V — LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

Leadership is a term with many connotations. When we add the modifier "Christian," the connotations increase. Some of these meanings come from the culture of which we are a part, and some come from Scripture. It is important that we learn to distinguish between these two sources.

There is a tendency on the part of Christians to want to define an ideal model of leadership by studying leaders in the Bible, but we must recognize that the patriarchal culture of the Old Testament and the Greco-Roman culture of the New Testament were quite different from the culture of the latter 20th century Western world. This is not to say that there are no biblical guidelines for leadership. It is only to say that the result of the biblical principles of leadership applied to our situation may look different than when applied to other cultures at other times.

For example, in the New Testament we find no highly developed church structures as we do today in the West. Organization and leadership within the early church were relatively simple. For that reason, we find no models for the leadership of our large, urban churches with their professional staffs or for denominations with national and international dimensions. To say that we find no models, however, is not to say we find no principles; and it is to those principles that we need to give careful attention as we seek to develop models for our present situation.

The first New Testament principle to be noted is that every church leader demonstrates exemplary Christian character (1 Tim 3, Titus 1:5-9). In pagan societies even to this day, character is not as important as the pragmatic ability to get results. Whoever can control spiritual power most effectively is looked to as a spiritual leader, regardless of his or her personal character or ethics. In the church, however, what a person is is more basic than what he can do. A leader is to be a living demonstration of the highest qualities of Christian life and thought and a living proof that biblical ethics work. These qualities and the living proof are not required only of leaders. Every Christian, whether in a leadership role or not, should be marked by them. The ideal is "every man mature in Christ" (Col 1:28). The point is that the basic qualification for leadership is a significant degree of spiritual maturity based on sound doctrine and continuing spiritual growth. A significant factor in this maturing process will be a lifestyle which puts into practice biblical values and which resists the molding pressures of contemporary non-Christian cultural values.

A second principle related to Christian leadership is that service is more important than status. Jesus made it clear that his followers were not to seek position or power for themselves (Matt 20:20-28; John 13:16). There is one Lord; and the words meaning "rule" (Greek words with the root arch) are never used in the New Testament in reference to relationships among Christians. So the Christian leader is not a ruler; he is a servant, although not primarily a servant of the people he serves. He is primarily a servant of God from whom he receives his guidance and direction.

For the leader to function only on the level of the group is to abdicate the role of the leader. This balance between being a servant and being a leader is demonstrated for us by Jesus himself. The accounts of the cleansing of the temple and the washing of the disciples' feet picture for us the balance which should be found in a leader, as one who exercises authority and yet ministers to the people with the heart of a servant.

A related principle is that leadership is more a matter of function than office, of doing the ministry than of being a minister. Leadership in groups almost always begins as a ministry function and gradually becomes institutionalized into an office. The tendency, then, is to begin to think of holding the office rather than of performing the function of a servant-leader. Seeking an office for personal satisfaction or as the base for exercising authority is contrary to the biblical concept of servant-leadership.

A third principle relates to the existence of various types of leaders, ranging from the prophetic type, characterized by the ability to motivate people to obey the Word of God, to the priestly type, more akin to our modern concept of management. The latter type of leader will organize and run the programs conceived by the former, and some leaders will have varying degrees of these characteristics. The danger is that tension may arise between the two functions or between the people

carrying out the functions, or that one function will tend to predominate at the expense of the other. For this reason, some prefer to distinguish between leadership and management.

However we may define the terms, we need to recognize that the body needs all of its members and both types of leadership.

A distinction is also made between professional and lay leaders. The concept of professional church leaders is not as clear in the New Testament as the general concept that leadership is a legitimate function in the church. Professionalism has grown as the church has developed institutional identity. The cultural factors become significant when dealing with this aspect of leadership. The church in a tribe with a subsistence-level economy would not have the option of professional leaders although it would certainly need leaders. The house churches in places where there is government suppression of Christianity, as in China, do not have the option of professional leadership as we know it, but the criteria for leaders would still apply.

This does not make professional clergy unbiblical; but it does mean that we need to begin with a concept of leadership in the church which comes from biblical principles and which recognizes that some of our common concepts and patterns of leadership are more a product of twentieth century Western society than a project of biblical principles or patterns.

A fourth principle underlying leadership in the church involves the recognition by the leader and by the church that a qualification for leaders is the possession of the appropriate leadership gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is why a leader needs more than just the general qualities of mature Christian character. All members of the body should possess these, and persons who are not in leadership posts are not exempt from the need to reach such standards. Neither are they second-class members of the church. It is simply a matter of recognizing that God in his sovereignty has given various gifts to the members of his body and that they need to be recognized not on a hierarchical basis but on the basis that all gifts are for the building up of the church. A leader, then, is one who has God-given leadership gifts and uses them within the church with the spirit of a servant.

The fifth principle is that Christian leadership involves skills which need to be developed through careful study and practice. Those skills may vary with the cultural expectations of leaders and with the complexity of the organization involved, but diligence in order to be "a workman who has no need to be ashamed" applies to leaders as well as to every other member of the church.

These skills will include varying combinations of such things as guiding in the development of purposes, goals and objectives; motivating the church in the pursuit of these ends; instructing the church in God's Word; helping the members of the church identify and use their gifts for the good of the church and the fulfillment of the person; keeping group and personal need-satisfaction in balance; counseling; encouraging; organizing and managing the activities and ministries of the church; administering discipline; serving musically; and doing evangelism and church planting in unreached areas.

A caution needs to be raised about the tendency to confuse certain personality types with gifts of leadership. Stereotypes of leaders are sometimes formed on less than valid biblical criteria, and anyone who fits the stereotype is thought to be a potential leader. Adherence to the above principles will help to avoid the error.

A second caution relates to the tendency for leaders to seek to avoid the risks involved in leadership by shunning the role entirely or by trying to transfer responsibility to the church or to a committee or board. It is clear from Scripture that God's people have not always been willing to follow God's appointed leaders. Jeremiah's case is an outstanding example of this resistance. This can prove to be a severe test for the servant-leader.

In summary, the criteria for leadership in the church are: (1) spiritual maturity as defined by the Scriptures, (2) a servant spirit committed to the service of the church, (3) a sense of divine call, (4) appropriate spiritual gifts, and (5) developed leadership skills.

— Adopted by the 1985 General Conference