

The Identity of a Christian Leader

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ABSTRACT: The subject of leadership has seen a rising growth in the last twenty years. A proliferation of material is available on and off-line on leadership along with thousands of seminars, webinars, and monthly conferences. All of these training efforts attempt to define and redefine leadership, and offer tips on how to be a successful leader. Prototypes for leadership are taken from religion, sport, and the corporate world. The question needs to be asked, “What is unique to Christian Leadership”? What are the marks that set aside Christian leadership from secular leadership? The answer is found in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the One who started Christianity. This article presents the identity of a Christian leader as a starting point in this uniqueness. A Christian leader’s identity is based on his relationship with Jesus Christ and it gives him worth, value, resources and a right mentality for transitions.

KEYWORDS: leader, identity, Christ, value, transition

Not until eternity will we have the luxury of time to read all that is written about leadership. If you search “leadership” on Google you will find nearly 824,000,000 results in 0.47 seconds. It is an ocean nobody can swim or dive. Tomorrow the number will grow. Definitions, strategies, skills, know how, characteristics, leadership development, leadership traits, new horizons, are all leadership concepts presented in a most desirable light promising success to leaders.

Nevertheless, one of the deepest crises remains the lack of leadership. James Krantz, from Yale School of Organization and Management, identified in 1990 a need for

leaders. He wrote “A consensus is emerging that contemporary organizations are in critical need of leadership with compelling vision. Often this leads to an overemphasis on the personality or character of the leader. Although people clearly need to coalesce around a shared purpose in today’s organizations, the same conditions that make “vision” so prominent also make the huge emphasis on the leader inappropriate. Increasingly complex, turbulent environments have made highly centralized, bureaucratic hierarchies obsolete, and require our understanding of effective leadership to shift from the leader alone to the context in which leadership can be exercised” (Krantz 1990). If in 1990, there was a lack of leaders, by 2013, the urgency increased. Mike Myatt (2013), Chairman of N2 Growth in his article *A Crisis of Leadership – What’s Next?* wrote: “a lack of leadership isn’t just a problem in the United States; it’s a global problem. It’s also much more than an indictment on global politics; it’s a systemic problem that pervades every level of society. I don’t think there’s much debate the world is ensnarled in a crisis of leadership. The question becomes what do we do about it?”

This crisis started when people considered themselves as being wise, even wiser than God. Mike Ayens (2016) put it so well when he stated: “Possibly the saddest occurrence coinciding with the rise of the study of leadership in the twentieth century was the drift of God’s people away from the Bible as the standard of truth. The church, like the world, bought into the “whatever works” paradigm. Thus, the widespread, secular notions about leadership became pervasive and difficult for God’s people to withstand. This eventually led to the people of God accepting the wholesale assumptions of worldly leadership, and the church began to take its leadership cues from a secular culture.” With a worldly leadership standard success was defined by the secular business criteria: numbers, size, growth, buildings, power and visibility. This mentality affects the way we see leaders. The successful leader becomes the one who gets the results: numbers, size, growth, buildings, power and visibility.

Cris Glynn (2012), senior vice president for Transformational Engagement at World Vision, in his article, *What Makes Christian Leaders Different*, notices in his business as well as ministry experience that “devout Christians try to honor God with their leadership yet only succeed in putting a Christian face on a worldly system. Unfortunately, most discussions of Christian leadership simply tinker around the edges of today’s predominantly un-Christian leadership approaches. Christian leaders need to radically rethink what it means to be led in a way that expresses God’s design and purposes for our relationships”

This approach has the problem of being far away from any biblical values. Neither God in the Old Testament, nor Jesus in the New Testament defined success in these

terms. A leader was never appreciated by his eloquence, nor by the number of people he gathered, nor by the size of the organization he grew. There were other criteria to be evaluated: godliness, obedience to God, character, humbleness and real love for the people he leads.

Now, after a more secular “more academic” approach has proved deficient, the pendulum has swung toward more biblical or religious leaders. We have started to learn from several lists of the most influential leaders. John Sweetman (2012) identified six leaders and one lesson from each of them: “Abraham and faith, Moses and Perseverance, Joshua and Courage, Gideon and Obedience, David and Heart and Daniel and Prayer.” The lists are countless, and also the characteristics of a leader.

Today, if somebody read a secular book on leadership and a Christian book, they will find a overlapping of qualities. For example, the bestseller book *Good to Great*, presents Jim Collin’s five-year study on companies searching for the reason behind their success. At the top of his pyramid, there is what he called a “Level 5 Executive”. This type of leader has a combination of “personal humility and professional will” (Collins 2001, 20). For the secular world, humility in the life of a top executive is a paradox. This sounds more like Jesus!

The question remains, what characteristics are unique to Christian leaders? What makes a Christian leader a Christian? Chris Glynn (2012), recognized that: “When Christians talk about how God desires us to lead, we often discuss qualities that may be present in any leader. The Christian leader should seek to serve, as Jesus did. The Christian leader should work with integrity and honesty. The Christian leader will treat people well and with respect. Of course, in my years of for-profit leadership, I’ve seen non-Christians demonstrate all these values.”

Looking at Jesus, the greatest Leader of all time, we can identify some of the unique qualities of Christian leaders. These qualities give different answers to the Who, What, How and Where of leadership. For the sake of time and purpose of this paper we will consider only the “Who question,” the identity of a Christian leader.

Who is the leader? What is his/her identity? More and more people take seriously the identity of the leader. Jim Collins entitled the whole chapter “First Who, Then What?”

The identity of a leader has a competence side and a character side. On competence, there is no distinction between a Christian and Non-Christian leader. Both leaders could be the same. On the character side there, are leaders who are humble, moral, and sincere, regardless of their belief system. What is the difference between a moral leader and a godly one?

This was the most difficult question, even in the time of Jesus. In the Jewish religious system, there were different groups of spiritual leaders. The most well known ones were the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. They were extremely preoccupied with the fulfillment of the Law as a sign of their spirituality. They tried to obey even the most minuscule commands in order to please God and impress people. They had a built-in righteousness, trying to work out their way to God. About them Jesus said: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

This righteousness gave them a sense of self-worth and superiority to any other person. About them, Jesus said: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent (Luke 15:7). The religious leaders did not consider that they needed repentance, because of their righteous works.

What is there in a Christian identity that makes Christian Leadership unique? The starting point is a sincere self-evaluation. Who are we on our own? The Bible teaches that we were lost, separated from God by our intentional sin. It is intentional because it involves a personal choice made by each one of us to get away from God, to do our own will, to control our own life. This state of being is also called being dead in our sin.

Being dead in our sin would not have been a problem if we were able to do something about it. Neither a dead person nor a spiritual dead person can on their own become alive. We are not only lost, but we are hopeless. We can do nothing to get to God! This reality should be understood and accepted. This is the starting point.

Because God continues to love us even after we betrayed Him, He acted. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ to come and offer the payment for our sin. It was the highest price possible, His own life for the sin of mankind. This unique sacrifice satisfied the righteousness of God and as a sign, He raised Jesus from the dead. Now there is a solution, the only acceptable solution.

But this solution is not imposed automatically on anybody. Each person should decide if he wants to continue far away from God or to come home to God. Leaving the sinful past is called repentance, and trusting God for salvation is faith. But this is not just one momentary encounter, it is a new relationship. As a new spiritual beginning, we also call it being born again.

The new identity is called the child of God. Apostle John presented this miracle so simply: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become

children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:11-13). This is our new position – member in the family of God.

But this new life needs to develop, a child needs to grow. He must become a disciple, a person who starts learning from his Master to be and to do whatever He is doing. A Christian leader is first a Christian, this means he is a child of God, reconciled with his Father and a disciple of Jesus Christ, full of the Holy Spirit. How does this identity affect his leadership?

Identity as a child of God gives a Christian leader his value and his sense of worth

The Christian leader's identity is based on Christ and what He did for us on the cross. A leader's worth is not dependent on how many deeds he is doing to please God. This truth is well illustrated in Jesus' baptism. After Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, "... a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"" (Matthew 3:17). This declaration came *before* Jesus performed any miracles, preached any sermon and did any public teaching.

A Christian leader's sense of worth is elevated by knowing the price paid for his redemption. He is like a captive held hostage then released by the life of the most important person in the Universe (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). God did not spare His own Son for us – for we have been bought with a great price.

A leader in an established position does not have to be concerned about numbers or performing great achievements. A Christian leader can concentrate on his job, not on his reputation. Makintosh and Rima (2007, 213) put it very well when they affirmed that "The idea that a Christian leader's identity is based on Christ is a challenge to 'come to the point where we recognize that our value is not dependent on our performance, position, titles, achievements, or the power we wield.'"

Non-Christian leaders find worth in a position. As a result, they are always looking for a better position, a higher rank, a more visible place in the business. They see an enemy in every person who might take their place, and a hindrance to every person who is occupying the next higher step where they want to be. Their worth and value in a position is like a drug: always requiring a higher dose to have the same effect.

Identity gives a Christian leader a sense of acceptance

A Christian leader is freed from the desire to be accepted and appreciated by people. He is accepted by God as a member in His own family (John 1:12), he is no longer an enemy of God, the war is over. He is justified by God through Christ and has peace with God (Romans 5:1). As a disciple, the leader is a friend of Jesus Christ (John 15:15)

A Non-Christian leader is a people pleaser, especially toward those who can help him get where he wants. He is a slave of others, trying to keep them happy at his own costs. He cannot please the superior because he is interested in higher performance. He cannot please his inferiors because they want higher benefits. He cannot please his colleagues who are theoretically a team, because in reality they are his competitors.

Identity connects the Christian leader with the resources

Leadership is hard, it is difficult. Only a follower thinks that leadership is easy! Brian Evje (2012), the principal of Equipoise Alliance put this so well when he stated: “Many burdens of leadership are well known and visible: getting people to back a common purpose and vision, managing change, and maintaining a balanced personal perspective. But there are a number of hidden challenges, common to both new and old leaders that underlie the more familiar work. To be a truly effective leader, you’re going to have to address them as well.” John Eades (2016) presented “A recent survey showed that there are roughly 2 Million new employees promoted into leadership roles in organizations every year. Consequently, 60% of them fail. Meaning 1.2M people fail at leadership every year.” These numbers are huge. Leadership is tough!

When you think of Christian leadership it becomes even tougher. A Christian leader is usually working with volunteers. He has no ways of “stimulating” the followers to change, or follow a vision, or volunteer their time, energy and money. He has no pay roll, grade book or any incentives. Still, he needs to motivate people, serve people, love people and invest his life in the community he leads. Where can a Christian leader find resources?

Brian K. Dodd (2013) offers a general answer to this question: “There is always a gap between what you have and what God wants done... The only way you can accomplish the assignment is if He does it through you.” He was right. Jesus expressed the same truth when he gave His disciples the last teaching before the crucifixion. Jesus used the wine to portray a visual lesson: He said: “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No

branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

The Christian leader gets his needed resources from Jesus. When he needs humility, Jesus invites him to “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). When he needs love, God places love into his heart through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). When he needs the power to forgive, Jesus reminds him how much he has been forgiven. When he needs the power to carry on, Jesus reminds him that He has all power in heaven and earth. When he feels alone, Jesus reminds him that He will be with him every day. When he needs wisdom Jesus is his wisdom.

What does a non-Christian leader do when the job becomes so difficult? Where will he turn for resources? Who can he really trust? It is no wonder why 60% of new leaders quit every year!

Identity makes a Christian leader’s transition easy

Leaders get older and the time comes when they need to step down off of the stage. This is painful! Likewise, there are times when a leader needs to move on from a place of comfort to a new uneasy place. How can a leader leave a project that gives him significance and the sense of importance? How can he leave his heart and go?

Rhoden (2018) clearly and gracefully puts it this way: “Guarding yourself against improper identity in those leadership roles allows you to transition out of roles when the time comes. There will come a point in certain leadership roles where the most God glorifying thing and the thing that best serves those around you is for you to transition out of that role. If your identity is wrapped up in Christ, this will come much easier. If your identity is wrapped up in what you’ve become good at doing, this will be a painful process for you and those around you.”

In conclusion, the main thing that makes a Christian leader unique is his identity in Christ. He is born again, forgiven, he is a member of God’s family, dead from a godless life and alive with Christ to a new life, he is a citizen of heaven and an ambassador on earth. This identity helps him to be confident in his internal world, where nobody can see, it helps him relate to his followers and serves them lovingly, it gives him unlimited resources for every situation and it helps him to do the transition with dignity and peace. This type of leader is surely successful!

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