

# Christ-Centered Leadership: God-Honoring Leadership for Committed Christians

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**ABSTRACT:** Leadership research has focused on questions of who leaders are and/or what they do. For some time, more development has been necessary regarding what motivates the leader to act and what guides specific leadership behavior. Servant leadership is an approach to leadership that looks at the motivation of leaders (a desire to serve), but it is applicable to a very broad spectrum of leaders. It does not specifically look at motivations to lead within a religious or specifically Christian framework. This conceptual paper attempts to narrow the focus to leadership based on a desire to honor God and Christ and to act universally according to His character and design, based on having the mind of Christ. “Christ-centered leadership” goes beyond the motivation to serve others (servant leadership) and suggests that some leaders desire to place God’s commandments prominently in the center of everything they do, including their business dealings. This paper addresses leadership motivation based upon the Christian “greatest commandment” to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

**KEYWORDS:** Christ-centered, leadership, mind of Christ, servant leadership, spirituality

## INTRODUCTION

Many definitions, approaches, models, and theories of leadership have been developed in an attempt to define what leadership is and to understand successful examples of leadership. While these useful explanations have together formed a fruitful field of inquiry, many of the past leadership studies have addressed relatively limited aspects or applications of leadership (Northouse, 2016). In his book, Northouse (2016) reviews five approaches to leadership, two theories of leadership, and four models of leadership. His comprehensive work concludes that while the traits, behaviors, and situational aspects of leadership are well-understood, the internal influences that motivate leadership behavior are still being explored.

Leadership research has focused on several ideas: the generic idea of what leadership is, the characteristics or traits of a leader, the context of leadership in various settings and with different types of followers, and the processes and outcomes of leadership. Blanchard (2007) and Parris and Peachey (2013) agree that while these streams

of research are contributing to the general understanding of leadership, we need to better understand the compelling internal motivations and specific influences on leader behavior. Over time, a sub-focus of leadership research has looked at what motivates leaders to take on those roles, such as with “servant leadership,” as proposed and defined by Greenleaf (1970). Servant leadership appears to draw from a number of biblical teachings such as the priority of loving and serving one’s neighbor and the notion that Jesus humbled Himself and came to serve rather than to be served. While certainly biblically influenced and consistent, servant leadership seems to be a broad perspective to leadership and doesn’t fully capture the motivations of truly committed Christians, as servant leaders can serve others for many different reasons and with many different motives.

Leading because it enhances the well-being of followers is arguably a proper way to lead, especially if the alternative is doing so because it creates positive outcomes solely for the leader or organization, perhaps even at the expense of those being led. The passion or “heart” for

servicing, developing, and enhancing followers is certainly a noble motivation toward leadership, but the opportunity exists to explore deeper into the role that religion plays in serving others. Grimes and Bennett (2015) offered a universal notion, referred to as “Theocentric Leadership,” which espoused that across most major world religions, effective leadership actions are logically motivated and guided by the standard of what will ultimately honor the leader’s god(s). They proposed a broad viewpoint that most of the world’s major religions adhere to a higher power, which has positive expectations related to how believers behave generally and treat their fellow man. Positive leadership behavior, especially related to the development and care for followers, would be internally motivated by this religious adherence. While the resulting behaviors are similar to those discussed in other principle-based approaches, the motivation to lead, serve, and develop followers comes from an intense desire to worship and serve one’s deity daily, and this works well when a leader’s particular religious beliefs center around a “Golden Rule” approach to treating others with respect in a way that reaffirms their dignity and worth.

It is recognized that a global view of “Theocentric Leadership” is beset with difficulty. Harrison (2015), for example, argued that some religions do not prescribe such positive, pro-social leadership behavior toward all others, and some radical views even call on followers to do harm to those outside that specific set of religious beliefs. It is also suggested that some religions contain clear descriptions of virtuous traits and behaviors that would support motivation for virtuous leadership, yet possess extremely difficult positions with regard to non-adherents of the religion, women, members of specific castes or social strata, and others (Wallace, 2007). It has been suggested, then, that it is difficult to apply a universal motivational philosophy of leadership across religions based on the prescribed behaviors of adherents toward others.

While it is beyond the scope of this particular paper to further dissect the applicability of servant leadership to these non-Christian religions, it appears beneficial to further explore the motivations and guidance of Christians specifically in an attempt to better understand a substantial segment of leaders. Of course, many who claim the title of “Christian” do so more in name than in practice. This paper seeks to channel this concept of “Theocentric Leadership” through the specific teachings of the Christian religion, specifically towards the motivations of those who are passionately committed, with a personal relationship with Christ that truly impacts everything that they do.

The God of the Judeo-Christian faith; His Son, Jesus Christ; and His Word, the Bible, all command followers to love and honor God in all that they do, to love others unconditionally through humility, and to seek the well-being of others by extension through altruism and service. While the outcomes of this desire to serve the Lord are similar to the outcomes of someone who is generally pursuing a servant leadership style, the motivation is slightly different. As John 12:26 states: “Whoever serves Me must follow Me; and where I am, My servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves Me” (this and all future references taken from the Ryrie Study Bible, New International Version, published by the Moody Press).

The focus of this paper allows for a more specific look at the internal leadership motivations and desired leadership outcomes of deeply committed Christians and will be referred to throughout this paper as “Christ-centered leadership.” Christ-centered leaders sense a powerful obligation to practice ethical, servant leadership: to serve, mentor, develop, and nurture their followers. They do this for no other reason than that is what God would do if He were on earth and because that is, with some exceptions, how Christ acted while He was on earth. By narrowing the perspective, this paper can begin to explore the genuine and persuasive internal motivation of Christians to serve, honor, and venerate God, and by extension, to serve and nurture others, through a review of selected passages in both the Old and New Testaments, focusing primarily on ideas captured from Matthew 22, Philippians 2, and First Chronicles 28.

## RELIGIOUS VALUES IN ORGANIZATIONS AND MANAGEMENT

Religion and its impact on people has always been a challenging avenue of scholarly inquiry. We have recently seen more research into spirituality and religion in business and the workplace (Biberman & Altman, 2004), but there is a great need for more studies that look at the influences of religion and spirituality in the practice of management (Kniss & Campbell, 1997; Fornaciari & Dean, 2009). Several recent surveys (e. g., Cohn, 2015; Langer, 2015) reveal that most Americans identify themselves as Christians, although certainly much fewer are devoted adherents to Christian teachings. Still, many Americans subscribe very passionately and faithfully to Christ’s principles and teachings, and these guide much of their life in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes, and most importantly,

behavior (Blau & Ryan, 1997; Vasconcelos, 2010). Neal, Lichtenstein, and Banner (2009) suggest that it is a natural progression of events for people who undergo spiritual changes to attempt to apply these changes to other areas of their lives, including work.

Research over the years indicates that religious values (Christian as well as those of other religions) can influence very positive personal and organizational outcomes. Values can enhance decision-making processes (Vasconcelos, 2009), heighten the perception of non-ethical behavior (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003), improve moral reasoning (Sapp & Jones, 1986), create stronger organizational citizenship behaviors (Madison & Kellermanns, 2013), and lead to lower levels of prejudice and discrimination (Allen & Spilka, 1967). Religious values that are incorporated into the workplace can provide meaning for workers, which in turn can contribute to personal happiness and good health and well-being (Gavin & Mason, 2004). Dyck and Schroeder (2005) found that these personal moral values impact our choices, work, and behavior in management settings, and Nash (1995) determined that these religious beliefs and values heavily influence decisions made by business leaders. Davidson and Caddell (1994) suggested that these values can actually cause individuals to see work as a divine calling, and this places increased significance on living out these values daily and impacting the lives of others. Angelidis and Ibrahim (2004), Kennedy and Lawton (1998), and McNichols and Zimmerer (1985) found that these religious values can have a very positive impact on ethics and ethical behavior.

Several studies found that religion-influenced approaches can have a number of very positive impacts on the practice of leadership and include enhancements related to ethics and trust and credibility. One study indicated that individuals who put a high value on religion in their daily decision making were less likely to engage in questionable ethical practices (Smith & Oakley, 1996). Another study reached a similar conclusion that individuals who place a moderate or high importance on religion had superior ethical judgment compared to those who had low or no importance (Longnecker, McKinney, & Moore, 2004). Likewise, Rawwas, Swaidan, and Al-Khatib (2006) determined that religion had a large impact on reducing unethical responses to situations, and Worden (2005) found that religious components might enrich leadership activities, including ethics and credibility. Rodgers and Gago (2006) indicate that man has tried for centuries to use religiosity and religious values in

influencing ethical considerations. This research suggests that being “religious” or being “spiritual” can have a positive impact on leadership. But Rodgers and Gago (2006), Sternberg (2011), and Conroy and Emerson (2004), among others, have suggested and given examples of where this relationship is not always so clear, and that, in some situations, being “religious” or “spiritual” has little impact or even a negative impact on leadership capability. As such, it is reasonable to suspect that something more than “religious” or “spiritual” is needed.

### **WHY “RELIGIOUS” OR “SPIRITUAL” IS INSUFFICIENT**

While some leaders certainly desire to allow their Christian beliefs to influence their leadership activities in the business world, Campbell (1957) has suggested that the reality of that business world is not conducive to this alignment as a wall has been constructed between the two. Most insist that the two be separate and distinct. Campbell found that, even more than fifty years ago, businesses were making moves to minimize the expression of faith-based values in the workplace. He argues, however, that religious values should create the best outcomes for all mankind and that Christianity and religious values are not in opposition to capitalistic ideals.

One problem that has certainly limited this type of study in the past is that religious and spiritual adherence and beliefs are typically closely-held and personal, and they can be very difficult to distinguish, characterize, and study. Also, many individuals maintain and exhibit disconnect between their “religious life” and their “everyday life.” For example, the linkage between religious values and the workplace is not always so clear and is not always so easy to ascertain because some business people are active privately in their religious pursuits, but their workplace actions (and actions elsewhere) show little evidence of their faith or values (Weaver & Agle, 2002). Those who study leadership certainly do not have to look far to find a number of “Christian” leaders who have made very hypocritical, unethical decisions.

Other researchers discount the impact of religious values completely, suggesting that ethical values and training by itself never seems to do a complete job of influencing good behaviors or preventing bad ones (Conroy & Emerson, 2004; Sternberg, 2011). It has been argued that people develop their own individual codes of right and wrong and frequently deceive themselves as to how

appropriate their actions are (Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). Some observe that there is either no relationship or a negative relationship between religious orientation and ethics (Clark & Dawson, 1996; Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Hegarty & Sims, 1979). Studies reveal that people are good at self-justification and regularly fool themselves into thinking that their personal behavior that actually is unethical or illegal really is not wrong at all (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004; Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugyh, 2003). Smith, Wheeler, and Diener (1975) concluded that there is no difference between religious and non-religious people in terms of dishonesty and cheating, and Kidwell, Stevens, and Bethke (1987) concluded that there was no relationship between religiosity and ethical judgments. Further, scenarios abound where religion and faith have obscured and clouded solid evidence and hampered the decision making process entirely, leading to sub-optimal and dysfunctional outcomes. Recent work by Mumford and Fried (2014) criticized the value-based, ideological views of leadership partly because of the lack of focus on the entirety of the leader's job, including dealing with other stakeholders and managing business strategy.

So even after many years of research and scholarly inquiry, it is unclear what the true influence of these values are on organizational and personal outcomes. It has been suggested through research studies like the ones above that general religious philosophies may not have any consistent influence on behaviors and little predictability in terms of who would lead in this fashion. Perhaps what makes the difference is not being "religious" but what that "religion" actually consists of and looks like. Perhaps what makes the difference is also not being "Christian," at least not in the generic sense that is claimed by many but which has no power behind the label because there is no real life-changing relationship that occurs as a result of taking on that label. Perhaps someone who goes deeper than mere "religion" and shallow "mainstream Christianity" and who actually begins to take on the mind of Christ will be a better, more caring leader.

### **A BETTER PERSPECTIVE: THE MIND OF CHRIST**

Recent surveys suggest that the majority of Americans identify themselves as "Christian," with one poll suggesting 71% (Cohn, 2015) and another 83% (Langer, 2015). The Bible and other Christian teachings are replete with appeals to serve, help, mentor, develop, and nurture

others, and most Christians are no doubt aware of these appeals. However, Langer's (2015) survey and others suggest that only about half of these respondents are fervent, passionate, or even evangelical in their faith. As such, Kessler and Kretzschmar (2015) rightly recognize that simply adopting the label of "Christian leader" is insufficient to automatically establish a compelling internal motivation to serve others. It is certainly insufficient to deem someone as either an effective leader or even an active servant leader. Beck (2010), for example, found little statistical relationship between "worship attendance" and the practice of servant leadership. True Christ-centered, God-honoring leadership by those who profess to follow and serve Christ must move beyond simply claiming to be "Christian."

It could be argued that the subset of individuals in these surveys who seek to live "Christianity" out in daily life; who profess an understanding and devotion to the character and will of God, spirituality, and religious values; and who believe that these things are very important and compelling motivations or "callings" see leadership roles as a way to honor God and to serve others. For these people, the positive influence that they can have on others could be viewed as being a very important part of their entire purpose in life. Leadership behavior from this perspective is a type of "calling" to the leader, but perhaps more importantly, it affirms and is in keeping with the will of God. What sets this motivation for leadership apart from other motivations and helps to distinguish between those who claim the name of Christ and those who are truly committed to honoring God in all that they do is what has led up to this point in the life of the leader.

One possible adjustment to the philosophical approaches of the past is to focus more on a leader who is not "religious" or "spiritual," but who, after undergoing a purposeful process, has become so "in tune" with God's view of humanity and with the value of people from His perspective that the leader has essentially taken on the mind of Christ. Here is how that might develop.

While some individuals initially profess Christ on an emotional or intellectual level, believing that is what "should" be done or as a method of escaping the wrath of God, others see the conversion experience as an opportunity to make wholesale changes to their former way of life in a desire to follow God wholeheartedly. Second Corinthians 5:17 says that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

When the individual fully understands the magnitude of his relationship with Christ, he begins to realize the



unworthiness of his former life and accepts that God has made him a new creature with a blank slate to be drawn on as he grows spiritually. As this person then submits to a new leadership in his own life, Christ begins to rewrite his values and priorities to be more in line with God's will, desires, and priorities. Over time, as the believer seeks to know God better, as God continues to reveal Himself to the seeking believer, and as the believer consequently surrenders more and more of his desires to God, that believer begins to understand the command in Romans 12:1, which implores seekers to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship."

As the believer empties himself daily, offering his thoughts and actions in a recurring offer of sacrifice, he begins to "own" the following exhortation in Romans 12:2 to "not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but (to) be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — His good, pleasing, and perfect will."

In a continual progression of being made over to seek God's pleasure in his daily actions through this renewing of his mind, that believer gradually takes on the mind of Christ and sees things and people from a different perspective. This result is not possible without the progression described, and is not evident in the life of one who has not undergone this fundamental change, as is indicated in First Corinthians 2:14-16, which states,

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: for who has known the mind of the Lord that He may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Thus, as the long-term outcome of seeking to know Christ more, the believer begins to take on the mind of Christ, and this impacts how he lives his life and how he makes decisions, including in the business world.

The final result of this redevelopment process is that this believer has, indeed, become a "new creation" (Second Corinthians 5:17) and has developed "the mind of Christ," (First Corinthians 2:16) which then fulfills the plea of the Apostle Paul for unselfish treatment of others in Philippians 2:3-8:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your

own interests, but also to the interests of the others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!

Through this process of building the same mindset as Christ, the believer changes his approach to his fellow man, and to those whom he leads, and he begins to act as a servant, living out the ideals of servant leadership, but for a different reason and with a different motivation than that of others who pursue this same leadership philosophy.

As such, adopting a leadership approach that embodies the approach of a servant seems to most closely model that leadership style that the New Testament endorses, but it is primarily accomplished through a specific development process of redefining who we are in relationship to God rather than as a general philosophy geared towards being kind and helpful to others.

Truly passionate Christians are transformed by the power of Christ, and the redeeming and sacrificial "other-serving" selflessness of Christ serves as an ever-present guide to how we should treat (and lead) others.

## THE CASE FOR STUDYING CHRIST-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

The concept of God's influence on the actions and thought processes of leadership has certainly been explored from purely within the context of Christian literature, but not as much has been done by business scholars in the specific area of business applications. As such, the business literature lags behind Christian literature in terms of how theology and religion in general influence leadership motivations and behaviors and how a "sold-out" approach to God further impacts those motivations and behaviors.

Kessler and Kretzschmar (2015) explore the possibility of "Christian leadership" as a valid area of research. They argue that such a study pulls from a number of academic disciplines and seeks to better define this construct in a specialized area. In their paper, they identify two types of "Christian leaders": the ones who lead solely within a religious institution, such as a church or Christian-faith-based non-profit, and the ones who are in authoritative roles in the secular world but who draw

on their Christian faith as they attempt to make decisions which will impact others.

For devoted Christians, service to the Lord is first and foremost, as stated by Paul in Colossians 3:23-24: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” But by extension, others are led and served. Matthew 20:26-28 says, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Although Christ did allow others to serve Him on occasion (such as the times when women anointed His head or feet in John 12:1-8 and Luke 7:36-38), Christ Himself is the model for how a leader can seek to serve others and still allow others to serve him as well. First Peter 5:2-3 says, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

King David encouraged his son Solomon to seek God in this manner, and this challenge and promise to him in First Chronicles 28:9-10 and 20-21 suggests that the leader who follows God whole-heartedly will be used by God to make a difference and that his or her followers will see that devotion and how it manifests itself and will serve alongside the leader:

And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve Him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you reject Him, He will reject you forever. Consider now, for the LORD has chosen you to build a temple as a sanctuary. Be strong and do the work... Be strong and courageous and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished... every willing man skilled in any craft will help you in all the work. The officials and all the people will obey your every command.

While God calls very few people to build a temple, He does give people tasks, and expects them to complete those tasks with wholehearted devotion and willing minds

with the promise that doing so will ensure His presence and power along with the support of His people. In other places, the Bible speaks clearly regarding the expectations of those in a leadership role. Luke 12:48 says, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” Psalm 78:72 tells us that “David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.” Acts 20:28 says to “keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood.”

As we consider the example of Christ-centered leadership and how leaders who adopt this philosophy sacrifice their own interests for the greater interests of others because they have been changed by God to have a mind like His, we should consider how closely this mirrors the example of how Christ lived out this service to others within the framework of submission to God.

Although the Bible never clearly compels individuals to always sacrifice their needs and wants for the good of others, it does clearly instruct followers to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). With a belief that many people “love themselves” and will take efforts to meet their own needs, the application could be logically extended from this that they will take equal efforts to meet the needs of their neighbors (or business colleagues or subordinates, as applicable) when they love those neighbors in the same way. What these leaders are willing to do for themselves, they will begin to be willing to do for their followers. While this is an admirable position to take in life and in one’s leadership role, Christ reminded us that the “first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:38) in the law was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

Therefore, it would seem that servant leadership teachings effectively address what Christ indicates is the second-best thing that we can do (loving and serving our neighbor), but that it doesn’t automatically include the first (loving God). For Christians, a different (but related) approach to leadership which takes a Matthew 22:37 approach would address the greatest commandment. We argue that when a leader effectively adopts the same mind towards others that God has and seeks to treat them in the way that He would because that leader desires to honor God, all other relationships reap the resulting benefits. Not only will leadership be characterized by selfless, other-serving, other-loving development of people, but all stake-

holders will be treated better, scandals and unscrupulous temptations will be less likely, and the organization will be above reproach. This is the idea of “Christ-centered leadership,” which becomes a specialized application of a broader “theocentric leadership” approach that seeks to follow a generic god’s commands.

King Solomon says that “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10), and Paul adds that “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24).

Paul further indicated that “we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts” (First Thessalonians 2:4). He also stated that “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (First Corinthians 10:31). Galatians 6:9 says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” It seems from Scripture that this God-centered approach to life is what God had in mind, and it has applicability to all of life, including the workplace and the leader-follower relationship.

A number of years ago, a popular cultural approach to decision-making was embodied in the acronym “WWJD” found on bracelets worn primarily by young people, which compelled people to ask in any situation “What Would Jesus Do?” before making any decisions or taking any actions. We attempt to use this as a foundation by considering first which potential action or decision would truly honor God and which would be the decision that He would make in this position. If God Himself were in this spot making this decision, He would generally act out of concern for others and in a way that builds and develops the achievement and well-being of others.

Christ actively lived out this concept while He lived on the earth, generally seeking to uplift others (although at times, He severely chastised the religious leaders who did not have the “mind of Christ” referenced in First Corinthians 2:16 or the “same attitude” from Philippians 2:5) while He sought to do God’s will and complete His calling. It is of note here that Jesus first and foremost sought God’s honor and glory, and that such a pursuit then influenced His actions towards others. His decisions were always about selfless honoring of God, and those decisions tended to lift up others in the process. Further, Christ was focused on those who were in the greatest need of altruism and self-sacrifice, saying in Matthew 25:40, 45 that “whatever you did for one of the least of these broth-

ers of Mine, you did for Me... (and) whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me.”

Christ gave up His position in heaven at the right hand of God in order to serve men and showed a willingness to go to extremes (death on a cross) for both the ones who followed and the ones who didn’t. The Apostle Paul encouraged his readers to imitate him, as he was seeking to imitate Christ (First Corinthians 4:16; First Corinthians 11:1, among other references). He did this because he had developed the mind of God, and this manifested itself partially through a willingness to sacrifice his own comfort to seek the welfare (spiritual and material) of those to whom he ministered. If Christians therefore desire to emulate Christ, it would seem paramount that they adopt a similar attitude of seeking first that which will honor God and then determining how this action can enhance those around them.

#### **WHAT “CHRIST-CENTERED LEADERSHIP” MIGHT LOOK LIKE**

The concept of Christ-centered leadership is fundamentally simple and one with which many committed and practicing Christians would possibly agree. But how do Christian leaders actually put such a concept into practice? How do they effectively and consistently put God in the center of everything that they do? What does such an approach look like, or not look like, in terms of behavior? How does it manifest itself in practical actions, and what common activities should people refrain from doing in the future? While people have varying and independent concepts of what God “wills” for humanity and personal lives and there is often disagreement on what Christianity should look like in daily living, this is one possible scenario of the kinds of activities leaders could engage in that effectively lift their followers above themselves.

Because of this, the questions posed above are not easy to answer. However, as stated earlier, any decision that is made within the framework of loving and serving God foremost, and loving others radically, is seemingly in keeping with these principles. The common denominator with these two ideas is that Christ-centered leaders are not acting with themselves in mind, and they are not seeking to better themselves at the expense of their relationship with God or other people. Instead, these Christ-centered leaders are seeking God’s welfare and the welfare of others, and if they are benefitted or are honored as a result, that is a bonus. Beyond that, a knowledge that God is

watching and is ready to either say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21) or “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you” (Matthew 25:12) helps frame their motivations, decisions, and daily behaviors and actions. A Christian leader realizes that “many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21).

### Recognition

Ideally, Christ-centered leadership would seek personal recognition, advancement, and glory only when it could be pointed or redirected to honor God or others for the gifts and abilities that He has given. Collins (2001) talks about the “window and the mirror” and expresses that the great leaders quickly look in the mirror when assessing blame, taking the brunt of the bad personally, and they look out the window when assessing credit and praise, deferring that to others. Leaders who put Christ at the center of all decisions and actions, and especially in leadership opportunities, seek to honor God with all of those decisions and actions, and they consistently redirect praise and accolades to others and seek to develop the self-esteem, confidence, and positive perceptions of others. It should be understood here that it is not the intention for the leader to always be in the background; the intention is to honestly and sincerely lift up followers when appropriate. As this type of leader recognizes the value of honoring others and feels the burden from God to act like this, he or she will also recognize that other leaders who have this same burden from God will occasionally seek to deflect praise onto them.

### Spotlight

In a similar logic, Christ-centered leadership would also cause leaders to shy away from the personal spotlight and the receiving of individual accolades for organizational accomplishments, preferring instead to let others stand in the light when it is favorable. Jesus Christ told the disciples that “the greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12). In far too many circumstances today, we see leaders who are drawn to the center stage when praise is being handed out and revel in exalting themselves, even when those leaders deserve no more of the attention than anyone else who contributed to the success. The Christ-centered leader would instead be helping to orchestrate activities and goals and leading the team to achieve them, but not seeking credit when those goals were achieved. Leaders who

put Christ at the center of everything that they do, and especially in leadership opportunities, realize that personal recognition simply means that other deserving individuals are missing opportunities to grow and receive recognition for the good things that they do, which oftentimes go unnoticed or overlooked by outsiders.

### Pay and Perks

Additionally, Christ-centered leadership should cause leaders to rethink the structure of salaries, benefits, bonuses, and “perks” in a way that frees up more organizational resources for those less-glorified team members who deserve additional rewards but who rarely receive them, and in a way that allows more corporate resources to be available for the benefit of both the local and the global community. The individualistic American way of life stresses that individuals have a primary duty to provide for themselves and their families’ needs, and certainly receiving more economic benefits allows leaders to share those benefits with others through giving. But it can also be argued that in our modern world of economic plenty, there is a point where additional benefits only create marginal value, and additional dollars in the form of annual salary and bonuses only provide an incremental, and perhaps unnecessary, extra cushion. Christ-centered leadership would compel leaders to reassess “wants” and focus more on “needs” in such a way as to assist others in meeting their “needs.”

An excellent example of how this might look in practice lies in a recent decision by the Board of Directors at Parkland Health and Hospital System in Dallas, Texas, to take between \$3 million and \$4 million from a pool of money that traditionally had been used to pay executive bonuses and to use it instead to improve the hourly wages of over 200 of their lower-paid workers. While we cannot be sure that this was prompted by a motive in line with Christ-centered leadership, the end results certainly provide an excellent picture of what this motivation and guidance looks like in real-world application. It is also not known whether this was a decision made by the Board outside the input of organizational leaders or if those leaders altruistically proposed that course of action to the Board for consideration. Leaders who put Christ at the center of everything that they do, and especially in leadership opportunities, realize that compensation and benefits that go beyond that which is “needed” and that are instead shared with colleagues at a lower hierarchical level or with the broader community can honor God by putting others first in a self-sacrificial way. It is quite reasonable to argue



that Christ compels people to provide for their families, so the suggestion here is not that leaders should fight for less than that which would meet the needs of their families. Rather, it is to remember that Christ encourages us not to “store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19-20). The Christ-centered leader would do well to consider the admonition of Luke 12:15-21 where Christ tells the parable of the man who builds bigger barns to store up his treasures but who is not rich to God, only to find that it was all fruitless.

### **Information**

Finally, Christ-centered leadership would compel leaders to use information in a way that benefits others, unlike what we saw so often in the 1990s in companies like Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco, where leaders took information and used it for personal gain at the expense of their workers and stakeholders, many of whom lost nearly everything while their greedy corporate leaders retired to extravagant settings. Leaders who put Christ at the center of everything that they do, and especially in leadership opportunities, realize that providing others with critical information enhances the lives of everyone and prevents the elect few from benefitting disproportionately.

In essence, Christ-centered leadership compels the leader to take a new look at his or her followers using the same mind that Christ had, and to look at actions and decisions in light of what brings ultimate honor and glory to God, and to what improves the livelihood and well-being of others, even if it means that the leaders could possibly miss out on those same honors, benefits, and rewards. A Christ-centered holistic leadership approach provides a reasonable response to those studies, which criticize servant leadership for its over-focus on the leader-follower exchange and lack of focus on serving other stakeholders and other business facets of organizational leadership (e.g. Mumford and Fried, 2014).

Some might legitimately ask why leaders in this modern “dog-eat-dog” world would even be interested in such a selfless approach to leadership. Why would anyone sacrifice self-interest so completely for the good of others? Second Corinthians 5:9-10 says, “So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good

or bad.” Simply put, Christ-centered leaders can gain reward here on earth in the form of those things viewed as tangible, perishable, and purely temporal, or they can gain future reward in heaven in the form of those things viewed as intangible and eternal. The Bible teaches in this and other passages that one day, people will answer directly to God for their decisions and behaviors. For Christians, it makes sense to adopt a leadership philosophy now that addresses the critical problems so that the judgment to come is more in their favor.

Making it a highest priority to have God at the center of decisions, whether those decisions are related to work, family, relationships, finances, or whatever else one’s “hand finds to do,” (Ecclesiastes 9:10) should make more of the ethical gray areas turn to black and white, and there seems to be evidence that this focus on God is beneficial and advantageous. As Romans 8:28 puts it, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

### **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Both of the authors have spent many years in leadership roles in rather large and complex business organizations. Both are Christians who actively and purposefully seek the mind of Christ, and both relied heavily in their leadership roles on the consistency of faith-based motivation that compels us to serve others and glorify God as an extension of our Christianity. We have observed many Christians over the years who seem to subscribe to the same concepts we have discussed in this paper. Further study is needed to investigate just how pervasive and important Christian-based leadership is in modern organizations. While the literature seems to support its existence, little work has been done to investigate just how meaningful fervent Christianity is in motivating servant leaders. As mentioned earlier, Beck (2010) found little statistical relationship between church attendance and the practice of servant leadership. But in a qualitative structured interview of exceptional servant leaders, Beck found faith to be an integral and important influence to their servant leadership approach.

It is understood that this approach to Christ-centered leadership does not fit neatly into what our society prefers in regards to life choices, responsibility, and accountability. Many in society simply do not want to acknowledge God or a responsibility to seek Him and His desires, and

many will reject an approach to leadership that involves giving up self and selfish goals and ambitions in order to seek a way of approaching leadership in the workplace that strives for something that is higher and purer. Nonetheless, it would seem to be difficult to envision a committed Christian arguing that God would accept anything less than seeking Him first — as Jesus Himself noted, “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

While this proposal for Christian leadership may not be ground-breaking to theological scholars, it is perhaps helpful for those who work entirely within business academic circles, who may not have really thought much about a need to move God back into His proper place in all aspects of our lives, and especially in one of the main areas where we have tried to remove Him — in the business world. By considering all actions, relationships, and decisions from within the context of “how do we ensure that God and His glorification is at the center of this?” we can begin to build a credibility as individuals and as organizations that will, first and foremost, do the right thing for others and for society every time. The consequences of our decisions will be minimized, and the benefits of our decisions will be maximized.

As noted above and previously in this paper, there would seem to be two primary obstacles to adopting, implementing, and then measuring the subsequent success of a Christ-centered leadership model. The first would be helping business leaders to see the value and necessity of bringing God back into the workplace and “in all your ways acknowledge Him” and allowing Him to “make your paths straight,” as Proverbs 3:6 states. The second would be in developing a reliable method for accurately measuring the degree to which people really desire to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

Future research in this area can be undertaken in a number of ways. First, academic and theological researchers can work towards a common understanding of the benefits that can accrue to organizations and to followers if leaders live out this concept of “Christ-centered leadership.” Second, researchers can begin to try to determine how to measure someone’s commitment to God and to Christ, and how to place a value on his desire to hold God in the center of everything. Third, researchers can theorize further on how such a commitment to God will positively impact the community in which an organization is located, the stakeholders and shareholders who invest in the organization, the people who devote much

of their waking hours to the success of the organization, and the individuals who develop the strategies and goals for these organizations. Fourth, practical applications of Christ-centered leadership can be explored in specialty areas of business, such as marketing, human resources, research and development, accounting, and other areas.

From a practical standpoint, leaders need a strong compass for making important leadership decisions and choosing appropriate leadership behaviors. Future development of this construct of Christ-centered leadership will no doubt provide a consistent understanding of the motivation and types of behaviors needed for other-serving leadership. Further, development of this construct will allow Christian business leaders to see more concretely the types of leader behaviors (and motivations behind them) that are fruitful in business settings and that solidify their understanding of how to practice their faith in secular settings.

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