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## LEADERSHIP HERESIES

A story is told of a young man filling out his college application. One of the questions on the form read, “Are you a leader or a follower?” He checked “follower.”

A few weeks later the dean telephoned him. “I don’t normally call students to congratulate them on their acceptance to our college,” he said. “But in your case, we’re particularly glad to have you. We’ve accepted five hundred students for the coming year—499 of whom identify themselves as leaders.”

Recently, as I was preparing to teach on the topic of “following,” I went to a nearby Barnes & Noble to do a little research. At the help desk I asked the attendant how many titles the store carried on the topic of leadership. She checked the computer and quickly found 125, telling me they probably carried more. Then I asked how many titles they carried on the topic of “followership.”

A puzzled look came across her face. “Followership?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Leaders need followers, right? I want to know how many books you carry that could help someone become a great follower.”

She turned back to her computer and searched for several minutes. “Two,” she said.

I was pleasantly surprised, as I hadn’t expected to find any. But my surprise quickly turned to disappointment when she told me the titles of the two books, each of which included the word *leadership*. Both books were written for leaders and focused on leadership issues—I’d already read one of them. Each made only a brief mention of the role of followers.

Why do we place such an emphasis on the topic of leadership? It seems everyone likes to think of himself or herself as a leader—and wants to be considered a leader by others. No one, it seems, wants to be called a follower. Leadership is where it’s at.

### *Missing the Gift*

Pastor David and I had stopped for lunch after he picked me up at the airport. A brief visit would give us time to get acquainted before I met with the church’s leadership team.

The church David had planted a year earlier had gotten off to a strong start but now struggled to break through the two-hundred barrier in weekly attendance. After we discussed his spiritual gifts, David hung his head. “I don’t have the gift of leadership,” he confessed. “I don’t know if I can build a great church.”

Seeing his discouragement, I reached for my Bible and asked him, “Show me where it states, ‘You must have the spiritual gift of leadership to build a great church.’”

He quickly acknowledged he knew of no such passage.

“How about where it states, ‘You need the gift of leadership to lead a church, even a church that isn’t so great?’”

Again, he was unaware of any such Scripture.

“Then where,” I asked him, “did you get the impression you need to possess the spiritual gift of leadership to build a great church?”

“It seems like every conference I attend and every book I read tells me I need to be a great leader,” he answered. “Leadership, leadership, leadership—that’s all I seem to hear about. I guess I’ve concluded it’s a necessary gift if you want to build a church.”

David’s not alone in his conclusion. Several years ago a Barna Group survey indicated that only 8 percent of America’s pastors see themselves as having the spiritual gift of leadership—a troubling statistic indeed if you attend the conferences and read the books David has. Most of these books and conferences bear a “leadership” label and are aimed at producing stronger leaders.

I’ve coached enough pastors among the 92 percent to know that many have reached the same conclusion as my friend David, and they share the same disappointment. It doesn’t take long to become convinced that becoming a great leader is the key to success. Success is based on your ability to lead. If you have “the gift,” you have a promising future. If you don’t, then start attending every leadership conference and start reading every leadership book you can get a hold of—because if God didn’t make you a “gifted leader,” you’ve got to make yourself one.

The same Barna survey taken today might bring different results—not because facts have changed, but because of the deep desire to see them change. I’ve found that a significant percentage of that 92 percent have talked themselves into believing they possess “the gift” (as typically defined). They want it, and their churches want it for them, so *not* having it is something few are willing to confess. In today’s culture it seems easier to admit being an addict of some kind. Perhaps we need to start support groups for those who acknowledge they aren’t “gifted leaders”: “Hi, my name is Bob, and I don’t have the spiritual gift of leadership.” That admission is more than the average ego can take. As a result the “non-gifted” work very hard to become better leaders and overcome the Holy Spirit’s “distribution error” in failing to gift them appropriately.

This misplaced emphasis on the spiritual gift of leadership has damaged the hearts and minds of many who fill positions of leadership. It has skewed their understanding of their role and contribution, and the distorting effects have been widely felt among those they lead. Churches and ministries have suffered.

This is why I’m suggesting that we need to let go of leadership heresies. I’m referring to the broad definition of *heresy*: “an error, a lie, a mistake in belief.” Heresies reflect a mixture of truth and error that alter God’s intended message and desired outcome. In the end heresies lead astray those who believe in them, bringing consequences that inevitably result from any departure from God’s truth.

Such is the case here. Leadership is important—critically important, but believing that leadership is the most important or most needed gift is heretical. It’s also heretical to believe that leadership’s expression is limited to just one gift.

In our culture, people place a great deal of emphasis and value on SNLs (strong natural leaders), while the church emphasizes and values the “gifted leader.” The concept is essentially the same, but the language is modified to make it sound more spiritual. Such an emphasis in the church is not a reflection of Scripture but of worldly philosophy and practice, and the results have done more harm than good.

### *Getting Our Biblical Facts Straight*

The Bible simply doesn’t state that those in positions of leadership should seek the spiritual gift of leadership. In fact none of the New Testament writers tells anyone to pursue it.

So what *should* we seek? Paul writes, “Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1). If you want to pursue any gift as *the* gift, Paul says, make it prophecy. Communicating revelation from God is at the top of the list. If we really took Paul’s words to heart, we would be holding and attending more prophecy conferences, right? And my pastor friend David would be more concerned about lacking *this* gift than that of leadership.

Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 12, 13, or 14 is the word *leadership* even mentioned. Neither is it found in Ephesians 4 or 1 Peter 4, other key passages on spiritual gifts. In fact, in the primary passages on the gifts, the *only* mention of leadership is Romans 12:8, which exhorts “he who leads” to do so “with diligence.” If the spiritual gift of leadership were as indispensable as some would have us believe, then the apostles would have placed more emphasis on it than those

five words—“he who leads, with diligence.” Truth is, in reading the passages on spiritual gifts, we find that the writers barely mention the gift of leadership.

One could make the case that the focus of Romans 12:8 is not so much on the gift of leadership as it is on the need for diligence by anyone occupying a leadership position. I realize that some liken the gift of leadership to that of apostleship mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11. But if we want to make those two gifts synonymous, we should refer to the gift of leadership as the gift of apostleship.

I do believe some possess the spiritual gift of leadership. But touting it as *the* all-important, absolutely needed, indispensable gift for those in positions of leadership is not in accordance with biblical truth. This erroneous belief has had several damaging effects:

*1. God's wisdom and sovereignty in the distribution of gifts is questioned.*

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12:11 that the Holy Spirit distributes the gifts “to each one individually just as He wills.” We don’t select our spiritual gifts; the Spirit does. If, in fact, 92 percent of America’s pastors are not “gifted leaders,” yet we insist that such giftedness is necessary, we can’t escape the notion that the Holy Spirit has left the body of Christ short.

While none of us wants to call into question God’s wisdom and sovereignty, this is essentially what we’re doing. It gives rise to a spirit of dissatisfaction with who God made us to be and how He

has gifted us. How often I hear a pastor or ministry leader say, “I wish I were a stronger leader.” Any time we exalt a specific gift as supremely important, those who don’t possess it are tempted to complain: “God, You didn’t give *me* what is central to *my* success.”

But such grumbling is sin and needs to be confessed as such. It needs to be repented of. To believe the Holy Spirit makes *any* error, in distribution or otherwise, is a lie and results in bondage for the one who thinks that way. The truth is, the Holy Spirit bestows all our gifts “just as He wills.” That includes *your* gifts. So rejoice in that truth, and serve in freedom and power accordingly.

## *2. The placement of “non-gifted” leaders in ministry is questioned.*

If 92 percent of America’s pastors don’t possess the gift of leadership, yet occupy positions of leadership in their churches, then they must be mis-slotted. Maybe the Holy Spirit didn’t make a distribution error, but many of His servants must have made an application error.

I know, from firsthand experience, the number of pastors who struggle with their supposed lack of leadership giftedness. “Can I still pastor this church?” they ask. “Has the church outgrown my ability to lead it? Do they need someone more gifted than me?”

They’re also confused about what leadership looks like on a day-to-day basis. “What should I be doing? What’s my role? What priorities should I be focusing on?” I hear these questions all the time. They come not only from leaders but also from team members who serve under their influence. “How can we help our pastor

become a better leader? Can he even lead our church? Or do we need a different leader altogether?”

So the right slot in ministry is a point of both internal and external tension for the “non-gifted” leader.

While I would agree that some who occupy positions of leadership are serving outside their gifting, the percentage isn’t as high as 92 percent. Ninety-two percent did not make a mistake when they followed what they believed to be God’s leading into their current roles.

We must stop bombarding ourselves with questions of competence that serve only to undermine our confidence. While there’s a time to thoughtfully and prayerfully consider your role in ministry, you can’t do that all the time. I’m fully in favor of prayerful examination of your role in ministry. I enthusiastically approve of your gaining input from godly counselors who love you. If such an appraisal suggests a major change, make it. If it suggests a minor adjustment, adjust. If neither, then move ahead with the confidence that God has you right where He wants you.

*3. Those leading try to become like someone else, rather than remaining true to who they are.*

It should come as no surprise that leadership conferences are usually put on by those who score high for the gift of leadership. Books on leadership are written either by these same “gifted” leaders or by people who study their practices. That’s because today’s church, just like our culture, places SNLs/“gifted leaders” on a pedestal. We’ve made mini-gods out of them. We stand in awe of



the organizations and churches they've built. People tell their stories over and over and study and record their habits. And the message is clear: Think as they think, relate as they relate, make decisions as they make them. By all means do as they do ... and you, too, can be a great leader just like them.

Recently a pastor told me about attending a conference led by one of these "gifted leaders." At the conclusion this leader stood before his audience and told them unashamedly that the best thing they could do to become better leaders was to buy his books and videos.

Some are buying this message and trying to remake themselves and their ministries in the image of a gifted leader. Rather than focusing their efforts and energy on developing and using the gifts God has given them, they focus on becoming like someone else.

Trying to minister out of someone else's gifting is a huge mistake. I observed this firsthand while on staff at Willow Creek Community Church. Curious pastors from all over the country came to find out what was responsible for our "success" (numerical growth). Many pastors returned home from our conferences (called Church Leadership Conferences) committed to launching seeker services in an effort to trigger conversion growth in their church. While their intentions for doing so were good, their implementations and results often were not.

Some sought to copy everything we did. One pastor called to ask what paper stock and ink we used for the bulletin. Another sought permission to copy the church logo. I know of pastors who even gave replica sermons from Willow Creek, including illustrations.

I'd like to believe that if God wanted us to mimic a particular

strategy for building His church, He would have put that strategy in His Word. *We've made the mistake of trying to copy the methodology of "success" rather than the process behind the methodology.* The ministry strategy Willow Creek employed is not the key to the church's high growth rate. The growth occurred for various reasons: The Holy Spirit released His anointing in the area of evangelism, church leaders cooperated with the Spirit's movement by employing a strategy that assisted this spirit of evangelism, and roles and contributions reflected each individual's gifts and passions. As a result the power of God was at work.

Programming methodologies come and go as time passes and cultures change. But the Spirit's anointing and our need to cooperate with Him are timeless.

Be the person God made you to be. Let your service flow from the gifts God has given you. Cooperate with the Holy Spirit's movement in your ministry. As Henry Blackaby has written in *Experiencing God*, "Find out where God is at work and join Him." Identify God's activity in your world and become part of what you see. God wants to do new works. Just take a look at the world around you and see the expanse of His creativity.

To learn from others is great! Trying to become like them is not.

#### *4. Those with the gift of leadership are prevented from exercising their gift.*

Perspectives differ concerning the number of spiritual gifts. Some people believe there are only nine, corresponding in number to the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22–23 and limited to

the list given in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10. Others believe the number is far greater than nine and includes gifts not even mentioned in the New Testament passages on spiritual gifts.

For a number of reasons, I'm part of this second group (though this isn't a matter of doctrine over which I would fight to the death). Several years ago, when Bruce Bugbee, Bill Hybels, and I compiled the content for *Network* (a curriculum focused on spiritual gifts), we reflected this position. We defined and described the spiritual gift of leadership as "the divine enablement to cast vision, motivate, and direct people to harmoniously accomplish the purposes of God." We went on to write,

People with this gift ...

- provide direction for God's people in ministry.
- motivate others to perform to the best of their abilities.
- present the "big picture" for others to see.
- model the values of the ministry.
- take responsibility and establish goals.

People with this gift tend to be ... influential, diligent, visionary, trustworthy, persuasive, motivating, and goal-setting.

While I have no desire to argue whether what we described is, in fact, a spiritual gift, I would argue strongly that such people do exist. Some folks, by God's design, fit the above description to a tee. I call these people "organization builders." When they do their thing, they build an organization. I believe this is Barna's 8 percent, those who score high for the gift of leadership. And just as