

A letter to prospective church leaders

Introduction

There is value in an old man giving his subjective thoughts on certain subjects based on empirical knowledge and long experience. I am now officially an old man and here I wish to pass some thoughts on to those who wish to be a church leader. Instead of objective Biblical analysis and exposition of leadership, which I have done many times, this paper is from the heart.

Motivation

If you desire to be a church leader that is a good thing – if your motivations are right. If they are not, then such desire is inherently dangerous.

Many people get into church leadership for a wide variety of reasons: a career choice, they weren't looking for it but were chosen by someone, ambition, glory, control and many more. None of these have any value; indeed they immediately disqualify such folk for leadership.

The only genuine reason to be a church leader is service.

First, a good leader desires to serve God and glorify him in everything. Second, the leader has a deep love for the people of God and urgently wants to do them good. Good leaders are humble and want nothing but to nurture God's people and defend them from dangers.

A good leader will die in a ditch rather than forsake or hurt God's people. He will do everything he possibly can to edify all of them, from the least to the greatest – but especially the least to whom most honour is attributed.

The Lord Jesus rightly compared church leadership to being a shepherd; a pastoral heart is the chief necessity of leadership. Now in Jesus' time a Galilean shepherd was a very low occupation; it was not something sought by most people. It was a laborious job involving being out in all weathers, extreme heat in the day and cold in the night, looking after very dumb animals. Yet it was important as it involved care of a large investment for the owner of the sheep. A flock of sheep was like money in the bank.

It also involved many dangers: bandits, poachers, lions, wolves, bears, thirst, hunger; no home comforts at all. It was a very difficult job that paid little. Yet shepherds learned to know their flock individually by name and the flock would follow the shepherd anywhere, trusting him to lead them to food, water and safety at night. Indeed, when the shepherd had made a rough sheepfold out of thorn bushes and branches, he himself would lie in the opening, or gate, so that sheep trying to escape had to walk over his body – as would predators.

Shepherds had to love the sheep or the task was onerous and pointless.

Today many church shepherds don't love their sheep; they want to control them. Sometimes this is for selfish reasons, such as a love of power or money or celebrity, but often it is mistaken vision. So many famous leaders have great goals to serve God according to their mistaken vision and see the sheep as a means to that end. They miss the

whole point. God gives leaders to the church as a gift to the sheep, not as a manager of a product. The point of church leadership is not your vision and plans to do great things but merely to serve the Lord's people. Your job is to sacrifice yourself to serve the sheep. You must lie down in the gate so that you know when a sheep wants to wander away or when a predator wants to attack them.

I have known famous church leaders that knew nothing about their sheep at all; in fact nothing about the sub-leaders under him either.¹ I have seen leaders pursue some lofty vision and pressurise the sheep to the point of damage. I have seen sub-leaders pushed to the point of damaging their families or their marriages. I have seen leaders restructure the whole church to make them look better but which actually damaged the life of fellowship.

Anything less than pure love done to the sheep is a great sin and will do serious damage to God's property and investment; but more than property, God's family.

The enormity of leading God's people just does not hit most leaders at all. The level of responsibility to God is absolutely huge and one will answer to God for it on the Day of Judgment. It is an onerous task. It is caring for God's own body on his behalf.

Leaders must love the sheep as they love God.

Yet amazingly even famous leaders often turn out not to even love God, let alone the sheep. How many leaders in recent decades, even very famous people, fell into apostasy and abandoned the sheep after doing them harm for years? The list is huge even in just evangelical circles, let alone the wider church.

When a leader apostatises in order to: pursue a fornicating relationship or adultery, to pursue a homosexual relationship, to pursue financial opportunities, to pursue business or celebrity opportunities, then the damage to the sheep is enormous. I have seen this time after time. The shepherd never loved the sheep in the first place.

But many turn out not to love God either. This is evidenced when they don't just apostatise but turn to evil, greed, fornication, drink, politics, paganism and heresy. Some openly admit it. John Wesley at the end of his life wrote to his brother stating that he did not love God and never did. His whole life had been a pursuit of a driven vision and responsibility but not true worship.

So this very first necessity turns out to be something that is neglected in many leaders. If you want to be a church leader your must genuinely love God and deeply love the people of God and desire to spend your life in service to them.

Be a worshipper

God loved David because he was a man after his own heart. On David's part he was the most excellent worshipper in the OT. His psalms still echo down the centuries and stimulate people to this very day. David loved God and was a true worshipper. Over and over again in the OT it is the worshipper that God answers the prayers of. Kings like Jehoshaphat that put worship first saw the greatest deliverance from enemies.

What you are in truth is what you are in secret.

¹ Biblically there is no such thing as a sub-leader (elders under apostles, house-group leaders under elders, elders under pastors, deacons under ministers) – all this is wrong. There are only elders leading Biblical churches and no one else. Deacons are practical servers with no spiritual authority.

You must be a worshipper in private if you are to be an example of a worshipper to others.

Now it is easy to worship in company and to praise God with others; but it is not easy to worship God in secret when everything is going wrong for you and you feel as if the world is falling down on your head. But that is when you must be a worshipper first.

It is worshipping against all the odds and circumstances that will make you a man of God.

When the tired and thirsty servant of Abraham found Rebekah, he worshipped. When the enslaved children of Israel saw Moses and gained hope, they worshipped. When David learned that his child had died, he worshipped God. When David learned that his chief counsellor, Ahithophel, had gone over to his enemies, he worshipped. When Job learned that all his children had died, he worshipped. Jacob only truly worshipped after his thigh was put out of joint.

Worship is the due response of man to the providence of God, not just the glory and grace of God. It is easy to worship God in the company of the Lord's people for the gift of salvation; it is harder to worship God when you have just lost your job, or someone you love. But our response to providence is the same as our response to grace – worship.

Worship is loving, reverent submission to God. It is giving God the glory that is due to his name.

It is worshippers that God uses.

Be an interceder

It is your job as a leader to intercede for all your people – all of them. If you are not in regular intercession for all the flock then you are failing as a leader.

Today there are ridiculous huge churches under one man (an unbiblical idea) where the leader does not even know the name of half of the church membership. This is anathema. The shepherd must know all the needs of his sheep. Israel in the wilderness could only walk as fast as the weakest old lady. The church can only move forward at the pace of the weakest member. You must know all about that person and exhort / encourage / cherish them.

Just as a father will seek to spend more time with the weakest child, bringing them forward, so a leader will honour the weakest member. Sadly in many modern churches the weak and vulnerable are completely ignored. This is shame on the leaders.

Be a father

Above all things, the local church is a family. It is not an institution, an organisation, a social club, a denomination, a headquarters for a powerful leader, a talking shop, an academy, or any of things that modern churches have become. It is a loving community, a family.

This is absolutely vital. The church is called to represent God, and the Godhead is a loving community in Trinity. The local church must be a loving community likewise.

Everything about the church must be based upon love in action. Thus all members submit to one another and care for each other. Leaders then become like fathers not despots. Leadership is not management; it is not domination; it is not control; it is fatherhood.

Far too many Western church leaders dominate the flock in an authoritarian system and proudly boast about this hierarchical domination of an undergroup, pretending that it is a good thing. It doesn't matter if the system is Anglican, Episcopalian, Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Independent, Charismatic, apostolic, Pentecostal or anything else. All hierarchical systems, based upon a split between clergy and laity, are unbiblical and anathema. All of them!

Hierarchical systems breed authoritarianism and this is hateful to God. It is the way the corporate world builds management tiers, the government builds social structures, the army builds authority structures, or the devil builds his demonic empire. Hierarchies produce controlling, despotic church leaders – therefore all hierarchies must be avoided.

This is done by the local church ordaining an equal eldership of men who are fathers. Yes they must be able to teach. Yes they must be able to counsel. Yes they must be able to lead. But above all they must be fathers to the church.

More than that, to young, immature believers they must be nursing mothers, as Paul said that he was when necessary. This means giving the people the food that they need in a way that they can absorb.

It means total care for those that cannot care for themselves yet. It means absolute focus on doing people good, edifying them, encouraging them, admonishing them, exhorting them, defending them, protecting them, nurturing them and cherishing them.

To do this you must know your people. To know your people you must have a small flock. Local churches meet in homes and are not very large, but there are many of them in an area. In this way they are like salt in the earth. The idea of a big pile of salt on a meal is preposterous - but so is a huge megachurch drawing in people from many miles around.

Fathers know each of their children and develop them accordingly. Church leaders must know their flock and care for them individually.

Be a developer of ministry

I have seen famous church leaders be so fixated on their own ministry and their plans for the corporate church that they actually hindered developing ministry in their midst. I have seen good men leave a church, after being constantly squashed and hindered and held down, only for them to quickly develop a ministry of their own. This is a disgrace.

It is the great responsibility of church leaders to identify and nourish the gifts of the sheep. This is one of their most important functions. When you see potential ministry in someone, do everything possible to encourage that ministry to grow; give the person opportunities and let them flourish. It doesn't matter if they flounder at first, that is part of growing up. Every child falls many times before they learn to walk. Help them get over that and try again.

Unbelievably, I have seen famous leaders see developing ministry in a church member as a threat. Then everything possible was done to squash that ministry from developing. This is the opposite of true leadership.

True leadership equips people to minister. It trains people in the truth and helps them to flourish in the gift that God has given them.

Encourage questions

So many leaders are so insecure that they deny anyone questioning anything at all. This is an example of weak leadership.

Jesus encouraged the disciples to ask all sorts of questions, even stupid ones. It is through questions that we learn the most important things because the question identifies something we don't understand. Platitudes, sermons, speeches and demands are all useless in comparison to answering questions and encouraging discussion.

Paul excelled in answering questions in discussions. Look up the Greek word *dialegomai*.

People learn far more from discussion than from sermons. In fact sermons are the worst form of education because people retain so little of what they hear; RL Dabney reckoned it was 4%. Also sermons develop by gaining attention and this turns the speaker into one who seeks that attention by saying something interesting or entertaining when the focus must be on instruction. This is why sermons are never mentioned in the NT as the means of didactic instruction in the church; sermons were used for proclamation of the Gospel to outsiders.

Spend time with the flock asking questions and discussing what concerns folk.

Focus on truth

Your key responsibility as a leader is to guide the people into truth so that they can be free. Liberty comes from understanding God's Trinitarian personhood, will, character and decree. Knowing God is the foremost necessity in God's children. This should be followed by understanding the details of salvation, providence, sanctification and witness.

Focusing on the truth means a commitment to real teaching; that is, instructional didactics. Mere philosophising, homilies, encouragement, posturing, entertaining, mesmerising, agenda setting or anything else to grab people's attention is to be avoided. What is important is dogmatic instruction – making people good theologians, and I would add, good historians, good analysts, good practical workers and good ethical people.

Those who know God will do good exploits. Knowledge of God comes from detailed doctrinal study. It is those who know God and have a good relationship with him that will change men's hearts.

Avoid the worldly practice of feel-good sermonising. Your job is not to jollify people, not to stimulate them and make them feel happy, not to elevate self-esteem, not to entertain – your job is to instruct; to make people wise in truth.

Every session with your people should leave them knowing more about God and his decree than when they walked in.

Teach the truth even when it hurts. Sometimes the truth is hard to accept, such as God's sovereign providence in times of affliction, persecution and tribulation. When bad things happen God is not absent; he still sovereignly directs your path and the tribulation occurs for a very good reason. All things work together for the good for those who love God. Men of God were made such by tribulation. Job is the key example of this; his final revelation of God was much greater than that of his friend's and it came through afflictions coupled with faith.

Focus on Christ

Christ is the centre of all God's purposes. He is the fulness of God and the revealer of God. His mediatorship means that we know the things of God through Jesus Christ. Only Jesus reveals God. Only the Son of God can impart the things of God.

Jesus must be pre-eminent in all that you do. He is before all things and all things exist in him. Therefore Jesus must be involved in all that you teach and the way you teach. People will only grow inasmuch as they appropriate Christ by faith, which means that you must minister Christ in all your teaching.

Christ is the Rock and on this rock all salvation is built. Your teaching to apply the benefits of salvation to people has to be founded upon Christ. If you don't build on that rock, the rock will crush you and make your work desolate. You can be famous, rich, travel the world, be respected by hundreds of leaders and have a huge church, but if your work is not founded upon Christ it will all mean nothing and you will receive no reward.

Christ is the basis of all that you do for God. If Christ isn't in it, God isn't in it.

Money

Never ever ask for money – under any circumstances. Asking for money is immediate proof of a lack of faith in your ministry, which requires utter trust in God. In fact, very few church leaders need to be full time anyway unless they are in continual itinerant ministry. Plural elders in a house church can do a good job and still hold down secular employment. I did for decades.

God promises, in many places, to supply all your wants and needs associated with ministry. The ministry that God calls you to will also receive the grace and power to fulfil it.

What is worse is when church leaders openly ask for money from the world or seek to get discounts from the taxman. All of this is terribly wrong. It is a denial of the power and grace of God; it is saying that God doesn't care enough about you to supply your needs and so you need help from outsiders. This is a scandal.

Asking for money immediately identifies you as being in the flesh. Those who do this will never do any spiritual good to the flock.

George Muller never asked anyone for money, despite being an independent church leader and the manager of orphanages. Yet he prayed so faithfully that God supplied him more than enough to cover all expenses as well as enabling him to give away millions (in today's money) to missions.

If God has called you to leadership and has established your church – he will provide for all your needs.

Leaders who ask for money are utter hypocrites. They demand tithes from church members and exhort them to have faith in God's supply and then give sacrificially to the church. Yet they themselves cannot trust God for supply and make demands of members, often much poorer than themselves. It is spiritual abuse to demand that poor people give a 10% tithe of their gross income to church leaders who themselves are on a much higher income; but that is commonplace in modern Western churches. God's anger is going to be vented fully on supposed church leaders who live in luxury, have private jets, have limousine fleets and multiple houses yet make demands of poor people for financial gifts, claiming that this is faith.

Money is a root of many evils. Those who focus on money (even for a supposed good cause) have already lost their way. They are deceived and can do no spiritual good. If you have aspired to a full-time ministry but cannot gain resources to survive, then you must get a job and trust that God will open a door in the future or open a new form of ministry. Do not make money your focus.

Beware of the world

In the past worldliness in churches was restricted by simple legalistic regulations: don't go to dances, don't go to the movies, don't drink alcohol; and such like. Today the world has invaded every corner of the home and avoiding such things is difficult.

The problem with legalistic approaches to worldliness is that they do not constrain the motivations and thus don't work. In any case they are often too broad. Watching certain movies may be a good thing for example; drinking wine in moderation is not a problem; Jesus did so.

What is important is to guard the heart; to guard your motivations and choices. Today the world has invaded the churches so that they are more pagan than Christian. Every aspect of modern Charismatic churches is heathen worldliness run riot. Charismatic worship times have more in common with worldly pop-rock concerts than anything Biblical.

The world insinuates itself into every corner of church life so easily. Leadership structure becomes worldly. Worship becomes emotional entertainment. Fellowship becomes sterile audiences. Teaching becomes moralising feel-good talks, or worse. Money is drawn in instead of sent out. Leaders adopt marketing tools, advertising, tax-breaks, and even become sinner-focused. Church meetings are dumbed-down, brainwashing shops or social hubs. Church members talk like the world, watch the same TV as the world, go to the same sports as the world, follow the same idols as the world, and think like the world.

You must stand aside from all this. You can enjoy innocent worldly pursuits but must not let your motivations be guided by the world. You must be a giver not a taker. You must respond to evil with good. You must avoid deception. You must love and forgive sacrificially.

Don't let the world affect your thinking. Be renewed in the spirit of your mind; be focused upon Christ; be guided by the Spirit; be centred on the truth, fix your eyes heavenward.

Conclusion

These are simply a few thoughts as I consider what advice to give those who wish to become a church leader, an elder. Clearly this is not a compendium of all information on this subject, but it is a condensation of some important thoughts.

Above all focus upon Christ, trust in God's grace and aim to teach the truth. This is a good start.

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