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Biblical Leadership in a Developing Global Culture, Part 1

Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, describes a sad yet humorous turn of events that was chronicled in *The Guardian International*.

In 2005, a French bus company, Transports Schiocchet Excursions (TSE), sued several French cleaning women who had previously used TSE for transport to their jobs in Luxembourg. The women's crime? Carpooling. TSE asked that the women be fined and that their cars be confiscated, on the grounds that the service the women had arranged to provide for themselves—transportation—should be provided only by commercial services such as TSE. (The case was thrown out in a lower court; it is pending on appeal.) (2006:78)

A global cultural change is developing which brings with it a new set of leadership opportunities and a new set of challenges. Shirky goes on to say,

Newly capable groups are assembling, and they are working without the managerial imperative and outside the previous strictures that bounded their effectiveness. These changes will transform the world everywhere groups of people come together to accomplish something, which is to say everywhere. (2006:23-24)

In addressing church leaders at the Seventh-day Adventist Church headquarters, London Business School Professor Gary Hamel asks, "Are we [church leaders] changing as fast as the world around us?" (2013).

A Developing Global Culture

In order to respond with the *right kind* of change, it is important to explore the nature of the change that is happening around us.

At the “*It’s Time*” World Urban Mission Conference held in Washington, DC, at the World Headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on September 21, 2013, presenter Monte Sahlin listed 36 cities expected to have a population of over 10 million by 2025 (2013:slide 9). Sahlin went on to pose the question, “What drives urbanization?” In response he listed five catalysts: (1) work and business opportunities, (2) people seeking education, (3) media sharing popular culture which has an urban flavor to it, (4) young adults leaving traditional cultures, and (5) Western ideas of personal freedom and democracy (slide 6). The interplay of these, especially points three through five, significantly contributes to a developing global culture.

While Western cultures may be leading in the development of this global culture, to think that non-Western cultures are exempt would be naive. In fact, only six of the megacities cited by Sahlin are in the Global North, and any urban location—Western or non-Western—is now plugged into one of the most powerful enculturating forces of our time: the Internet. The worldwide web not only reflects a global culture, but also provides access to, shapes, and largely defines the culture (Shirky 2008; Godin 2008). It is quickly changing the way people respond to and interact with leadership at every level.

Leadership Models Forced to Change

Whether in the area of transport, government, parenting, for-profit companies, or not-for-profit organizations, leadership models are being forced to change. Sahlin suggests that urbanization will impact religion and faith in seven ways: pluralism, competition, secular values, invention of new religions, erosion of traditional institutions, a “consumer” mentality among adherents, and the rise of the “nones” (2013:19). These changes, especially in the context of major urban challenges such as climate change, hunger/malnutrition, income inequality, and rapid growth, will force leaders and the denominations they serve to reevaluate existing paradigms.

Leadership could find this frightening, threatening, or at least frustrating—but not necessarily. Mike Cauley, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Florida Conference, affirms this need for change. In a recent presentation given to church leaders, he concluded with five missional considerations, the final being: “We must be about changing the culture in the Seventh-day Adventist Church if we are going to be successful in our mission” (Sahlin 2013:70). Church co-founder Ellen White anticipated change as a positive experience with great potential for evangelism. “Some of the methods used in the work will be different from the methods used

in the past, *but let no one, because of this, block the way by criticism*" (White 1948:7:25, emphasis mine).

As field after field is entered, *new methods and new plans will spring from new circumstances. New thoughts will come with the new workers who give themselves to the work. As they seek the Lord for help, He will communicate with them. They will receive plans devised by the Lord Himself.* Souls will be converted. (White 1948:6:476, emphasis mine)

Yet, in times of change, leaders must anchor their response in a biblical approach to leadership.

Four Principles of Biblical Leadership in a Developing Global Culture

1. *Leaders lead relationally—Rom 12:8.* The Bible makes no apology for leadership. Leadership is, in fact, assumed in the Bible. Writing in Rom 12:8, Paul advises, "If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously" NLT. Then verse 10 adds the relational element: "Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." The Bible affirms responsible, relational leadership!

Institutions and their leaders are coming under intense scrutiny today. And whether we like it or not, the wary can cite ample evidence as to why they should *not* trust leaders, including church leaders. At the very least, they want to choose their leaders. And, in a globally connected culture, there are many leaders from which to choose (Godin 2008).

Integrity and relational leadership go hand in hand because relationships depend upon trust. Although relational leadership is not always convenient, efficient, and cost-effective for an organization, it is necessary. Sometimes leaders need to make difficult decisions knowing they will be criticized and misunderstood. At these times reputation carries a responsible, relational leader through.

2. *Leaders follow their Leader—John 5:19-20.* Leaders must live in recognition of a higher Leadership than their own. John 5:19-20 tells how Jesus modeled this principle: "So Jesus explained, 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing.'"

When Jesus spoke these words, He was interacting with the church leaders of his day. This was a difficult interaction for a number of reasons. Yet clearly understanding where his authority came from, Jesus stated simply that he accepted his Father's invitation to join him in his missionary work—whatever, whenever, and wherever it might be. His listeners

were outraged, because they understood the implication: *They* were not Jesus' first and final authority; His Heavenly Father was.

A temptation sometimes exists for church leaders to assume that lay people's first line of accountability/authority is to them. This subject is a very delicate one. Yet at the risk of being misunderstood, it is worth exploring.

The grand principle maintained by the Reformers—the same that had been held by the Waldenses, by Wycliffe, by John Huss, by Luther, Zwingli, and those who united with them—was the infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. They denied the rights of popes, councils, Fathers, and kings, to control the conscience in matters of religion. The Bible was their authority, and by its teaching they tested all doctrines and all claims. (White 1939:249)

In our time there is a wide departure from their doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty. *The same unswerving adherence to the Word and God manifested at that crisis of the Reformation is the only hope of reform today.* (White, 1939:205, emphasis mine)

One must respect all human authority because “the Word and God” require it:

For the Lord's sake, respect all human authority—whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right. (1 Pet 2:13-14 NLT)

Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. (Rom 13:5 NKJV)

Jesus, in the context of John 5, is still respectful of and submissive to human authority. Respectful submission to an earthly authority does not elevate that authority above “the Word and God.” Instead, respectful submission to an earthly authority is necessary *because of* submission to “the Word and God.” And that same Word acknowledges that there are times when “we ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29 NKJV).

Admittedly, this principle was very difficult for the religious leaders to accept in Jesus' day. Possibly it is no less difficult for today's biblical leader.

3. *Leaders, at times, part ways—Acts 15:36-41.* Ideally, one would like to see all differences between leaders worked out. However, the Bible

example of Paul and Barnabas provides the possibility that strong disagreements can prompt people to part ways yet continue in God-honoring ministry.

After some time Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing.” Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. *Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated.* Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul chose Silas, and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord’s gracious care. Then he traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there. (Acts 15:36-41, emphasis mine)

Missionary-minded people, whether leaders or lay people, are often strong people; they do not go with the flow. (If they went with the flow, they might not have the conviction or stamina it takes to be a missionary leader.) Strong personalities clash at times; Paul and Barnabas are examples. Yet Scripture shows that both were able to go about God-honoring ministry in spite of their disagreements.

This same kind of disagreement still happens among leaders and between church leaders and lay leaders. And the same kind of God-honoring outcome, people being reached with the gospel, can be realized.

4. *Leaders share the Commission—Matt 28:18-20.* This passage is well known, and yet unbiblical leadership assumptions are often drawn from the passage.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.” Amen.

To whom is the Gospel Commission given? A few church leaders have insisted the Gospel Commission was only given to Jesus’ twelve disciples, representing “official/ordained” leadership. Most, however, agree that it is given to any disciple, or follower, of Christ. This was the understanding portrayed in Ellen White’s commentary on the life of Christ:

The gospel commission had been given to the twelve when Christ met with them in the upper chamber; but it [the gospel commission] was

now to be given to a larger number. At the meeting on a mountain in Galilee, *all the believers who could be called together were assembled.*" (1940:818, emphasis mine)

The Savior's commission to the disciples included *all the believers*. It includes all believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on the ordained minister. *All to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in trust with the gospel. All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men.* For this work the church was established, and *all who take upon themselves its sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ.* (White, 1940:822, emphasis mine)

Christ gives his followers, both church leaders and lay people, the same commission to go to all nations, in Christ's name, and do *all* the work of disciple-making. One can only accept God's invitation to join him in his work—whatever, whenever, and wherever it may be (see Blackaby 2007, where he extensively develops this concept).

Conventional leadership interpretations of Christ's commission may need adjustment. The Gospel Commission was given as a package. To split it up, giving some portions to professional church leadership and some to laypeople, is not sound exegesis. *Leaders are laypeople first, and leaders second.* Biblical leaders are privileged to share in the Gospel Commission with all believers, recognizing it to literally be a "co-mission."

Within the Commission, however, there remains a function unique to leadership: Leaders equip. In one of the clearest job descriptions recorded in Scripture, we read: "Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11, 12 NLT).

This passage has gained a lot of attention in current church leadership literature (Hirsh (n.d.)). Much has been built upon and around these five-fold ministry gifts. Yet what is clear from the text?

First, these leadership gifts are from Christ—the same Christ that gave the Gospel Commission to every believer.

Second, the collective purpose of these leadership gifts is to *equip* God's people. *Equippers do not replace the worker.* While they perform personal ministry in a layperson capacity, their *primary role* is to *equip* "the saints, for the work of ministry" (KJV). This means that if a teacher is not spending the majority of his/her time teaching others to teach, then he/she is neglecting the primary purpose of the gift. Ellen White felt so keenly about clergy being trainers and equippers rather than performers of ministry,

she even stated that “pastors who are performing ministry rather than teaching members to minister should be fired” (1948a:197-198; see also Burrill 1998).

Third, “to equip God’s people to do His work” is about empowering. Because titled positions naturally tend to lose the servant perspective of empowering and equipping (and may even deteriorate into controlling and manipulating lay people under the guise of leadership or cultural traditions), the 5-fold gifts are better viewed as descriptions rather than as positions.

Paul is clear: These gifts are for the purpose of empowering others to fully embrace Christ’s Commission! To empower them to do anything less falls short of authentic biblical leadership. Scripture commissions church leadership to release ministry (Knott 2014), to empower the ministry of lay people.

Summary

Today’s Christian leader must respond to changes in the developing global culture that is driven by urbanism and connected by technology. This will require new models and methods of leadership.

Bible principles provide a foundation upon which to build adequate models of leadership. According to Scripture:

1. Leaders must lead with integrity and authentic concern for people.
2. As Jesus modeled submission to his Father, biblical leaders must also recognize a higher authority than their own which both church leaders and lay leader are accountable to.
3. This authority is expressed in the Word of God.
4. God-honoring leaders sometimes differ and part ways as they continue in God-honoring Kingdom work. Yet it is a leader’s privilege to share with both laypeople and fellow leaders in the Gospel Co-mission. Unique to the leader’s role is the responsibility of equipping God’s people for His work.

With this as a biblical foundation, part 2, “Game Changers” in a Developing Global Culture,” will be presented in the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 11, no. 1.

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Video clips address the developing global culture

Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody*
(21 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/29343101>

Alan Hirsch, author of *Forgotten Ways*
(8 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/43050068>

Gary Hamel, *Encourage Church Innovation*
(90 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/95216145>

Upside Down Leadership
(22 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/29378253>

Gary Krause, director of AdventistMission.org
(9 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/47602362>
- <https://vimeo.com/47596697>

Bill Hybels, *A Holy Discontent*
(42 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/29154790>

Dwight Nelson, *Something More Important Than Truth* (41 minutes)

- <https://vimeo.com/32454378>



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