A Biblical Definition of Leadership

In his book, *The Making of a Leader*, Dr. J. Robert Clinton describes biblical leadership as “a dynamic process in which a man or woman with God-given capacity influences a specific group of God’s people toward His purposes for the group.”1 Clearly, biblical leadership is influence. Anyone who has influenced someone to do something has led that person. Several times, the scriptures refer to God’s people as sheep, and His leaders as shepherds. The 23rd Psalm describes the Lord Himself as a shepherd who leads his sheep beside the still waters and in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Like good shepherds, *biblical leaders lead people through their godly influence down God’s divine paths*. Remarking about influence, Hans Finzel states, “Great leaders…inspire us to go places we would never go on our own, and to attempt things we never thought we had in us”2

*Genuine biblical leadership wields influence based upon godly character.* Granted, sometimes in the Old Testament God used men to lead whose characters were quite tarnished (e.g. the Judges). But the New Testament sets a high standard for biblical leadership that emphasizes Christ-likeness and godliness. Look at the qualifications for a bishop, listed in I Timothy 3:2-7:

> A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride, he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must

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While nothing is stated about organizational skills or administrative ability, much is said about character traits and godly influence with those within and without the church.

**God and Leader Formation**

Put simply, life is basically about *being* and *doing*. Put differently, life is about who you are and what you do. This concept is realized in the believer in the Fruit of the Spirit (c.f. Galatians 5:22-23) and in the Gifts of the Spirit (c.f. I Corinthians 12:7-11). The Fruit of the Spirit describe who Jesus was as a man, while the Gifts of the Spirit describe what He did as a man. Likewise, the Fruit of the Spirit should describe who we are in Christ, while the Gifts of the Spirit (among the other spiritual gifts of God) should describe what we do for Christ. Another way of saying it is that the Fruit are the marks of a mature Christian, while the Gifts are the mark of a good minister. The critical key, however, is to understand that *our doing must flow out of our being*.

Too often, we look past a leader’s character or overlook a leader’s obvious weaknesses because of the strength of his gifts and abilities. We have been guilty to even elevate such a person to a level of great spiritual maturity and strength of character on the basis of his giftings. Yet, Jesus doesn’t share that value system. In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus predicted that there would be those who would prophesy in His name, cast out devils, and do many mighty works but fail to do the Father’s will. On judgment day, they will hear Him say, “I never knew you; depart from

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3 I Timothy 3:2-7 NKJV (New King James Version)
Genuine obedient discipleship, built on a character-transforming relationship with Jesus, is more important than a spectacular ministry.

The goal for the biblical leader is what Dr. Clinton calls “the Upward Development Pattern.” Throughout a leader’s life, he should experience a spiral of growth in being and doing. In each being cycle there is an increase in experiencing and knowing God, while in each doing cycle there is an increase of effective service for God. The growth in being results in a higher level of doing, which creates a need for increased maturity in being, and so on. Effective leaders should reach the place where they stop trying to do ministry, and instead pursue depth of relationship with God and allow Him to work through them.4

God uses processes of life to create this “Upward Development Pattern.” While patterns deal with the overall framework (big picture) of life, processes deal with the ways and means God uses to move the leader along in the overall pattern.5 God takes “the good, the bad and the ugly” of life and turns these experiences into valuable leadership lessons. Often, what too many leaders fail to understand is that leadership development is a lifetime process. They are convinced that the right combination of leadership books and seminars will magically transform them into a top, effective leader. They will “arrive” on top of the leadership mountain of success. The fact is the journey of life, with all of its ups and downs, is the key to becoming the biblical leader God wants you to be. The story of Joseph in Genesis 37-41 illustrates this well. Joseph was divinely called to be a leader at 17 years old. He had big dreams and visions. But it took 13 years and experiences in a pit, Potiphar’s house, and a prison to prepare him for the palace of Egypt.

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4 Clinton, 156-157.
5 Ibid., 42.