

Discernment As an Essential Leadership Quality

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Introduction

We live in a day and age where leaders are prone to ask for recipes for success. What produced success for others might just as well work for me. Leadership is often regarded as the effective application of successful models rather than principles. Unfortunately this tendency also has its effect on church leadership. What I will be pleading for in the time allotted for this lecture is the constant awareness that there must be a distinct difference between church leadership and secular leadership. This awareness must lead us to the conviction that spiritual discernment is the essential leadership quality for good Christian leadership.

Secular leadership stands in direct conflict with church leadership because it focuses, through achievement, on the enhancement and upliftment of the leader itself. It is therefore humanistic in its nature. All attention is directed to the outstanding qualities of this leader. The achievement of goals of secular leadership are often to the eventual benefit of the leader. Christian leadership focuses on the ability to discern, in the presence of many possibilities, what the will of the Father is in a specific situation. It focuses on the Kingdom of God and has the upliftment of Jesus Christ as Lord in mind.

Essentially I plead for a strategic *and* spiritual approach to Christian leadership as opposed to a sole strategic approach.¹

Discernment in Theology

At the very heart of the Christian leadership process lies one fundamental question. What does God want? Or, to put it another way, What is His wis-

¹ A helpful resource is Roy M. Oswald and Robert F. Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1996).

dom in a specific situation? It is so fundamental that the answer to this question determines the make-up of the Christian community. Jesus made it clear that whoever does the will of God is a member of the family of God.

Mark 3:35 For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

Jesus led by example on the night of His agony in the garden of Gethsemane. In the midst of the biggest Christian-leadership decision ever made, the process of discernment and the underlying question and answer session was present. His prayer was simply and profoundly that God's will be done.

Mark 14:35, 36 And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.

Discernment was vital to the outcome. Leadership sometimes requires relatively quick decisions under immense pressure. In this decision-making process, discernment is essential.

The desire and longing to seek God's will is "discernment"; this should be the hallmark of Christian leadership. All true followers of Christ, and therefore mostly applicable to Christian leaders, should adhere to Jesus' plea in Luke.

Luke 6:46 And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?

According to the New Testament, the church as the community of Christ is gathered and led by the Holy Spirit. From this then the logical principle should be derived that the leaders of this community must also be gathered and led by the Holy Spirit. Again the New Testament confirms this principle in the words of Paul in Romans.

Rom 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

Up to this point it all sounds very clear and simple. Just do God's will! The complication in this matter and the ultimate challenge to Christian leadership is that no one person can fully comprehend the will of God. Each of us can glimpse an understanding of what God desires. By sharing these understandings in the applicable faith community we engage in a discernment process. Essential elements of this discernment process are prayer and sharing. Through this the Holy Spirit will move amongst us and start to build a collective consensus as to what the will of God is in the specific situation.

This challenge is often so demanding and time consuming that the easy way out is to skip the process of discernment all together and therefore fall into the secular leadership trap.

In our sinfulness, we can never be assured that we have truly and fully comprehended God's will, let alone acted on it. The New Testament constantly reminds us, in the words of Habakkuk, of the element of faith in what we do.

Romans 1:17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

We trust the Holy Spirit to lead us in this process of faith. A discernment process should never be seen as closed. In faithfulness, we make decisions and act on them for the service of God, but we are ever open to God's further guidance. True Christian leadership is the acceptance of the duty, privilege and fulfillment in living the will of God in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Discernment in Prophetic Voice

Responsible discernment as an essential element of Christian leadership asks for the collective wisdom of a faith community guided by God rather than taking the risk of submitting to the often risky prophetic revelation of an individual leader.

Christian leadership based on the "Moses-like up the mountain and returning with a revelation" experience can easily lead a faith community down a path of despair. An individual can mistake his own, often humanistic wishes, for the voice of the Spirit.

Corporate discernment is, in almost every case, more reliable than individual discernment. The exceptions are those times when God requires an individual to be a prophetic voice to God's people or the voice of conscience to an irreverent community. For example, a community of faith may be pursuing comfort over discipleship and avoiding action when deeds of justice and mercy are called for. Even in such cases an individual needs to test what is discerned as the will of God with at least one other Christian leader who is faithful in prayer and Scripture reading.

Unless the abovementioned is distinctly applicable to you, invite your faith community to participate in any leadership process with spiritual discernment as the essential element.

Discernment in Prayer

The etymological basis of the term discernment comes from the Greek word that means to "sift through". Very early it was seen as sifting the wheat from the chaff, sifting through our own interior experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings. Throw all the options of possible leadership decisions into the

basket and go through a process by which God will guide you through His Holy Spirit as to the right leadership decision.

It is simply impossible to acquire spiritual discernment if we do not pray, that is, consciously seek to find God. Prayer is the conscious decision to “involve” God in the decision-making process. Maybe “involve” is not the right word. Prayer brings an openness, a freedom wherein we are able to adopt the unconditional attitude, “God, when you show me a direction to follow, I will say ‘yes’ no matter what the cost.”

Discernment is not simply having a Christian leader offer a prayer and then going about working out a solution using the best of rational skills. That is similar to secular-leadership decision making. Discernment does not mean that we simply go along with the prayer, because that is what we are supposed to do – and then get down to the real work of deciding through rational discourse.

Discernment means just the opposite. Our real work in Christian leadership is in praying prior to our leadership and decision-making meetings, with the rest of the meeting flowing from that. What follows prayer is not so much a reasoned approach to decisions than a faithful approach with a spiritual awareness of God’s collective guidance.

Discernment and Fasting

The church has lost the spiritual discipline of fasting prior to major decision making as an integral part of the discernment process. What originated in Christianity is now part of almost every major religion apart from Christianity!

Collective fasting as a prerequisite to major decisions is biblical.

Act 14:23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Guiding Principles for Discernment As an Essential Quality of Christian Leadership

- 1) Discernment is a part of the total leadership process and cannot be achieved without careful, prayerful attention to seeking the will of God for a faith community. When this community is identifying needs or developing strategic action plans, discernment should be evident in frequent times of reflective prayer.
- 2) Discernment should be conceived as part of an ongoing leadership process to determine how God guides the community in their decisions.
- 3) Discernment requires that people understand faith communities are called to be effective servants serving the Master in His will.
- 4) Discernment involves thinking, praying and assessing the alternatives a faith community might be facing.

- 5) Discernment takes time and cannot be hurried. When it is hurried, it is likely because those in leadership roles have already made up their minds about a solution and want a quick process to sanctify their position.

Questions for Application

- 1) du Toit mentions “time” as one factor that tempts Christian leaders to bypass “spiritual discernment” and replace it with a secular leadership model (pp. 2-3). What specific measures can be implemented to guard against this temptation and encourage the development of spiritual discernment?
- 2) List and discuss at least three dangers with high-speed communication in the practise of spiritual discernment. Likewise, list three positive applications of high-speed communication for Christian leadership and discernment.
- 3) Re-read the Scripture verses contained in this article. Write a personal prayer based on these Scriptures concerning your desire for spiritual discernment.