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The Leadership Paradox

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CRITICAL REVIEW

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Gunderson, Denny. 1997. *The Leadership Paradox*. Seattle: YWAM Publishing. 156 pp.

This book explores the challenges to servant leadership in a power hungry world. It was written by Denny Gunderson who has been on the staff of Youth With A Mission for nearly 30 years. Seven of those years he served as the North America director. Denny has ministered and taught in more than 45 countries around the world.

The *Leadership Paradox* expounds the values of the Kingdom of God, as fleshed out in the life of Jesus and other biblical biographies. The author applies the lessons contained therein to modern-day leadership paradoxes. The book focuses on five qualities which characterize a servant leader: acceptance (53), teachability (79), being a model (105), meekness (117), and trust (129). The book warns against four dangers: the controlling trap (19), stardom (37), favoritism (67), and compromising (95).

Five Qualities

The servant leader seeks to establish a relational base of love and acceptance. People have a need to belong and to be forgiven. Teachable leaders will be willing to receive ministry from their followers, just like Jesus who allowed a well known prostitute to minister to Him in the house of Simon (Luke 7:36-38 NIV). He recognizes that humbly receiving ministry from a follower actually allows the follower to grow in confidence. In the New Testament context, leadership implies discipleship as modeled by Jesus. This is about the impartation of ourselves.

True meekness is another characteristic of the servant leader. Humility and meekness are closely related because both have to do with submission. Leaders need also to have trust. God chose to use the eleven disciples to change the world and now He chooses to use us, sinful men and women. Leadership develops to its full potential when an atmosphere of trust and freedom is provided.

Four Dangers

The human obsession for control and the sincere desire of a true leader to serve are mutually exclusive (24). “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28 NIV). Obedience and humility are God’s twin guardians against the plague of vain ambition resident within the heart of the leader who want to be a star (42). On numerous occasions, Jesus told people not to tell others how they had been healed. The temptation to gain special favor or to extend partial treatment can weave its seductive spell upon the soul impressed with status (71). To fight compromise, the servant leader will resist the temptation to gain personal financial advancement from ministry opportunities, knowing that to compromise integrity is to lose the ministry (98).

The thrust of the author’s work is describing the basic attitudes of a servant leader instead of giving techniques or methods to employ when leading. The author believes that people who develop the right attitudes will eventually do the right things. The book gives enough qualities to cultivate and shows pitfalls to avoid.

The author goes beyond addressing classical leadership pitfalls and gets to the deeper issues of the kingdom values and how they are worked out in the life of a servant leader. This writing is directed to leaders of all kinds in the church who have a challenge to merge in one person the characteristics of a leader and that of servant. The purpose is to visualize a number of incidents from the life of Jesus and see whether they apply to us today. In the process, we can understand some principles that will help us point the way to Jesus, the perfect leader.

Compared to other writings, this author goes in the same line with some prominent evangelical leaders. Issues discussed in this book are supported by Dr Lynn Anderson (1997) in his book *They Smell Like Sheep* and John C. Maxwell (1999) in his book *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of A Leader*.

Anderson (1997) approaches the problem of stardom in these terms: “Other (leaders), with both heart and skills, are hamstrung by leadership styles patterned after business models rather than after Jesus” (2). Anderson gives a light to the meaning of acceptance in the analysis of the title ‘bishop’. He points out that the Greek word *episkeptomai* emphasizes the sense of loving one another and submission to one another, each considering others better than himself. The word implies a sense of responsibility and concern toward a person (190).

John C. Maxwell (1999) notices that in order to be loved by others, you need to appreciate them, encourage them, and help them reach their potential (11). Anderson warns spiritual leaders who are prone to do favoritism. He summons leaders to pay attention to balance their time between problem people and possibility people (116).

The teachable leader is described by both authors. All leaders need to be teachable because all are imperfect. Anderson even points out that our attempt to pull off a perfect image would, in itself, demonstrate a lack of integrity. Rather, leaders will surround themselves with people who will hold them accountable and offer needed support (114). Maxwell rightly remarks that a leader who wants to grow his organization has to remain teachable, but that requires putting of pride, as one cannot be prideful and teachable at the same time (144-145).

Maxwell deals with compromise. According to him, true leaders will be willing to risk their success, their future, and even their life instead of their integrity. That takes character. He understands that adversity is a crossroads that makes a person choose one of two paths: character or compromise (3-4).

Modeling was one of Jesus' methods of teaching. About this method, Dr Anderson demonstrates how the essence of spiritual leadership consists in sheep following a shepherd because they trust him (17). As Maxwell points it out, character is more than talk but action is its real indicator (4).

Jesus trusted his disciples and entrusted them with the message of the Gospel. Dr Anderson says that the twelve trusted the 7 deacons and entrusted them with duties of managing and administration. He then pointed out that our times call for spiritually discerning church leaders who understand clearly the difference between shepherding and administration and entrust others with the later (179). Maxwell gives these wise advises: "Work in your strengths, you can reach your potential. And work with your contemporaries, you cannot be effective alone (56). Trust and entrust.

This book is a precious tool in the hands of church leaders. Nevertheless, some thoughts presented are themselves a challenge to my understanding. Chapter one is dealing with issue of the control trap. When Jesus came, crowd left John and shifted allegiance to Jesus. John had recognized himself as one not worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. As a pastor, I am not ready to encourage my flock follow a new pastor who start his new church a few blocks from my church; but this is the very illustration given by the author (25-26). I understand that John himself suffered an intense inner struggle (Matt 11:2-3). The issue was not ended with John's death, as we see his movement still alive twenty years later, even reaching remote area like Ephesus (Acts 19:1-3).

When we read the Bible carefully, we see that John did not step aside and give up his leadership. John was put in prison for many months and was beheaded later. Even in prison, he had still his disciples with him and could use their services (Matt. 11:2). Nevertheless, he recognized that Jesus was greater than him and it was true. How can a leader judge that he is no longer needed and step aside? Organizations and churches have by-laws that regulate how leaders will be elected and removed. I rather agree with the author when he recognizes that the sovereignty of God makes no allowance for accidents.

The author discusses the issue of hierarchies in our denominations (26-27). This structure, admittedly, was brought by third century church fathers. They used it as an attempt to deal with problems of their time. As this structure has been followed through centuries, is it wise to renounce it when we have nothing better to replace it? We have been witnesses of many leaders leaving their positions and of many organizations dying, even if they were not 'killed' by those used by God to start them. Can we not believe that sovereignty?

Continuing the discussion against positions and status, the author emits disagreement about position of seats when big leaders are invited in receptions and wedding (72). I consider this idea more related to cultural differences than to Biblical principles. In our African setting, the leader is honored and is expected to get privileges related to his position. By doing that even to Christian leaders, people feel secure. We are far away from modern America saturated with freedom and egalitarian concepts. I do not believe that a positional honor will prevent you to become a servant leader. Things go differently in different cultures.

The author deals with the issue of a lonely leader. He believes that loneliness in lives of leaders comes from their willingness to be 'above' their congregations (84-85). I agree that leaders must live among their flocks but with some kind of 'body guards'. The very call to leadership implies a kind of isolation

which is the cost of that call. A leader must avoid vulgarity and vileness in order to protect his call. We have not the potential of Jesus who, as a perfect man, could perfectly control his environment. Even though, one day he made this prayer: "I sanctify myself..." (John 17:19). There is a kind of loneliness which is the cost to the position of a leader. The leader Timothy was given this advise, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (1Tim. 4:12).

The Leadership Paradox is worth reading for any leader who wants to understand how servant leadership is a challenge in this world hungry for power. It is a kind of book which makes a lasting influence on a leader. It can help them put a balance in relations between character, calling, talent, and charisma. It will challenge them to rethink their ministries.

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