lohfink, a Roman Catholic scholar, often sounds like a Restorationist in his appeal to Jesus and the earliest church. The premise of the book is that Jesus initiated

a new community, with its own "countercultural" lifestyle, and that the dynamics of this new community continued into the first generations of Christianity before taking a wrong turn at the time of Constantine.

According to Lohfink, a distinctive area where Christianity took a "wrong turn" was in the concept of leadership. With keen exegetical insight, he shows that the new community around Jesus was a brotherhood, and that its countercultural identity was to be seen in its rejection of "structures of domination." He calls attention to the significant passages in the gospels where Jesus contrasts this new brotherhood with the worldly forms of leadership. In commenting on Mark 10:42-45, Lohfink says,

This text, every line of which reflects the thought and conduct of Jesus, addresses precisely what we would today call **structures of domination**. Such structures are standard in the societies of this world. In the community of disciples, however, relationships of domination are not permitted. Whoever wishes to be first there must be the slave of all. The greatest shall become like the smallest (cf. Luke 22:26). Jesus, in other words, demanded of his disciples a completely new type of relationship with each other, something otherwise not typical of society. But this means that he required a **contrast society** (p. 50).

In a later chapter, Lohfink analyzes some of the discussion between Paul and his opponents, demonstrating that the Pauline church was faithful to Jesus' understanding of leadership based on service in opposition to those who wanted to maintain structures of domination.

When we recognize that the same temptation exists today for the church to base its leadership upon secular models, sermons based on the major texts in the gospels and epistles become not onerous duties to be performed when leaders are chosen, but a major feature of nurturing a church. Jesus and Community is one important resource for nurturing the church's understanding of itself.