

Editorial: Is Christian Leadership Unique?

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Most people spend their lives trying to find answers. I usually prefer the questions because, if we get them right, almost everything else follows.

As someone responsible for teaching leadership to others, I wrestle with one question constantly: What do Christian leaders have to offer that an equally talented atheist cannot? When this issue first started plaguing me, I quickly found myself hung up on two smaller questions:

1. If unbelievers have little to say on the issue, why do we read their leadership books? A simple search on *Amazon.com* turns up 17,176 hits for “leadership.” Adding the modifiers, “business leadership” results in 10 times more hits than “church leadership.” After all, we attend corporate conferences to learn how to lead, but few CEOs attend church conferences to do the same. I find some believing leaders are intimidated by the degree to which we are beholden to the business community, feeling we would never figure out what to do without the help of the Harvard Business School. Others resent these secular intrusions so much as to condemn them publicly. Neither of these attitudes seems like the path to an answer.

2. What about the unbelieving leader who is more “effective” in her/his context than many believing peers? We wish this were never the case but we all know that it is sometimes. Aren’t Christian leaders supposed to be, well, Christians? Shouldn’t that be enough to make us the equal of any well-intentioned atheist? While the difference between darkness and marvelous light is quite stark both in Scripture and in life, I am painfully aware that being a Christian does not guarantee leadership effectiveness any more than it guarantees that I can play middle linebacker in the NFL (which I don’t, by the way). Both Scripture and life teach us that there simply is more to it than that. If this were not the case, the gift of teaching would not be in the church, because learning would be unnecessary.

So then, if both Christian and non-Christian leaders

- possess ability in some form,
- have access to the same resources and training and
- experience “success” and “failure” in their context,

what do believers uniquely bring to the leadership table?

Of course, being in a redemptive relationship with Christ makes a difference. And, of course, being gifted

by the Spirit makes a difference. And, of course, revering the Word of God makes a difference. And, of course, our definitions of “success” make a difference. But I have concluded that there is something more that is the foundation upon which all of the other differences rest:

Christian leaders have access to the Cross in real time.

Unlike our secular counterparts, we can be “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20)¹ by walking up Calvary to a place where our egos can die, our ambition can be executed, our self-dependence can expire and our tendency to substitute pretense for integrity can be nailed to the tree.

The unbelieving leader has no place to die to her/himself. In seeking to save her life, she will lose it. However, Jesus said, “Whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Mark 8:35). Christian leaders

know that the only way to live and lead is to “die every day” (1 Corinthians 15:31) so that we can be renewed in the life of the Spirit.

While our corporate counterparts trumpet their power for all to hear, we listen for a still, small voice. While they keep score by accumulating high-tech toys, we store treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20). While they put their accomplishments on their resumes, we put ours on the Cross.

Excellent training and relevant resources are extremely important in today’s organizational climate. Recognizing the giftings the Spirit imparted to us is even more important. In the end, however, a Christian leader must walk up Calvary to the place of surrender and death. His willingness to take this walk is one of the things that made Jesus so worth following (Philippians 2: 5-12). It will make us worth following as well.

¹ Biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).