The Heart of the Steward Leader: Applications for Life and Ministry

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My friend, Dave Jewitt, Founder of Your One Degree, recently wrote, "How we work, lead, handle conflict, treat others, and conduct ourselves impacts how people view the gospel and Christianity." (personal correspondence, March 25, 2014) From a worldview perspective, we are beginning to see the conflict that occurs as values from divergent belief systems clash. But there are deeper lessons here for those who lead "Christian" organizations.

The academic field of organizational behavior studies why people behave the way they do in organizations. Topics in this field of organizational research include organizational theory, the human dimension of organizations, organizational culture and climate, organizational change, leadership, decision making, conflict, and motivation (Organizational Behavior in organizations, Owens and Valesky, tenth edition, Pearson, 2011). From a biblical perspective, all believers are to be faithful stewards fulfilling the purposes of the Master for all He has entrusted to their care. This means, as the Puritans used to say, that ultimately we serve "an audience of One."

However, the reality is that all believers live in a fallen world, and all struggle with lust and lure...temptations to do wrong from within and from without. Christian leaders are tempted to make decisions based on pride, selfish motives, or even out of anger or fear. Conflict in Christian organizations is inevitable. Most people resist change. And, Christian ministries can struggle with ineffective structure, negative climate and secular culture. With all of this in mind, for now, let's accept as a working hypothesis that *most Christian organizations are led by godly, Christian men and women who love The Lord and desire to lead well.*

As a starting point, we need to grapple with two questions. *First, what theory of leadership should Christian leaders embrace, and second what should a Christian organization look like?*

Let's define a few terms. "Steward leadership is a model that views the primary identity and role of the leader as one who is a steward managing the resources of another that are entrusted into his or her care." (Wilson, p. 76) "Stewardship is to hold something in trust for another and is defined as the choice to preside over the orderly distribution of power." (Block, p. xx) In Block's words, choosing service over self-interest means that we are willing to be deeply accountable without choosing to control the world around us. It requires a level of trust that we are not used to holding. (Block, p. 41ff) "The antidote to self-interest is to find cause. To commit to something outside of ourselves." (Block,p. 10) Stewards who are called to lead must undergo a personal transformation. "This process of personal transformation rests on three foundations: 1) the purpose of our existence rooted in the image of God that we bear, 2) the radical freedom the steward experiences to work in joyful, responsive obedience (to the Master) and 3) the distinctiveness of the steward leader model which is based on inward-outward transformation and an emphasis on being over doing." (Rodin, p. 30ff)

Brinckerhoff writes about the importance of serving others as a mission-based steward. He writes, "a mission-based steward is a person who consistently leads the organization in managing the resources of the community in a manner that maximizes its mission-effectiveness. Characteristics of a mission-based steward are balance, humility, accountability, integrity, the ability to motivate, a thirst for innovation. communication skills, and a quest for lifelong learning." (Brinckerhoff, p. 4)

The gaps we identify between theory and practice and between biblical truth and practice expose some problems many stewards experience as they serve the Master in Christian organizations. These problems look like behavior of leaders that does not line up with either best practice or biblical principles of leadership.

As a case in point, recently, a former board member of a Christian organization emailed me about the board's dismissal of its CEO. He wrote that the board had voted unanimously to dismiss this Christian brother because of "his behavior." Just because a decision is "unanimous" doesn't mean the decision is a good one. The literature has much to say about groupthink and the pressure dominant board members place on others in the group to go along with decisions they support. Irving L. Janis, in his article "Groupthink: the Desperate Drive for Consensus at Any Cost" writes, "groupthink is the quick and easy way to refer to the mode of thinking that persons engage in when *concurrence-seeking* becomes so dominant in a cohesive in-group that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action." ("Groupthink", Irving J. Janis, Psychology Today, November, 1971)

According to research on this topic, lack of effective formal and informal, formative and summative evaluation of Superintendents by their school boards is prevalent in Christian schools (Simmons, 1996). Even more troubling, this scenario is evident in hundreds and perhaps thousands of other "Christian" organizations and bible-believing churches across the country. In short, boards and CEOs do not engage in effective dialog about performance as much as they should, and when problems crop up politics often prevails and due process is seldom followed.

It is important to recognize that these sorts of organizational problems are not in the sole purview of Christian ministries. As a case in point, the city of Columbia, South Carolina, where I currently reside, just hired a new police chief...their ninth since since 2007! Commenting on this, the Chief of the Hampton Police Department in Virginia said, "Columbia's story is not news to anybody. Everybody in professional circles knows what is going on down there. The key will lie with the city officials and their willingness to trust him to do his job. His (the new chief's) success or failure don't depend on his capabilities, but the political will of those who lead the city." (The State Newspaper, Sunday, March 23, 2014, p. A10). Ultimately, in a discussion of leadership either self will or the will of the Master rules in one's life.

Steward leadership has specific application to board leadership. Board members are trustees, and a trustee is one to whom has been given a trust.   This is the biblical definition of a steward. To be a faithful trustee, board members must lead effectively. A starting point to effective governance is to ensure that the machinery and structure of the organization is sound. If the structure is right, there is still no guarantee that the organization will be effective, but if the structure is wrong, effective ministry will be difficult if not impossible (The Board Book, an Insider's Guide for Directors and Trustees, William G. Bowen, Norton, 2008, p. 149 ff)

The reason for this is that behavior of people cannot always be explained or predicted by motivation, personal needs or behavior of the leader. Sometimes structure plays a role. Structure defines the ways labor is divided and how information flows between

people and groups. Structure, then, influences the feelings, attitudes and emotions of individuals and ultimately the behavior of people and groups within every organization.

As a good example of broken structure, I know of a Christian school that was founded with an "A" board and a "B" board. The superintendent of the school met monthly with the "B" board that appeared to be the governing board of the school. But the founder and two other board members served on the "A" board which met annually and made the "important decisions" for the school. The Founder established himself as the Chairman of the "A" board and had five votes, the second member had three votes and the third member had one vote. You do the math! This school was led for 30 years by these three men, and years after the death of this founder and the dissolution of this autocratic, ineffective board structure, the school still struggles with a negative climate which in large part is the result of an ineffective structure and all that went along with the way this board led.

Peter Drucker once said "the only thing non-profit boards have in common is that they are all dysfunctional." The primary reason for this dysfunction is confusion of roles. Simply put, boards need to do board stuff and CEO's need to do CEO stuff. Boards, ideally, should exercise fiduciary, strategic and generative leadership (Governance as Leadership, Chait, Ryan and Taylor, pp.6-7). The CEO, then, should be empowered and supported by the board to serve as their only employee tasked by the board with the responsibility to carry out the mission of the organization.

The Bible is full of principles about how leaders should lead. For example, Christian leaders should strive daily to follow the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Many of our organizations are still struggling financially from the economic downturn of 2008. If there is no margin, there is no ministry! Often when budgets have been reduced due to decreasing revenue, the only alternative for Christian leaders is to lay off staff. How we do this is of utmost importance to the Master as we lovingly manage relationships with the people He has entrusted to our care. As a leader ask yourself, "How would I want the board and CEO to treat me if the roles were reversed?" Having led an organization in decline through several years of necessary downsizing, if I had this to do over again, I would be more involved in the process than I was expressing love and concern for these individuals.

To complicate matters, as we lead our organizations we all realize that the world is changing. We now live in a global economy, and the majority of citizens of the United States embrace a secular worldview. We experience opportunities and threats from the convergence of technological, financial and demographic factors. To innovate also requires shifting of resources during times of limited or declining revenue. Again, these changes often involve people and how we lead through times of change is of utmost importance to the Master. These are not problems to be solved, but rather tensions we need wisdom to manage. The tension between what is good for individual employees and what is best for the organization, keeping in mind that the organization and it's employees belong to God, is one of the most difficult tensions we manage as steward leaders. As we manage this tension, we need to continually seek the will of the Master

for all He has entrusted to our care as we prayerfully make important decisions which have far-ranging impact and the potential to affect many lives. Leaders are charged by the Master to make these important decisions while staying faithful to Him as expressed in continued fulfillment of the mission and vision of the organization guided by the organization's statement of faith and core values.

One other problem leaders face is the fact that we live in a litigious society. One organization I learned about recently was led by a senior leader who passed six figure contracts to his son for school projects. Steward leaders must deal with these unethical situations if they are committed to fulfilling the will of the Master for the organizations entrusted to their care. What is difficult, however, is that in dealing with such complicated matters, steward leaders must deal wisely with the fear associated with threats of lawsuits and critical opinions of other staff, board members and stakeholders.

Leaders make decisions, and someone will disagree with virtually every decision the leader makes! Covey writes that trust is an outgrowth of the competence and character of the leader. From an organizational standpoint, however, trust is more complicated as it also involves the leader's ability to manage the tension between implicit and explicit expectations of employees and other stakeholders.

Hurt and resulting disillusionment are potent tools the evil one often uses for his purposes. In relation to specific stewardship responsibilities for the relationships with the people entrusted to our care, here is some specific advice. For the one who has been wronged, the Bible is clear on what path of action to take. Forgive! Forgiveness means to make a conscious decision not to hold an offense against another. It means we will not dwell on the offense. We must choose not to become bitter, disillusioned, jaded or cynical. And for the one committing the offense, recommit to living according to biblical principles and "do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8)

The point here is that Christian leaders including CEOs and board members should not fall into the same conflicts over political will including power struggles, micromanagement, and disputes over finances as those who do not claim to be steward leaders and followers of Christ. Christian organizations should be characterized by steward leaders acting Christianly!

Those living and working in a secular culture understand human nature and often take steps to protect themselves from unjust treatment. Unions, tenure, strikes, specific labor laws, lawsuits, and specific contractual provisions all provide protection for workers in secular workplaces. But for workers in Christian organizations, often there is no such protection, and the workers in Christian organizations are usually "at-will" employees. Again, we often turn to platitudes to excuse wrong behavior like "God will take care of you." But as steward leaders we need to realize that we act to fulfill the purposes of the Master whom we serve. He chooses to do His work through us as we function as his loving arms, hands and feet to meet the needs of those entrusted to our care.

We are tempted to turn to platitudes like "God is in control" dismissing human responsibility for poor decisions, but the truth of the sovereignty of God should not be used to excuse wrong behavior that can have devastating consequences for devoted co-workers or employees who

are brothers in Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that Christians are to love one another. (I John 3:10-11) Sadly, our behavior leaves millennials and others questioning why anyone would ever subject themselves to such destructive behavior at the hands of Christian leaders of Christian organizations who are tasked with the primary responsibility of faithfully serving God as they steward the relationships entrusted to their care.

Let's accept for a moment another hypothesis. *The primary reason Christian leaders of Christian organizations sometimes act "unChristianly" is a lack of a theoretical and biblical understanding of and consistent commitment to principles of effective leadership.* For some answers to this specific problem, let's turn our attention, now, to the biblical construct of steward leadership.

It was July of 2009 and my family was preparing to move to Colorado Springs from Indianapolis, Indiana. My daughter, Aubrey, was out late our last Friday night in the downtown area. Bonnie and I had just slipped into bed. It was a few minutes after midnight when the phone by my bedside rang. It was Aubrey. She said, "Hi dad. We are finished down here and I am on my way home. Do I go east or west on I70..." Just then, there was a loud crash, and the phone went dead. I scrambled out of bed pulling on my pants and a shirt when the phone rang a second time. It was Aubrey. "Dad," she said, "I am ok...but your Durango is another story." Relieved, I drove the car from our home in Fortville to her location downtown. As I drove I thought "That's ok...we can buy another Durango. The SUV is God's anyway, and if He wants us to use His money to buy a new one that's ok with me." But then, another thought came to my mind, "Not only is the Durango God's, so is Aubrey!"

You see, when we think of stewardship in the Bible, we often think only of money. Sometimes we may even expand our paradigm to include time, treasure and talent. But the Bible teaches very clearly that everything in the universe belongs to the Creator. Kuypers often said to this point, "There is not one square inch in all of Creation over which God does not declare 'Mine!'"

Consider David's prayer, "Praise be to you, Lord, the God our our Father Israel from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor. For everything in heaven and in earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God we give you thanks and praise your glorious name." (I Chronicles 29:10-13) So, clearly, all of "our stuff" including the organizations we work for and serve really belong to God and have been entrusted to our care for only a short time.

But what about people? The Bible tells us, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to Him." (Psalm 24:1)

The steward leader, according to Scripture, is responsible for everything the Master has entrusted to his care. Certainly, this responsibility includes time, treasure and talent, but this biblical paradigm of leadership goes beyond these three limited areas of life and ministry to include everything including relationships with the people entrusted to our care. This includes, but is not limited to employees, spouses, children, grandchildren, neighbors etc. Stewardship in the Bible, in a very real sense, is an all-of-life paradigm. To state this principle another way, every decision in life is ultimately a stewardship decision. Kent Wilson verified this point in his dissertation when he wrote, "In one of the latest books to view stewardship holistically,

Westbrook (1996) writes a basic review of the elements of biblical stewardship in which she concludes every decision we make is at heart a stewardship decision" (p. 52)

When you think about leadership theories in the Bible, what is the predominate theory? Most followers of Jesus would look to His example of leadership and reply that servant leadership is the predominate leadership theory in Scripture. Certainly, we are called as followers of Christ to serve God the Father and others as Jesus did. But, is there an overarching leadership paradigm in Scripture that includes servant leadership? Wilson comments on this in his dissertation when he writes, "in the Bible, all stewards are servants, but not all servants are stewards." (p. 76). Think about this profound point. The difference between a steward and a servant is motivation of the heart! The steward leader's motivation for life and service is to fulfill the purposes of the Master while some servants spend their lifetimes shaking their fists at their Master!

There are many important ramifications to consider when one comes to this realization. First, in order to fulfill the purposes of a Master, one needs to commit their lives to the Master. This is the first step, as well as a daily process, for the steward leader (Romans 12:1-2). The way up is down on your knees as the path to success for the steward leader is total surrender of one's life to the Master!   Next, the steward leader must get to know the Master to grow in a deeper and deeper understanding of the purposes of the Master. Ultimately, like Jesus, our response needs to be "not my will but Thy will be done!" For the believer in Christ, this growth in relationship with the Master occurs as the steward practices the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading and meditation, prayer, fellowship with other believers and the like. This is a "Divine-human cooperative" or a "dependent responsibility." (Bridges, p. 10) The tension we manage as leaders in this regard is somewhere in between the two extremes of "just do it" and "let go and let God."

My grandfather, Albert Zehr, was a farmer in central Illinois. I can remember as a small boy my excitement every time we visited my grandma and grandpa on the farm. The final leg of the journey from my home in Indiana to Hopedale, Illinois we traveled down a dirt road to my grandpa's property. We left the dirt road to drive up a small lane, crossed a creek over a wooden bridge, and pulled up by the farmhouse. By the back door was a well. The water was ice cold!

My grandpa would greet me at the door, and after a hug we would walk together to the barn. Parked inside was a green Ford pickup and hanging from the dash was a bag of candy. After eating a few pieces, we walked together to the next barn where the tractor was parked.

The tractor was a red International with one steel seat. My grandpa took me on his lap and we went for a ride out in his fields. What good memories!

In his timeless book, The Pursuit of Holiness, Jerry Bridges writes, "A farmer plows his field, sows the seed, and fertilizes and cultivates- all the while knowing that in the final analysis he is utterly dependent on forces outside of himself. He knows he cannot cause the seed to germinate, nor can he produce the rain and sunshine for growing and harvesting the crop. For a successful harvest, he is dependent on these things from God. Yet the farmer knows that unless he diligently pursues his responsibilities to plow,

plant, fertilize and cultivate, he cannot expect a harvest at the end of the season. In a sense, he is in a partnership with God, and he will reap its benefits only when he has fulfilled his own responsibilities." (p. 10)

This partnership is a dependent responsibility! Bridges continues, "Farming is a joint venture between God and the farmer. The farmer cannot do what God must do, and God will not do what the farmer should do." (p.10)

So what should a Christian organization look like? In other words, what are some applications of this overriding biblical construct of steward leadership based on the biblical principle of dependent responsibility for the leaders of Christian ministries today? First, *we must realize that we do not minister in the realm of "rights" but rather in the realm of "responsibilities."* We are responsible to be faithful stewards of all the Master has chosen to entrust to our care. When we operate in the realm of rights, we replace the Master as the final judge of our actions.

Second, *how much the Master chooses to entrust to our care is His prerogative!* The Owner, God, alone maintains the right to distribute that which belongs to Him however He chooses. It is encouraging to note that the steward to whom was given two talents and the one to whom was given five were both faithful and received identical commendations (Matthew 24:14-30). The unfaithful steward was the only servant that received a condemnation because his heart motivation and resulting action was grounded in a mistrust of the Master.

Third, *leaders who have been entrusted with relationships involving teaching others have a greater responsibility*. An example is the warning in Scripture to stewards who have been entrusted with the responsibility to care for God's precious children. "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18:6). And again a specific warning to steward teachers, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." (James 3:1)

Fourth, *there will be a day of reckoning*. "Here is the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing whether good or evil." (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14) "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13)

My best advice on this point is for us to realize that one day we will all give an answer to the Supreme Judge of the World for what we did with everything He entrusted to our care, so it seems to me to be a really good idea to give thought to our answer to this question before that day occurs! Try this activity. Take out a sheet of paper and list your various roles in life...leader, husband, father, etc. Then, beside each role give yourself a score between one and ten rating your faithfulness to the Master in fulfilling His purposes through you in each of these areas of your life. How are you doing? Are

you happy with your scores? If so, great. Continue to serve the Master as a faithful steward in each of these areas of your life. But if there is some room for improvement in an area or two, the really good news is that there is still time to change and do better!

Finally, "***it is required of stewards that we be found faithful***." (I Corinthians 4:2) As Christian leaders of Christian organizations, let's commit today to lead as faithful biblical stewards committed to fulfilling the purposes of the Master for all He has entrusted to our care. Our driving motivation should be to one day hear the Master say to us, "Well done, good and faithful steward. Come, let's celebrate!"

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