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Improving African Christian Leadership: A Biblical View

by Emmanuel Kwasi Amoafo

Introduction

Much has been said, researched and written about the shortcomings of African Christian leadership today. Both in the church and in the academy there is much handwringing and remonstration about the sad and unacceptable state of African Christian leadership. Everywhere we turn there are stories of Christian leaders embroiled in financial and sexual scandals, and power abuse, with their behaviour characterized by a general display of the same moral degeneracy, insensitivity, abrasiveness and incompetence that is all too evident in secular African leadership. In many African church denominations today there is a general view that most senior church leaders are not even born again, with no appreciable walk with God, and that they have gained their positions of leadership through nepotism, tribalism and even bribery and corruption. Many of these "leaders" see their positions as careers and personal businesses to be gained and protected at all costs. The widespread nominalism, the lack of commitment to missions and evangelism, the lack of meaningful discipleship, and the growing syncretism that permeates the African church today have often been blamed on this sad state of African church leadership.

It seems to me that a fundamental biblical view of the issue is a frequently missing or under-emphasized perspective in the current debate about how to improve African Christian leadership. It is this perspective that this article seeks to briefly highlight.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Emergence of a Christian Leader

The first thing to note is that every genuine Christian leader is called by God the Father into his leadership position. For this reason God the Holy Spirit plays an indispensable, predominant, central and defining role in the emergence and development of the Christian leader - from his selection, through the process of his equipping to his ever-growing maturity.

Elliston draws from the biblical examples of the leadership development of King David and the apostles Paul and Peter to illustrate his reflections on the vital role of the Holy Spirit in the emergence and development of Christian leaders. Of the Holy Spirit's role in the selection of the leader, Elliston says, "He matches the person with the task, followers and situation."[1] Of his role in

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[1] Edgar J. Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992, p. 100.

gifting and empowering the leader Elliston observes, "The gifts of the Holy Spirit . . . provide the initial and on-going empowerment . . . for ministry. They may be seen as part of the Spirit's legitimation of His selection process".[2] Concerning the Holy Spirit's equipping of the leader, Elliston goes on to say, "The Holy Spirit is responsible for the equipping of men and women for ministry. He superintends the whole process. It is He who works to have them thoroughly fit for ministry".[3] Adeyemo concurs with this by observing that God pours Himself by His Holy Spirit into the life of the Christian leader to whom He has assigned any responsibility.[4] Elliston notes that the Holy Spirit works through existing leaders to develop them through counseling and discipline[5] and that the Holy Spirit also plays a key role in the maturing of the Christian leader by bringing the leader through various crises, conflicts and even life-threatening circumstances. These, he notes, test, refine and greatly aid in the maturing and effectiveness of the leader.[6]

Surveying the landscape of African Christian leadership today it may not be an exaggeration to say that this calling, equipping and maturing role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of African Christian leaders is sadly lacking.

Biblical Images of African Christian Leadership

African Christian leadership, unfortunately, is more often than not modeled upon and shaped by the African cultural understanding and worldview of the uses and purposes of leadership and power than by biblical concepts of leadership. African traditional concepts of leadership embrace the ideas of might, material wealth, worldly wisdom and obeisance to ancestors and ancestral spirits.[7]

Heavily influenced by this worldview and cultural understanding of leadership, African Christian leadership frequently displays values that are self-serving, intolerant, nepotistic, autocratic, inefficient and inconsiderate of the real and felt needs of the people they lead. Leadership is perceived to be a means to personal aggrandizement and material wealth. Commenting on this, Osei-Mensah writes, "Such leaders have no real conception of serving others; they promote themselves and have no thought of being examples of godliness. Instead they lord it over those in their trust".[8]

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[2] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, p. 101.

[3] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, p. 102.

[4] Tokunbo Adeyemo, *Africa's Enigma and Leadership Solutions*, Nairobi: WordAlive, 2009, p. 22.

[5] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, p. 103.

[6] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, pp. 105-106.

[7] Tokunbo Adeyemo, *Leadership* in the *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006, p. 546.

[8] Gottfried Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders,* Accra, Ghana: Africa Christians Press, 1990, p. 25.

For this reason, sadly, the first biblical image that best describes the typical understanding of African Christian leadership is the image of the failed shepherd leaders of Israel in Ezekiel 34 who took care of themselves and not the sheep by eating the curds, clothing themselves with the wool and eating the meat provided by the sheep. The second biblical image that best describes the typical understanding of African Christian leaders is found in the words of Jesus from Matthew 20:25, "the rulers of the Gentiles who lord it over them and their high officials who exercise authority over them."

The key to changing this unfortunate profile of African Christian leadership is to heed the counsel of Osei-Mensah who says we must allow the Bible to judge our African culture and to jettison our ungodly African models of leadership that are incompatible with biblical principles of servant-leadership.[9] Clinton notes that, as fallen human beings, our natural instinct is not to serve but to be served, and that the idea of serving others is very unnatural to us. He says, "No one seems to be born with servanthood as a controlling attitude for leadership functions. Nor do many cultures shape towards servanthood as a significant value for leadership thinking".[10] Stanko adds, "The issue of service is one of the hardest concepts for leaders to grasp".[11]

Developing a servant leadership spirit first requires that we have the new nature that Christ gives us by His Holy Spirit when we are born again. Osei-Mensah says, "The first prerequisite for servant-leadership is a genuine conversion experience".[12] With the conversion experience as his foundation, the Christian leader then commits himself to developing a renewed mind as Osei-Mensah notes.[13] A renewed mind, he goes on to observe, enables the Christian leader to humble himself to serve the congregation of God's people. Such leaders cultivate the mind of Christ and develop a spiritual dimension that transforms their thinking and acting.[14] In addition to the renewing of the mind, a lifelong process, the third prerequisite for developing servant-leadership is, in Osei-Mensah's view, "a lifestyle of exemplary obedience" to Christ. He observes that "the people we are called to lead are more likely to cooperate and submit if they know it is to the Lord they are submitting, and if they see us showing the way by bowing our knee to king Jesus".[15]

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[9] Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, p. 55.
[10] Robert J. Clinton, *Leadership Series: Conclusions on Leadership Style.* Altadena, CA: Barnabas Resources, 1992, p. 46.
[11] John Stanko, *So Many Leaders, So Little Leadership*, Nairobi: WordAlive, 2000, p. 23.
[12] Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, p. 24.
[13] Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, p. 24.
[14] Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, p. 26.
[15] Osei-Mensah, *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, p. 33.

African Christian Leadership Spiritual Formation

It is only as a leader draws close to God and develops intimacy with Him, learning to hear and to obey Him, that the leader can lead God's people in God's way. Notes Eims, "If the Christian leader tries to put on an outward show with no inward fortification of purity and holiness before God, one day a test will reveal his or her true nature and character. Thus, the leader must live a pure life".[16] The development of the leader's spirituality must be a conscious one that includes prayerfulness, unwavering faith in God, determined obedience to scripture and an attitude of life-long learning.

Prayerfulness is a value that is enacted in the Christian leader's life, for example, by a habit of waking up long before daybreak on most mornings to spend devotional time in the presence of God. This habit enables the Christian leader to develop a growing intimacy with the Lord in which he learns to daily speak to and listen to God. The insights that God gives the leader into scripture, into the daily affairs of his life and his ministry assignments will then form a firm foundation for God's guidance and direction of his leadership.

Unwavering faith in God is a value that enables the Christian leader to respond to the ups and downs of life and ministry on the basis of God's revealed character of divine love for and His faithfulness to the Christian leader. This faith will calm him in the face of panic-inducing situations and enable him to make godly, sane and intelligent choices. It will enable him to treat difficult persons and tough circumstances with forbearance, humility and patience. It will enable him to adopt attitudes of hope and expectant assurance when facing tough assignments and limited resources related to his Christian ministry and leadership.

The Christian leader's determined obedience to scripture is based on seeing the scripture as God's revelation of Himself and His will and purposes for humanity and as the Christian's final standard for faith and practice. Such an understanding of scripture will make the leader seek to obey its commands, believe its promises and follow its examples in his life and ministry. Scripture will then be the non-negotiable plumb line that guides his relationships, his conduct and his Christian ministry and leadership.

An attitude of life-long learning acts as an important fulcrum of personal development in the Christian leader's life. This manifests itself in a commitment to reading widely on subjects related to scriptural subjects, theological concerns and social and historical subjects. Such focused reading will keep the Christian leader informed and able to relate to a wide range of

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[16] LeRoy Eims, *Be The Leader You Were Meant To Be*, Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2001, p. 30.

issues that come up from time to time in his work and leadership.[17] The cultivation of habits of life-long learning and attitudes of teachableness make leaders open to improving their knowledge and understanding of scripture and other subjects that matter to their congregations, empowering them to respond more practically and effectively to the felt needs of those whom God has put in their care. In an age of much adult learning in which there is now a plethora of guided learning opportunities no Christian leader has a valid excuse not to avail themselves of these opportunities that can so significantly improve and enhance their leadership.[18]

These values, when they undergird leadership, demonstrate the vital linkage between spirituality and effective Christian leadership. These values enable the Christian leader to develop attitudes of servant leadership that seek to serve God and His people in humble self-giving as modeled for us by Jesus Christ Himself (Matthew 20:28, Luke 22:27) and as His apostles modeled for us in the New Testament.[19] Barna believes that they enable the Christian leader to live an exemplary life that is obvious to both Christians and non-Christians.[20] These values promote the absence of greed for money, a willingness to serve, exemplary behaviour (1 Peter 5:2-3) and a display of spiritual maturity and the fruit of the Spirit (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

The Godly Management of Power by Christian Leaders

African Christian leaders' use of power and authority reveal the basic motivations and values that undergird their leadership. Lee defines *power* as the ability to do something or to prevent something from being done and *authority* as the right to do something. In the church context Lee notes that the godly use of power and authority requires Christian leaders to learn how to use both as stewards of Christ and on behalf of His mission.[21] Lee draws on the research work of psychotherapist Rollo May to identify and explain five different kinds of power and authority. These are *exploitative power* that uses force and often leads to violence, *manipulative power* that uses people as pawns, *competitive power* that seeks to win while others lose, *nutrient power* that is used for the well-being of others and *integrative power* that is used with the cooperation and consensus of others.[22] Lee believes that in the church

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[17] Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership,* New York: Free Press, 2003, p. 33.

[18] Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People, Revised Ed.* Reprinted in *Foundations for Christian Leadership Supplemental Readings: Course Number LDR 5013. First Ed.* Springfield, MO: Global University, 2010, pp. 37-38.

[19] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, p. 68.

[20] George Barna, *Leaders on Leadership*, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997, p. 84.

[21] Harris W. Lee, *Effective Church Leadership: A Practical Sourcebook*, Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, GCSDA, 2003, p.73.

[22] Lee, *Effective Church Leadership: A Practical Sourcebook*, p. 74.

context *nutrient* and *integrative power* are the most appropriate forms of power that should be used. This is because, he says, "Nutrient conveys the idea of nurture, one of the primary ministries of the church. Integrative power is compatible with the . . . democratic or participative type of governance that is characteristic of most congregations".[23]

In Africa the ability of church leaders to use *nutrient* and *integrative* forms of power in their leadership calls for qualities and priorities that depend largely on their spiritual maturity and submission to the lordship of Christ as demonstrated by their trust and obedience. Elliston notes that "trust and obedience provide the essential stimulation for both spiritual and ministry maturation" of Christian leaders.[24]

Conclusion

It is as African Christian leaders take this overall biblical view of Christian leadership and as they seriously learn to develop these values in their exercise of church and other forms of Christian leadership that the Lord will empower them to overcome the restraining forces of appetites and passions, pride and pretension, and unbridled aspiration and ambition.[25] It is then that their leadership will be rewarded with the fruitfulness that will please their Lord and Master and be a blessing to his church on this continent.

African Christian leaders must first learn to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, becoming more like Christ as they follow Him. This will develop both their character and competence and lend greater credibility to their leadership as their lived-out trust of Christ results in faithfulness, conviction, confidence and commitment. The Christian leader's obedience, Elliston observes, is displayed by his faithfulness to God's Word and his submission to God's clear guidance. Obedience shows the leader to be a person of integrity and a trustworthy and accountable steward of God's flock (1 Corinthians 4:1-2 and 1 Peter 5:1-4). As African Christian leaders exhibit trust and obedience in their leadership, they will "mature internally in spiritual formation and externally in ministering".[26] Fernando says, "Nothing short of total obedience is normal for one who follows a resurrected and victorious Master".[27] Nowhere is this truth more urgently needed today than in African Christian leadership if African society is to be transformed by the truth of the Gospel.

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[23] Lee, *Effective Church Leadership: A Practical Sourcebook*, p. 75.
[24] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, p. 153.
[25] Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership,* pp. 50-54.
[26] Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders*, p. 162.
[27] Ajith Fernando, *Leadership Lifestyle*, Mumbai, India: GLS Publishing, 1985, p. 106.

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