

# What is 'Christian' About Christian Leadership?

---

## Introduction

What “Christian” about Christian leadership? In this article, I propose that theories of Christian leadership can be defined, implemented, and evaluated through qualitative and quantitative research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Qualitative-research methods suit the complex (Heifetz, 1994), context-embedded nature of leadership, which involves an inter-relation of contextual boundaries and leader characteristics (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). Qualitative research can prepare the way for quantitative research, which is better suited to testing theories (Lowe & Gardner, 2000).

At the pre-theoretical level, leadership is common to all people. Everyone participates in leadership within his or her spheres of influence, and everyone does so with or without refined reflections about leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Various models of leadership exist at the theoretical level. In this article, however, I focus on a specific model of Christian leadership. In that model, leadership is “a dynamic relational process in which people, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, partner to achieve a common goal . . . [which is] . . . serving others by leading and leading others by serving” (Christian Leadership Center, 2005).

The CLC model for Christian leadership may be evaluated and its implications explored by meta-theory dialog (Dyck, 1970; Meeks, Moltmann, & Trost, 1999) with a model of Christian theology as a study of God which is as Christ-centered, biblical, and relevant to the world in which we live (Hanna, 2006). The Christ-centered characteristic corresponds to the term “Christian leadership” because the disciples, or followers, of Christ (Jones, 1995) are called Christians (Acts 11:26). The biblical characteristic provides a way of evaluating the Christian authenticity of Christian leadership (Malphurs, 2003) in terms of faithfulness to the Christ of Scripture (Hanna, 2006). The characteristic of relevance to the world encourages the evaluation of Christian-leadership theory according to leadership research in general (Plantinga, 2002; Wheatley, 1999).

Spiritual leadership is increasingly recognized in leadership literature (Dodd, 2003; Greenleaf, 1988). At the same time, researchers acknowledge that not enough study has been given to models of spiritual leadership (Hunt, 2005, 1-2; Heifetz and Laurie, 1998). In the subsequent sections

of this article, I present a discussion of what is “Christian” about Christian leadership in relation to these four elements of the CLC definition:

- e influence of the Holy Spirit.
- e dynamic, relational, partnership process.
- e implementation of servant-leadership.
- e necessity of a partnership to achieve a common goal.

In addition, in dialog with Christ-centered, biblical, and relevant theology, I present four leadership initiatives of the Holy Spirit in relation to current leadership-research issues. (Note: All scriptural citations are from the King James Version of the Bible.)

### What Is “Christian” About the Influence of the Holy Spirit?

e most obvious “Christian” dimension of the CLC definition of leadership is the reference to “the influence of the Holy Spirit” (CLC, 2005).

is idea is compatible with the fact that Scripture does link the influence of the Spirit to leadership. For example, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abeizrites to follow him” (Jud. 6:34). Scripture does not limit the ministry of the Spirit to those who regard themselves as the people of God. In the Old Testament, the Spirit is active in the creation of the heavens and Earth (Gen. 1:1-2; Ps. 33:6, 9) and the four spirits of the heavens go forth from standing before the Lord of all the earth (Zech. 6:5). In the New Testament we read of the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the Earth (Rev. 5:6). So, if the ministry of God’s Spirit is worldwide, what is “Christian” about the influence of the Holy Spirit?

It is Christ who sends the Holy Spirit to be a Christ-centered guide or leader. “When He (the Spirit of truth) is come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak of Himself. . . . He will glorify me for He will receive what is mine and show it to you” (Jn. 16:13-14). Four Christ-centered leadership initiatives of the Holy Spirit take place in cooperation with the actions of those who follow the Spirit’s leading. is action involves four leader-follower synergies: conviction-confession, conversion-repentance, consecration-obedience, and confirmation-perseverance (cf. Stagich, 2003). Leader-follower synergy is central to Christian leadership. “He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following him is only taking a walk” (Maxwell, 1993, p. 1).

e Spirit’s first leadership initiative is conviction. “When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment” (Jn. 16:8). Judgment includes the condemnation of sin. He convicts “of sin” (Jn. 16:8) “because they believe not on me [Jesus]” (16:9;

cf. v. 11). Judgment is also the gift of discerning the difference between sin and righteousness. “He will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:19). The Spirit’s leadership initiative in conviction calls for a human response in confession. “If we confess our sins, He [Christ] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9). We are also to confess the truth about Christ into which the Spirit leads. Jesus said: “I am the truth” (Jn. 14:6, King James Version) and the Spirit “will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:13). As Paul put it, “if you confess . . . the Lord Jesus, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

How is the conviction-confession synergy relevant to Christian leadership and to leadership research in general? In the research literature, one point of contact is the frequent discussion about the overlap between management and leadership—and of the distinction the two roles. Although leadership is applied in management (Bass, 1990), it is a completely different role from management (Burchard, 2003). According to several researchers, management maintains the status quo whereas leadership points out what is wrong with the status quo and identifies the ways in which to make it right. Management is not necessarily evil, because the status quo may be good. At the same time, a leader has gained followers when he or she has persuaded others to confess or admit that there is a problem and that they can participate in its solution (Nelson & Toler, 2002). Poor leaders manifest an attitude of unwillingness to confess and correct mistakes. Effective leaders make themselves vulnerable by modeling a willingness to admit, acknowledge, apologize, accept, and then to act (Malphurs, 2003, p. 69). In addition, Christian forgiveness is relevant not only for sin against God; it also is relevant for offenses against human leaders and followers. Christian leadership fosters communities of people who forgive each other. Jesus said, “forgive and you will be forgiven” (Lk. 6:37). This admonition is part of the dynamic relational processes among members of a team fostered by Christian leadership.

## What Is “Christian” About a Dynamic, Relational, Partnership Process?

At the beginning of the CLC definition, Christian leadership is described as “a dynamic relational process in which people . . . partner” (CLC, 2005).

This idea parallels elements of non-Christian definitions of leadership. For example, according to Centerpoint for Leadership, a non-sectarian organization, “Leadership is a dynamic relational process of influencing the thinking, behavior, and actions of others toward a shared purpose” (Grey, 2005). Similarly, one of the insights of feminist research is that “relational leadership is dynamic” (Regan & Brook, 1995, p. 103). This overlap of Christian



into the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). Each member is a team leader in harmony with the chief leader who is Christ. This is how we “grow up into Him . . . who is the head, even Christ; from whom the whole body increases, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working of every part” (Eph. 4:15-16).

Christian team leadership also has worldly relevance. “It is God’s will and purpose to gather all things in heaven and earth in Christ who is head

groups of people to obey God. They will not achieve this unless they themselves know how to obey” (Klopp, p. 109). Christian leaders must “lead with a follower’s heart” (Habecker, 1990).

The Bible also makes explicit that servant-leadership is connected with Christ-centered, Spirit empowered consecration-obedience. The Apostle Paul presents servant-leadership as a “consolation in Christ” and a “fellowship of the Spirit” (Phil 2:1). He writes, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who . . . took . . . the form of a servant, and . . . became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:5-9). God does not call all his leader-followers to give up their physical life as part of their consecrated obedience. However, He does call us all to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice fully acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1). We do this because, in harmony with the mind of Christ, our minds are “renewed” so we may know and follow or obey the “will of God” (12:2).

In reaction to the concepts of “obedience till death” and “living sacrifices” (Carson, 1993), even Christians sometimes question the relevance of servant-leadership, because they view it as powerless. It is important to note that servant-leadership is not weak leadership. Servant-leadership redefines leadership and redefines service: “it is serving others by leading and leading others by serving” (CLC, 2005). Servant-leaders serve as well as lead. They are “focused, intentional, and proactive” (Clinton, 1988; cited in Klopp,

is thought brings us back to the issue of cooperating with God's leadership through obedience. Jesus said, "Why do you call me Lord while you refuse to do what I say?" (Lk. 4:46). Fortunately, Christ is the model for Christian servant-leadership, and He provides the power to practice it: "We are buried with Him [Christ] by baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). "All His biddings are enablings" (White, 1900, p. 333).

When Christians contemplate the challenges and sacrifices involved with servant-leadership, it is reassuring to recognize that leadership is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Servant-leadership is relevant because it is consecrated and obedient to God's ultimate purpose for the world.

## What Is "Christian" About Partnership to Achieve a Common Goal?

Let us now examine the aspect of the CLC definition that describes Christian leadership as a "partner[ship] to achieve a common goal" (CLC, 2005). As with other aspects of the CLC definition, this one parallels non-Christian definitions. Most non-Christian leadership researchers would agree that the considerable time and effort required to find real partners inside and outside one's institution who share the same goals is well worth the endeavor (Linsky & Heifetz, 2002). Therefore, it is important to ask this question: What is "Christian" about Christian leadership as "a partnership to achieve a common goal"?

The partnership aspect of Christian leadership may be illuminated by the fourth leader-follower synergy initiated by the Holy Spirit. The Bible highlights the purpose and process of Christ-centered, Spirit-gifted confirmation-perseverance in terms of waiting and ministering until the end and until the perfecting of unity in Christ: "The testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that you come behind in no gift [of the Spirit while] waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless" (1 Cor. 1:5-8). The gifts of the Spirit equip leaders (Eph. 4:6) "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect person, unto the measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12; cf. 1 Pet. 4:11).

Encouragement in pursuing the high standard of confirmation-perseverance may be found through focusing on Christ. We are to "run with patience the race set before us looking unto Jesus . . . who for the joy that

was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12: 1-2). Additionally, Christian leaders should not expect absolute perfection from themselves or from those they lead. A progressive attitude constitutes Christian perfection. Paul wrote, “I don’t count myself to have attained perfection.



ous liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pains together until now. (Rom. 8:18-19, 21-22)

is biblical personification of the desire of the non-human creation for the Spirit-led children of God calls for Christian leaders to recognize the relevance of a new field of research on the ecology of leadership (Edgington, 1997).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have begun to answer the question, What is “Christian” about Christian leadership? The qualitative investigation in this article needs further development through ongoing dialogue with other leadership researchers. Clarification of specific implications for leadership formation and behavior is also needed. Doing so would build on research already begun at the CLC and elsewhere. Additional quantitative research projects are also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the actual implementation of such insights.

The meta-leadership dialog with theology suggests that the Christ-centered leadership influence of the Holy Spirit is relevant to the world in which we live. The dynamic, relational, partnership process of Christian leadership includes relations between Christ and the Church, among the members of the Church and between the church and the world. In addition, the posture of Christian servant-leadership, as modeled by Jesus, is progressively manifest in the Church for the benefit of the world. The flexible goals of Christian leadership are stages along the way to God’s eternal purpose for the ecology of the world.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christian leaders are commissioned to cooperate in the divine-human synergies of conviction-confession, conversion-repentance, consecration-obedience, and confirmation-perseverance. They are to foster dissatisfaction with the status quo, redirection of perspectives, empowerment, long-term motivation, and flexible short-term action plans. In this way, Christian leaders also foster synergy among human leaders and followers. They inspire responsiveness on the part of followers. The leaders lead and the followers cooperate. At the same time, Christian leaders are responsive to those whom they serve. Christian leaders lead with a follower’s heart.

## Reference

---

- Alvesson, M., Skoldberg, K. (2000).  
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Atonakis, J., Cianciolo, A. T., & Sternberg, R.J. (2004).  
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Bass, B. M. (1990). *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership*.  
New York: Free Press.
- Bouchard, B. (2003). *Leadership Development*.  
Montana: SwiftKick
- Carson, D. A. (1993).  
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Christian Leadership Center. <http://www.andrews.edu/clc/>
- Clarke, A. D. (2000).  
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Clinton, J. R. (1988). *Leadership: Theory and Research*.  
Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress.
- Dodd, B. J. (2003).  
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Drucker, P. F. (1986). *The Effective Executive*.  
New York: Harper & Row.

- Klopp, H. (2004).  
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1987). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Klimes, R. E., & Klimes, A. H. (1977). Berrien Springs, MI: Rudolf E. Klimes.
- Linsky, M., & Heifetz, R.A. (2002). Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Lowe, K. B., & Gardner, W. L. (2000). Ten years of the Leadership Quarterly: Contributions and challenges for the future. 11, 459-514.
- McIntosh, D. (2000). Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- Malphurs, A. (2003). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Maxwell, J. (1993). Nashville: Nelson.
- Meeks, M. D., Moltmann, J., & Trost, F. R. eds. (1999). Kirk House.
- Nelson, A., & Toler, S. (2002). Ventura, CA: Regal.
- Parcells, B. (1995). New York: Doubleday.
- Plantinga, C. (2002). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Riley, K., & Louis, K. S. eds. (2000). Falmer Press.
- Regan, H. B., & Brook, G. H. (1995). Corwin Press, 1995.
- Stagich, T. (2003). Aventine Press.
- The Robert K. Greenleaf center. (2005). <http://www.greenleaf.org/leadership/servant-leadership/What-is-Servant-Leadership.html>
- Wheatley, M. J. (1999). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- White, E. G. (1900). Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.

---

**Dr. Martin Hanna** has an earned Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Andrews University and currently serves as an Associate Professor at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University.