



LEADERSHIP

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**ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES**

Biblical Foundations

The Great Commission as quoted in John 20:21 reads: ‘... *“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”*’ The scene is the commissioning of the resurrected Jesus’ apostles to spread the word concerning his definitive atoning work on the cross and resurrection by inviting humanity to receive forgiveness of sins and entrance into the new creation through repentance and faith in him. The task was a nation-transcending, gospel-proclaiming, church-planting expedition. The mission was God’s redemption of humanity and the created order through Jesus. The people were the risen Lord’s apostles (and by extension his soon to be established church). Biblical leadership always seeks to answer these three questions: the who, the what and the how. The first is the question of **Election**, the second is the question of **Mission** and the third is the question of **Task**. It is important to note that Biblical leadership history is exclusively bound up with redemptive history. That is, an examination of biblical redemptive history reveals the choice of leaders – good and bad, individual and corporate – for the purpose of advancing God’s kingdom, prefigured in the Old Testament and realized in the New, with God working through the circumstances, influence, initiative and gifts of the chosen leader(s). Therefore, success in leadership was measured on the basis of the furtherance of God’s redemptive agenda through chosen leaders.

Jesus’ commission can be directly tied to the first divine commission given to humanity when God spoke to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28. As the apex of God’s creation, mankind was chosen above and invested with authority over other creatures (Genesis 1:26) and thus commissioned to expand the flourishing environment of Eden throughout the whole world through the varied tasks of fruitfulness, multiplication, filling and subduing the earth. The bestowal of this leadership role upon His image bearers was, however, designed in such a way that brought glory to the Creator-God and not the created man. Thus, mankind’s fall was the first failure of leadership ever recorded. This was not only because of the catastrophic events that ensued from their rebellious action, but because they had failed to understand something fundamental about biblical leadership: its authority and function are subordinated under the absolute authority of the Creator-God.

Having exercised his judgment upon them, the Creator-God, still deeply committed to displaying his glory and the flourishing of his creation, set in motion a plan to redeem the mess created by Adam and Eve that form the narrative for the rest of the Bible. But God doesn’t proceed without dropping a prophetic hint in Genesis 3:15 as to how all this would be achieved: *a chosen human offspring will lead the way in ensuring the fulfilment of God’s plan by destroying the embodiment of evil present in the garden.*

When God calls out to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, he chooses a man whose leadership role in the unfolding redemptive story was to initiate the birth of a nation through which the elected line of the serpent destroyer promised in Genesis 3:15 would emerge. Like Abraham, God elected this nation by grace (Deuteronomy 9:5-6) but also made them distinct by covenanting himself to them and giving them his laws (Deuteronomy 4:7-8), thus appointing them with the leadership mandate to be his mode of administering Abraham’s blessing to all other nations (Exodus 19:4-6, Psalm 67:1-4).

Within the nation of Israel, God appointed specific leaders to act in his stead to ensure that his chosen ethno-redemptive community fulfils the mission for which He called and delivered her, so that Israel will not suffer the same exilic fate as Adam (and humanity by extension) suffered in Eden. These leaders were not only to lead in accordance with God's will, they were also to model it before the people. And so, Moses began the lineage of the prophets (Deuteronomy 18:15-18) who led by acting primarily as a conscience to the nation by being God's mouthpiece, always calling them back to the Law God gave them through Moses. The priests were to lead by instructing the people in the way of God's Law to ensure their functional holiness (Leviticus 10:8-11). While the kings were to lead by personally devoting themselves to and enforcing the rule of God's Law (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Prophets reminded of God's Law, Priests instructed in God's Law and Kings governed through God's Law. That is, redemptive leadership was always exercised in a derivative sense under God's Law, because these subordinated leaders were God's servants.

This is why when the prophet Isaiah looks forward to the redemption of Israel and rebellious nations, he envisions the leadership of God's chosen Servant per excellence (Isaiah 42:1-4). This Servant will be a faithful Israelite that will fulfil Israel's mandate to be a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 49:1-7), but despite his faithfulness to God he will suffer rejection from his people (Isaiah 50:4-6) that will ultimately lead to his substitutionary atoning death (Isaiah 53:3-6). Nonetheless, because of his resolute faithfulness, this Servant-leader will eventually be vindicated (Isaiah 50:7-8) by conquering death (Isaiah 25:8-9) and witnessing the world changing effects of his suffering (Isaiah 53:10-54:3). This will culminate in his rule and reign as the greater Davidic monarch with wisdom, righteousness and justice (Isaiah 11:1-5) in a recreated, flourishing new heavens and new earth (Isaiah 65:17-20).

John, the apostle, shows us that this faithful Israelite that would lead God's redemptive mission is God come as a man in Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14) who succeeded where the first man fell. Jesus' supreme missional task on earth was to be high and lifted up (John 3:14-15) not first in majestic heavenly glory of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1) but on a cross (John 12:32-33) to bear the sins of both believing Israel and of all nations (John 11:49-52; cf John 12:39-41). Jesus, as 'light of the world' (John 9:5), demonstrated redemptive leadership by shining the light to the nations that Adam extinguished and Israel failed to ignite by having his light momentarily snuffed out on the cross, but gloriously beaming with new creation power in his resurrection.

Therefore, the commission given to his disciples in John 20:21 was the conferral of the elective leadership role in building upon his finished atoning and redemptive work (John 19:30). This leadership was not given only through the conferring of a forensic positional status, but through the subjective supply of power through the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39). The Holy Spirit not only gives new life (John 1:12-13, 3:3, 5) to the members of the new people of God (John 15:5), but without Him Christ's mission through the disciples would not be accomplished (John 20:22-23). Thus "in the same way" that the Incarnate Servant of the Lord was chosen (John 1:34), anointed in the Spirit (John 3:34) and sent to lead the divine redemptive mission, he now baptizes his people, the church, in the Spirit (John 1:32-33) as his chosen servant-leader(s) and sends them out as his light bearing children (John 12:36) on mission into a dark world with the task of preaching his Gospel and planting churches. Which is why he says: "*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*" (John 20:21).

It is because the church is uniquely chosen to lead in this way that the importance of constantly planting churches cannot be overemphasized. It is a leadership mandate that carries with it the mission of redeeming the world through Christ. Also, because the church is uniquely chosen to lead in this way, the internal dynamics of how its leaders are chosen (1 Timothy 4:14, 5:22), their character (Titus 1:6-9), their gifting (Romans 12:7-8), their remuneration (1 Timothy 5:17-18), their responsibilities (Acts 20:28, 2 Timothy 4:2), their authority (Hebrews 13:17), their conduct (1 Peter 5:2-3), their reproduction (2 Timothy 2:2) and their counterfeits (Acts 20:29-31) are all given special attention in the early church. That is having leaders is important, but the nature of leaders produced reflecting their supreme Leader is equally relevant (Mark 10:42-45).

Theological Reflection

Owing to a variety of factors – such as the inherent importance of leadership and the observation that it is significantly lacking in both church and society¹ – interest in developing leadership theory and its subsequent use in cultivating leaders really took off in the middle of the 20th century. The approach taken by most writers in secular leadership theory is to begin with clearly articulating a desired outcome through a number of measurable indicators. Leadership is then defined on the basis of the essential elements utilized in achieving the set goal². As a result, Don N. Howell rightly points out that the secular leadership framework “tends to concern itself with the narrower domains of leadership style, role and setting”³.

As useful as secular leadership literature has been and continues to be for the church, there is a danger that an uncritical and wholesale integration of its methods into church leadership will result in unbiblical outcomes, such as unfettered pragmatism. This is because these theories are developed based on material, as opposed to spiritual, outcomes⁴ and, thus, will not be nearly as concerned with the agenda, motivations and character that is expected of the servant leaders of Jesus as specified in Scriptures⁵. Secular leadership, for example, places its premium on achieving quantifiable material goals. When this sort of thinking is uncritically adopted by the church, concretely observable parameters like worship attendance figures, budget size, possessing a worship facility and book publications inevitably become the primary indicators for judging ‘successful’ church leaders. This is unbiblical and inevitably proves to be unhealthy.⁵

¹ Beeley, C. A., Britton, J. H. (2009), *Introduction: Toward a theology of leadership*, Anglican Theological Review, 91(1), 3-10.

² Frank, T. E. (2006), *Leadership and administration: An emerging field in practical theology*, International Journal of Practical Theology, 10(1), 113-136. doi:10.1515/IJPT.2006.009

³ Howell, D. N., Jr., (2003) *Servants of the Servant: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

⁴ Huizing, R. L., (2011), *Bringing Christ to the table of leadership: Moving towards a theology of leadership*, The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership, 5(2), 59-75.

⁵ The case of Jeroboam II is instructive. The biblical writer acknowledges his various military conquests and the expansion of Israel territory (2 Kings 14:25, 28), and yet identifies him along the lines of several failed kings/leaders because “he did evil in the eyes of God” (2 Kings 14:24) leading his people astray.

However, if our starting point for understanding a theology of Christian leadership is to remember that church leaders are followers of King Jesus and that the exercise of their leadership is primarily tied to his redemptive mission, not only will we be concerned about achieving the desired outcomes, but the manner in which they are achieved, and the character and motivation of the leaders involved will all play central roles in defining what successful leadership looks like.

With that in mind it is difficult to improve on this definition of biblical leadership offered by David Howell Jr.: *“Biblical Leadership is taking the initiative to influence people to grow in holiness and to passionately promote the extension of God’s kingdom in the world”*.³

In other words, Christian leaders must be intentional in allowing the Gospel to shape their concept of leadership from the bottom up. We must be careful to allow our leadership theory and practice to emerge from our theology and not vice versa. Good Christian leadership is the kind that constantly allows the Gospel to shape the character, motivations and agenda of its leaders while being (necessarily) informed by all the good things general leadership theory and practice has to offer.

This kind of integration also transforms our attitude towards what is often pejoratively referred to as the “practical stuff” of ministry. Many pastors make the mistake of creating a bifurcation that separates important tasks like preaching, teaching and prayer into theological matters of leadership, while things like strategic thinking, intentional leadership development and budgetary issues are considered as the irritating, but necessary non-theological leadership matters. However, were our theology of leadership to begin from the standpoint of playing visible roles in the advance of Jesus’ redemptive mission, then each of those latter tasks will not only be seen as practical, but deeply theological as well. After all pastors are also called *overseers* because although they are called to preach, they are also called to ensure that all things in the church are managed properly if Christ’s mission is to advance.

Cultural Engagement

Leadership development and reproduction is an essential part of what churches must be about (2 Timothy 2:2). Eric Geiger and Kevin Peck have said that the church should be a leadership locus of any community it resides in⁶. In other words, the unique kind of leadership the church is called to produce is not to benefit the church in managing her affairs alone, but should be used to bless the world (when the church scatters) as well.

However, how the church engages with the culture in the aspect of leadership must be carefully thought through if her primary identity is not to be clouded and her unique witness compromised. Here are three thoughts to consider in the development of leaders:

1. The development of competent, strategic-minded and decisive leaders within the church must be done with the primary aim of ‘the propagation of the Gospel’ to all

⁶ Geiger, E., Peck, K., (2016) *Designed to Lead: The Church and Leadership Development*. Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group.

nations. (This also assumes clarity on what the Gospel is). The desirable transferable skills gained will no doubt be useful in other contexts, but if the church's mission isn't the locus of her leadership development, then the church ceases to uniquely function as the church.

2. Because the Gospel is meant to spread in a diversity of contexts globally, it should be expected that Christian leadership development methods, though possessing a unique and distinct core, will differ from place to place. Therefore, the particular ways in which diverse leaders are designated or express their authority will vary, and other church leaders must allow for flexibility and display charity when assessing others in contexts that differ from theirs.
3. Perhaps most importantly is the role the church plays in developing Christ-like leaders who are called to serve in the secular space. At a time when greed-fuelled, empire-building, ego-centric leadership abound in the world, church leaders must embrace the task of building up competent, gospel-shaped, servant-leaders to be sent out to bless their world through the work they do and how they go about achieving it. The contrast this creates with a worldly, destructive form of leadership provides both a credible alternative and a witness to Christ's kingdom.

Missional Significance

As a family of church-planting churches Acts 29 is about one thing: *church planting*. A church planter is someone called to actualize a particular vision within God's larger redemptive vision. He is called to realize a specific mission within Christ's grand redemptive mission. Though he receives this calling personally, he cannot achieve it individually, he will need others to come alongside him. But they come *alongside* him; he leads, they follow.

Church planting is one of the greatest tests of a person's leadership qualities. Most church planters will be tried in a multiplicity of areas: administration and legal, preaching and teaching, vision casting and strategic thinking, budgeting and fundraising, counselling and networking. At some point in the development of the church some of these responsibilities will either no longer be required or will be handled by some other people, but at its infancy people will be looking to the planter for leadership and direction in these areas. While a planter may not excel in all of these vital aspects, proficiency in each of them is required.

However, the leadership prerequisite for a planter is deeper. Since a church planter must recognize that his church plant comes under Christ's headship and his leadership subsumed under Christ's authority, he must be careful to always lead his people towards following their true Leader and Head of the church. This must reflect in the character, motives and agenda of the planter. Since his allegiance is not to his fame and glory, he is to accord his thoughts and behaviour in line with the requirements of Christ, his Master. Such a leader will be passionate about using his initiative and influence over those following him solely in the worship and service of God.

Acts 29 is not simply about ‘planting churches that plant churches’, we’re about ‘planting *healthy* churches that plant *healthy* churches’. Those kinds of churches comprise of Spirit-filled members whose sole aim is to honour Christ. From a human perspective this entails the church members being able to imitate godly, Christ-serving and Spirit-filled leaders. Since leaders who are worthy of obeying (Hebrews 13:17) must first be worthy of imitating (Hebrews 13:7).

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.